

TESTIMONIALS OF THE 2ND CAUCASIAN RIFLE BRIGADE OFFICERS ABOUT THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Abstract

In the article are presented the memoirs and reports of four officers of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade, later Division: General T. Nazarbekyan,⁴ Colonel (later General) V. N. Poltavtsev,⁵ M. A. Krim Shamkhalov-Sokolov,⁶ and *zauryad praporshchik* (Warrant Officer) Udovitsa⁷ on numerous cases of mass massacres of Armenians, the Genocide, which mainly took place in the province of Van and the city and district of Mush. The testimonies mostly cover the years 1915–1916. They contain some unknown information about the brutal and inhuman actions carried out by the Ottoman authorities. T. Nazarbekyan's memoirs were written based on materials preserved in his personal archive. V. N. Poltavtsev wrote his memoirs abroad, in Belgrade. The report of the interrogation of Staff Captain Krim Shamkhalov and the report of the *zauryad praporshchik* Udovitsa are preserved in T. Nazarbekyan's personal archive.

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⁴ Tovmas Nazarbekyan (Foma Nazarbekov, 1855–1931), Major General of the Russian army, Lieutenant General (Sparapet) of the Armenian army. Participant in the Russo-Turkish (1877–1878), Russo-Japanese (1904–1905), and First World War Caucasian front (1914–1917), as well as the Turkish-Armenian wars (1918, 1920). Commander of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade (25.03–19.11.1915), then the division (19.11.1915–10.07.1916), and 7th Caucasian Separate Army Corps (01.1917). Commander of the Armenian Separate Corps (from 26.12.1917). Participant in the battles of Sardarapat and Bash-Aparan (05.1918). After the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia, he was arrested and transferred to Baku, then to the Ryazan concentration camp (1921). Died in Tbilisi.

⁵ Poltavtsev Vladimir Nikolaevich (1875–1937), colonel (06.12.1912), major general (03.03.1917). Graduated from the Nikolaev academy of the general staff (1904). Participant in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) and the First World War (1914–1917). Chief of Staff of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade (03.08.1913–02.03.1916), then of the division (02.03.1916–18.05.1917). Participant in the White movement.

⁶ Krimshamkhalov-Sokolov Mikhail Avgusti (1871–1947), colonel of the Russian army (1917). Commander of a company of the Caucasian 8th Rifle Regiment (1915). Head of the intelligence department of the Armenian Corps (04.1918). Participant in the White movement.

⁷ In the Russian army, the title of “*zauryad*” was given to civilians who were conscripted into the army but did not have military education.

Keywords: First World War Caucasian front, Armenian genocide, memoirs, testimonies

Introduction

During the First World War, the Young Turk leadership of the Ottoman Empire carried out mass massacres and deportations of Armenians, an act of genocide. A vast and multilingual body of literature has been produced on this issue, and the flow of scholarly works continues to this day. Foreigners who, for various reasons, were present in Western Armenia and in Armenian-populated regions of Asia Minor witnessed these atrocities firsthand. Valuable archival documents preserved in various countries around the world provide evidence of the Armenian Genocide as a state-organized and systematically implemented policy of the Ottoman government.

Testimonies of the genocide in the Van province

During the years of the First World War, important and credible testimonies about the Armenian genocide were preserved in the memoirs of T. Nazarbekyan, of which he was an eyewitness. The general recalls with sorrow the difficult situation of the Armenian and Assyrian refugees retreating from northern Persia to the Russian border on December 27, 1914. He testifies: "... there was no care for these unfortunate refugees. Their suffering was further aggravated by the impassable mud on the road from Khoy to the village of Sardavar. The unfortunate refugees were simply drowning in that mud. Children, the elderly and weak women were literally dragged out of the mud. All types of troops provided willing assistance".⁸ This was one of the first warnings that heavy and terrible days awaited the Armenian people. As early as 1911, the Armenians of Qaradagh (Armenian Mountains) in the Atropatene province were subjected to an attack by the Shahsevan Turkic tribe, for which they were harshly punished by the Russians.⁹

On June 10, 1915, the brigade crossed into the Van province from Atropatene through the Chukh-Gyaduk pass. Along the way lay a great number of mutilated corpses. The general notes in his memoirs: "They were all Armenians tortured to death by the Kurds and by Jevdet Pasha's detachment".¹⁰ After staying near Van for several days, the Caucasian 2nd Rifle Brigade resumed its march on June 16, and again encountered Armenian "...wealthy villages, all of them in ruins and filled with the corpses of people and animals".¹¹ On the road from Artske to Khanik, the villages they encountered were Kurdish, and their inhabitants had not left their homes.¹² This

⁸ Sahakyan 2019a: 291.

⁹ SARF, collection R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 7; Sahakyan 2011: 270.

¹⁰ Sahakyan 2019b: 209.

¹¹ Sahakyan 2019b: 214.

¹² Sahakyan 2019b: 215.

testimony of T. Nazarbekov is important because Turkish historiography accuses Armenians of massacring Muslims.

In the village of Purkhush in the province, where there were many refugees, including children, T. Nazarbekyan wished to adopt one of them. However, the boy, who was about 12 or 13 years old, refused, explaining that he wanted to look for his parents, and if he could not find them alive, he would take revenge on the Turks. All the general's persuasions were in vain.¹³

On July 9, 1915, T. Nazarbekov received an order to retreat, as rumors spread that a large number of Turkish forces were approaching. The general, accompanied by a large number of refugee Armenians from Mush, began to retreat. In the village of Tapavank, a barefoot Armenian man begged the soldiers to save his younger brothers, but he refused to go with them, "saying that he had decided to die in his home".¹⁴

The unexpected retreat of the Russian army forced the Armenians of Vaspurakan to abandon their settlements and follow the Russians. T. Nazarbekyan was compelled to protect the refugees with his brigade and Armenian volunteers. Unfortunately, a significant number of civilians were killed as a result of Kurdish attacks.¹⁵

Mass massacres of Armenians in the city of Mush and the province: Testimonies of Muslims

The memoirs of T. Nazarbekyan and V. N. Poltavtsev, along with the reports of Krim-Shamkhalov and Udovitsa, present the massacres of Armenians in the city of Mush and in the Armenian villages of the plain. On February 3, 1916, the Russian army captured Mush. Approximately 50 families remained in the city, including a small number of Armenians. The Armenian population had been massacred in June 1915.¹⁶ Only a small number of craftsmen:¹⁷ tailors, locksmiths, and shoemakers were left alive, as they were essential for the army's needs. A Turk was settled in each of their households, acting as "the full master and owner of both the people and the property".¹⁸ Regarding the Armenian quarter of the city, it was almost entirely destroyed during the self-defense, by Turkish artillery.

¹³ Sahakyan 2019b: 226.

¹⁴ Sahakyan 2019b: 227–228.

¹⁵ American missionaries, one year later in 1916, while in the Berkry Gorge, counted about seven thousand human skeletons. See Ussher, Knapp 1917: 312.

¹⁶ In May 1915, the authorities ordered the residents of Mush to forcibly deport within two hours; however, the Armenians refused and, under the leadership of Hakob Kotoyan (1864–1915), organized the self-defense of the city's five Armenian quarters. The population of Mush, which was 12,000, had been increased by about 10,000 Armenians who had taken refuge from the surrounding villages. The forces were uneven; the Armenians lacked sufficient weapons and ammunition and, in addition, had to fight against approximately 2,000 regular soldiers of the Turkish army, 11 cannons, and Kurdish irregular militias. The battles continued until June 30.

¹⁷ Sahakyan 2020: 301–302.

¹⁸ Sahakyan 2020: 309.

On February 12, 1916, while crossing the bridge over the Euphrates near the village of Sulukh, T. Nazarbekyan noticed that the stones on the riverbank were red in color. He was informed that in June of the previous year, the Turks and Kurds had forced some Armenians to be thrown into the Euphrates, while those who refused were beheaded and thrown into the river.¹⁹ According to Muslim testimonies, even if Armenians managed to escape by swimming, they were caught and thrown back into the river. In this way, about 15,000 Armenians were killed.²⁰

On February 13, T. Nazarbekyan was visited by a delegation of Muslim representatives from Mush, including Sheikh Avis Kadler, several mullahs, Jafar Agha, and other prominent citizens. They raised their voices in protest against the massacres and attempted to stop them, which caused them to face hostility from the authorities. Armenian eyewitnesses confirmed the statements of the Muslims and, at the same time, testified as witnesses to the atrocities committed by the Turks, such as burying people alive.²¹

Colonel V. N. Poltavtsev, chief of staff of the brigade, while still in Northern Persia, reported on the massacre of about 1,000 Assyrians and Armenians in the Dilman region. They were forced to build defensive fortifications and trenches. Upon learning of the approach of Russian troops, the Turks decapitated them, throwing the severed heads to the ground and the bodies into a well. Realizing that it was impossible to kill everyone in this manner, the perpetrators bound the hands of the Armenians and Assyrians and began crushing their heads with mattocks.²² The Colonel testifies about another incident: "According to eyewitnesses, on the eve of the capture of Mush by our troops, the Turks gathered Christian men, and a Turkish doctor shot them one by one with revolvers. They brought them to him individually (Armenians: R.S., N.A., L.K.), and he cold-bloodedly shot them. From time to time, he paused to cool down or change revolvers. In this way, he shot about 500 people."²³ The colonel gives another example: "Near Bitlis, our officers went to inspect an Armenian church that was filled with decomposed bodies and skeletons of Armenians of various ages and genders".²⁴

Staff-Captain Krim-Shamkhalov, a subordinate of T. Nazarbekyan, reports on the inquiry he conducted among Muslims and Armenians regarding the massacre of Armenians in Mush. The general proposes to present this report in the form of an official memorandum.²⁵ On February 16, 1916, the staff-captain presented his detailed report. The organizer of the massacre in Mush was Rashid Bey, a representative of the "Union

¹⁹ Sahakyan 2020: 304.

²⁰ Sahakyan 2020: 308.

²¹ Sahakyan 2020: 305.

²² SARF, collection R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 15-16.

²³ SARF, collection R-6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 10-11.

²⁴ SARF, collection R-6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 11.

²⁵ The report of Krim-Shamkhalov was first published by Nersisyan 1991: 501-504. M. G. Nersisyan discovered the copy of the report in the archive of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Leo's collection, fond 1, inventory 1, file 226, list 1-6.

and Progress” party and later head of military secret intelligence. He was supported by Servet Bey, the governor of the Mush district; Kyazim Bey, commander of the gendarme battalion responsible for massacres in the Van province; and other individuals. The local Muslim clergy protested against the massacres, while the imam of Mush, Sheikh Avis Kadler, appealed to Servet Bey, “asking him to respect the laws of Muhammad, which permit killing only those males aged 15 to 60 capable of bearing arms and resisting”. In response, he was threatened with arrest and subjected to public insults.²⁶ The troops, and partly the Kurds, actively participated in the massacres. The order to begin the killings was given from Constantinople.²⁷ They dug pits, into which women with their children were driven to the edges. “Mothers were forced to push their children into the pit, after which a little soil was poured over them. Then, in front of their bound husbands, the women were raped and killed. After that, the men were killed...”²⁸ Velis Pasha, the commander of the Ottoman 34th Division, also participated in the massacres.²⁹

During a meeting with one of the influential citizens of Mush, Jafar Agha, T. Nazarbekyan spoke about the massacres of the Armenians. Jafar confirmed the facts presented in Krim-Shamkhalov’s report.³⁰ The authorities did not forgive Jafar, and on July 26, 1916, after the Turks recaptured Mush, Jafar Agha was executed.

Insufficient supplies forced T. Nazarbekyan to send armed groups into the deserted and destroyed Armenian villages of the Mush plain to find hidden wheat. Numerous reports from their commanders described the mass killings of Armenians. For example, on March 16, T. Nazarbekyan received the report of *zauryad-yentaspá* (junior officer) Udovitsa about at least 200 charred bodies discovered in three barns in one of the Armenian villages.³¹ The only surviving Armenian reports that these are traces of atrocities committed by the Kurds and Turks. As T. Nazarbekyan notes, there were so many reports of this nature that he sent them to the American representative in Van, probably one of the missionaries, and the photographs to Ashot Atanasyan in Mush,³² who on July 26, 1916, in his report to the Caucasian Committee of the All-Russian Union of Cities, referred to T. Nazarbekyan's conversation with Jafar Agha.³³

²⁶ Sahakyan 2020: 308.

²⁷ Sahakyan 2020: 309.

²⁸ Sahakyan 2020: 308.

²⁹ Sahakyan 2020: 309.

³⁰ Sahakyan 2021: 287.

³¹ NAA, fund 45, list 1, file 11, list 1–36.

³² Ashot Atanasyan (1870–1941) was an Armenian public and political figure, agronomist, and editor-publisher. Together with A. Sahakyan, he published the weekly newspaper *Gyughatntes* (The Agriculturist). During the First World War, he was sent to Western Armenia to organize and manage agricultural works.

³³ Sahakyan 2007: 109–110, 42–45.

The massacres of the Armenians in Mush were witnessed by Bodil,³⁴ a Norwegian working at a German missionary institution, and Alma,³⁵ a Swedish missionary. They attempted to protest against the massacres but were unsuccessful. The missionaries were prohibited from sending telegrams, and their correspondence was censored by the authorities. The district governor, Servet, forcibly compelled the missionaries to leave Mush, likely to prevent them from testifying about the atrocities.

T. Nazarbekov testifies to another incident. While in the village of Khashtagh near Mush, he witnessed about 50 naked Russian soldiers fleeing down from the mountains toward their comrades; they had been captured by Kurds. The soldiers recounted that the Kurds, in their presence, humiliated Armenian women, after which they stripped the soldiers naked and began shooting at them.³⁶

Conclusion

The article highlights the testimonies of Russian military personnel who witnessed the consequences of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Particularly important and credible are the accounts confirmed by Turkish citizens. Their testimonies indicate that the order to carry out the massacres was given by the highest authorities, with participation from the regular army and Kurdish irregular bands. The operations were directed by local authorities.

³⁴ Bodil Biørn (1871–1960) was a Norwegian missionary. In 1905, she was sent to the Ottoman Empire by the organization “Women’s Missionary Association.” She collaborated with the German missionary mission. Initially, she worked in Mezre (Harput province) before moving to Mush. She was a witness to the Armenian Genocide. After the war, she continued her work in Syria, Lebanon, and Constantinople. In 1922, she founded the “Lusaghbyur” orphanage in Alexandropol to care for 33 orphans.

³⁵ Alma Viktoria Leontina Johansson (1880–1974) was a Swedish missionary. From 1910 to 1915, she was in Mush as part of the German mission, working in a German orphanage established for Armenian orphans. She was a witness to the Armenian Genocide. In Sweden, she published two books dedicated to the Armenian Genocide: *Alma Johansson: Ett folk i landsflykt: Ett år ur armeniernas historia* (1930; facsimile edition 1979) and *Alma Johansson: Armeniskt flyktningliv*, Kvinnliga Missions Arbetare, Stockholm, 1931. On April 21, 2011, through the initiative of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, soil brought from Johansson’s grave was interred in the memorial wall of the Armenian Genocide Memorial, and a commemorative plaque was installed. Afterwards, guests from Scandinavian countries planted a Scandinavian tree in the Memory Park in honor of Scandinavian supporters of the Armenian cause. Near the entrance of the Yerevan State University Library, a “Path of Gratitude” was opened, featuring busts of twelve foreign figures who contributed to the Armenian cause, including a bust of Alma Johansson (April 29, 2015).

³⁶ Sahakyan 2020: 293.

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