

VAN-VASPURAKAN DURING WORLD WAR I

(Summer of 1915-1917)

Sahakyan Ruben

Institute of History of NAS RA



The fortress of Van

After the retreat of July 1915 some Armenians of Vaspurakan returned again to restore their paternal hearths. There was no longer an Armenian authority both in Van and in the province. P. Voronov was appointed the governor of Van, and the lieutenant-colonel A. I. Termen, the head of the district¹. Various Armenian, Russian as well as American and British charitable and public organizations were

gradually being established both in Van and in Vaspurakan's districts. Van-Vaspurakan was shown a considerable help by order of Gevorg V, the Catholicos of all Armenians.



The quarter of Van after Turkish devastation in 1915

¹ Termen Alfred Yosif (1855 - after 1918), a lieutenant-colonel, police officer; has served as a Chief of Police in China and Central Asia.



Catholicos of All Armenians, Gevorg V



Armenak Yekaryan

Avetis Terzibashyan was appointed the mayor of Van, Armenak Yekaryan and then Jim Changalyan, a captain of the American Army, the Commander of Militia (mercenary, Yerkrpah [country defender] regiment)². Poghos Nubar pasha provided four thousand roubles for Police activities³. A court was organized with Aghabek Hambaryan as its chairman (members - Eghishe Kadjuni, a lawyer, and Martiros Nalbandyan, a vice-inspector of Yeramyian School). With the assistance of public and charitable organizations the population began to rebuild their houses, almost completely destroyed, also start agricultural works. The Armenian public-political figures such as Vahan Papazyan (Coms), Avetik Sahakyan, Ashot Atanasyan, Grigor Ohandjanyan and others, came to Vaspurakan to help the population.



Vahan Papazyan (Coms)

The American "Committee for the Help of Armenians and Syrians" was also participating in the reconstruction of Western Armenia, particularly Vaspurakan, along with the Russian Government, Armenian and Russian public and charitable organizations. It started working in Vaspurakan since March 1916. But the Committee had "secured" its

² Jim Changalyan had come from the USA with 52 volunteers to be united with the volunteer groups, but getting informed of dissolution of the groups, decided to enter into the service of Van Police.

³ "Horizon", Tiflis, 1915, N 200, September 7 (in Arm.). The number of combatants was 222, as of 13 December of the same year. See Karapetyan M., Armenian volunteer groups and national battallions in the Caucasian front (1914-1917), Yerevan, 1999, pp. 150-157 (in Arm.). J. Changalyan returned to the USA on 7 October 1916.

presence in Van at an earlier period. Karapet Torgomyan, a medical assistant, was sent to Van prior to the arrival of senior members for the purpose of organizing a medical services; he had to be their representative up to their arrival. "The Lord Merry Fund of the London's Mayor", a British public organization, was operating along with the Americans.



Lest they perish campaign poster of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE)

46 thousand roubles, 13 thousand of which was set aside for establishing an orphanage within a month, and 33 thousand for buying warm clothes for the refugees of the province⁴.

At the same time, the head of the district, lieutenant-colonel A.I. Termen, requested the directorates of all orphanages in the South Caucasus to give the names of orphans from Vaspurakan, enrolled in their institutions, as well as the residence places and the possible information about the property their parents were holding, in order to be able "to protect the legacy of these orphans and to appoint a guardianship of their property..."⁵.

The organizations helped primarily in the agricultural works. The villagers were donated farming tools, livestock, carriers and other domestic animals. Despite the retreats that occurred several times had broken the normal life of the province, the Armenians continued to restore the ruined economy upon return and were involved in farming works.

Thanks to the implemented works, not only Armenians, but also Assyrian and Yezidi populations started to return to Van-Vaspurakan. The public organizations created conditions step by step for the population to be involved in more or less normal working activities.

To help the Armenians of Van the Caucasian Committee of the Union of All-Russia's cities donated



Jim (Petros) Changalyan

⁴ "Horizon", N 255, November 12, 1915 (in Arm.).

⁵ Ibid., N 267, 27 November 1915 (in Arm.).



1915 Russian poster



Russian-Turkish front



Ruins of the Kaxakamej district of Van

Along with that, it was projected to build tea-houses and canteens in Van, for the population was relatively well supplied with bread. They needed only clothing. The abbot of Lim cloister, archimandrite Hovhannes, arrived in Van by the order of catholicos Gevorg V. He had to do his best to collect the saved manuscripts of Varag monastery, the convents of Aghtamar, Lim and Ktuts as well as those of the churches of Van, taking them to Etchmiadzin⁶.

On December 23, 1915, the medical and nutritional detachment (consisting of 20 vans⁷) of the Union of Cities and headed by Ashot Atanasyan, a commissioner, arrived in Van. He founded an orphanage where 70 orphans were sheltered. After a while they were sent to Dilijan. A hospital with 50 beds was also opened. At the same time, the Union of

Cities had an intention of opening three food stations in Van and thus much in villages. Seven tea-houses, one store, a bathroom and a laundry were founded in Van by the same organization. Forty four orphans of Assyrian, Kurdish and Turkish origin were sent to the Caucasus⁸.

⁶ "Van-Tosp", Tiflis, N 10, January 31, 1916, p. 15 (in Arm.). The senior supervisor of the Caucasian museum returned from Van on 23 January 1916. He has been able to find 1150 pieces of manuscripts and sent them to Etchmiadzin after long-term search works. See "Arev", Baku, N 10, January 31, 1916.

⁷ "Van-Tosp", N 7, January 10, 1916, p. 13.

⁸ "Mshak", Tiflis, N 15, January 4, 1916.

The internal life of Van was a little bit regulated. The disorders of ordinary soldiers, such as invading houses and demanding wine and women, searching the leftover houses for the purpose of finding treasures, were almost stopped due to the strict measures taken by the military authorities⁹. The return of refugees to their homes became more urgent after capturing Mush and Erzerum (Karin) by the military units of the Caucasian Army in February 1916.



Ashot Atanasyan

The organizations in Van and the province considered as their primary task to involve schoolchildren in schools. According to the project, schools have to be established in Khjishk and Ererin villages of Timar province. The task of founding of schools was laid upon archimandrite Daniel.



Russian cavalry detachment in the Russian-Turkish front

The main part of the refugees from Van was centered not only in the province of Yerevan, but also in other districts of the Caucasus Vicegerency. It is true that the Russian state and public organizations, especially the Armenian ones, were trying to help, providing assistance in several fields, but the situation of the Western Armenians was continuing to be too heavy, for the aid, being provided, was not reaching everyone; it even did not meet their most basic needs. The war and especially the irregular supply led to a sharp rise in prices and depreciation of the rouble.

⁹ "Van-Tosp", N 7, January 10, 1916, p. 13.



Armenian returnees of Van waiting for bread

All this was supplemented by articles published in the Georgian press, which accused Armenians in "colonization" of the Caucasus. Besides, the Georgians opposed the allocation of loans by the state to refugees¹⁰. Hovhannes Tumanyan was compelled to deny such absurdities in a special article and identify the issues, related to the Armenian refugees¹¹. Such a moral-psychological and hard economic situation made the Western Armenians to take actions in order to return to their dwelling places and restore the destroyed and ruined homes as soon as possible.

In December of 1915 the Union of Cities sent A. Atanasyan, an experienced agronomist and public figure, to Van. He had to go through the situation and find out the needs the refugees could encounter upon their return in the spring. These operations should have been administered by A. I. Termen.



Alexander Khatisyan

A. Atanasyan considered the sending of a sanitary-disinfectant group and dustcarts to Van one of the primary issues to clean the city from various garbages for preventing the possible spread of epidemics in the spring¹².

On 18 January, 1916, the reporter of "Mshak" wrote from Van that the situation was stabilizing in the city. By the proposal of the chief commissioner of the Caucasus branch of the Union of Cities, Al. Khatisyan, and through mediation by A.I. Termen "A. Atanasyan should remain in Van as a commissioner of the Union of Cities to assist

¹⁰ "Mshak", N 163, July 28, 1915.

¹¹ "Horizon", N 238, October 23, 1915.

¹² "Van-Tosp", N 12, February 14, 1916, p. 16.

Mr. A. Termen to carry into effect a number of heavy and responsible works, which are connected with the return of population of Van and the region in the coming spring”.

A. Atanasyan cabled M. Papadjanov (Papadjanyan), a deputy of the State Duma, Al. Khatisyan and the chief commissioner, dealing with the issues of refugees at the Russian-Turkish frontier, general M. Tamamshev (Tamamshyan), in order to make preparations for providing the returnees with seeds, domestic animals, farming tools and other necessary supplies. At the same time it was necessary to set up several food stations on the way to provide with food the people returning to Van¹³.



Mikayel Papadjanov (Papadjanyan)

On February 28, 1916, Atanasyan informed from Van that the number of returnees is increasing day by day. This fact worried the local Russian authorities because they themselves had to face the problems on the refugees' way of life. During the consultation at A.I. Termen's meeting, Atanasyan said that, first and foremost, 36 villages of Nerkin Timar needed primary assistance, where the people of Vaspuarakan, returning to homes, would have been concentrated. It was necessary for their life to buy seeds of at least 131,500 roubles, draught animals of 48,000 roubles and dairy cattle of 44,000 roubles and farming tools of 25,000 roubles.

In the case of satisfying the abovementioned needs, the population could cultivate 9050 tithes of land, which would be sufficient to secure the survival of 25,000 people.

It was recommended to apply to the Government for the required amount with the obligation to repay it within two to three years.

Why the Armenian societies, especially the people from Van, were in a hurry to be back to their abandoned and ruined settlements a day before? And that was when the retreat of the Russian troops would become a fact in every moment and they would take the path of migration again. Such hastiness had its deep and well founded reasons.

The local morals and customs were unfamiliar for the people from Van, sheltered in the province of Yerevan and various settlements of the Caucasian Vicegerency. In addition, they preferred to go back to their native places against the uncertain situation and unemployment. The Western Armenians and, especially, the people from Vaspurakan were also worried of the Russian Government's decision to settle the Alashkert valley with Russian migrants.

According to the cadet newspaper "Speech" ("Речь"), the government wished to "create a fairly wide geographical area with Russian population on the Russian-Turkish frontier to demarcate the Russian-Armenians from Turkish-Armenians"¹⁴.

¹³ "Mshak", N 24, February 3, 1916. "Mshak", N 52, March 8, 1916.

¹⁴ "Arev", Baku, N 171, 5 August 1916.

The divan of the Caucasian Vicegerent handed over 120 thousand roubles to the Armenian Benevolent Society of the Caucasus (ABSC) for purchasing agricultural tools, seeds and domestic animals for Armenians of Van district. In addition, 43.000 roubles were allocated for transportation of cargoes from Igdir to Van as well as for creating a convoy¹⁵.

Atanasyan asked in the letter, dated with 11 March 1916, to inform the people from Vaspurakan that it was desirable to have only men returned to their birthplaces and, especially, those who had oxen to perform their farming work. He warned that there were no draught animal in Van-Vaspurakan and the oxen in Julfa and Khoy were being sold at 300 to 350 roubles¹⁶.

The charity committee of the Grand-Princess Tatyana (daughter of Nikolay II) started operating in Van since May 1916¹⁷.

The Armenian Central Committee, operating along with the ABSC, got 60 thousand roubles from Tamamshev to purchase draught animals and seeds for the Van region¹⁸.

The Americans working in Vaspurakan, choose the valley of Hayots Dzor in the south-west of Van for their activities. There were up to three thousand refugees there, as of June 1. They were given eight hundred draught animals and dairy cattle within a month¹⁹.

The members of the American Committee, Reverend McCalm and S. Wilson, distributed 400 oxen, 100 cows, 50 buffaloes and seeds of 10,000 roubles in 35 villages of Hayots Dzor. Each three families were given a pair of oxen, and the cows were given to the widows²⁰.



Grand-Princess Tatyana
(daughter of Nikolay II)

¹⁵ "Hambavaber", Tiflis, N 18, 1 May 1916, p. 563.

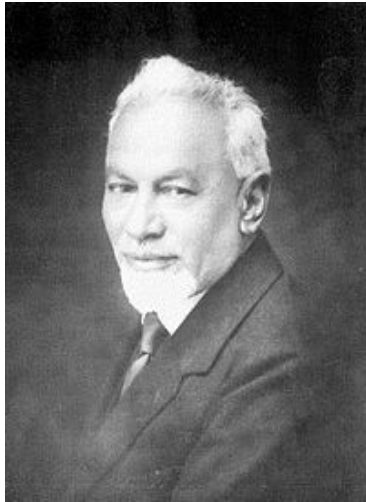
¹⁶ "Van-Tosp", N 16, 13 March, p. 16.

¹⁷ National Archive of Armenia (hereafter NAA), f. 221, l. 1, d. 6, list 4.

¹⁸ "Hambavaber", N 22, 29 May 1916, p. 687.

¹⁹ NAA, f. 221, l. 1, d. 6, l. 4 rev.

²⁰ "Mshak", N 106, May 11, 1916.

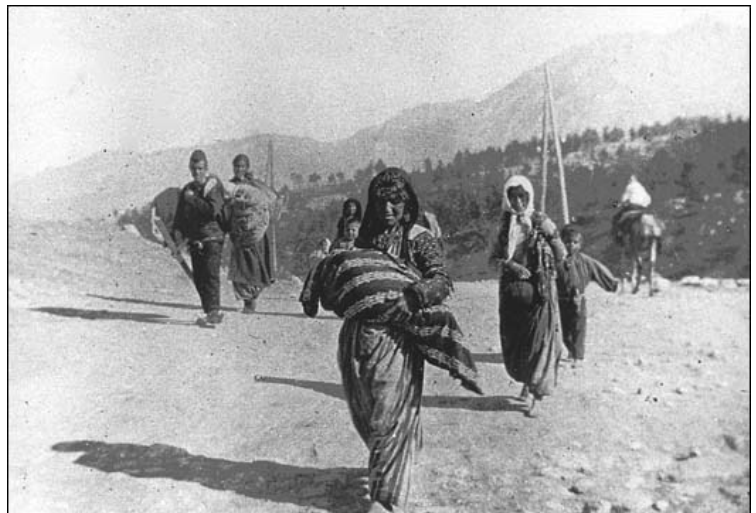


Avetik Sahakyan

Av. Sahakyan, the chairman of the "Agricultural Society", visited Van to get acquainted with situation on the spot and to coordinate the works of the ABSC, "The Relief Society" and "The Agricultural Company". Perhaps his arrival was also conditioned by the help to be provided from Van for the Armenian and Assyrian refugees in Salmast and the surrounding areas, being in a difficult situation. The spiritual leader of the Armenian Diocese of Atrpatakan, Bishop Nerses Melik-Tangyan, had warned of the mentioned fact by the telegram²¹.

A. Atanasyan has mentioned in the report he made in Tiflis on 26 July 1916 that the committees under the guidance of the Grand-Princess Tatyana Romanova and that of the Americans have done considerable work. The latter has distributed three thousand heads of cattle and up to one thousand pounds of wheat to some three thousand refugees within a month.

The spiritual leader of the Armenian Diocese of the United States, Archimandrite Vehouni, stated the following about the true aims of the American Protestant preachers still in his letter of November 9, 1915, addressed to the Catholicos. "The missionaries were preaching to the American people for many years that they have assumed an apostolic heavy duty to



Refugees

make idolatrous Armenians Christian, and have thus accumulated millions of dollars from the Americans and are still collecting money²²".

G. Vardanyan, the commissioner of the "Relief Society" purchased 232 large cattle, 11 calves, 409 hens, 1 cart in Khoy and sent them to Van. He also planned to buy 100 cows to distribute among Aygestan residents²³.

The Union of Cities established two clinics in Khoy and Van, built shelters for orphans, food stations on the road of Julfa-Khoy-Van for returning refugees as well as a number of workshops in Van and three ships. According to A. Atanasyan, the Union of

²¹ "Hambavaber", N 24, 12 June 1916, p. 751-752.

²² NAA, f. 57, l. 2, f. 1272, p. 81.

²³ "Mshak", N 104, 13 May 1916.



Sirakan Tigranyan

Cities had taken the first place in Van and in the region when considering the implemented projects²⁴.

Sirakan Tigranyan, the Commissioner of the Armenian Society of Petrograd, purchased appropriate tools for a working shop to be opened in Van and villagers. A medical-food station was built in Salmast by means of the Grand-Princess Tatyana Romanova's committee²⁵.

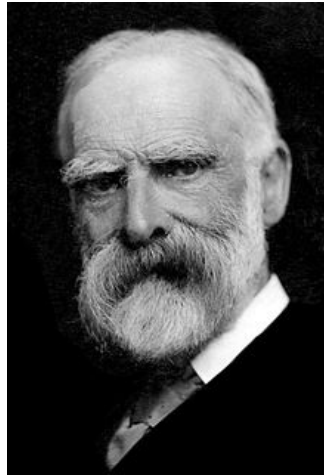
A number of British charitable and non-governmental organizations supported the Western Armenian refugees in 1915-1917 and the following years. They were united and the London Committee of "Britain for the Armenian Refugees" or the Anglcom was founded. The Armenian Society, Lord Mayor's Fund, the Manchester Women's Society, the British Women's Fund for the benefit of Armenians and other societies were among these organizations.



"Britain for the Armenian Refugees"

²⁴ NAA, f. 221, l. 1, f. 6, p. 5.

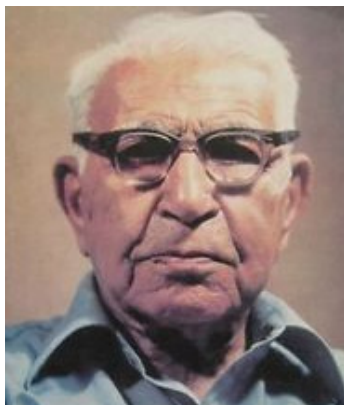
²⁵ "Hambavaber", N 25, 19 June 1916, p. 781.

**Emilia Robinson****Lord James Bryce**

Getting informed of the organization of Armenian volunteer groups and the hardships of Armenian refugees, E. Robinson decided to organize the "Anglo-Armenian Red Cross and Refugee Fund" to collect clothes, money and medicine for the wounded Armenian volunteers and refugees. The Presidency of the Fund assumed Lord James Bryce²⁶.

E. Robinson donated 3080 roubles on behalf of the Fund to "the Union of Vanuhis (women of Van)", operating in Tiflis. The latter sent 1540 roubles from this amount to the "Armenian Womens' Union of Vaspurakan", functioning in Yerevan²⁷.

The organizations activated their works in Van-Vaspurakan just since April 1916. In order to make them more efficient, each organization fixed a certain province. Thus, the "Commission for Rehabilitating Armenia" and the "Relief Society" were functioning in some parts of Timar province and in Archak, and the American missionaries, in several Armenian villages in the Upper Timar and Gavash.

**Tachat Terlemezyan****Constantin (Costi) Hambardzumyan**

Constantin (Costi) Hambardzumyan, Armenak Maksapetyan and Tachat Terlemezyan were the representatives of the "Agricultural Society" in Vaspurakan²⁸. Unlike other organizations, they were trying to find necessary things on the spot. They managed to get 110 heads of pets, about 40 pounds of various seeds, 200 ploughshares and 150 hooks²⁹. However, the aforementioned companies were not always coordinating their actions and the affairs were being damaged as a result³⁰.

²⁶ "Horizon", Tiflis, N 12, 17 January 1916.

²⁷ "Van-Tosp", N 7, 10 January 1916, p. 13.

²⁸ NAA, f. 654, l. 4, d. 15, p. 7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Papazyan Vahan, My Memories, vol.II, Beirut, 1952, p. 428.

Besides the Armenian population, the Yezidis also returned to the Van province, being compelled to constantly fight the Kurdish gangs. Around 500 Assyrians, who fled from Bohtan, also found shelter in Van³¹.

Arshak Tadevosyan, a representative of the "Agricultural Society", operating in Van and the province, presented the accomplishments on 28 July, 1916. He left for Persia with his companion, G. Shahumyan, to buy draught animals. They got two thousand heads of animals.



Narekavank (X century)

A special consultation, operating along with the Russian government, allocated 700 thousand roubles for the development of 30,000 sowing areas in Van and Diadin³². Bishop Ter-Movsisyan got information from the General Commissioner of the "Office for Accomodating Refugees of the Caucasus Front" that 50,000 roubles were to be donated to Stepan Ter-Mkrtchyan, a commissioner of the "Agricultural Society", to buy seeds from Persia for Van province³³.

The anti-Armenian stance of Voronov impeded seriously the normal activities of the Van-based organizations. As Grigor Ohanjanyan, a representative of the Armenian Central Committee, operating along with the ABSC in Van and Persia, reported, "The Armenian was the most terrifying element in the days of Voronov and Termen. The powerless sympathy of Termen towards Armenians was inflamating, more and more, the hatred of Voronov towards Armenians of Vaspurakan".

The Russian army, deployed both in Van and the province, was confiscating the herbs, collected by the population, for their own needs, cutting down fruit trees to have a

³¹ "Horizon", N 119, 31 May, 1916.

³² "Hambavaber", N 29, 17 July 1916, p. 918.

³³ NAA, f. 239, l. 1, d. 8, p. 5.

firewood and for other purposes, dismantling also the wooden houses. As Gr. Ohanjanyan notes, it was not possible to intervene, for "...that would mean to become an enemy of Voronov and be deported from Van"³⁴.

When the general Voronov and prince B. Shakhovski left the province³⁵, the attitude towards Armenians was changed. The authorities, excluding some commandants of the villages, realized that 'making up relations with the Kurds is impossible'³⁶.

On February 1917, VI. Burkovsky was appointed a lieutenant-governor of Van³⁷. To Gr. Ohanjanyan's opinion the new appointment evoked certain hopes among Armenians. He was sure that general Burkovsky had come as not to rule but to govern³⁸. The governor's first steps were promising. At first, he established a new administrative division for the province and assigned provincial governors and officials.

Gr. Ohanjanyan offered the Armenian Central Committee to assign a translator at the Governor's Office inasmuch as such a position was not provided for the staff of the latter. Besides, there was necessary to form a legal organization to help the refugees that would give an opportunity to quickly solve the problems.

Gr. Ohanjanyan was considering the permission of authorities allowing Armenians to carry arms as the matter of priority. At the same time, the population should have been increased to 40-50 thousand people, which would allow 20 thousand people to be armed. Such amount of forces would have a restraining role on the Kurds, compelling them to refrain from attacking the Armenian populated areas via equivalent actions in case of necessity³⁹.

"The Union of the Armenian Associations of Tiflis, Assisting the Refugees", which was formed from the ABSC, "Agricultural Society" and the "Relief", intended to send one thousand ploughs, five thousand scythes, more than one thousand and three hundred sickles, axes, spades, shovels and other goods to Van. One hundred thousand roubles were provided on that end and one hundred and fifty thousand roubles were allocated to buy draught animals from Persia⁴⁰. The American committee, in its turn, bought

³⁴ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, n. 3.

³⁵ Prince Boris Shakhovski who was a former diplomat and had served in the Ottoman Empire, was openly patronizing the Kurds. He had a considerable role in supporting Badirkhan zade Kyamil bek, returned to Vaspurakan. The Kurdish chieftain was giving arms and money to the Kurds of Abagha and Zilan canyons to enable them to fight against the Turks. Nevertheless, all this brought no result. See "Ashkhatanq", Yerevan, N 64, 10 December 1916. The prevailing mass of the Kurds were continuing to faithfully serve the Turks and their "subjugation" to the Russians was false. The Kurds used every convenient moment to attack not only Armenians, Assyrians or Yezidis, but also Russians.

³⁶ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, n. 9 rev.

³⁷ "Ashkhatanq", N 48, 15 October 1916.

³⁸ NAA, v. 28, l. 1, d. 171, n. 10.

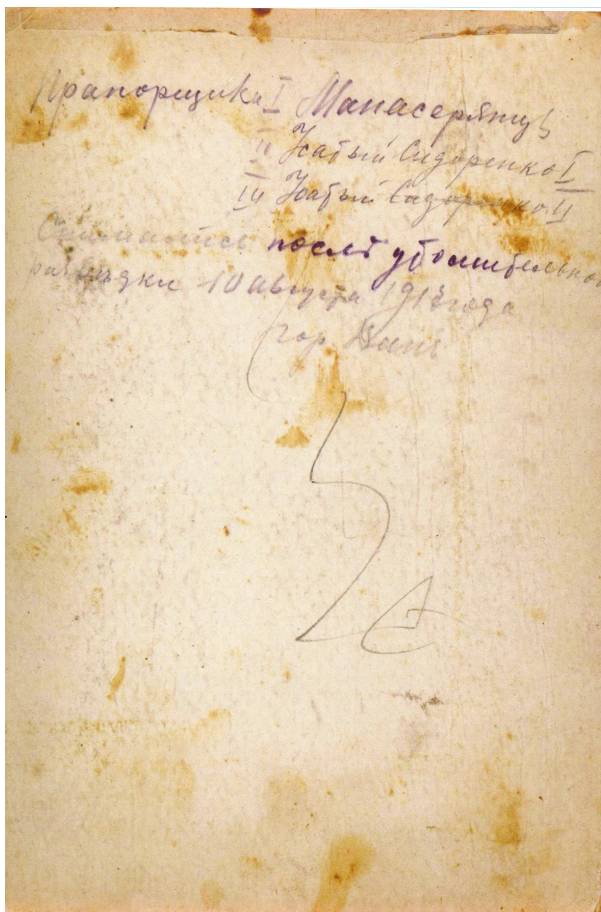
³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁰ "Mshak", N 103, 12 May 1916.

domestic animals for Armenians around Persia and Van, providing 350 thousand roubles⁴¹.

The Russian authorities decided to explore the fish resources of Lake Van to clarify the expediency of fishery⁴². N. Marr arrived in Van to explore the cuneiform inscriptions, found in the city⁴³.

In spite of many difficulties the life was getting back on its track gradually. The merchants started to make relations with Persia and the Caucasus. A group of people from Van founded a corporative company "Van", which had to provide the population of the city with agricultural products⁴⁴. The population started to restore their houses, markets and other buildings. The presence of a relatively large population played a restraining role against the soldiers and Cossacks who did illegal activities (including killings) until that moment.



In photo - 1. Praporshchik Mikhail Manaseryan (1892-1920),
2. "Moustached" Sidorenko, 3. "Moustached" Sidorenko.

On the reverse of the photo - «Shooted after humiliating reconnaissance, August 10 1917, city of Van».
The photo from the personal archive of historian Ruben Manaseryan (is published first time).

⁴¹ "Hambavaber", N 16, 10 April 1916, p. 497.

⁴² "Horizon", N 144, 30 June 1916.

⁴³ "Gakhapar", Tiflis, N 45, 5 June 1916.

⁴⁴ "Arev", N 78, 14 April 1916.

The situation was changed again after 25 July, when unofficial news of possible retreat was spread, which misled and panicked the population. The people of Gavash and Karjkan provinces abandoned their villages by the order of the Russian command. Some of the inhabitants of Van who had already tested the bitter experience of "retreat" considered that "this was an apparent trick, and the enemy was far away from Van". The previous retreats had shown that the enemy forces consists of about 300-400 Kurds, who could be easily beaten off. At the same time, the population of Van was of the firm conviction that fighting would have caused less losses than escaping. They applied to the commander of the Caucasian 4th cavalry division, general F.G. Chernozubov, to be provided with arms and ammunitions, but were rejected⁴⁵.

Unfortunately, the meeting of the representatives of the Armenian social and charitable associations in Van did not come to a common decision about the position they had to adopt.

Nevertheless, a group of fellows rushed to Hayots Dzor to constrain the retreat and to organize a resistance. However, the locals, obeying the instructions of the Russian authorities, had already started to leave. The panic grew after Russian subdivisions started to abandon Norduz, Shatakh and Gavash posts⁴⁶. As a result of this retreat 50.000 people left the regions of Mush, Bitlis and Vaspurakan⁴⁷.

V. Papazyan formed two armed groups: the first group was to be the vanguard of the retreating population, and the second, the rearguard. By the instruction of V. Papazyan transportation and self-defensive forces were gathered in Timar. He stayed in the abandoned Van putting his life in danger as to set free the stores till the last moment (it is about the food storages of the ABSC- R. S.)⁴⁸.

The retreat of the population of Van started on July 28. Only the next day they had a chance to get 126 guns, which were given out to the militia, headed by Changalyan and lieutenant-colonel A. Termen. As far as the people of Van testify, Termen did his best to return the people to their homes, as he was convinced that there was no danger⁴⁹.

This last evidence proves once more that the defense of Van was possible with the Armenian and Russian forces that were located in the city. However, taking the order of general Voronov, the Armenian militia was compelled to leave the city on the night of July 29⁵⁰.

Taking the opportunity of the situation, the soldiers that were still in Van, began to loot the property and estates of the Armenians and companies by the permission of the Command. The warehouse of the "Union of Cities" as well as the clothing, costing

⁴⁵ NAA, f. 57, l. 5, d. 122, p. 2.

⁴⁶ NAA, f. 57, l. 5, d. 122, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Hambavaber", N 33, 14 August 1916, p. 1032.

⁴⁸ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 11.

⁴⁹ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 11.

⁵⁰ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 11.

100.000 roubles and stored in the storehouse of the American missionaries, were pillaged. The two buildings, belonging to them, were fired as well. The houses of the city were robbed; the elders and the sick people there were killed⁵¹.

The militia was able to beat the Kurdish horde coming to loot the Armenian villages of Timar province on August 9. The province had 3,000 Armenian population, who had not given credence to the truthfulness of the retreat and organized a self-defense⁵². After the retreat of July the population returned to Van and the surrounding villages. The population of Vaspurakan consisted of 12639 Armenians, 817 Assyrians and 191 Turks, as of 15 October⁵³. The Assyrians, living in Van, formed a fighting group of 60-70 people. They were occasionally sent to scouting by the authorities.

After the retreat of July 1916 the charitable organizations started to return to Van. However, they did not undertake a wide range of activities, unlike the previous periods. The organizations were frightened of the possibility of retreat. The main support was given by the ABSC. Nutrition houses and markets were opened by that organization in Van and Alyur village in the province of Timar. As the insecure condition of the roads did not allow getting the necessary amount of provisions from the Caucasus, it was decided to take the following step. "The Vaspurakani families, living in the Caucasus, give their stored wheat to the storage of Van and get flour from the warehouses of the Benevolent Society in the Caucasus"⁵⁴. This fact gave a chance to alleviate the acute shortage of food, especially that of the wheat, in Van, and put an end to the sale of wheat and flour at speculative prices by some dishonest merchants.

Besides, the stored wheat in different caches of villages was saved from being spoiled. This would have also given an opportunity to store and accumulate certain amount of wheat for spring. Substantial monetary resources that had to be spent for transporting wheat from the Caucasus and Persia would have been also saved. It was planned to open several bakeries in Van.

It was thought that there would have been an opportunity to receive from 15,000 to 20,000 poods of wheat in 1917⁵⁵, if the seeds would have been provided in a timely manner and the "danger" of the retreat would not have hindered the field works.

One of the greatest problems of the Armenians of Van was the inclusion of school-aged children in schools. There were 2.000 school-aged children in Van and the region in the autumn of 1916. The Armenian Central Committee provided 3.000 roubles to buy stationery and textbooks and to send them to Van⁵⁶. Projects were being developed to reopen the schools and to resume studies. Initially, it was planned to have three

⁵¹ NAA, f. 57, l. 5, d. 122, p. 2 rev.

⁵² NAA, f. 57, l. 5, d. 122, p. 3.

⁵³ The number was eighteen thousand as Gr. Ohandjanyan says. See NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 2. Half a million of roubles were set aside to assist the Mohammedans in the conquered areas by order of the Caucasus Vicegerent. The Kurds were deprived of the assistance; see NAA, 1168, l. 1, d. 324, p. 16.

⁵⁴ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 3.

⁵⁵ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 6.

⁵⁶ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 1083, p. 4. Events in Vaspurakan (The Diary of Hm. Manukyan), "Vem", Paris, n. 1, 1937, p. 60.

schools. One of them was to be functioned in Van, the other in the village of Berdak, not far from the city, and the third in Alyur village of the Timar province. But all the efforts were in vain because of the retreat on November 9⁵⁷.

Gr. Ohandjanyan has presented all the details of the situation in Van and the region in the report, dated with December 10. He distinguished the uncoordinated actions of both military and civilian authorities because of which the population had suffered. "The Commission for the Reconstruction of Armenia" sent relevant specialists, who had to help establish court, town hall and other administrative bodies. The governor allowed the villages to have four armed guards to protect the settlements from the possible attacks of the Kurds⁵⁸. It goes without saying that those four armed men would not have been able to repel the large-scale attack of the Kurds, but their presence had a moral and psychological significance for the villagers.

The population of the province began gradually to increase. Approximately 18 thousand people were living in the city and the surrounding villages. All their problems were being solved by the Armenian Central Committee, operating along with the ABSC. As Gr. Ohandjanyan wrote in his report "The other organizations came as well, but they came and went. Only the "Union of Cities" and the "Benevolent Society" stayed". The Union of Cities was satisfied only with the repair of its own buildings and office, and they were "waiting for the food and other supplies to operate"⁵⁹.

Needless to say that supplying 18,000 people with food was a complicated and responsible task, as most of the sowing areas could not be cultivated in time. To alleviate the situation of the population, shops and stores were opened in Van and Alyur village in the province of Timar.

The problem of education was among the matters that were of primary importance. Gr. Ohandjanyan stated painfully, "it is the third year already that several thousand Vaspurakani children are deprived of school... the school brings rules and regulations in the village..."⁶⁰. To have the schools restored the Armenian Central Committee prepared two estimates; the first one consisted of eight thousand roubles for three schools, where four hundred children would have been enrolled. The second estimate concerned the project of founding seven schools for 750 children. One has to mention that the number of school-age children was much higher. Thus, there were 400 school-age children in Alyur village, but the local school was capable to accommodate only 250 pupils. Hence, it follows that the planned seven schools could have accommodated all children. However, it required more money⁶¹.

⁵⁷ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 1083, p. 4. Events in Vaspurakan (the Diary of Hm. Manukyan), "Vem", Paris, n. 1, 1937, p. 60.

⁵⁸ "Van-Tosp", N 3, 13 December 1915, p. 14.

⁵⁹ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 3 rev.

⁶⁰ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 6 rev.

⁶¹ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 7.

Gr. Ohanjanyan considered it necessary to teach Russian language. He had offered that in case of appointing a senior teacher at the Alyur village school, his knowledge of Russian should have been considered mandatory⁶².

The Armenian central committee, operating along with the ABSC, spent considerable resources for cargo transportation. About 1,000 poods of goods of different types and importance were being transported to Van monthly, for which more than ten thousand roubles were required. In order to save money that was spent on cargo transportation, Gr. Ohandjanyan provided funds both to build sailing vessels and to send the loads to different settlements of Van⁶³. Four sailboats were built with a total capacity of 16.000 poods⁶⁴. The Russian authorities, attaching importance to the strategic position of Vaspurakan, decided to organize a Van fleet, and a temporary statute was adopted about it. The commander of the Baku port had to provide necessary supplies, as well as consultations⁶⁵. The Head of the Petrograd Military District with headquarters in Petrograd, General Hakob Bagratuni, proposed the position of the Commander of the Van Navy to a marine officer, later an admiral of the Soviet Union, Hovhannes Isakov (Isahakyan), who refused to accept this proposal.

At the beginning of 1917, the territory of Van district occupies 3425 versts² (verst is equal to 1.06 m) and was divided into 6 zones. The Russian Revolution of February 1917 and the overthrow of the autocracy in Russia brought some changes in Western Armenia as well, but a number of officials, who remained in their positions, continued to harass and prevent the return of Armenian refugees. We find the evidence of this fact in the telegram of the Van commissioner of the Union of Cities, K. Hambardzumyan, addressed to V. Kharlamov, the chairman of the Transcaucasian Special Committee, dated with 21 June, 1917. The Commissioner reported about the Kurdish threat facing Van and the settlements of the provinces. A number of principals of destination points (etaps) continued the project adopted by Prince B. Shakhovskij;



Generals Hakob Bagratuni and Andranik Ozanyan

⁶² NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 171, p. 7.

⁶³ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 1030, p. 27 rev.

⁶⁴ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 1030, p. 28.

⁶⁵ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 1030, p. 173.

they disallowed the return of Armenian refugees and patronized the Kurds. K. Hambardzumyan proposed to immediately remove such persons as they continued to pursue the policy of the former authorities⁶⁶.



Admiral of the Soviet Union,
Hovhannes Isakov (Isahakyan)

The Russian government divided the Western Armenia into 19 districts on July 21. The district of Van, which included the territories of Saray, Bashkale and Diadin, were placed under the authority of Commissar K. Hambardzumyan⁶⁷. In October it was allowed to form the third battalion of the Armenian 5th Rifle Regiment in Van by order of the Command of the Caucasian Army. It was formed by local residents. However, it was ordered shortly after to form the 4th Regiment of Van. The men aged 18 to 40 were mobilized. An instructional brigade of non-commissioned officers was also formed⁶⁸.

The activities of reconstructing Van-Vaspurakan were continued in 1917. However, after the military units of the Caucasian Army left the Russian-Turkish front on February 1918, the Ottoman troops began a large-scale attack. In March, the Armenians of Van and the province were compelled to retreat into Eastern Armenia and Persia. There they continued to fight against Turkish invaders.

***Translated from Armenian
by V. M. Gharakhanyan***

⁶⁶ NAA, f. 1168, l. 1, d. 318, p. 277.

⁶⁷ NAA, f. 1267, l. 4, d. 16, p. 47-48.

⁶⁸ NAA, f. 1267, l. 2, d. 96, p. 1.