Armenian Nationalism:
Emergent Political Organizations and Revolutionary Activity Surrounding the First World War

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On February 25th, 1915, the Ottoman interior ministry of Talaat Pasha issued Directive 8682.¹ Drafted in response to the disastrous status of imperial forces throughout the Caucasus and Suez, this correspondence not only encouraged increased domestic security, but openly warned of possible Armenian dissidence. Within this simple decree, it is possible to witness the sudden realization faced by the Ottoman state; namely, that fears of true revolt among Armenian communities had become a dire possibility, and therefore required federal attention. To provide a conclusive solution to such matters, the Sublime Porte chose to issue a further declaration in spring of the same year. Prominent Armenian community leaders, in Constantinople and abroad, were to be seized and detained on April 24th in what would be later be known as Red Sunday:

…the most recent rebellions…have demonstrated the continuing attempts of the Armenian committees to obtain, through their revolutionary and political organizations, an independent administration for themselves in Ottoman territory…You are therefore ordered to close down immediately all branches in your province…to immediately arrest all leaders and prominent members of the committees…and to transport them to other parts of the province, as not to give them the opportunity to engage in harmful acts.²

This preemptive measure, today commemorated as the beginning of sanctioned massacres, had a simple aim—by robbing any coherence from regimented dissidence, outright rebellion would collapse.³ Such optimism, however, would prove wholly inadequate and ill-advised. Armenian resistance to Ottoman aggression during WWI was not created out of spontaneous insurgency, but rather spurred by

² Guenther Lewy, quoting Talaat Pasha, The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 151.
decades-long organization within the framework of mounting nationalism. Honed by progressive ideologies, continual failure of promised reform, and increased harassment within Ottoman domains, the sentiments of Armenian nationalists would eventually coalesce to produce political-minded revolutionary organizations bent on the protection, democratic autonomy, and legitimacy of the Armenian people. In studying the trajectory of such movements, a remarkable persistence is discovered that extends well beyond the era of supposed genocide (1915-1918). Armenian nationalists skillfully adapted to the dynamics of contemporary upheaval, and thus maintained a presence that not only survived the turmoil of pre-war decades, but continued many years after the initial conflict. Though their goal of an enduring, independent Armenia would not be achieved until the late 20th century, these revolutionaries offered hardened resistance to all transgression, and set upon any chance, domestic and abroad, for the betterment and protection of ethnic communities. Like the multitude of competing separatist bodies within the Ottoman state, the Armenian nationalists represent a distinct resistance that plays into a much larger history. Such movements tormented an already strained imperial structure, and would contribute immensely to its eventual and total collapse under the weight of a divided realm.

The relationship of nationalism and subversive political organizations can be examined as inseparable through prolonged, mutual histories. During the specific period of the late 19th century, this is most notably examined in the studies of F. Müge Göçek, who provides a comparable analysis of nationalist movements and their presence during the waning years of Ottoman power. Through this research, several factors are seen as to provoke emerging nationalism; notably, the development of commercial ties with European nations, the occurrence of polarizing wars, and the presence of failed reforms.4 From this framework, there then can occur cultural awakening, and above all, new ideas of

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personal identity within an imperial state. These characteristics can be directly witnessed among the Armenian peoples of this time. Intellectuals revisited Armenian history, focusing upon ancient, autonomous kingdoms;\(^5\) scholars expanded and refined vernacular language, heralding a brief Armenian Renaissance based upon heroic legends;\(^6\) foreign education grew in popularity, creating a generation of progressive-minded Diaspora;\(^7\) while print journals flourished, popularizing patriotic ideals.\(^8\) Through these combined elements, Armenian nationalism had found a basic structure capable of creating images of an ethno-religious identity; a new consciousness based on “past glories” and “oppressed condition.”\(^9\) Yet among these varied components of nationalism, there arrives, Göçek notes, a further presence—that being the political organization. Within radical social movements, such parties came to play immeasurable roles. Regions, moved through cultural awareness, soon discovered the necessity for regimented action; and these groups, bent on revolutionary principles, were prepared to offer such opportunities while coming to function as a medium through which the “total mobilization” of the populace could be achieved.\(^10\) In acting as a physical arm of the nationalist movement, they not only embodied the most defiant elements of communities such as the Armenian population, but became the tools through which the oftentimes violent task of nation-building could be achieved. With this understanding, it is then clear how distinct organizations would thrive in the chaotic years of the First World War. However, as is discovered, Armenian nationalism had matured at a dangerous point in regional affairs. Caught between Ottoman determinism and Russian intrigue, the movements of revolutionaries would suffer in the dynamic power-play of greater nations.

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\(^5\) Göçek, 31-32.
\(^7\) Ibid, 48-52.
\(^8\) Ibid, 52-57.
\(^9\) Ibid, 66.
\(^10\) Göçek, 51
Armenian Revolutionary Organizations: Hunchak and Dashnaktsutyun

Rooted in the aforementioned social conditions, it is unsurprising to discover the vast collections of patriotic bodies which came to emerge throughout the close of the 19th century. But for the purpose of analyzing Armenian revolutionaries, it is prudent to focus upon, above others, the Hunchaks and Dashnaktsutyun. These specific parties lack the brief-lived and indistinct nature of their contemporaries, and are advantageous to study for several reasons. Firstly, they represent groups which experienced large-scale organization in relation to areas of influence and physical presence; secondly, their existence was extremely pronounced, and therefore offers innumerable publicized episodes which aid in understanding tactics and ideological goals; and thirdly, both (in particular the Dashnaktsutyun) maintained an appearance within regional affairs for extended periods of time, and can be examined alongside other socio-political developments. Therefore, with these notions in mind, both organizations can be explored within the framework of evolving nationalism, and the like-minded agendas they came to follow.

The Hunchakian Revolutionary Party should be held, foremost, as a political structure brought about by enlightened, European circles. Founded in Geneva during the late 1880s, its initial assembly was comprised of Russian-Armenian youths sent abroad for a modern, Western education.¹¹ These students would adopt a Marxist ideology in their nationalist endeavors, and attempt to frame the struggle of producing an Armenian nation in regards to such philosophy. The Hunchak political program reveals a vision of continuous struggle bent on economic revolution and the fall of a corrupt and abusive Ottoman state.¹² Interpreting the anarchic conditions of the late 19th century as signs of eventual

¹¹ Nalbandian, 104.
collapse, the Hunchaks prepared their organization for opportunistic action. In a time of war, it was
decided, a freed, socialist Armenia would be disentangled from the soon to be partitioned Ottoman
Empire, and emerge as an autonomous state.\textsuperscript{13} This program, in addition to ideological provisions, also
explains the acceptable means through which such goals would be achieved. These included regional
chapters and subcommittees, extensive propaganda, the use of terror, and the arming of irregular,
citizenry groups.

As with the Hunchaks, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or Dashnaktsutyun
(Federation), was conceived beyond the borders of Turkish Armenia with aims of radical involvement in
Anatolian affairs. Formed within the Russian Empire, the Dashnaks’ goal was to combine the otherwise
scattered revolutionary efforts within Ottoman territories.\textsuperscript{14} Through this general platform, the
Hunchakian Party was absorbed by the Dashnaks for a short time, but would later sever itself with the
coalition over dissatisfaction in the handling of Marxist affairs. Unlike the Hunchaks, however, the
Dashnaktsutyun did not immediately advocate a fully independent Armenia, and instead campaigned for
a land endowed with somewhat ambiguous economic and political freedoms.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the large task
afforded to this organization, and the rather nebulousness of its directives, members of the
Dashnaktsutyun would come to play part in arguably some of the most sensationalized and infamous
episodes within pre-war Anatolia. Furthermore, this immeasurable presence would be maintained and
furthered during WWI, and act as a forceful component in the eventual, desperate drive for an
Armenian nation.

\textsuperscript{13} Ökte, 31.
\textsuperscript{14} Nalbandian, 151.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 169.
Impact of the Hamidian Era: 1876-1909

The core sentiments of Armenian revolutionaries originated in their disappointment with foreign and domestic policy. Gaining the perceived grounds for administrative change through various developments, political organizations faced repeated failures of promised reform, and therefore, felt greater encouragement and justification for radical action.

The ill-fated Armenian Question entered the realm of international politics with the close of the 1878 Russo-Turkish War. At this moment, territorial realignment had brought world attention to the newly autonomous Christian Balkan states (Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Montenegro.) In the conclusion of these post-war affairs, most concessions and agreements were facilitated by the Treaty of Berlin; an official accord that as well for the first time directly mentioned the Armenian peoples. The demands of this document, specifically Article LXI, would carry immense importance for nationalist movements. Armenians were promised protection from Kurdish tribal harassment, the implementation of provincial reforms, and subsequent Ottoman reports to the Great Powers on achieved progress.\(^\text{16}\) In the same vein, an identical provision for guardianship was part of the Cyprus Convention that same year.\(^\text{17}\) These developments led many advocates to believe legitimacy, and perhaps patronage had been established between Europe and Armenian communities. However, both pieces of international correspondence can be interpreted as producing similar outcomes. Follow-up attempts at achieving such reforms were deflected, delayed, or wholly ignored by the sultanate; despite their apparent authority over a failing Ottoman state, the Great Powers were undermined and received clear indication

\(^{16}\) "Treaty Between Great Britain, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Russia, and Turkey for the Settlement of Affairs in the East" July 13, 1878. The American Journal of International Law 2, no. 4 (October, 1908): 401-424.

\(^{17}\) "The Cyprus Convention of 1878". National Union Gleanings 7 (July-December, 1896): 229.
that their demands would not be met.\textsuperscript{18} This medium of international inactivity, as Anatolia slid towards collapse, evolved into a central pillar of Armenian patriots. Harboring feelings of both dependency and abandonment towards the Great Powers, these groups not only began a ceaseless campaign of self-defense and armament, but one also of publicized sympathy to once again capture the attention of a powerful world that appeared absent as Armenians were put to the sword.

Facing the embarrassment of a lost Balkan claim and constant separatism among his realm, Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s (r. 1876-1909) policies would prove as vital to the formation of nationalist movements as those of the listless European powers. The era was that of staunch overbearance and severity on the part of the empire to stem its own collapse; and therefore, as Göçek notes, the Armenians “faced a harsher, polarized, and more nationalistic Ottoman state.”\textsuperscript{19} Throughout the latter half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the issue of Armenian populations had become a great inconvenience in attempts at imperial consolidation. International arrangements, as those previously mentioned, were seen as the meddling of European nations to stake an unwelcome claim within Ottoman affairs. Requests for reform, or threats of reprisals, came as affronts to the Sultan and his administration, and worked to steer such circles away from Armenian any sympathies.\textsuperscript{20} As the Ottoman government attempted to regain its territorial integrity, Armenian groups only furthered a sense of unrest with increasingly drastic actions. Incidents in the regions of Zeitun (1894) and Sasun (1895) were met with brutal responses, while in Constantinople itself, a protest-turned riot (1895) and sudden seizure of the Ottoman Bank (1896) resulted in the indiscriminate slaughter of Armenia citizens.\textsuperscript{21} This growing sense of distrust with the

\textsuperscript{19} Göçek, 16.
\textsuperscript{20} Lewy, 8-10.
Armenian people, coupled with a collapsing imperial structure, resulted in an era of violent suppression collectively known as the Hamidian Massacres (1894-96). Revolutionary groups, nonetheless involved in the incidents mentioned above, witnessed the decimation of local, faultless communities at the hands of exploitive and unwieldy Kurdish hamidiye cavalry, and felt a sense of overwhelming justification to defend their peoples in hopes of radical alteration in policy that, it appeared, could soon arrive.22

When change did occur, and Abdul Hamid II was deposed in 1908 by elements of the Young Turk movement, there existed an era of apparent hope for Armenian domestic policies before the barbarism of WWI. A Westernized, secular ideology had come into power, and with it, as was imagined, a solution to the social and ethnic problems which riddled the empire. Of all peoples, it were the Armenians who had the greatest chance for reform. The Dashnaktsutyun, alongside other underground elements from Anatolia, had participated in the overthrow with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and had thus become the de facto voice of Armenians within the new administration.23 Short-term concessions, however, were meager. Political intrigue within Constantinople proved fatal to amiable relations, and after being replaced by a peripheral political group, members of the CUP staged a second coup in 1913. This movement, headed by the triumvirate of Enver, Talaat, and Djemal Pasha, would steer the Ottoman state beneath a banner of Pan-Turkism in attempts to salvage a splintered imperium.24 The Young Turks distanced themselves from Armenian revolutionaries, and favored Muslim-Kurdish elements over distraught Anatolian Christians in their own nationalistic efforts.25 Left with this tension, Armenian parties received further encouragement of outright revolt.


25 Davison, 482-83.
Dashnaksutyun and Hunchak Pre-War Activities

Between both parties, the Hunchaks and Dashnaks shared generalized goals while attempting to insure the protection and betterment of the Armenian people. Among city-strongholds and rural networks of _fedayi_ militia, these agenda-based actions and desires can be summarized as thus: demands for a democratically independent/autonomous Armenia; implementation of promised reforms; the protection and armament of local populations; the widespread organization of provincial offices/subcommittees to spread revolutionary principles; the extensive use of propaganda; the use of terror against Ottoman forces—military, administrative, and allied peoples; the decision to launch a coordinated attempt at revolt when national powers were preoccupied with war; the full attention, sympathy, and subsequent involvement of European nations in the Armenian struggle. It was this final condition, however, one of international recognition, which came to dominate pivotal cases of Armenian insurrection described in the succeeding section.

On the cusp of Hamidian atrocities, Armenian revolutionaries easily demonstrated the far-reaching purpose of their goals and the means by which the Ottoman state would be coerced into desirable action. The Hunchaks, for example, instigated violence in 1894 within the region of Sasun. Though these minor skirmishes were viewed as attempted revolt and therefore brutally crushed by government forces, they would nonetheless come to represent a historic accomplishment.26

The incident at Sasun was, beyond all else, an event to garner the sensational attention of foreign audiences. While the Ottoman state had previously offered such violent suppression to separatist activities—most notable being Albanian populations during the Balkan Wars—this particular episode

26 Nalbandian, 122.
took on dimensions far more severe than the former. Occurring at the perceived height of decline of an outdated empire, events such as Sasun gained special attention in the ‘West’. To be simply put: the revolutionary attempts of Albanians had been made by a Muslim peoples, while Armenians remained distinct, albeit distant Christians. Taken up by the sympathies of foreign press, Armenian revolutionaries had discovered their most potent tool in the pursuit of international leverage. The popular culture of Europe was more than willing to accept Ottomans being pitted as the historically ‘backwards’ Muslim Turks who reveled in sectarian violence. Exemplary headlines are innumerable. At Sasun itself, docile Christians were reported as having been cremated alive; while in Orfah, such were slaughtered in the same manner as the Meccan lambs of the hajj, killed nonetheless in the presence of a Sheikh who recited verses from the Qur’an. These sentiments were not merely confined to the European continent, and found ample footing in the United States as well. The most glaring testimonial to this can perhaps be seen in a work from 1896, simply entitled *Armenian Massacres*. Dedicated by its somber publishers to “the memory of the Christians massacred in Armenia by the Sword of Mohammed”, it offers clear evidence of the nearly hysterical attitude taken against Ottoman forces in portraying their attempts at consolidation and suppression.

Here, 15,000 were slaughtered…The Kurds plunder, but do not generally kill unless resisted; but the Turks kill in cold blood and in ways suggested by the Arch-Fiend himself. The fate of the survivors is even worse than that of those who have been killed…Everywhere they meet the dread alternative, ‘Become Moslems or die.’

Through an outpouring of public outrage and horror at this supposed barbarism, the Great Powers were pressured to act. In direct response to Sasun, European states drafted a body of reforms.

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to be immediately impressed upon the Sultan’s administration. Such was the outcry over certain matters, that some Turkish sources cite the actions at Sasun a scheme solely and wholeheartedly enacted for the purpose of gaining European support, rather than any attempt at revolutionary advancement. Still, with these realities carefully in mind, the Hunchak-instigators of the incident found themselves prepared for other opportunities—one such instance being the Bab Ali demonstration of the following year. Prior to marching on the Sultan’s residence in delivery of a petition, extensive precautions were taken by revolutionaries to insure freedom from blame. The Sublime Porte itself was informed of the intentions for a civil, non-violent protest, with a correspondence explaining “the intervention of the police and military…may have regrettable consequences, for which we disclaim beforehand all responsibility.” But moreover, this same assurance was sent to numerous foreign embassies throughout Constantinople on the eve of the demonstration. Thus, when a small melee between guardsmen and revolutionaries escalated into the blind slaughter of Armenian citizens, international backlash was quick to follow. The humble demands of the Armenians were printed abroad, while European powers forced the sultanate to sign one of many eventual reform packages which spurred temporary hopes.

Accordingly, the Dashnaks followed suit in events of notoriety and publicity. On August 26th, 1896, an armed band of party-members seized the Ottoman Bank of Constantinople. The individuals claimed intention of siege and destruction of the building if their demands for reform were not met, and directly appealed to the Great Powers in such matters. The takeover of this well-known institution had

31 Ökte, 65.
32 Nalbandian, 123-124.
not been done merely in aim of destroying imperial property, but rather for the fact that the Ottoman Bank was a critical and lucrative Franco-British enterprise.\textsuperscript{35} Pressured by this situation, European nations could not help but intervene. Their mediation ended the siege not only with a tentative agreement to demands, but as well asylum for the fighters in France—far from the Armenian pogrom which followed the bank’s seizure.\textsuperscript{36} Alongside this infamous demonstration, the Dashnaks are also credited with a failed attempt on Abdul Hamid II’s life in 1905 outside the imperial Yıldız Mosque.\textsuperscript{37} However, in regards to the event of WWI, this organization’s most crucial contributions were its prominent operations in Eastern Anatolia. With the Van Vilayet (administrative district) firmly beneath their control, and arms freely flowing between Russo-Iranian territories into Turkish Armenia,\textsuperscript{38} the Dashnaks were poised to begin a competent resistance as Ottoman forces became entangled in global conflict.

\textit{Revolutionary Presence, 1914-1918}

Upon the empire’s sudden entry into war in late summer 1914, Armenian revolutionaries were faced with weakened standings between themselves and the Ottoman administration. The Young Turks had requested Armenian communities act as provocateurs along Russia’s Transcaucasia border; but this was rejected by the Dashnaks in favor of neutrality and continued efforts of potential reform.\textsuperscript{39} Nonetheless, as 1915 began, these hopes were shattered alongside Enver Pasha’s “Pan-Turanian” army at the hands of the Caucasian winter.\textsuperscript{40} Aided by logistical failures on the part of the Turks, Russian

\textsuperscript{36} Kirakossian, 263-268.
\textsuperscript{37} “Blown To Death.” \textit{Cincinnati Enquirer}, Jul 24, 1905.
\textsuperscript{38} Justin McCarthy et al, \textit{The Armenian Rebellion at Van} (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), 93-98.
\textsuperscript{39} Hovannisian, 40-42.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 46.
forces (bolstered by Russian-Armenian volunteers as well as native Turkish-Armenians) began a steady westward advance.\textsuperscript{41} This uncontrollable decline would lead the Ottoman state to instigate infamous episodes such as the Red Sunday of Constantinople on April 24; and moreover, the Tehcir (Displacement) Law of late May, which began the systematic movement of Armenian populations into the imperial interior.\textsuperscript{42} As mass deportations came to degenerate into massacres and increased abuse, far-flung Armenian populations began to act under the guiding hand of revolutionary leadership. Though scattered and short-lived, these early years of war maintained movements of resistance which seized opportunities of turmoil to undermine and challenge Ottoman power.

Of specific examples of Armenian resistance recorded outside the Siege of Van, the majority resulted from the loose military framework established by revolutionaries in provincial settings. An image of large scale regional organization had long been sought as a necessity of successful revolt. The Marxist Hunchaks, in their political agenda, felt obligated to win the support of the peasant and working masses. These populations would not only serve to strengthen guerilla numbers, but act as a foundation for a freed Armenia after successful revolution.\textsuperscript{43} The Dashnaks followed similar paths, stating the need for direct interaction with the Armenian people, and an overarching presence in the form of committees and protection.\textsuperscript{44} By the time of outright war, both parties had managed to permeate the society of the otherwise disconnected areas of Eastern Anatolia. Villages and rural communities had been instructed on the creation of militant bands, with information on administrative guidelines, acquisition of arms, and the sheltering of fellow fighters being received through inconspicuous mediums; one such Dashnak


\textsuperscript{42} Arshavir Shiragian, \textit{The Legacy: Memoirs of an Armenian Patriot} (Boston: Hairenik Press, 1976), 10-12; Lewy, 152.

\textsuperscript{43} Nalbandian, 111.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 168.
pamphlet, dated 1910, cited as being spread through local religious figures.\textsuperscript{45} The foundations and presence of these resistances, while draining and disruptive on Ottoman forces, were often met with disastrous results. Prolonged operations are seen as difficult to maintain, and to often collapse with horrific ramifications for the local populace.

With scattered reports of disarmament, arrests, and wholesale killing, Armenian revolts often escalated through movements of self-defense.\textsuperscript{46} At Zeitun, the historic site of an 1895 rebellion, the Hunchaks spurred an extremely effective resistance as Enver Pasha’s armies had just begun their advance into the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{47} This insurgency, however, was to be overrun early next year. Identical episodes across Anatolia are dutifully recorded in Dasnabedian’s history of the Dashnaktsutyun, and are interpreted as following a similar pattern: the population of Shabin Karahisar revolted in response to disarmament, resulting in massacres when fighters no longer remained supplied; in the region of Sasun, Dashnak munitions and province-wide defensive coordination staved off Ottoman advances, but eventually succumbed in part to sporadic, confusing movements of nearby Russian armies; embattled fighters on the Cilician coast took to mountainous enclaves, and were eventually evacuated by French warships to Port Said.\textsuperscript{48} Besides these far-reaching, often short-lived examples of Armenian resistance, the Siege of Van in the spring of 1915 is worth elevation as a distinct effort which demonstrates revolutionaries’ highly organized presence.

\textsuperscript{45} Republic of Turkey, \textit{Aspirations et Agissements Revolutionnaires des Comités Arméniens avant et après la Proclamation de la Constitution Ottomane} (Ankara, 2001), 179-186.
\textsuperscript{46} Hratch Dasnabedian, \textit{History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation} (Milan: Grafiche Editoriali Ambrosiane, 1988), 110.
The Van Vilayet had long been a power-base for the Dashnaktsutyun. Rebellions had occurred in both 1896 and 1906, and the region had been home to assassination plots against its mayors and governors by Armenian fighters. Under the apparent liberty afforded by an alliance with the CUP, Dashnaks had continued unbridled, pro-revolutionary activities without fear. The party held political strength and immunity in the region due to their brief Young Turk affiliation, and in 1908, even managed to nullify Ottoman Parliamentary elections after dissatisfaction with those chosen for the Van administration; similarly, the governor of the province would come to be removed at the party’s request. This temporary freedom proved critical for revolutionaries, who still fermented aspects of revolt and separation from Ottoman control. Over his period, Van had effectively transformed into a regional terminus for smuggled arms. The Dashnaks provided munitions to the people of the region, as well as warned of coming religious violence. Additionally, the organization laid the groundwork for a trained, competent resistance. Manuals entitled “Instructions for Personal Defense” were circulated among Armenian communities, outlining techniques for waging effective partisan warfare. Therefore, as situational conditions deteriorated, region-wide counter-activities began. Communications and transportation were disrupted by irregulars to such a point that, according to McCarthy, entire Ottoman divisions were retired in order to maintain internal peace; while in this simultaneous state of lawlessness, indiscriminate brigandage and sectarian violence flared between Armenian and Muslim populations. Despite Ottoman attempts at suppression, Eastern Anatolia had emerged “completely at war” in March of 1915.

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49 McCarthy et al, 115, 164-165.
50 McCarthy et al, 135
51 British Foreign Office,195/2949, Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, Van, February 17, 1913.
52 Republic of Turkey, Aspirations et Agissements Revolutionnaires. 67-70
54 McCarthy et al, 195.
The cause of the revolt in the physical city of Van is often disputed between historical sources; still it is clear that by late April, outright fighting had begun. Within their titular quarter, the Armenian populace rallied beneath the Dashnak-led body of revolutionary parties known as the Military Committee of Armenian Self-Defense.\textsuperscript{55} This organization would oversee dimensions of the resistance such as munitions production, weapons distribution, and the building of fortifications. These revolutionary forces, despite nearby superior Turkish units, proved immovable through resourceful, desperate measures. The true intricacies of the city’s defense can be best revealed through the recollections of Clarence D. Ussher, an American physician present within Van during its siege:

The Armenians joined house to house, built walls at night, and dug trenches across the roads. They built walls within walls to withstand the Turkish artillery and soon found just how thick these must be in order to stop the Turkish shells. The Turks would fire a volley with rifles and the Armenians would reply with pistols, but with surprising accuracy. Small boys would watch their chance, dash to the door of a Turkish position with a bundle of rags saturated with kerosene, ignite it, fan it with a fez or cap till the door was blazing and the smoke driving the Turks out, and then run back.\textsuperscript{56}

However tenacious this resistance, it, like all others, was endangered by continuous exposure to Ottoman regulars. The chaos of the war’s early months had begun to settle, giving the Turks a chance to redirect efforts at ending the Van rebellion.\textsuperscript{57} However, to the rebels’ great hope, a timely relief was reached in early May through Russian and Russian-Armenian reinforcements. Yet this apparent victory, accompanied with an Armenian governorship that gave glimpses autonomy, was short-lived. The ebb and flow of Russian and Ottoman offensives was entirely unpredictable. A counteroffensive by the Ottomans retook Van in late summer, only to lose it once more in January of the following year. It

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 201.
\textsuperscript{57} Mesut Uyar and Edward J. Erickson, \textit{A Military History of the Ottomans} (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), 267.
wasn’t until 1917, with the advent of Russian revolutionary turmoil, that the military climate of Eastern Anatolia settled with an Ottoman presence. By then, the region had been gutted through mass exoduses of populations in wake of shifting armies, particularly those Armenians seeking refuge across the Russian border. Despite the scale and strength of the revolt at Van, and the undeniable impact it had on siphoning Ottoman resources away from other critical ventures, it ultimately failed. With the region known as Turkish Armenia once more in ‘foreign’ hands, and global conflict coming to a close, the prospects of revolutionaries now turned to salvaging any possibility of an established, sovereign state to the east.

Transcaucasian Presence of Revolutionary Organizations

Facing their numerous Anatolian setbacks, Armenian nationalists demonstrated persistence and flexibility in pursuit of similar endeavors among Russia’s Transcaucasian territories. In this region of ever-changing political chaos, such nationalistic groups welcomed a dynamic and often unstable environment that placed them at the forefront of localized affairs. Here, revolutionary bodies found themselves with rare positions of administrative power, and chances at providing the greatest tangible results yet afforded to the Armenian people. Though nearly achieving permanent autonomy, these efforts would ultimately falter beneath a newer, and greater power that had taken interest in the region.

Tenuous bonds had long existed between the Russian Empire and the populations of Transcaucasia and Turkish Armenia, oftentimes in relation to predatory, Ottoman movements; therefore, with the advent of global warfare, the Tsarist government of Petrograd once again turned to the territory in hopes of reclamation. This prospect is fully noted by the fact that both Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot—the guiding hands behind the partition of the Ottoman realm—gave assurances that
Russian annexations of certain Anatolian provinces would go unchallenged in the course of the war.\textsuperscript{58} These potential acquisitions, however, would be left unfulfilled. In February 1917, the first episode of the Russian Revolution began with the deposition of Tsar Nicholas II, and with it came a renewed sense of Armenian determination. Transcaucasia quickly transformed into a collection of hopeful soviets aligned with Petrograd; and shortly after, the region of then-Russian occupied Turkish Armenia was elevated beyond local jurisdiction and placed under direct control of the Provisional Government.\textsuperscript{59} At this moment, the officialdom and recognition sought by Armenian nationalists seemed near at hand. Of course, revolutionary turmoil was far from settled. Political bodies such as the Bolsheviks found the current status quo as an ‘incomplete revolution’, and continued to vocalize their presence throughout Transcaucasia much to the annoyance of competing parties. It was here, at summits such as the First Regional Conference of Caucasian Bolshevik Organizations, that groups like the Dashnaktsutyun came under scrutiny for their patriotic principles. Bolshevik entities labeled Armenian movements as those of “bourgeois-nationalist parties”, and heavily condemned their activities which were seen as harmful to the new collective masses.\textsuperscript{60} Finding this ideological conflict already in place, and Russian governmental integrity beginning to falter, it became clear to Armenian nationalists that greater steps must be taken to achieve any prospect of true independence. This would come about in the way of eventual separation from any existing power, and a total realignment of the Transcaucasian political climate.

Following a fragile year of reorganization, it was in October 1917 when Bolshevik elements finally seized power from an incompetent interim administration. Here, Armenian nationalists faced a paradoxical relationship with the new regime, as despite the aforementioned conflicts, the common

\textsuperscript{58} Hovannisian, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{59} Pascual C. Ohanian, \textit{La Cuestion Armenia y las Relaciones Internacionales - Tomo 3} (Buenos Aires: Academia Nacional de Ciencias de la Republica de Armenia, 2010), Page 523.
\textsuperscript{60} Hovannisian, 85-93.
sentiment of hopeful revolutionaries was the involvement of a powerful Russian state. Without a legitimate presence to solidify autonomous claims, it was determined there could be no Armenia; thus, when figures such as Vladimir Lenin denounced his new state’s continued activity in regions such as Turkish Armenia, revolutionaries were once more faced with abandonment and defeat.\(^{61}\) While the inherited war of the Tsarist regime was held as an imperialistic enterprise threatening the weakened Russian state;\(^{62}\) Armenian parties, in contrast, cried out at the thought of an emptied front—without Russian determent, Armenia would vanish, and Turkish advances would once again swallow the vulnerable region.\(^{63}\) However, through desperation on part of the Bolsheviks, these objections were brushed aside. In an attempt to halt a German offensive launched in February 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was drafted by Petrograd on March 3\(^{rd}\), effectively ending hostilities between the Central Powers and Russia. The text of the document, among other items, ominously called for an evacuation of Russian troops from Anatolia, as well as the disbanding of Armenian irregulars.\(^{64}\) From this moment onwards, Transcaucasia can be seen to begin its timely drift towards frail and marginal sovereignty. The region’s amalgamated collection of soviets thereafter united beneath the banner of a Transcaucasia Commissariat. Supportive of the Provisional Government in the newly-begun Russian Civil War, this body immediately faced the prospect of an eastern-facing Turkish offensive that had begun in early spring. Beneath the pressure of this inherent threat, the multitudes of the Commissariat voiced wishes to break away from distant Russia altogether. On this development, the Dashnaks were faced with a critical choice. Remaining loyal to a still-powerful Russia would entertain hopes of a sanctioned,

\(^{61}\) Ibid, 96.
\(^{63}\) Hovannisian, 96-98.
autonomous Armenia; doing so, however, would also work to drive awayTranscaucasian allies in light of impending Turkish advances. Thus, with reluctance, Armenian nationalists favored the latter. A separate government was brought into existence, though entirely unprepared to deal with the situation at hand. By the end of May, the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic had dissolved. In chaotic attempts at consolidating any sort of independent claim, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia each broke away into separate entities. Declared independent by the Dashnak-led Armenian National Council, the dream of a free, autonomous Armenia was suddenly achieved on May 28th, 1918.

The First Republic of Armenia was fraught with difficulties from the moment of its inception. Though it had been stabilized by a hasty peace-agreement with the Turks shortly after the breakup of the Transecaucasian alliance, this truce offered little hope of gain for the new nation; Ottoman forces were given full access to Armenian roads and railways, and reserved the right to occupy the young republic if it failed to maintain peace. Within its own borders, Armenia was in shambles. Nearly half of the population was comprised of starving refugees from wartime migrations, and its first year was marred with unrest at lack of supplies such as fuel and medicine. Moreover, the new nation was only one of three in the distraught region. Conflicts with Georgia and Muslim Azerbaijan were inevitable over undeclared borders, and only contributed to its decline. Still, it were greater, external forces which would ultimately demolish the prospect of a freed Armenia. Since 1919, Turkish nationalists beneath Mustafa Kemal had been waging an insurgency against occupying Allied forces throughout Anatolia.

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65 Hovannisian, 160.
66 Suny, 125.
68 Hovannisian, 197.
69 Bournoutian, 134-135.
This revolutionary government had recently turned to Bolshevik Russia, and with the signing of a friendship-pact at Moscow, both then-unrecognized factions determinedly nullified the legislation of the Treaty of Sèvres—a war-ending decree signed by the victorious Entente powers which also allocated lands and rights to the Armenian people.\textsuperscript{71} Acting beyond international jurisdiction, Turkish forces then drove east in September of 1920. Shortly after their advance, the Bolsheviks descended from Russia, offering timely deliverance to the Armenian Republic in the form of becoming a soviet state. With little choice between colliding forces and total disarray, the Armenian administration accepted, and on December 2\textsuperscript{nd}, the Republic had ceased to be.\textsuperscript{72}

During the chaotic two-year span which resulted in the demise of an independent Armenia, it is nonetheless vital to examine the works of nationalist movements. Revolutionary activities never faltered under this apparent collapse, and instead continued in determined efforts to produce a legitimate, and capable Armenian state. It is during this time that the enduring presence of such organizations came to play even greater roles, and worked to reveal an unending bond between the nation of Armenia and entities such as the Dashnaktsutyun. Perhaps most notable is the fact that the Dashnaks not only furnished the weak republic with its governmental community—all four prime ministers being of party rank—but as well acted as a militant arm capable of providing defense against leery neighbors in the absence of any foreign aid.\textsuperscript{73} Beyond uniting a struggling community beneath revolutionary politics, the group also committed itself to lead the infamous, retributive actions of a post-war world. The 1918 Ninth World Congress of the Dashnaktsutyun produced, among its proceedings, the planning of the


\textsuperscript{72} Boumoutian, 147-149.

\textsuperscript{73} Dasnabedian, 129.
overtly-named Operation Nemesis. This international effort was comprised of Armenian organizations seeking to locate those deemed responsible for crimes committed against the Armenian peoples.\textsuperscript{74} As a result, leading Ottoman individuals such as Talaat and Djemal Pasha—already having been sentenced to death in absentia by Turkish courts—were assassinated by Armenians with direct ties to the Dashnaks.\textsuperscript{75} Such episodes would not only serve to complicate unresolved Turko-Armenian relations, but also act as controversial evidence in deeming whether inter-war massacres were justified against perceived ‘unruly’ communities. Nonetheless, these events highlight the enduring prominence of revolutionaries; and likewise, their continued prevalence even when a freed, united Armenia had become an unlikelihood under contemporary pressures.

\textit{Conclusion}

Though seemingly defeated in their endeavors to produce a wholly sovereign and distinctly Armenian state, the original revolutionaries of the late Ottoman era should be viewed as part of a greater phenomenon. Whether Kurd, Greek, Serb, Arab, Armenian or other, the many peoples of the Ottoman Empire had long started upon unalterable paths to ensure and promote personal ethno-religious identities. Tempered by potent ideologies, foreign entanglement, and the perceived failures of the powers to be, these 19\textsuperscript{th} century communities immeasurably hastened the disintegration of the Ottoman state well before foreign invasion and the events of the First World War. Encouraged by patriotic sentiments and cultural pride, such movements inevitably produced infamous collections of political

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 155.
\textsuperscript{75} Talaat Pasha Slain In Berlin Suburb."\textit{New York Times}, Mar 16, 1921;
parties; those of which, Göçek holds, were entirely vital to any long-lasting achievement on the part of nationalist campaigns. Entities like the Dashnaktsutyun and Hunchaks provided tangible outlets for the intellectual demands sought by a mobilized people. Such bodies were natural instruments in the elusive task of nation-building, and were more than willing to create, or counter, the drastic realities which came about in the tumultuous process. Though often violently suppressed, the impact of such resistance was undeniable. The Ottoman Empire could no longer exist, torn along ethnic lines in a rapidly developing world; nor ever hope to entirely end its internal quarreling. The revolutionary products of 19th century nationalism endured the numerous hardships in their decades-spanning history, and evolved to survive their many shortcomings and defeats. Therefore, it is fitting to see nearly eight decades after its collapse, an Armenia state reemerge from Soviet withdrawal; and more so, to see its administration populated by Diasporic elements of the Dashnaks and Hunchaks long kept abroad since the fall of the brief-lived, but determined First Republic.76

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