

THE EPIC STRUGGLE OF MUSA LER

Gasparyan R. H.

PhD in History

To “solve” the Armenian question once and for all, the Young Turk leaders had determined to exploit The First World War to their own advantage and massacre and expel Armenians from Western Armenia and Cilicia, thereby compelling the international community to face the facts. The plan was put into action without delay¹. Within the next few months and further, Armenians were massacred and forcibly deported from the western part of their Motherland (western and central regions of the Armenian Highland) and Asia Minor. During the Armenian Genocide more than 1.5 million Armenians fell victim to the bloody Turkish yataghan². Material and spiritual harm, too, was immeasurable. Age-old memorials and magnificent historic monuments - the unique evidence of Armenia’s rich spiritual life and cultural heritage - were destroyed and reduced to ashes.

The Armenian people in Mush, Sassun, Van, Edessa-Urha (Urfa), Shapin-Garahisar and elsewhere stood up against the Turkish slaughterers to defend their rights, lives, honor and Homeland.

The Armenians of Svedia, inhabiting the southernmost part of Cilicia, engaged in heroic resistance as well. In July 1915, the Ottoman government set in motion a plan to deport Svedian Armenians, entrusting the task to the prefect of Antioch, Marouf, and the myudir³ of Svedia, Khalit. The Armenian population of Kebusiyeh, Vakif, Haji Habibli, *Yoghunoluk*, Kheder Beg and Bitias - the six villages perched spherically on the southern and eastern slopes of Musa Ler (“Dagh”) - cherished a naive hope that they would remain unaffected due to the fact that their place of residence was remote from all the other Armenian communities. Meanwhile, on July 30, deportation orders were given by Marouf, along with “profuse promises” that “the relocation will be safe and peaceful and the government will assist and ensure the deportees’ survival, further shelter, etc.”⁴

Hopes of escaping displacement were now fading. Therefore, a meeting was called, during which the majority of attendees - the influential and distinguished Armenian intellectuals of the six villages - who fully grasped the primary purpose of displacement, resolved that they should resist the Young Turk regime.

¹ Kirakosyan J. S., *The Armenian genocide : the Young Turks before the judgment of history*, English edition prepared by Arman Kirakossian, Madison, Conn., 1992.

² A scimitar.

³ A provincial governor.

⁴ Արզումանյան Մ. Վ., Դարավոր զոյամարտ, Երևան, 1989, էջ 406:

Realizing that the forcible removal would lead to carnage and physical destruction nonetheless, large sections of the Armenian population, with trust in glorious traditions of their fighting skill, took the path of a massive resistance. "Should the worst of evil come about, fight like a lion and perish in your highlands, rather than slavishly give in to the foe, like a flock of sheep, and then die in disgrace"⁵. Upon his return to the home village of *Yoghunoluk from exile in Zeitun*, Dikran Andreassian spread the word about the ongoing expulsions and massacres, impelling the people to their ultimate decision to take up arms against the Turkish butchers - the Ottoman and Young Turkish rulers, who committed the Armenian Genocide.

On August 1, following the myudir's new deportation edict, the majority of Svedian Armenians made an important decision to fortify themselves in the highlands, with livestock and food supplies, and seek liberation by putting up a strong organized resistance. "Nearly all of Kebusiyeh and a part of Haji Habibli and Bitias defied the Ottoman edicts"⁶. According to Hakob Davtyan, 4231 Svedian Armenians chose to go up the mountain⁷.

Upon the arrival at the summit of the mountain, the Armenians set up camp in Tamlacheg, Gushcheghaz and Gezelcha, where topography, fairly impregnable, offered favourable defence prospects. The newcomers had made an irrevocable decision to struggle against the Turkish forces for as long as possible, making good use of the mountainous terrain. Once atop the mountain, they embarked on solving urgent problems, with a disappointing start though. Each encampment had appointed a separate military power. The lack of unified command, in spite of constant contact and agreement between the senior leadership, led to further difficulties.

The construction of defensive fortifications, which commenced on August 2, continued day and night until the Turks' first offensive attempt. All along the settlements, multiple defensive fighting positions and posts were structured, trenches were bored, and rocks and boulder-stones were piled to shower the enemy with from the mountain peak.

On August 7, Khalit, having boastfully pledged to remove Armenians from the mountain within a day, launched an assault out of Yogh Aghzli with a company of 200 soldiers. He tried to profit by the incompleteness of fortifications' construction and spontaneity of action. 20 Armenian combatants were promptly dispatched from Taratalan, till reinforcements would arrive from nearby encampments. The Turks opened a heavy fire and tried to break through the Armenian's right flank but were thwarted by the valiant defenders, whose flanking and front cross-fire forced the enemy to surrender in the gathering darkness. The aim, pursued by the Turks in the first battle,

⁵ Անդրեասյան Տ., Ձեյթունի անձնատվությունը և Սուետիո ինքնապաշտպանություն, Կահիրե, 1915, էջ 29:

⁶ Հ. Հ. ԿՊՊԱ, ք. 57, գ. 5, գ. 108, թ. 7:

⁷ Հուշամատյան մեծ եղեռնի, Բեյրութ, 1965, էջ 789:

was to assess the Armenians' combat readiness. After a six-hour clash, there were 5 or 6 killed and a score of wounded among the Turks⁸.

During the two days that followed, the precise number of the Armenian fighting force was determined, all able-bodied men were split up into sections of 10, and commanders were appointed. Connection was set up between the positions, and signalmen designated. The construction of fortifications was mostly completed but there was a desperate shortage of arms and ammunition. As a reporter of "The Times" wrote, "Incredibly, there were barely 600 physically healthy men among the resisters, of whom only a quarter was armed with guns, the rest had plain hunting rifles"⁹.

In the early hours of the morning of August 10, the Turkish 2000-strong regiment under the cover of fog, sneaked close to the Armenian posts and launched a surprise attack. Two enemy cannons ripped through the Armenian first line of defense. Taken by surprise and heavily outnumbered, the mountain warriors were unable to resist and retreated to the second line. The Turkish thugs, thrilled by an imaginary triumph, rushed forward with wild shrieks and whistles but the Armenians' death-sowing bullets impeded their advance;¹⁰ however, this did not last long. Both weaponry and military strength worked to the Turks' advantage and, after a series of attacks, they managed to reach Taratalan, whereupon the camp of Gezelcha was subjected to intense shelling. The people had to take refuge in Gushcheghaz, where the enemy was at last upset. Musa Ler resisters had succeeded in repulsing the enemy's continuous forays.

Thoroughly familiar with the terrain and deployed effectively, the Armenians made good use of the natural and newly constructed fortifications and inflicted heavy blows on the enemy. "Every single bush was a hiding place for Armenians but a deadly trap for Turks," as is justly observed by acclaimed Austrian writer and humanist Franz Werfel¹¹. The battle lasted for 12 hours and consequently the enemy was chased away. Three Armenians were wounded and two killed that day, while the Turks suffered more than fifty casualties¹².

On August 11, a meeting was convened in Tamlacheg. As a result, a centralised military station was set up and all of the Armenian forces were transferred to Tamlacheg. Furthermore, a joint defence council was established. Dikran Andreassian was appointed to head the council; the members included Hetoum Filian, Sahak Antekian, Movses Der-Galoustian and others, 16 in all¹³.

Yesayi Yaghoubian became the military leader with two assistants, Movses Der-Galoustian and Habet Iskenterian. The fighting force was split up into 43 sections, to be led by corporals. Additionally, a squad was formed, made up of thirty volunteers, whose

⁸ Մուրադյան Հ. Մ., Էջերի հայ ժողովրդի հերոսական անցյալից, Երևան, 1983, էջ 174:

⁹ Геноцид армян в Османской империи. Сборник документов и материалов под ред. М.Г. Нерсисян, Ереван, 1982, стр. 364.

¹⁰ Անդրեասյան Տ., *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹¹ Վերջել Ֆ., Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը, Երևան, 1964, էջ 508:

¹² Անդրեասյան Տ., *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹³ Անդրեասյան Տ., Զեյթունի տարագրությունը և Սուեիտի ապստամբությունը, Հալեպ, 1935, էջ 68:

commanders - Yesayi Yaghoubian, Bedros Tmlagian and Bedros Toutagian - were renowned for their boldness and military skill. As clashes broke out, this squad, faster than lightning, would rush to side with the lookout soldiers and take on the first blow until the main forces would get in.

After the first failure, the Turks intensified preparations for the capture of Musa Ler. The Turkish authorities issued a call to arms to residents of neighbouring Muslim villages, and soon a sizeable division of 3,000 regular soldiers and 4,000 volunteers was established.

On August 19 and 20, one or two more assaults launched by the Turkish forces were driven off by the resisters of the Musa Ler (Mountain of Moses), who, albeit surrounded on all sides but with never-ending fighting spirit, managed to offer a fierce resistance, resulting in heavy Turkish casualties. The situation, however, was precarious for Svedian Armenians whose ammunition and food stocks were running low; regular enemy corps tailed by a rag-tag mob craving for killings and looting versus almost unarmed heroes, with virtually no hope of rescue or way out, yet able to withstand the Turkish troops' continuous attacks. From the sea alone could the chance of survival come forth. Thus, to attract the attention of Allied battleships, the Armenians hoisted two banners, one of which bore Dikran Andreassian's inscription in English "Christians Are in Danger" and the other was embellished with a big red cross.

On August 19, the Turkish regiments under the direct command of Rifat Bey attacked upon Savouloug and Tamlacheg but had to retreat soon, injured by falling rocks and boulder-stones dumped off the top of Musa Ler . The Turkish regular army unit of nearly 7000, accompanied by gangs of outlaws and marauders, tried to break through the defensive line of Taratalan and approach the Armenian positions, but were intercepted by the deadly fire of the fearless resisters. The latter pushed back the enemy forces, which were advancing in the direction of Gezelcha, Sheikh-Ordu and Savouloug, while a throng of brave Armenian women confronted the enemy, who was heading towards Tamlacheg. The female warriors showered the Turks with rocks and made them flee in panic. During the night, the resisters' western positions were ambushed, and then the heaviest attacks followed one another. When the Turkish hordes were too close to the barracks a few valiant Armenian warriors forced the enemy to surrender¹⁴.

Early next morning, the enemy's offensive attempts were renewed with full force and, despite the Armenians' stern counter-measures, Turks were able to approach the settlements. The enemy's assault was so vicious that there seemed to be no hope of rescue. In the evening the Turks felt confident of winning and looked forward to the dawn to finally annihilate a handful of brave hearts. However, fighting broke out during the night. Musa Ler resisters, surrounding Turks on all sides, launched a surprise attack, and caused enormous confusion in their ranks. A conspicuous success was of the greatest importance to the Armenian resisters. The faith in their own strength and

¹⁴ Անդրեասյան Տ., Զեյթունի անձնատվությունը, էջ 53:

liberation was restored. Considerable supplies of food, medicine and ammunition - 95 Mauser rifles and 10,000 bullets - were obtained¹⁵. As Dikran Andreassian wrote, "Every fighting occasion claimed the lives of at least 600-700 enemy soldiers."¹⁶

Having faced a big defeat the Turks tightened the siege in an attempt to either make the Armenians die of hunger, or force them to capitulate. Minor skirmishes would break out daily. Meanwhile, the Turkish government was concentrating over-15,000 troop reinforcements at the base of Musa Ler¹⁷. On September 5, the crew of a French battleship, Le Guichen, patrolling in the vicinity and sighting the banners, dropped the anchor to pick up the on-duty soldiers, who handed in SOS messages to Captain Joseph Brisson and related the plight of Musa Ler defenders¹⁸. Unable to offer any assistance without official permission, Brisson promised to inform the heroes of Musa Ler within the following eight days what aid the French high command would be able to afford. On the same day, Le Guichen bombarded the village of Kebusiyeh, where a segment of the Turkish army was deployed, and away she sailed afterwards.

On September 7, realizing that they were threatened with a shameful defeat upon the arrival of the French Navy and that Armenians were in fact victorious by dint of their heroic resistance, Turks rallied their troops for an all-out offensive from Sheikh-Ordu. Armenians, encouraged by imminent salvation, would repel an unending round of attacks with a strong determination throughout the day.

On September 10, the long-awaited relief did arrive. From September 11 through 14, under the command of Admiral Louis Dartige du Fournet, the French cruisers Le Guichen, Le Desaix, Le D'Estrées and La Foudre, along with another British warship, evacuated the 4058 people from Musa Ler and conveyed them to Port Said¹⁹. According to Bishop Torgom, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Egypt, the number of the Turkish yataghan survivors on Musa amounted to 4,200.

The heroic resistance of Musa Ler is a glorious chapter in the turbulent history of Armenia.

It proved again that the Armenian nation's liberation was feasible through armed struggle - the only way of defending the Motherland with the unconditional right to independent existence.

Translated from Armenian

by M. L. Yandyan

¹⁵ Մուրադյան Հ. Մ., օր. cit., p. 181.

¹⁶ Անդրեասյան Տ., Ձեռքովի անձնատվությունը, էջ 55:

¹⁷ Геноцид армян..., стр. 466.

¹⁸ Барби А., В стране ужаса-мученца Армения, Тифлис, 1919, стр. 64-65.

¹⁹ Սահակյան Ռ. Գ., Ցեղասպանության պատմությունից, Երևան, 1990, էջ 188: