

## GENERAL VLADIMIR POLTAVTSEV'S UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS ABOUT THE PARTICIPATION OF ARMENIANS IN THE CAUCASIAN CAMPAIGN OF WORLD WAR I

**Ruben Sahakyan\***

### **Abstract**

Significant studies, articles, memoirs, and collections of documents and materials<sup>1</sup> have been written about Armenians, particularly Armenian volunteer detachments, on the Caucasian or Russian-Turkish front of the First World War. Among these is the unpublished memoir<sup>2</sup> of Vladimir Nikolayevich Poltavtsev (June 4, 1875 – January 19, 1937), a general of the Russian army, a participant in the White movement, and an émigré major general.<sup>3</sup> Poltavtsev graduated from the Kiev Infantry Junker School<sup>4</sup> (1897) and the Nikolaev Academy of the General Staff<sup>5</sup> (1904). During the Russo-Japanese War, he was in the active army but did not participate in combat operations.<sup>6</sup> He participated in the First World War and the White movement. In 1917, he was promoted to the rank of major general. On the eve of the First World War, on October 11, 1913<sup>7</sup>, and at the beginning, he held the positions of Chief of Staff of the Azerbaijan (Atropatene) detachment stationed in Northern Persia<sup>8</sup> and the Caucasian 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade within it, then the division (1913-1916), and other positions, and was awarded

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<sup>1</sup> Voluntary military units are known as group, regiment and army, and in official writings as druzhina.

<sup>2</sup> See Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds). See the review: Sahakyan: 2024, № 2, *Fundamental Armenology*, 66-86.

<sup>3</sup> State Archives of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as GARF), collection R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheets 1-19. Original. Manuscript

<sup>4</sup> Junker (German: Junker) was the equivalent of a non-commissioned officer in the Russian army. The Kiev Military Junker School was founded in 1865 and operated until 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Originally called the Imperial Military Academy, and from 1909 the Nikolaev Imperial Military Academy, it was the highest military educational institution of the Russian Army (1832-1918).

<sup>6</sup> Service record of the Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Brigade of the General Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev. Compiled on January 27, 1914, sheets 1-6 and rev. see: <https://bit.ly/44RkPEq> (accessed 04.04.2025).

<sup>7</sup> Service record of the Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Brigade of the General Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev. Compiled on January 27, 1914, sheet 3 rev. see: <https://bit.ly/4kITUAk> (accessed 04.04.2025).

<sup>8</sup> Service record of the Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Brigade of the General Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev. Compiled on January 27, 1914, sheet 3 rev. see: <https://bit.ly/44KIRSN> (accessed 04.04.2025).

the Order of St. George with Weapons and other decorations<sup>9</sup>. During the trial of Lieutenant General N. A. Marx<sup>10</sup>, he was a member of the field military court (1919), and then emigrated to Yugoslavia, Belgrade<sup>11</sup>, where he was a member of the editorial board of the newspaper “Русский голос”<sup>12</sup> (“Russian Voice”).

Poltavtsev’s unpublished manuscripts are preserved in the archive<sup>13</sup> of the former Quartermaster General of the Caucasian Army, Major General E. V. Maslovsky (1876-1971), which is located in the B. A. Bakhmetev Archive<sup>14</sup> at Columbia University in the USA and in the State Archives of the Russian Federation.<sup>15</sup>



**B. A. Bakhmetev**



**General E. V. Maslovsky**

<sup>9</sup> According to the Anglo-Russian agreement signed on August 18, 1907, the north of Persia came under Russian influence, the south came under the British influence, and the center became a neutral zone.

<sup>10</sup> Service record of the Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Brigade of the General Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev. Compiled on January 27, 1914, sheet 3 rev. see: <https://bit.ly/3THqvf5> (accessed 04.04.2025).

<sup>11</sup> Marx Nikandr Aleksandrovich (1861-1921), Lieutenant General of the Russian Army (31.05.1913), professor, historian and archaeologist. Accused by the White movement of serving the Bolsheviks, for which he was sentenced to 4 years of suspended imprisonment (15.07.1919). First rector of Kuban University (19.12.1920).

<sup>12</sup> For more details about his service, see Russian army in the First World War. Project file. Poltavtsev Vladimir Nikolaevich. <https://bit.ly/4kw9nDN> (accessed 29.12.2024); <https://bit.ly/4kw9nDN> (accessed 29.12.2024); Ganin 2009: 312, 448.

<sup>13</sup> Published in Belgrade between 1931 and 1941.

<sup>14</sup> General E. V. Maslovsky used the information provided by V. N. Poltavtsev in his fundamental work on the Caucasian Front: “Extensive material on the actions of the Second Caucasian Rifle Division throughout the war”, see Maslovsky 1934: 11.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhmetev Boris Alexandrovich (1880-1951), Russian scientist, political and public figure, businessman, Menshevik, professor, Russian Ambassador to the United States (1917-1922).

The general titled his memoirs “Армяне на Кавказском фронте во время Великой войны” (“Armenians on the Caucasian Front during the Great War”).<sup>16</sup>

Memoirs regarding the Armenian volunteer movement and Armenian servicemen mainly concern the 1<sup>st</sup> Armenian Volunteer Druzhina under the command of Andranik, which operated in Northern Persia.

Poltavtsev finished his memoirs with a clipping from a Belgrade newspaper announcing the death of General Andranik in the USA: “Чувени јерменски војвода генерал Антраниг, умро је у Калифорнију”<sup>17</sup> (“The famous Armenian voyevoda, General Antranig, died in California”). The newspaper is dated October 5, 1927, and Poltavtsev finished the article on May 20, 1929.<sup>18</sup>



**The First Armenian Volunteer Druzhina. In the center, Andranik**

In his memoirs, the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, General T. Nazarbekyan, provides interesting information about his Chief of Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev, which may shed some light on his passive attitude towards Armenians. After the battle near Dilman in April 24, 1915, the commander of the Azerbaijan detachment, General F. G. Chernozubov, came to T. Nazarbekyan and reported that a Turkish spy

<sup>16</sup> The Russian State Archives contain other studies by the general, such as: The Russian State Archives contain other studies by the general, such as: “On the promotion to officer ranks in the White armies in the south of Russia”, “The occupation of Azerbaijan (Northern Persia) by Russian troops before and during the “Great War” etc., see: <http://online.archives.ru/guide/1001/543631001/543652001/> (accessed 29.12.2024).

<sup>17</sup> The operational-strategic concept of the Caucasian Front came into circulation only in March 1917.

<sup>18</sup> “The famous Armenian voyevoda, General Antranig, died in California”.

was operating in the brigade's headquarters. T. Nazarbekyan wrote in his memoirs: "I was surprised and asked who it could be. He told me (R.S.) that (the spy - R.S.) was my Chief of Staff, Colonel Poltavtsev".<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, T. Nazarbekyan does not elaborate on what facts or evidence Chernozubov based such a conclusion on.

T. Nazarbekyan categorically rejected the accusation. It is self-evident that such an accusation is debatable, as there are no reliable facts. Positive words addressed to Armenian volunteers and servicemen by Poltavtsev are rare in the memoirs; even if they occur, they are immediately followed by the identification or presentation of various shortcomings. It should be noted that some of these corresponded to reality, which the Armenian side had pointed out at the time and made efforts to overcome. Poltavtsev did not notice this latter circumstance.

**Keywords:** First World War, Caucasian front, V. N. Poltavtsev, Andranik, H. Zavryan, T. Nazarbekyan, Armenian volunteer movement, M. Silikov, N. N. Voropanov, Dro.

V. N. Poltavtsev's memoirs can be divided into the following conditional parts:

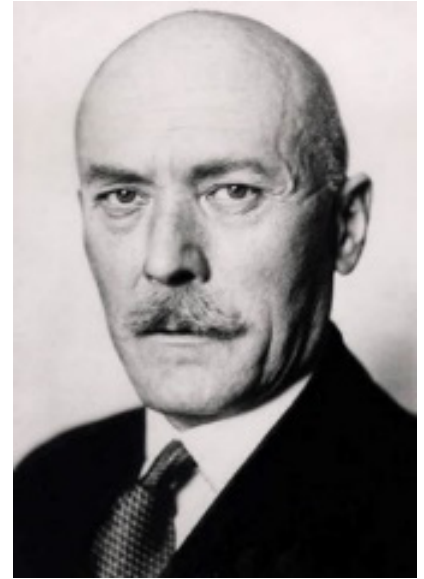
1. The assessment given to the Armenian people and the reason for their dominance in the Caucasus Viceroyalty.
2. The assessment given to the command staff of the druzhinas.
3. The armament and incomplete combat readiness of the volunteers.
4. The insufficient military discipline and tactics of the volunteers.
5. The first phase of participation in combat operations (autumn-winter 1914).
6. Participation in the Battle of Dilman.
7. The underestimation of the military and historical significance of the Van self-defense and liberation.
8. The dissolution of the detachments and the organization of Armenian rifle battalions.
9. The massacres of Armenians.
10. The organization of the Provisional Administration of Van and the problems associated with Armenian authority.
11. The disintegration of the Caucasian Army after the February and October Revolutions of 1917.
12. The organization of national military units in Transcaucasia and the participation of Armenian military units in combat operations.
13. The defense of Julfa.
14. The Turkish invasion of Armenia in 1918 and the May heroic battles.
15. The choice of the political leadership of the Transcaucasian peoples regarding a new geopolitical path (1917-1918).
16. Violations of the civil rights of the Russian population in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

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<sup>19</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 1 and back.



Old Tbilisi



Werner Graf von der Schulenburg



Viceroy of the Caucasus, Adjutant  
General I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov  
(1837-1916)

At the beginning of his memoirs, Poltavtsev makes no mention of the Armenian people's past or history, but considers his primary task to be to "explain" why Armenians occupied a dominant position in the Caucasus, particularly in Transcaucasia. The general identifies two reasons: economic and political. His first contacts with Armenians were in Tbilisi, where he began his service in 1911. As Poltavtsev notes, the widespread belief was that Georgians, unlike Armenians, did not think about autonomy<sup>20</sup>, let alone independence, while Armenians dreamed of Greater Armenia, so the government was fighting against Armenian national parties. For this purpose, precautionary measures were taken: the service of Armenian officers of the

General Staff and non-Armenian officers married to Armenian women in the Caucasian Military District was restricted.<sup>21</sup>

Poltavtsev, one of the "front-runners" of anti-Armenian propaganda, mentions the State Duma deputy Purishkevich<sup>22</sup>, who on the eve of the war "God knows where he had obtained a map of "Greater Armenia", which included Turkish Armenia (Western

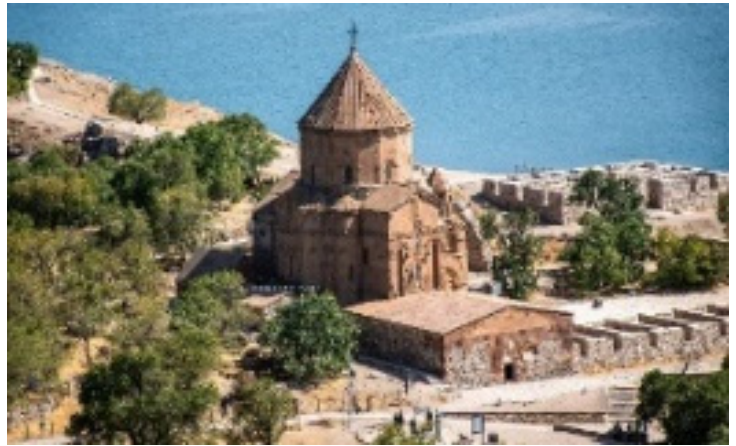
<sup>20</sup> Sahakyan 2019b: 317.

<sup>21</sup> He was probably unaware that the Georgians were in active relations with the Germans. As early as 1914, a secret agreement was signed in Constantinople between the Committee for the Freedom of Georgia and the Ottoman government, see A-Do 2019: 119-122. Zakaryan 2005: 254-257. Secret ties with the Georgian opposition were maintained by the German vice-consul in Tiflis, Werner von Schulenburg, who organized the Georgian legion operating within the Ottoman army during the war, see Pipiya 1978: 36-38.

<sup>22</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 1 back.

Armenia - R.S.), Transcaucasia, the Caucasus, the Don Cossack Host territory<sup>23</sup>, and even part of the Kharkov province”.<sup>24</sup> These and other similar barefaced statements had an impact on many Russian officers serving in the Caucasus.<sup>25</sup> Some, such as General, military intelligence officer and diplomat Mayevsky<sup>26</sup>, were known for their anti-Armenian and pro-Turkish stance and believed that “Russia needs a strong Turkey”.<sup>27</sup>

Distrust towards Armenians reached such a level that the high-ranking officer heading the intelligence of the Caucasian Military District, on the eve of the war, refused Armenian intelligence officers, completely liquidated the border agent network without creating a new one. According to Major General E. V. Maslovsky’s assessment: “This circumstance severely affected the work of the headquarters, making it difficult to obtain agent information in a timely manner”.<sup>28</sup> The same is testified by the military historian, Lieutenant General N. Korsun.<sup>29</sup>



**Akhtamar (modern photo)**



**V. M. Purishkevich**

Poltavtsev’s information was probably based on various rumors, which led him to a wrong conclusion: “Armenians, in general, do not enjoy sympathy in the Caucasus”<sup>30</sup>, because being resourceful and active, they gradually took over the local economy. Before the appointment of I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov as viceroy, a significant part of the administrative positions were occupied by Georgian princes, as well as a certain number of Russian nobles.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Mitrofany Purishkevich (1870-1920), Russian politician, extreme monarchist. Participant in the murder of G. Rasputin (1916).

<sup>24</sup> It was an autonomous administrative unit of the Russian Empire (1870-1920). The region was inhabited by about 2,500,000 people, mainly Don Cossacks, and had an area of 152,700 km<sup>2</sup> (1897). During the Soviet years, the administrative unit was divided between the Russian SFSR and the Ukrainian SSR.

<sup>25</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1 sheet 1 and back.

<sup>26</sup> Austrian and German officers serving in the Ottoman army had a similar attitude towards the Turks, who considered themselves superior to the “allies” because they were largely unfamiliar with Turkish customs and manners, see Maslovsky 1934: 44.

<sup>27</sup> Mayevsky Vladimir Teofili (1857-?), Major General (09.11.1916), graduated from the Nikolaev Academy of the General Staff (1888), Russian Vice-Consul in Van, Rize (1900, 1903, 1909, 1911, 1913).

<sup>28</sup> Ter-Oganov 2014: 220.

<sup>29</sup> Maslovsky 1934: 47-48.

<sup>30</sup> Korsun 1940: 28, 122.



Three provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan (Atropatene) region

and the Countess. Poltavtsev suggests that the above was the main reason why Armenians enjoyed the Countess's sympathy.<sup>32</sup>

In Poltavtsev's opinion, Armenians, taking advantage of the weakening of the Georgian nobility, one of the reasons for which was their difficult financial situation, were able to seize dominant positions in the Caucasus. Through various means, they managed to win the sympathy of the Caucasian Viceroy's wife, Elizaveta Andreyevna, who had a great influence on her husband<sup>31</sup>. The lady was angered by the arrogance of the Georgian nobility, who considered themselves equal to her



Viceroy I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov with a group of officers (1914)

<sup>31</sup> The "negative" image of the viceroy's wife was even used as a scapegoat to justify the army's failures on the Caucasian front. In a letter dated December 12, 1914, the Russian Minister of War V. A. Sukhomlinov wrote to the Chief of the Supreme General Staff, General N. N. Yanushkevich: "In the Caucasus, the leadership, probably led by Countess (Vorontsova-Dashkova), did everything to thwart any operation....", see Red Archive: 1923. 158.

<sup>32</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 1.



E. A. Vorontsova-Dashkova  
(Shuvalova, 1845-1924)

According to Poltavtsev, the Georgians were more loyal to Russia, while the Armenians, who dreamed of Greater Armenia, had many parties, the most notable of which was the Dashnaktsutyun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation). In the general’s assessment: “To the credit of the Armenian parties, it must be said that they worked harmoniously and energetically, did not stop at terrorist acts, and enjoyed the respect and trust of their nation”.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the parties were particularly united when the Armenian people faced a serious threat.



The officer corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle  
Brigade (Yerevan)



Mohammad Ali Shah and his suite, 1907

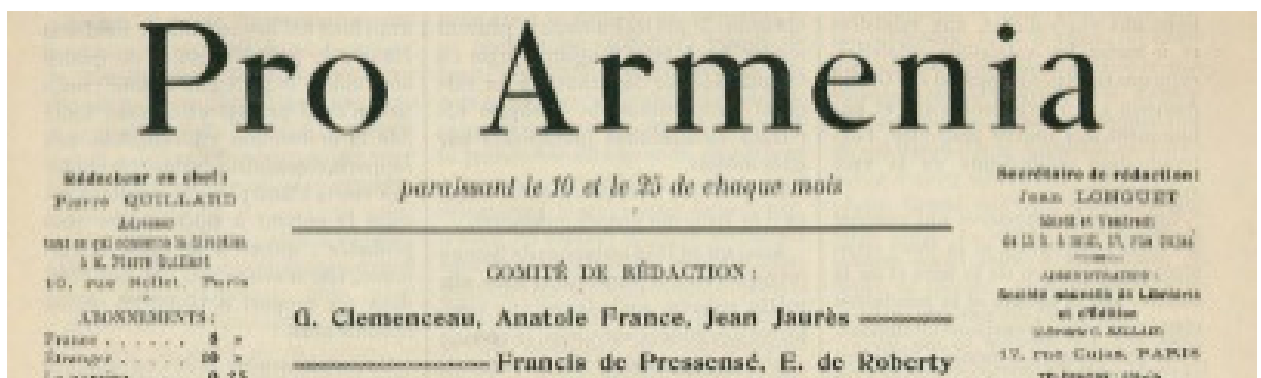
Describing the situation of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Poltavtsev reports that they were hostile towards the Turks, who periodically massacred Armenians, which resulted in uprisings. Regarding the Armenians living in Persia, as well as other Christians,

<sup>33</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 2.



the general assesses that Muslims did not like them but did not oppress them.<sup>34</sup>

The World War aroused hopes among Armenians that it would be possible to realize the dream of establishing a united Armenia, that is, “by uniting Transcaucasian (Eastern Armenia - R.S.) and Turkish Armenia (Western Armenia - R.S.), which did not exist, but there were regions where, in general, the Armenian population constituted a majority”.<sup>35</sup> This idea united the Armenian national parties, which were hostile to the Russian government, because only with Russia’s help could they achieve their long-standing dream.<sup>36</sup> In turn, the Russian authorities carried out propaganda work abroad in favor of the Armenians, stating their goal was to liberate the Armenians from the “Turkish yoke and Turkish atrocities”.<sup>37</sup> For this purpose, propaganda books and brochures were published in English and French.<sup>38</sup> It is self-evident that this was done based on their own geopolitical interests, and not for the sake of the Armenians.



The war against the Ottoman Empire relegated past contradictions to oblivion, and Armenian exiles persecuted by the Russian authorities had the opportunity not only to return and operate openly, but also “even negotiate with officials and institutions”.<sup>39</sup> Among such individuals, he mentions Dro<sup>40</sup> and Samson.<sup>41</sup> Regarding the latter, Poltavtsev provides the following information: as early as 1913, the headquarters of the Azerbaijan detachment had received an order to arrest the prominent revolutionary Samson and transfer him to Tbilisi<sup>42</sup>. Samson, who was 40-45 years old, was in charge

<sup>34</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 2 and back.

<sup>35</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 3.

<sup>36</sup> The Russian government had no desire to grant autonomy to Western Armenia, but rather to annex part of it to Russia, see The Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014: 44.

<sup>37</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 3.

<sup>38</sup> The French weekly “Pro Armenia” was published in France (1914-1914). It was initiated by C. Mikayelyan. Editor-in-chief: Pierre Quillard (1864-1912), secretary: Jean Longuet (1876-1938), members: Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), Anatole France (1844-1924), Jean Jaurès and others.

<sup>39</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 3 and back.

<sup>40</sup> Kanayan Drastamat (Dro, 1883-1956), prominent figure of the Armenian liberation movement, statesman and politician, participant in World War I, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armenian Volunteer Group, member of the ARF.

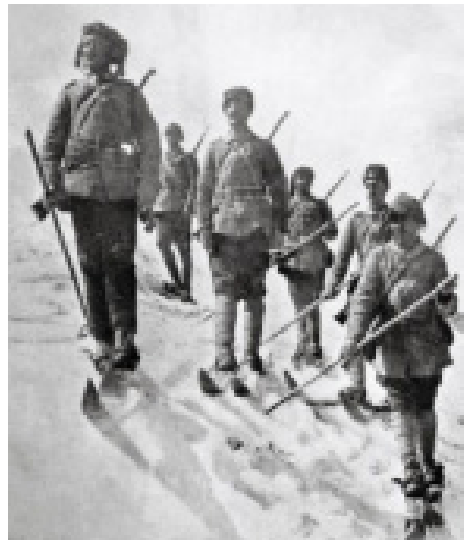
<sup>41</sup> Tadevosyan Stepan (Samson), member of the ARF. He was a political representative in the 1<sup>st</sup> Armenian Volunteer Group, see Pambukian (ed.) 2015: 169.

<sup>42</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 3 and back.

of the 1<sup>st</sup> group's supply service. Poltavtsev characterizes him as an untrustworthy person, a drunkard, who was suspected of embezzlement, so at the end of December 1914, he was removed from the druzhina.<sup>43</sup>



**Drastamat Kanayan (Dro)**



**Ottoman soldiers**



**General N. N. Voropanov**



**Felix Guse, German Major: Chief of Staff of the Ottoman 3<sup>rd</sup> Army**

The general reiterates the widespread view that the Armenians asked to form volunteer detachments, but in reality, the Russian authorities were the initiator.

At the suggestion of the Caucasian Army headquarters, the druzhina under the command of Andranik joined the Azerbaijan detachment of General N. N. Voropanov<sup>44</sup> (1854-1918) stationed in Northern Persia.<sup>45</sup> According to Poltavtsev, the druzhina, which consisted of about 1000 people, unexpectedly arrived in Khoy unarmed around October 20, 1914. Among the leaders, the general mentions Hakob Zavryan (Yakov Zavriev)<sup>46</sup> and Captain Artem Hovsepyan.<sup>47</sup> In Poltavtsev's assessment: "Andranik was a man of impeccable integrity, unselfish, a fanatical enemy disposed against the Turks. I even find it difficult to say what predominated in him: love for the Armenian cause or hatred for the Turks... He was a modest man in his

<sup>43</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 4 and back.

<sup>44</sup> Voropanov Nikolay Nikolay (1854-1918), Lieutenant General of the Russian Army (08.05.1914). Commander of the Azerbaijani detachment (1911-1914).

<sup>45</sup> For more information about the Armenian volunteer movement, see: The History of Armenia 2015: 467-478; Ambartsumyan K. R., Velichko L. N., I. V. Kryuchkov *et al.* 2024. 82-98.

<sup>46</sup> Zavriev Yakov (Hakob Zavryan, 1866-1920), liberation movement, state and party figure, participant in the volunteer movement, doctor by profession, member of the ARF.

<sup>47</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 3 and back.

demands, cruel, accustomed to command, very strict with subordinates, brave and resourceful”.<sup>48</sup>



H. Zavryan

Poltavtsev singles out H. Zavryan, noting that he was not only a doctor but also one of the organizers of the Armenian volunteer druzhinas. He testifies: “He (H. Zavryan - R.S.) was a very intelligent, honest, kind and sympathetic person, wholeheartedly devoted to the cause (the liberation of Western Armenia - R.S.), an idealist who sought some kind of sublimity in everyone... He strived to evoke lofty feelings among the druzhiniks and make them serve for the future of their nation”.<sup>49</sup>

Poltavtsev testifies that H. Zavryan steadfastly endured all the difficulties and deprivations associated with military life. He willingly gave his belongings, provisions, horses, tobacco, money, etc., to the volunteers.<sup>50</sup> The doctor eventually left the druzhina in 1915 and continued his energetic activities in Russia, Europe, and Western Armenia, which were entirely related to the Armenian Question.



Cossacks at the Battle of Sarighamish (December 1914)



3<sup>rd</sup> Labinsky Cossack Regiment  
(Kars, 21.08.1915)

Poltavtsev positively assesses the activities of Captain A. Hovsepyan as a military instructor. The latter had been seconded from the 14<sup>th</sup> Georgian Grenadier Regiment: “He (A. Hovsepyan - R.S.) was an energetic, capable, brave, and honest officer who knew his job excellently”.<sup>51</sup> The general notes that the company commanders of the druzhina, who had no military education, did not accept A. Hovsepyan’s authority. Neither the commanders nor the subordinates wanted to learn military affairs.<sup>52</sup> In Poltavtsev’s assessment, the company commanders were resourceful and capable of leading small groups and carrying out partisan warfare with them. The majority of the

<sup>48</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 4.

<sup>49</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 4 and back.

<sup>50</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 4 and back.

<sup>51</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 4 and back.

<sup>52</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 6 and back.

rank-and-file were Western Armenians, there were *hayduks* (Armenian irregulars), as well as a small number of students, but most of them had not received any military education, although many were familiar with weapons.<sup>53</sup> This testimony contradicts the above. It can be concluded that a significant part of the volunteers had undergone some, albeit brief, training.

Based on his service experience, Poltavtsev expresses the following erroneous viewpoint: “In general, Armenians did not like military service, because by their nature they were merchants, the goal of their entire life was their well-being”.<sup>54</sup> In the general’s opinion, Armenians, as well as all southerners, were not able to remain in a tense state for long and quickly became exhausted.<sup>55</sup> He admits that the volunteers showed courage and endurance during battles, risking their lives while carrying out tasks.<sup>56</sup>

The widespread view was that the Ottoman Empire would only enter the war in the spring of 1915, but for the Russians, the Turkish attack was unexpected. This forced them to throw all available forces to the front, so the physical condition and readiness of the volunteers were neglected. A thorough selection of volunteers was not carried out. For a significant part, the war was a “walk”, which was refuted shortly thereafter. Hence, the existing shortcomings and mistakes, which they were forced to eliminate during combat operations. It should be noted that the Russian side, in turn, had underestimated the enemy.



Mobile field kitchen

Poltavtsev expresses the following opinion about the volunteers: it seemed that they had enlisted to liberate their homeland, but the number of people with such ideas was small. Some of the volunteers, upon entering service, wanted to reach their birthplace, after which they deserted. Some wanted to take revenge on the Turks, and some were attracted by plunder. Some of the volunteers

hoped that the war would be short, but as the fighting dragged on, they began to desert.<sup>57</sup> General E. V. Maslovsky similarly mentions the undisciplined nature of the Armenian volunteers, but notes that they were irreplaceable as scouts, connoisseurs of the terrain, and guides.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5.

<sup>54</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5.

<sup>55</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5 and back.

<sup>56</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5.

<sup>57</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5 and back.

<sup>58</sup> Maslovsky 1934: 39.



Russian military boiler



Map of combat operations (Caucasian Front)

Unlike the volunteers, the Armenian career officers were generally good military men from all points of view, and there were a significant number of distinguished officers. Poltavtsev complains about the reserve officers and Armenians who had undergone short-term officer courses.<sup>59</sup> We believe that such an assessment was wrong, as the responsibility lay with the military authorities, which ensured quantity rather than quality. The same applied to other nationalities, including Russians. The main reason for all this was that the Caucasian Front was considered secondary, not playing a decisive role in the World War. Only two years later did the Russian command understand that the weakest link in the Quadruple Alliance was the Ottoman Empire, but geopolitical changes did not allow for the final defeat of the Turkish army.



Andranik Ozanyan (1865-1927)

The same evening, a military council was convened, attended by the detachment commander Voropanov, Poltavtsev, Andranik, Samson, and H. Zavryan. The Russian side proposed dividing the druzhina into several combat groups and carrying out partisan, sabotage-reconnaissance work behind enemy lines, operating on the flanks of the detachment.<sup>60</sup> It was assumed that the proposal should have attracted Andranik, but probably the *hayduk* leader, realizing the inadequate combat readiness of the personnel, refused, finding that the druzhina could only operate jointly with the Russian troops.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 5 and back.

<sup>60</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 6.

<sup>61</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 6.



The sword presented to Andranik by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (Cairo, 1920)



Russian "Mosin" rifle

visited the druzhina, distributing tobacco, food, clothing, etc.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of October 1914, the Azerbaijani detachment began combat operations against the Turks. At the same time, the command of the detachment was taken over by Major General F. G. Chernozubov<sup>63</sup>, and the command of the Caucasian 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade by Major General Tovmas Nazarbekyan<sup>64</sup>, about whom Poltavtsev notes that he was Armenian by nationality but did not know Armenian "and was wholeheartedly devoted to the Russians"<sup>65</sup>.

This was the only assessment given by Poltavtsev.

Poltavtsev did not attempt to assess T. Nazarbekyan as a commander or analyze the combat operations planned and led by him, which, unfortunately, the enemy, General Kyazim Karabekir, did later: "Armenia has three men: Nazarbekian, Aram (Manukyan - R.G., R.S.) and Alexander Khatisyan. If the Armenians had the wisdom to leave these three free to manage their affairs, there is no doubt that their fate would have been different".<sup>66</sup>



German-made Ottoman cavalry sword



Russian officer's sword

<sup>62</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 6 and back.

<sup>63</sup> Chernozubov Fyodor Grigory (1863-1919), Lieutenant General (18.06.1915), military intelligence officer, commander of the Azerbaijani detachment: the 4<sup>th</sup> Caucasian Cossack Division (01.04-18.06.1915), the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Cavalry Corps (04.07.1916), the 7<sup>th</sup> Caucasian Army Corps (15.02.1917).

<sup>64</sup> See more about him: Sahakyan 2016a.

<sup>65</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7.

<sup>66</sup> Artsruni 2002: 380. Gasparyan, Sahakyan 2017: 214-229.

Poltavtsev's similar attitude can be explained by the following: he himself wanted to head the brigade, so he does not express any opinion about T. Nazarbekyan as a commander. He does not appreciate the Battle of Dilman led by his commander. Later, A. Chernyshev, one of T. Nazarbekyan's officers and a participant in the battle, highly praised the general's military talent.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Poltavtsev complains about Nazarbekyan for demanding that the Armenians hand over the door of one of the Armenian churches in Bitlis (Baghesh) kept by one of the officers, which had carvings and inscriptions of various scenes. The door was a work of art and was worth several hundred thousand rubles.<sup>68</sup> On May 29, 1916, T. Nazarbekyan ordered the commander of the Caucasian 5<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment to send the Armenian manuscripts found in Bitlis to the Caucasian Museum in Tbilisi.<sup>69</sup>

Probably, the relations between the two military men had become so strained, or T. Nazarbekyan could no longer tolerate the arrogance of his subordinate, so on February 19, 1916, Poltavtsev was replaced by another officer as Chief of Staff.<sup>70</sup>



**Alexander Khatisyan (1874-1945)**



**Thomas Nazarbekian (1855-1931)**

According to Poltavtsev's testimony, Chernozubov did not like Armenians but tried not to show it and wanted to win their sympathy.<sup>71</sup> He simply dreamed of taking the post of Governor-General of Western Armenia and, with the help of H. Zavryan, had begun to learn Armenian.<sup>72</sup> When the dream did not come true, he drastically changed his attitude. On October 13, 1916, by Chernozubov's order, without an impartial investigation, the Field Military Court sentenced six Armenian volunteers to death, whose guilt was never proven.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>67</sup> "Hairenik", 1955, № 13171, August 14.

<sup>68</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 12 back. See T. Nazarbekyan's order: NAA, fund 45, inventory 1, file 23, sheet 47.

<sup>69</sup> NAA, fund 45, inventory 1, file 23, sheet 49.

<sup>70</sup> Sahakyan 2020: 311-312.

<sup>71</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7.

<sup>72</sup> Sahakyan 2019b: 301.

<sup>73</sup> Sahakyan 2015: 106.



A 76 mm mountain gun in action.



Commander of the Labinsky Cossack Regiment (1917), Colonel P. S. Abashkin with his family

Poltavtsev mentions the first combat operations when two companies of Armenian volunteers with two cannons engaged the enemy, which consisted of gendarmes, border guards, local militia, and Kurds. According to Poltavtsev’s testimony, the volunteers managed to push back the Turks from Kotur<sup>74</sup>, after which the druzhina was stationed in the town of Saray, where it remained for about a week.



The Turkish Mauser battle rifle. The Ottoman army was armed with several modifications of the German Mauser.



Captured Turkish machine guns.

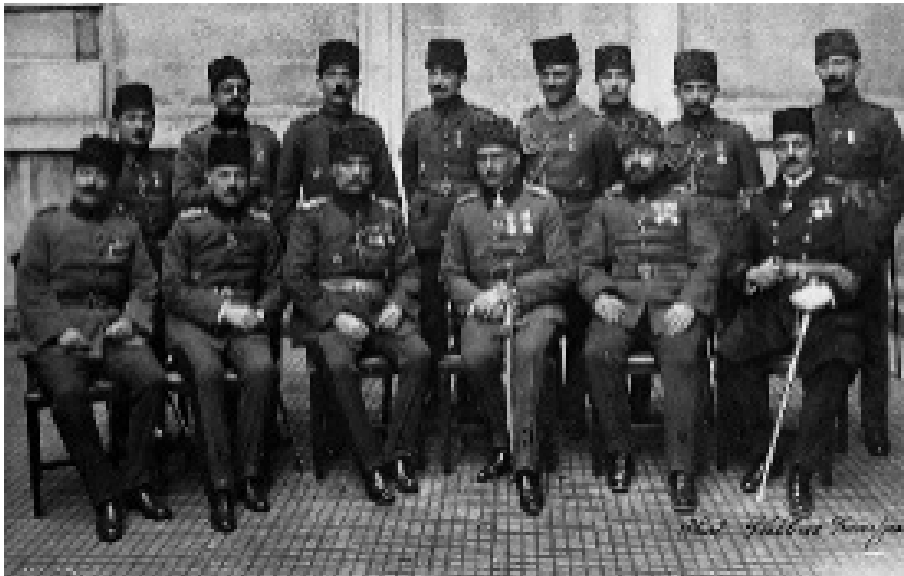
Poltavtsev briefly mentions the Turkish operation that began in the Sarighamish area in December 1914, as a result of which the Caucasian Army found itself in a difficult situation, and without any basis, the Azerbaijani detachment was ordered to retreat to Julfa.<sup>75</sup> He constantly reports on the decline in the discipline of the volunteers but does not mention the reasons. The following had occurred: the Christian population of Northern Persia – Armenians and Assyrians – had warmly welcomed the Russians, who, after their hasty retreat, were forced to flee. The retreat route of the multi-thousand

<sup>74</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7.

<sup>75</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7 back.



population, which was about 50 versts, was also defended by the volunteers along with the Russian troops. After a long and sleepless march, they were exhausted and physically unable to carry out any orders, so they could not be blamed for being undisciplined. Poltavtsev, for some unknown reason not taking into account the situation, continues to note that the druzhiniks refused to obey orders and it was impossible to force them to obey in any way. However, he was forced to admit that on December 7, having regained their strength, the druzhina participated in the battle.<sup>76</sup>



The officer corps of the Ottoman army



Yesaul of the  
Transcaspian Cossack  
Division Fyodor Eliseev

Poltavtsev characterizes the first battles of the druzhina as border clashes of no significant importance. He constantly emphasizes that the fighting was against a weak enemy<sup>77</sup>, but admits that the operations took place in difficult climatic conditions, in a snow-covered mountainous area, and the supply was inadequate. The volunteers, Cossacks, and riflemen were forced to spend the night in tents in snow-covered areas, in frosty conditions.<sup>78</sup>

Poltavtsev notes that he was with the druzhina throughout the aforementioned period. In his description: “For battle, they (the volunteers - R.S.) were still fit, the fighting itself did not require much effort, but outside of battle, it (the druzhina - R.S.) was a burden. During the march, the druzhiniks advanced in scattered groups and even alone and were very strung out... they mixed with other

<sup>76</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7 back.

<sup>77</sup> The qualification does not correspond to reality. They are mainly border guards and gendarmes, who, according to General E. V. Maslovsky, “were made up of selected people, with good military training and the best troops in terms of their qualities”, see Maslovsky 1934: 43.

<sup>78</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7 back.

troops, created disorder, besides, they consciously did not perform guard duty, considering it superfluous, and under unexpected shelling, they fled in panic or engaged in irregular combat”.<sup>79</sup>

During the battle, the volunteers advanced without a dispersed formation, without any order, attacking in a group behind the bravest and most initiative fighter, during which they shouted, made noise, and fired a lot, even when there was no need for it.<sup>80</sup>

Poltavtsev was angered by the fact that in settlements, the volunteers occupied the best buildings, arguing that they were lightly dressed and did not have winter clothing.<sup>81</sup> This last circumstance contradicts Poltavtsev’s claim that the volunteers had been given winter clothing, the absence of which is confirmed by T. Nazarbekyan.<sup>82</sup>



**Cavalry General Pyotr Ivanovich Oganovsky (1851-after 1917), commander of the IV Caucasian Army Corps**

The druzhina participated in battles for about a month, during which it suffered minor losses. After the first battles, Poltavtsev reiterates his opinion about the volunteers, namely that they had not undergone any training, which, if done, could have resulted in decent soldiers. The problem could have been solved if line officers had been appointed as company commanders, which, however, was not possible because the commander-volunteers had great authority among the fighters.<sup>83</sup>

After the end of the Sarighamish operation<sup>84</sup> in January 1915, the druzhina was sent for rest and replenishment and returned to the Azerbaijani detachment at the end of February.<sup>85</sup> In the rear, the druzhina command took steps to establish military discipline. At the same time, a simple military code was drawn up, which also mentioned the organization of a military police force.

The oath text of 9 policemen with their signatures has been preserved.<sup>86</sup>

In his subsequent notes, Poltavtsev again tries to belittle the role of the 1<sup>st</sup> druzhina and its commanders, especially during the Battle of Dilman, on which the fate of almost the entire Transcaucasia, and in case of failure, the Caucasus, depended.

<sup>79</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 7 back -8.

<sup>80</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 8 back.

<sup>81</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 8.

<sup>82</sup> He testifies: “Winter and snow took us by surprise. There was no warm clothing. The situation of the Armenian Druzhina was especially difficult. Their clothing was light... they suffered more during guard duty”, see: Sahakyan 2019a: 281.

<sup>83</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9.

<sup>84</sup> According to the British-Turkish historian Norman Stone, the Ottoman 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was defeated due to disease and frost, which is not true, see Stone 2010: 79.

<sup>85</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9 back.

<sup>86</sup> NAR, fund 1267, inventory 1, file 155, sheet 1, 2, 3.

Turkish intelligence managed to ascertain that the Russians had few forces in Dilman, and Halil Bey captured the city with a sharp attack. T. Nazarbekyan, who had few forces at his disposal, received an order to stop the Turks. In the battle near the city of Dilman from April 16 to 18, 1915, Halil Bey's division, suffering heavy losses, was forced to retreat.<sup>87</sup>

Poltavtsev admits that the Armenian druzhina fought hard during the Battle of Dilman. "They (the volunteers - R.S.) initially stopped the Turkish attack, then they defended one of the sections of the positions... The losses were great, the Turks resumed their attacks several times, but all attacks were repulsed, and the druzhina stood firm".<sup>88</sup> True to himself, the general complains that the volunteers fired a large number of bullets. We consider it necessary to note that the entire army spent a large number of bullets, which is confirmed in T. Nazarbekyan's memoirs.<sup>89</sup> Poltavtsev accuses the Armenians of the fact that the Armenian company on the right flank of the Russian defense unnoticed left its positions and joined the druzhina.<sup>90</sup>



Kurdish Hamidiye

Poltavtsev addresses the issue of the liberation of Van and again tries to underestimate the significance of the self-defense of the people of Van. He writes: "In Van (Turkish - R.S.), the garrison was insignificant, and the Turks hardly defended it (Van - R.S.). That is why it was easily conquered, which gave the Armenians an occasion to exaggerate the capture of Van as a major event".<sup>91</sup> Such an attitude was understandable. He did not want to admit that the V druzhina or the Ararat Regiment<sup>92</sup>, which operated within the Russian Bayazet detachment, upon learning about the difficult situation in Van, decided to help their compatriots fighting

desperate battles with only the regiment's forces.<sup>93</sup>

First of all, Poltavtsev makes no mention or allusion to the Armenian self-defense battles. In addition, the general downplays the number of Turkish-Kurdish forces besieging the Armenian quarters of Van.

<sup>87</sup> Sahakyan 2016: 210-215. Maslovsky 1934: 156.

<sup>88</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9 back.

<sup>89</sup> Sahakyan 2019b: 313.

<sup>90</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9 back.

<sup>91</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9 back.

<sup>92</sup> On April 1, 1915, the Ararat Regiment was formed, consisting of the II, III, and IV druzhinas. The commander was Vardan (Sargis Mehrabyan).

<sup>93</sup> Mehrabian 2022: 198-202.

Poltavtsev notes that the Turkish subject Aram<sup>94</sup> was appointed governor of Van and in no way comments on the activities of the Armenian authorities under Russian jurisdiction. He complains that the Armenian authorities provided their brigade with firewood at high prices.<sup>95</sup> The commander of the Ararat (V) Regiment, Vardan (Sargis Mehrabyan), also reports on the high prices.<sup>96</sup>

As Poltavtsev notes, in November 1915, a telegram was received from the headquarters of the Caucasian Army, which demanded answers to several questions, including “Is it true that the Armenian druzhina captured the city of Van? Which Armenian druzhina captured it, this or that, etc., etc.?”<sup>97</sup> It follows from the telegram that rumors were spreading that the successes of the army were allegedly due to the Armenian volunteers. The news that Andranik and the Armenian volunteers had captured Van was widely circulated.<sup>98</sup>



In 1909, in memory of the 250th anniversary of the regiment (June 28, 1892), the badge of the 13<sup>th</sup> Life-Grenadier Erivan His Majesty's Regiment was approved.

As Poltavtsev notes, he prepares a response, which, however, is not accepted by T. Nazarbekyan because it was not favorable to the Armenians. Therefore, the commander personally prepared the response and sent it to the army headquarters.<sup>99</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Armenian Druzhina, then the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, moved from Northern Persia to Van, where the 1<sup>st</sup> joined the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> druzhinas. Poltavtsev notes that the unification took place at the end of July 1915<sup>100</sup>, while in reality, it was in June. The general reports that in Van and Ardjesh, some of the volunteers left their druzhinas and went into peaceful life. Poltavtsev notes that in Adiljevaz (Artske), they witnessed alleged massacres carried out by Armenians. In the courtyard of one of the houses intended for the brigade headquarters, lay the bodies of 12 women and children with

<sup>94</sup> Manukyan Aram (Sargis Hovhannisyan, 1879-1919), prominent Armenian liberation, political and state figure. Temporary governor of Van and surrounding provinces (May 7-July 14, 1915). One of the founders of the Republic of Armenia, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (1918-1919).

<sup>95</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 11.

<sup>96</sup> Mehrabian 2022: 207. The Chinese general Sun Tzi (late VI century BC – early V century BC) observed on this occasion: “The population living near the army sells everything necessary for the army at a high price. When everything is sold at a high price, the people's property is depleted, and it is difficult to fulfill the obligations.” Sun Tzi 2006.

<sup>97</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 12 and back.

<sup>98</sup> Price 1917: 140.

<sup>99</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 12 back.

<sup>100</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 9 back.

their throats cut.<sup>101</sup> A doctor testifies to another similar case that he witnessed on the road from Mush to Bitlis.<sup>102</sup>



**Soldiers of the French “Oriental” or “Armenian” Legion**

Poltavtsev notes the massacres of Armenians in Mush by the Turks, as recounted by the Muslim notables of the city. A local Turkish doctor had personally shot about 500 Armenians<sup>103</sup>. Regarding the mass killings of Armenians, Poltavtsev cites another example witnessed by the officers of his division in an Armenian Apostolic church near Bitlis.<sup>104</sup>



**Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Division, General P. S. Stefanovich-Stasenko (from 20.03.1916)**

Continuing to underestimate the combat operations of the volunteers, Poltavtsev reports that in the summer of 1915, the Armenians did not participate in any serious battles and continues to note that a significant part of the volunteers left the druzhinas. Among the commanders, he mentions Dro and his druzhina, which was no different from Andranik’s group. In his opinion, Dro was intelligent and made a better impression than Andranik. “He (Dro - R.S.) understood the situation better, understood the military situation more, and there was more order in his unit”.<sup>105</sup>

In the article, Poltavtsev avoids and even makes no allusion to the reasons and consequences of the July 1915 retreat from Van. It is self-evident that he would have had to admit that the retreat from Vaspurakan had no basis, as nothing threatened the city. And just as the retreat of the

<sup>101</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10.

<sup>102</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10 back.

<sup>103</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10 back and 11.

<sup>104</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 11.

<sup>105</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10.

Russian troops from Northern Persia in December 1914, the July 1915 retreat from Van was not a military operation driven by any military necessity.



„Глаза и уши армии“. Кавказские казаки перед разведкой.  
По фот. нашего специального корреспондента.

"Глаза и уши армии". Кавказские казаки перед разведкой. Иллюстрация из ж  
© Макаров Алексей / Фотобанк Лорис



**Cossack reconnaissance vanguard (Caucasian Front)**



**Staff Captain of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Regiment**



**Hamazasp Srvandztyants**

Falsifying the truth, Poltavtsev reports that at the suggestion of the Armenians, the army command allowed Armenian refugees to cultivate the lands of the Alashkert Valley, for which it provided the necessary supplies.<sup>106</sup> In reality, by allowing the refugees to restore settlements and begin agricultural work, the Russian authorities aimed to prepare the ground for the relocation of Russian settlers to the Alashkert Valley. Applications had already been received from various parts of the empire, expressing a desire to move to the Alashkert Valley for residence.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>106</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 11 back.

<sup>107</sup> Sahakyan 2014.



The Kuban Cossack army. In the center is Emperor Nicholas II.



Russian machine gun crew (Caucasian Front, 1914-1915)

In the winter of 1915 and 1916, Andranik's 1<sup>st</sup> and Hamazasp's<sup>108</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> druzhinas participated in the offensive operations of the IV Caucasian Army Corps. "Both the druzhinas and the other troops faced a difficult task: advancing through snow-covered mountains, without roads, and suffering severe deprivations due to the lack of provisions".<sup>109</sup> Constant battles, difficult terrain, and low-quality food physically weakened the volunteers, and after the capture of Bitlis, the part of the fighters who were locals left the druzhina, while some began to engage in looting.

Poltavtsev reports that in March 1916, Andranik left the druzhina, noting that "By that time, the supreme command had been disappointed with the druzhinas and had decided to disband them".<sup>110</sup> In reality, the Armenians were disappointed upon learning about the Russian authorities' intention to settle the captured territories of Western Armenia with Russians and Cossacks.

Poltavtsev believes that after the decision to disband the druzhinas, taking into account the sentiments of the Armenians, they decided to organize regular units from the Armenians: six rifle battalions with 5,719 soldiers and officers<sup>111</sup>, and on September 11 and 30, 1917, it was allowed to form two Armenian rifle brigades, one of which operated in Persia. Each of the brigades consisted of 2 rifle regiments.<sup>112</sup>

Poltavtsev notes that in addition to the Armenians, a Georgian rifle battalion and a cavalry regiment, and an Assyrian rifle battalion were organized. A hundred was formed from the Transcaucasian Tatars. Neither the commander, Khan Khoysky, nor his subordinates had any idea of military affairs.<sup>113</sup> It can be assumed that the formation of the hundred was merely a propaganda step, as it did not participate in combat operations.

<sup>108</sup> Srvandzdyants Hamazasp (1873-1921), figure in the Armenian liberation movement, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> volunteer druzhina, member of the ARF.

<sup>109</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10.

<sup>110</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10 back.

<sup>111</sup> Nazaryan 1999: 73.

<sup>112</sup> Nazaryan 1999: 129-130.

<sup>113</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 11.

## The Caucasian Front of World War I in the Memories of Participants and Eyewitnesses



ARMENIAN OFFICERS IN THE WORLD WAR I. OFFICERS OF THE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA. 1914-1920: HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY.



Caucasian front of the First World War. 1914-1917. Collection of documents. Moscow.





Poltavtsev's next meeting with the Armenian brigade takes place in the summer of 1917, when he held the position of Chief of Staff of the VII Caucasian Rifle Army Corps.<sup>114</sup> The corps was stationed in Atropatene. The Armenian brigade and the IV Caucasian Cossack Division were located in the Baneh region, 150 versts southeast of Lake Urmia.<sup>115</sup> The brigade consisted of volunteers and Armenian conscripts, and the commanders were Armenians.



**76 mm mountain gun in action**

The “innovations” of the Provisional Government formed after the February Revolution of 1917 dealt a heavy blow to Russian statehood. The order of March 1, 1917, required the immediate formation of elected committees of privates in the units of the Petrograd garrison, which became mandatory for the entire Russian army and navy.



**Cossack centurion Fyodor Eliseev and his family**

Poltavtsev reports that after the revolution, the army rapidly disintegrated<sup>116</sup>, the reason for which was the military committees, which in fact replaced the commanders,

<sup>114</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13.

<sup>115</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13.

<sup>116</sup> As of August 1, 1917, the number of deserters on the front was 128,000, Nazaryan 1999: 92.

who had to coordinate all orders with the committees.<sup>117</sup> As for the Armenians, Poltavtsev makes the following surprising, uncharacteristic confession: "...committees also existed in the Armenian units, but (did not interfere with the decisions of the command - R.S.) they maintained order and did not harm".<sup>118</sup> From this, it can be concluded that the committees established in the Armenian units were formal; the Armenians had simply carried out the order of their superiors and created military committees because they were aware of the disaster that the disintegration of the army could cause to the Armenian people.



The personnel of the Persian Cossack brigade



Cossack cavalry



Кавказский фронтъ. Партия плѣнныхъ турокъ, взятыхъ въ періодъ алашкертскихъ боевъ.

Turkish soldiers captured during the Alashkert operation (June 26 – July 21, 1915)

In mid-June 1917, the VII Caucasian Army Corps launched an offensive in 4 important directions, which, according to Poltavtsev's confession, stopped due to the insubordination of the Russian units. They refused to continue the offensive; only the Armenian brigade carried out the operation<sup>119</sup>, which was quite successful; the Turks

<sup>117</sup> The Socialist-Revolutionaries, represented by the infamous Yakov Blyumkin (1900-1929), also played a significant role in destabilizing the army in Persia, see Yemelyanov 1923: 178.

<sup>118</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13.

<sup>119</sup> Actually, 4 battalions, with 3,000 soldiers and officers, see: The History of Armenia 2015: 602.

were defeated, and the Armenians captured several cannons.<sup>120</sup> The undertaken operation failed because false rumors spread that the Turks had managed to break through the rear of the Armenian brigade, which caused panic followed by a retreat. Poltavtsev is convinced that the Armenians could not be blamed. He assumed there had been treachery, but it was unknown who had spread the false rumors. Remaining true to his unfriendly attitude towards the Armenians, the general concludes that the instability of the Armenians reappeared, which manifested itself in a panicked flight.<sup>121</sup>



**Turkish prisoners of war (Erzurum, February 1916)**

The October Revolution of 1917 brought about serious changes. The Soviet government led by V. I. Lenin, in order to maintain power, began negotiations with the Quadruple Alliance countries. The Transcaucasian Seim, which replaced the Transcaucasian Special Committee, did not recognize the Bolshevik government and its proclaimed Soviet power. An armistice was signed on the Caucasian Front in Erzrnka, after which the Russian army began to massively abandon the front. After the orders of the Bolshevik leaders L. Trotsky and V. Lenin on December 10, the collapse of the Caucasian Front accelerated<sup>122</sup>. Mass desertion began. The Russian army withdrew from the Caucasian Front. The soldiers wanted to return to Russia, where “they were dividing the land, factories, plants, and houses”<sup>123</sup>. Therefore, certain steps were taken to form national military units. In Poltavtsev’s opinion, the Transcaucasian army, composed of Armenians, Georgians, and Caucasian Tatars, was not able to replace the six army corps that had left the front. As an example, he cites the VII Caucasian Army Corps, which occupied a 400-verst long area. In his assessment: “In essence, that (the replacement of Russian troops - R.S.) was a fairy-tale dream”.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>120</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13 and back.

<sup>121</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13 back.

<sup>122</sup> The History of Armenia 2015: 599.

<sup>123</sup> Yemelyanov 1923: 179.

<sup>124</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 13 back. As of December 18, 1916, there were 19,436 Armenian and 16,115 Georgian reservists in the Caucasian Military District, see Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 637.



Russian artillery calculation near Erznka (1916, spring)

Regardless of everything, the formation of national military units begins. At that time, there were one Georgian infantry and one cavalry regiment, three Armenian infantry and one Assyrian battalion. It was planned to form Armenian, Georgian, Assyrian, and Russian volunteer units. According to Poltavtsev's testimony: "The Armenians worked most diligently of all, as they understood what threatened their nation... They are forming the largest number of troops of all arms. The Georgians did something, but their troops did not reach the front..., only one officer battalion was formed from the Russians<sup>125</sup> under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Yefremov, which, together with the Armenians, bravely operated near Kars and Alexandropol..."<sup>126</sup> Poltavtsev makes no mention that the creation of the Armenian armed forces met with the resistance of the Georgians and Tatars, "who did not tolerate the Armenian military-political dominance in the Caucasus and Western Armenia".<sup>127</sup>

In Atropatene, Poltavtsev, as the commander of the Azerbaijani detachment, is instructed to organize battalions from the local Armenians and Tatars. He complains that the undertaking is unsuccessful because he did not have real authority. The Assyrians, under the leadership of Agha Petros<sup>128</sup>, organize a combat unit. The Armenian unit, which numbered 80 people, is headed by Ensign Stepanyan.<sup>129</sup> Poltavtsev accuses the Armenians and Assyrians of allegedly looting and killing many civilians in the city of Urmia. On July 17, 1917, he submits a report to the command about the aforementioned events.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>125</sup> It consisted of 300 officers, see: The History of Armenia 2015: 601.

<sup>126</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet back and 14.

<sup>127</sup> The History of Armenia 2015: 598.

<sup>128</sup> Petros Elia of Baz (1880-1932), commander of the Assyrian forces. He served as the temporary translator for the Russian Consulate in Urmia. He was repeatedly praised by the Russian command, see: Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 985-986.

<sup>129</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 14.

<sup>130</sup> Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 981.



**Petros Elia of Baz**

Poltavtsev resigns from the post of commander of the Azerbaijani detachment and in mid-February 1918, after handing over the post to Colonel Kuzmin, comes to Julfa with the army corps headquarters.<sup>131</sup> As for Kuzmin's forces, which were an officer battalion, in our opinion, Poltavtsev does not provide accurate information. The "Azerbaijani Special Detachment" was organized from the local Armenians and Assyrians, headed by Colonel Kuzmin, and the chief of staff was Colonel Goretsky. The detachment's composition was replenished on March 21, 1918, by the Armenian battalion that had retreated from Van.<sup>132</sup>

According to his memoirs, the Muslim residents of Urmia and the Persian authorities, upon learning of the advance of the Turkish army, began military operations. Fierce battles took place on May 7. The "Azerbaijani Special Detachment" defended about 80,000<sup>133</sup> Armenian and Assyrian refugees, who suffered significant losses from the forces of Halil Bey (6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> divisions) and Kurdish bandits. The Russian battalion, overcoming great difficulties through the mountains, managed to reach Northern Mesopotamia and join the British troops.<sup>134</sup>



**Andranik with his comrades in arms in Syunik (1918)**

Probably, Poltavtsev, presenting the aforementioned operation, did not have the opportunity to compare it with other testimonies or sources. Fortunately, the report of an Armenian officer, a participant in the joint combat operations of the Armenian-Assyrian

<sup>131</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 14 back.

<sup>132</sup> Sahakyan 2011: 348.

<sup>133</sup> Sahakyan 2011: 351.

<sup>134</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 14 back.

forces with the Russian battalion in Northern Persia from March 21, 1918, has been preserved, in which the author presents the real picture.<sup>135</sup>

Arriving in Julfa, Poltavtsev cannot reach Tbilisi because the railway and road were controlled by the Tatars, who were constantly clashing with the Armenians. He admits that the local Armenians had a benevolent attitude towards the Russians, so they preferred to stay in Julfa until mid-April 1918.<sup>136</sup>



The Turkish attack on Armenia in 1918

In Julfa, the Armenians had organized infantry, cavalry, and artillery units. The commanders were young officers, and the detachment commander was a former student who had completed accelerated officer courses and held the rank of ensign. In Poltavtsev’s assessment, the commander was intelligent, but the events of 1917 had turned everything upside down, including military discipline, which is why the commander’s influence was not complete, absolute. However, this did not prevent the Armenians from

delivering a worthy counterblow to the Tatars, as the personnel consisted of battle-hardened and experienced servicemen.

Unlike the Armenians, the Tatars had no experience in military service; their commanders were beys who similarly had no idea about military service, so the Armenians were in a more favorable position. As an example, he cites the clash near Nakhichevan. The Tatars attacked the Armenians in a large crowd, but almost all of them were destroyed by machine gun fire. It remained incomprehensible to the surviving Tatars why, having an enormous numerical superiority, they could not achieve results. They explained their defeat by some miraculous means the Armenians possessed. “We know,” they said, “a rifle, we know a top (that is, a cannon), but what is this that goes ta-ta-ta-, and people fall like logs, we don’t know”.<sup>137</sup>



American-made Lewis gun (1913-1963)

Poltavtsev, true to his adopted policy, hastens to add that the Tatars, who numerically outnumbered the Armenians, their ignorance or backwardness was temporary. They were waiting for the Ottoman army to

<sup>135</sup> For more details, see Sahakyan 2011.

<sup>136</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 14 back.

<sup>137</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 15.

nullify the Armenians' combat superiority.<sup>138</sup>

As for the Armenians, Poltavtsev gives the following assessment: "Like all Eastern peoples, the Armenians, in general, are prone to exaggerations and extremes. Success intoxicates them and makes them arrogant and conceited, failure leads to a state of panic. Being balanced and practical by nature, they nevertheless easily succumb to excitement".<sup>139</sup> As an example, he cites Andranik, who in 1918 was supposed to defend Erzurum. And when the Turkish army launched an offensive, the Armenian army, almost without any resistance, began to retreat, destroying Turkish villages. In the general's opinion, the Armenians should not have taken such a step, as they only further enraged the Turks.<sup>140</sup>

In Julfa, they were cut off from the rest of the world, but when they installed a radio station, they were able to get some information. Thus, it was a surprise for the Russians that the Germans had captured Kharkov and Rostov and were continuing to advance. The Russian military believed that all this was



French "Lebel" rifle (French: Fusil Modèle 1886 dit "Fusil Lebel") (1887-1940). The Russian army was also armed with these rifles

misinformation that should not be trusted. After such a short transition, Poltavtsev again refers to Armenian-Tatar relations. Armenian military units are sent in the direction of Alexandropol-Kars-Erzurum against the Turks. He reports that the command of the troops is carried out by General T. Nazarbekyan.<sup>141</sup>



General V. K. Karpov

Being in an isolated situation, the command of the Russian detachment considers its main task to be the defense of Julfa, for which a garrison is organized and guard posts are placed around the settlement. The Tatars occasionally approached the guard posts in small groups, after which a shootout would begin. However, during one such shootout, a terrible panic arose in Julfa; even a cavalry platoon was sent to help. A rumor spread among the population that the Tatars were advancing with large forces. In reality, there had been no serious attack. The battle lasted two hours and ended without any losses.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>138</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 15.

<sup>139</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 15 back.

<sup>140</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 15 back.

<sup>141</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 15 back and 16.

<sup>142</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 16.



The command of the Caucasian Army in 1917



Circassian Hamidiye

It follows from Poltavtsev's testimony that there were hostile forces in Julfa that, if necessary, would create artificial panic among the troops and the population. This was probably done deliberately, as after this incident, a military council was convened, headed by the corps commander, General V. K. Karpov.<sup>143</sup> Poltavtsev was the first to speak, proposing to contact the Armenian command and join them. Next, a young Armenian officer spoke, assuring that with the available forces, it was possible to resist the enemy. He proposed taking punitive actions against the Tatars, which would make it possible to stop their attacks. According to Poltavtsev's confession, the officer's proposal was approved by those present.<sup>144</sup>

In Poltavtsev's opinion, the Armenians took no steps to establish good neighborly relations with the Tatars. The question arises, how should this have been done if the Tatars had an openly hostile position, and besides, were waiting for the Turkish army hour by hour?<sup>145</sup> In such a case, why should they have been interested in normalizing relations with the Armenians? In our opinion, the general either did not notice this important circumstance or deliberately overlooked it.

In mid-April 1918, information was received that a representative of the Tatars was coming to Nakhichevan on a peace mission, and since the area between Nakhichevan and Julfa was controlled by the Armenians, and Nakhichevan was in the hands of the Tatars, it was necessary to have the permission of both sides to move. The Armenians invite General Karpov to participate in the negotiations. The latter takes Poltavtsev and General Gashimbekov<sup>146</sup> with him. Poltavtsev is convinced that the detachment

<sup>143</sup> Karpov Vladimir Kirill (1864-after 1926), Lieutenant General. Chief of Communications of the Caucasian Army and Navy (20.10.1914-to 12.08.1917), Commander of the Caucasian Combined Infantry Division (02.04.1-12.08.1917). Chief of Supply of the 7<sup>th</sup> Caucasian Separate Army Corps, Acting Commander of the same corps (12.01-19.04.1918).

<sup>144</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 16 back.

<sup>145</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.

<sup>146</sup> Aliar-Bek Mehti Gashimbekov (1856-1920), Major General. Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Caucasian Rifle Brigade (10.07.1916), Head of the General Administration of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1919-19.02.1920).



commander agrees to participate, hoping to get to Tbilisi. Poltavtsev also had such a desire, but for some unknown reason, he only mentions his commander. They knew that there was a train with Russian passengers in Nakhichevan who had been waiting for two months for the opportunity to travel to Tbilisi.<sup>147</sup>



**General Aliar-Bek Gashimbekov**

The negotiations last for two months. The Armenian side demands the withdrawal of the Tatar armed formations, monetary compensation to the families of the Armenians killed by the Tatars, and the extradition of the criminals who committed the murders, some of whom are named personally.

A Tatar negotiator from Yerevan makes efforts to reconcile the parties. Eventually, peace is established, although it is clear to everyone that it is temporary. This circumstance allows the Russians to leave for Yerevan by train.<sup>148</sup>

Poltavtsev notes that both Armenians and Tatars are feverishly arming themselves. The general reports that the Armenian side had officially received weapons and ammunition, while the Tatars were buying them from retreating Russian soldiers, as the Provisional Government had refused to hand over weapons to them. He even mentions the prices: “A combat rifle cost three rubles, and a cannon is a little more expensive”.<sup>149</sup> It follows from this that the Tatars were worse armed, which does not correspond to reality. Poltavtsev forgets the Shamkhor massacre of Russian soldiers and officers in January 1918 carried out by the Tatars<sup>150</sup>, during which they seized a large quantity of weapons and ammunition.



**The coat of arms of the Republic of Armenia**

<sup>147</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17.

<sup>148</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.

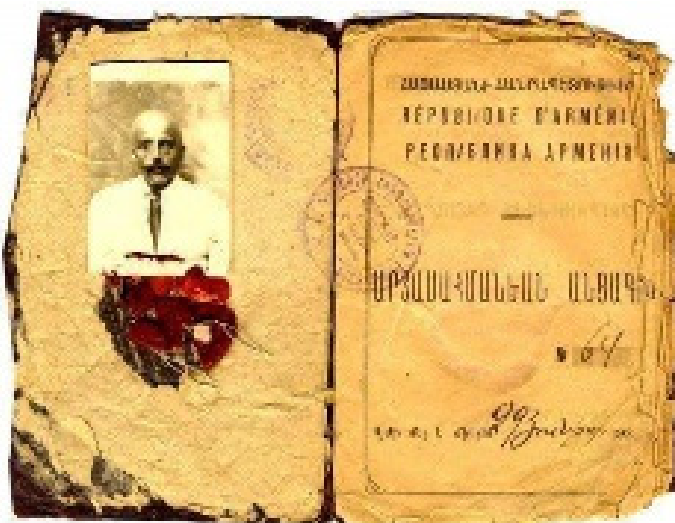
<sup>149</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.

<sup>150</sup> Baikov 1923: 113-114; Kadishev 1960: 36; Mukhanov 2019: 57-97.

Samples of RA passports



Zabel Yesayan's passport



Foreign passport of the Republic of Armenia: Issued to Georgi Gurdjieff



RA foreign passport



RA foreign passport



Armenian banknotes



**General Movses Silikyan**

On April 17, 1918, the train departs from Nakhichevan and arrives in Yerevan in the evening. Here, Poltavtsev meets his colleagues, among whom was General M. Silikyan<sup>151</sup>, about whom he notes: “He is a very good officer”.<sup>152</sup>

On April 18, on the way to Tbilisi, they meet General T. Nazarbekyan in Alexandropol. “The poor old man was in a state of despair. He showed us the fires of the Turkish positions near

Alexandropol and said that as soon as the Turks attacked, his troops would flee. In his opinion, nothing good was foreseen for the Armenians in general... he would do what the nation demanded of him. In his spirit, he was Russian, a supporter of a united, indivisible, and great Russia”.<sup>153</sup>



**Old Alexandropol**

On April 19, Poltavtsev arrives in Tbilisi. He notes that the power was in the hands of the Transcaucasian Commissariat<sup>154</sup> and had no separatist sentiments towards Russia, but was against the Bolsheviks and preferred republican Russia.<sup>155</sup>

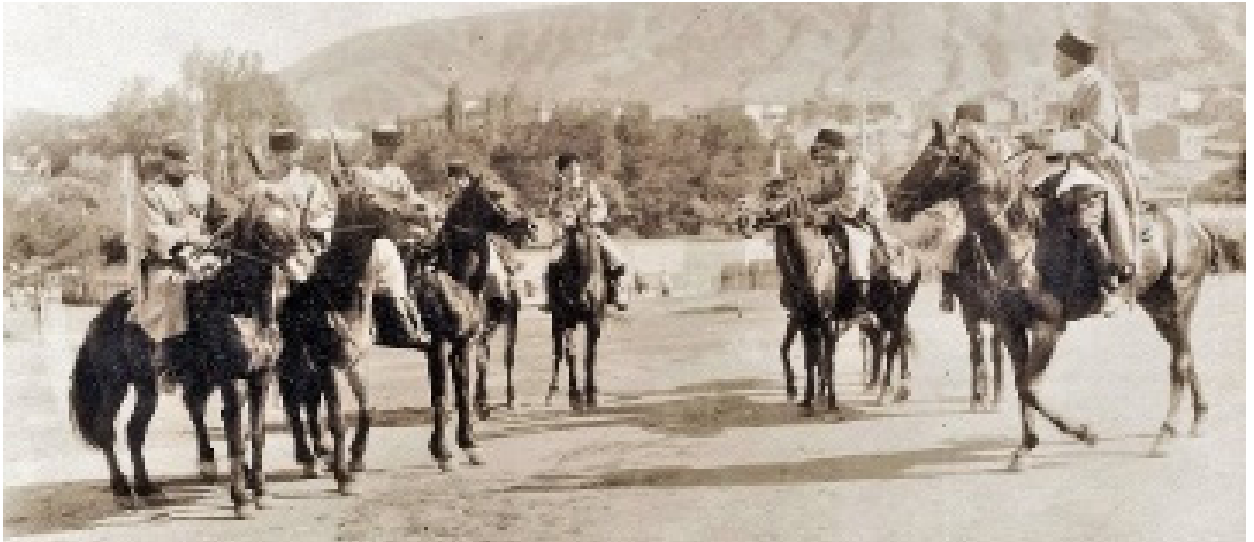
<sup>151</sup> Silikyan Movses (Silikov Moisey, 1862-1937), Udi by nationality, lieutenant general (22.09.1917), Russian and Armenian military figure. Victim of Stalinist violence.

<sup>152</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.

<sup>153</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 18.

<sup>154</sup> The author is mistaken. At that time, the Transcaucasian Special Committee (OZAKOM) was operating. The Transcaucasian Commissariat was formed in November 1917.

<sup>155</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 18.



**Georgian cavalry (1918)**

Poltavtsev notes that the war continued and only the Armenians were fighting against the Turks. The Turks managed to capture Alexandropol and march on Yerevan. The Turkish advance was dangerous only for the Armenians. Under such conditions, the Transcaucasian government, where Georgians and Tatars predominated, decided to declare its independence.<sup>156</sup> The Georgians received the patronage of the Germans, and the Tatars had no problems with their co-ethnics and co-religionists, the Turks. Germans also fought against the Ottoman forces in the Georgian army.<sup>157</sup> During the clashes, according to Poltavtsev, the Georgians had 3 to 5 killed, who were “brought to Tbilisi and buried as national heroes”<sup>158</sup>.



**Georgian soldiers (1918)**

<sup>156</sup> For more details, see Melikyan 2025.

<sup>157</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 18 back. The Turks also shot captured German soldiers, see Baum 2010: 143.

<sup>158</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 19.



Armenian cavalry and infantry in Sardarapat (May 1918)

Armenian population.

Poltavtsev mentions the Treaty of Batum of June 4, 1918, as a result of which the territory of Armenia was severely limited.<sup>160</sup> He notes that T. Nazarbekyan retired, while Andranik continued the struggle against the Turks.



General Hovhannes  
Hakhverdyan (1873-1931)

Poltavtsev appreciates the attitude of the locals in the Transcaucasian republics towards the Russians. He is particularly dissatisfied with the Georgians, whom, in his opinion, the Germans partially incited. Azerbaijan hires the Russians they need, while others begin to be persecuted. "The attitude towards the Russians was best in Armenia... Many Russian officers and officials served with them, and the Russians were treated quite well, like their own".<sup>161</sup>

The Minister of War of the Republic of Armenia, General Hovhannes Hakhverdyan<sup>162</sup>, whom Poltavtsev describes as a distinguished and combat-ready officer of the General Staff, at the mediation of T. Nazarbekyan, wanted Poltavtsev to take the post of Chief of the General Staff of the Republic of Armenia's armed forces, which could not be realized due to the unfavorable conditions.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 19.

<sup>160</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 19.

<sup>161</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 19.

<sup>162</sup> Hakhverdyan Hovhannes (Ivan Akhverdov, 1873-1931), Major General of the Russian Army (21.01.1916), Lieutenant General of the Armenian Army (1918), participant in the Russo-Japanese (1904-1905) and World War I (1914-1918) wars. Graduate of the Nikolaev Academy of the General Staff (1902). Minister of War of the Republic of Armenia (04.1918-03.1919), Chief of the General Staff (1919), Assistant to the Minister of War (Deputy, 05.1920-11.1921). Victim of Stalinist violence (25.04.1931). Acquitted (20.09.1989).

<sup>163</sup> GARF, fund R 6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 19.

In September 1918, V. N. Poltavtsev left Tbilisi for the Volunteer Army to participate in the battles against the Bolsheviks, and information about the events in Armenia is scarce. In his opinion, there were two opinions among the Armenians regarding the future of Armenia: some believed that Armenia should link its fate with Russia liberated from the Bolsheviks, while others with Soviet Russia.<sup>164</sup>

In conclusion, despite the fact that General N. Poltavtsev tries to underestimate the Armenian volunteers and Armenian servicemen who served in the Russian regular army in his memoirs, nevertheless, as an eyewitness and direct participant, he provides additional material on the events of 1914-1918.

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