

AROUND THE ASSASSINATION OF PETROS GAPAMAJYAN, THE GOVERNER OF VAN

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In 1912 mayoral elections were held in Van and two renowned public figures of Van were nominated for the position of mayor: Avetis Terzibashyan and Petros Gapamajyan. Avetis Terzibashyan, who was a more educated person, secured a convincing victory. But soon he had to leave Van and gave his position to ambitious P. Gapamajyan who received a title of «bey» and was called Haji bey.

Petros bey Gapamajyan was one of the wealthy and distinguished merchants thanks to whom trade largely developed in Van and affiliates of trading companies were opened in villages and regions. He was also a district guardian, a trustee of monasteries and schools, and a member of the provincial administrative council (*mejlis idare*). At the same time, Gapamajyan founded the Van branch of the Charity, became its chairman, helped schools and played an important role in the opening of the Van seminary, donating a large amount of money and later also raising funds for that institution. Several hundred families in Van lived at his expense.¹

P. Gapamajyan was a successful mayor. As A. Yekaryan confessed, the city of Van had hardly seen such a good mayor as him.² In his article the writer Vahan Minakhoryan (Whip)³ wrote about him: «He sincerely and fearlessly expressed his feelings, was right and impartial in his position, and for this reason a lot of people envied him and he became their victim. As an impartial, straightforward person, he was never afraid to speak the truth and boldly spoke in front of the government as well as in the national circles; a virtue that was not given to many».⁴

Thus, everything went well until the Dashnaks decided to get a share from P. Gapamajyan's wealth. However, beautiful words and threats had no value for him. And

¹ The ARF press indicates that P. Gapamajyan was a highly arrogant, haughty and ambitious person: «He was an agha with old views and thoughts... he could not accept that others besides himself were recognized as governors of the nation». He took part in Vazgen's (Tigran Teroyan) and his friends' leaving of Van, and later in the arrest and banishment of revolutionary youth. With his personal resources P. Gapamajyan made a military uniform for a part of soldiers of the Turkish army that had suppressed the rebellion of Sasoon in 1904. In 1908, during Davo's treachery he helped the police to discover the hiding place of weapons. P. Gapamajyan did not contribute to the settlement of the land issue and elimination of oppression. See *Horizon*, March 2, 1913, N 47 (in Arm.).

² See Armenak Yekaryan 1947: 169.

³ Hovakimyan 2005: 302.

⁴ Mshak, January 17, 1913, N 11 (in Arm.).

he responded to the Dashnaks: «I disagree with your actions that I find damaging and thus, I cannot have any financial contribution to your sins».⁵

Later, his relations with the Dashnak committee of Van became more strained and P. Gapamajyan had to send a heart-to-heart letter to the Archbishop Hovhannes Arsharuni, the Patriarch of Constantinople and complained of the nation-damaging activities of Dashnak leaders, Aram and Ishkhan, and asked him to expel those two «stranger rebels» from Van. Vahan Papazian sent the news of the contents of the letter to Arshak Vramyan in Van, at the same time expressing his surprise: «Is this man still alive?» In his turn, the short-sighted Patriarch H. Arsharuni sent that heart-to-heart letter to the Van vicar general bishop Hovsep Sarajian, who discussed the letter with the Van City Council, most of the members of which were Dashnaks.⁶

Several days after these developments, on the evening of December 23, 1912, on the holiday of Prophet David, when the 72-year-old mayor Petros Gapamajyan was heading for the celebration in his own sledge-chariot to the house of his relative Marjitjyan (Tchitazyan), the conspiratorial terrorist group killed him with four handgun bullets in front of his house.⁷ The incident was very shocking for the Armenian and Turkish population of Van, because P. Gapamajyan was a very influential man, was the mayor and had an active participation in the social and state affairs of the city.⁸

P. Gapamajyan's funeral took place on December 25, 1912, in the Norashen church of Van, under the chairmanship of diocesan leader H. bishop Sarajian and with the participation of more than 1,000 people, representatives of the Van governor, commander of the troops, foreign consuls and missionaries. All the representatives who delivered eulogies - the priest, the American missionary Reynolds, the German Speo, the inspector of the Van seminary - M. Minasyan, Mihran Tevkants and Abraham Brutyan pointed out that P. Gapamajyan's murder was carried out by «black hands» that had long-term goals.⁹ And H. bishop Sarajian openly claimed that the crime was committed by Armenians.

There are two approaches in the press of that time in regard to P. Gapamajyan's murder: a) that he was killed by the Dashnaks by the order of Aram and Ishkhan, and b) the authorities had him killed in order to seize the mayor's position (*pele die reisi*).

The fact that in 1905 the ARF threatened to kill P. Gapamajyan and his beautiful house was burnt, was not denied even by their press. «Kohak» wrote the following in its editorial: «It is a general belief that the Dashnaks have killed Haji bey ... Because unpleasant whispers spread by the political current that the Turks killed him and other such childish distortions».¹⁰

⁵ Armenak Yekaryan 1947: 169.

⁶ Armenak Yekaryan 1947: 170.

⁷ See Bithynia, December 26, 1912 - 1 January 8, 1913, N 18 (in Arm.).

⁸ See Horizon, March 2, 1913, N 47.

⁹ See Mshak, January 17, 1913, N 11.

¹⁰ Kohak, February 23/26, 1913, N 5 (in Arm.).

At the same time the ARF did not regard the deceased as a powerful rival of the party¹¹. In fact, «Azatamart» wrote about it: «The Government that wants to see Dashnaktsutyun's fault in everything, immediately imputed this to the same party, though it has officially done nothing. They did not take into account the rumors in the society that on the occasion of the New Year Gapamajyan intended to donate a large sum of money to some national institution and thus, has become victim of conspiracy of his own people»¹².

The Government and particularly Goneal Mustafa, the head of the police of Van, who had punished dozens of Armenians for the assassination of one Kurdish bandit did not start an investigation into the murder of the Mayor at first, but on the contrary defended the ARF, so the murder investigation went on silently. The ARF Committee tried to justify themselves saying they had no information on that murder, that P. Gapamajyan was killed by a former Dashnak soldier who had acted on his own initiative. Certainly, no one believed it. In order to avoid further doubt, besides, taking the opportunity to persecute the Dashnaks, Izzet Bey, the governor of Van, ordered to arrest Garegin Voskerchyan and Shirin Hakobyan, the members of ARF, accusing them of selling weapons for self-defense in villages¹³. Some Dashnaks from Van were also persecuted, namely Tevos, Ales and Panos, and their number soon rose to 10-15¹⁴.

Taking advantage of the fact that there were serious disagreements between P. Gapamajyan and the ARF, the authorities spread the news that he was killed by his opponents. The Turkish press («Allemtari» and «Iphhami»), at least, accused ARF pointing out that the crime was committed near their office and that the victim was the Dashnaks' adversary¹⁵. Thus, in his letter dated with Nov. 20, 1913 addressed to the Central Committee of ARF in the United States, A. Vramyan stated: «Gapamajyan's murder by unknown hands seemed favorable for the governor to begin the persecution. That assassination was committed on Dec. 23 whereas I left on Dec. 4, and my friend Aram was very ill and was in the hospital in America for several months. Finally, they sent a notification to me and Aram, accusing both of us of the murder. We denied it, sent a complaint by the telegram, 1 day later the governor resigned and soon after the case was closed»¹⁶. Nevertheless, attributing the mayor's murder to the ARF was only a result of suspicion which the Dashnaks deny, even though there was no official response to the charges against them¹⁷.

There are also arguments regarding the authorities' involvement in Gapamajyan's murder. Olferev, the Russian Deputy Consul to Van, being well-aware of the events, considered it necessary to inform the Russian Ambassador to Constantinople that P.

¹¹ See Horizon, March 2, 1913, N 47.

¹² Azatamart, January 29, 1913, N 1123 (in Arm.).

¹³ See Horizon, March 2, 1913, N 47.

¹⁴ See Azatamart, January 29, 1913, N 1123.

¹⁵ See Bithynia, December 26, 1912 - January 8, 1913, N 18.

¹⁶ The documents for the history of the party of Dashnaktsutyun: 289.

¹⁷ See Kohak, March 13/26, 1913, N 9.

Gapamajyan was killed not by the Dashnaks, but by Turkish officials in order to use up the huge sum that only the deceased knew about.¹⁸

In his secret telegram No. 245/39 dated with March 8, 1913 addressed to Garroni, the Ambassador of Italy to Constantinople, Gorini, the Consul General of Italy to Trabzon, also states that Gapamajyan's murder was dictated by the authorities and was carried out by the Kurds: «even the Van Mayor Kapamajian's murder has not been disclosed yet ... Recently a clash took place between the gendarmes of Van and a Kurdish gang. The Armenian gendarme killed the Kurdish chieftain to whom Kapamajyan's murder was attributed. The Armenian gendarme is now arrested and convicted».¹⁹

For the purpose of disclosing the murder, ARF offered Set Gapamajian, P. Gapamajyan's son to set a friendly court. The latter recommended P. R. Shatvoryan and H. Gondaktchyan as members of the court. However, the Dashnaks objected to their candidacy, after which S. Brutyan and Paramaz were suggested as members. But the Dashnaksutjun did not make any move this time either.²⁰

The secret of P. Gapamajyan's murder was left undisclosed. In the face of P. Gapamajyan Van-Vaspurakan lost a distinguished mayor who had played an important role in the improvement of advancing education and economy of Van-Vaspurakan.

To replace P. Gapamajyan, Vahan Ef. Marutyan was appointed as acting mayor and the new mayor's elections were to be held in March, 1913 with the participation of citizens having the right to vote.²¹

After the attack on P. Gapamajyan several other new murders were committed in the province of Van. A. Yekaryan attributes them to the Dashnaks. As a result of party conflicts and disagreements melik Markos of the Gortsot village (Berkri region) was murdered. He had managed to keep Gortsot away from Kurdish persecutions to some extent. A. Yekaryan wrote about him the following: «He was an influential man and during the past years had a lot of conflicts with Kurdish chieftains. He was brave, firm and resolute and thanks to these qualities was always victorious in the mentioned conflicts. He was also a wealthy man. He was the head of a traditional family whose door was always open to travellers of all nations, whose table was always laid and whose fire was always burning to feed travelling guests».²²

In similar conditions Harutyun, the head of the Anggh village of Hayots Dzor was killed. He was a clever and experienced person and the villagers were pleased by his actions. The village was in a good state until Ishkhan went to Anggh and demanded that Harutyun «take orders from him from now on and act the way he demanded».²³ And

¹⁸ See Central State Military-historical Archive. Russian empire, Fund 1300, list 29, p.96, N 8.

¹⁹ Baloyan 2008: 24.

²⁰ See Kohak, May 1/14, 1913, N 16.

²¹ See Mshak, February 8, 1913, N 30.

²² Armenak Yekaryan 1947: 170.

²³ Idem: 171.

Ishkhan demanded that the head of the village make all the villagers buy weapons. But they did not reach an agreement and Harutyun was killed by his own son (who was under the influence of the ideas of the new generation) and by his accomplices.

A question arises against whom the ARF wanted to secretly arm the Armenian villagers, being a state party and having its deputy mandates in the Parliament - Mepusan. Outwardly the Dashnak chiefs of Van - Ishkhan, Aram, V. Papazyan, Rapael, Teos and others formed mixed Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Kurdish armed groups against the seeming threat of *Ittilaf*, but according to A. Yekaryan it was directed against Russia since during the days of the Balkan war Russian-Turkish relations were tense.²⁴

Then, according to the order of the ARF, Nazaret Tndukhyan, one of the district governors of Aygestan, in Van, was killed just for saying that he knew a lot about the ARF's internal affairs which were very disgusting. A. Yekaryan cited the testimony of Harutyun Chavush, one of the organizers of the murder, writing the following: «A conspiratorial group of twelve people hid themselves in the ruins near the house of Atom Agha. A man called Harutyun Chavush who was unknown to the people of Kharberd and Van, presented himself to Nazaret and invited him to the police station of Kentrchi under the pretence of some business connected with his position. Without having any doubt Nazaret followed him. When they reached the agreed place the eleven conspirators attacked the unarmed man, tied him, put a sack over his head, took him to a faraway garden and slaughtered him like a sheep. Before being butchered the poor man begged something from these brutal villains - to tell his only son not to testify before the government. But of course the criminals would not deliver this message».²⁵

These people were killed because they had great influence among the population in their provinces and did not want to become toys in the hands of the ARF. These assassinations took place in Van and prominent centers of the province, and what was going on in distant villages, no one knows.

In March, 1913 brothers Hayk and Yervand Ter-Mkrtchyan were attacked and injured in Van. The general opinion was that the purpose of the attack had been to hinder the publication of «Van-Tap», the periodical of the Ramkavar party (Armenian Democratic Liberal Party) (the two brothers were the typesetters and proofreaders of the periodical). «Mshak» called what had happened a barbaric act and reproached the ARF which considered itself the most viable element of the Armenian people: «We do not believe that the Dashnaktsutyun party could have directly decided on and ordered such ferocious attacks and we do not believe that their purpose was to kill. But the party has created such an atmosphere that the attacks and ferocities can take place and they take place even by themselves all around by separate comrades or a group and this is even worse because it proves that the party is deprived of order and discipline and the

²⁴ Idem: 172.

²⁵ Idem: 172-173.

comrades are prejudiced with lamentable thoughts and it is their fault that they have created such a contagious atmosphere».²⁶

In March 29, 1913 there was an attempt to threaten Avetis effendi Terzibashyan, one of the Armenian prominent people of Van, by demanding 50 golden coins from him. Suspecting the Dashnaks, A. Terzibashyan turned to Ishkhan for help. But during the discovery of the crime the two villains that made a terror attempt were neutralized and the real motive of the crime remained unknown.²⁷ A. Yekaryan wrote that when Deli Ghazar, a Dashnak chieftain realized that the extortionists were from among themselves he immediately «ordered to stop the fire, they took the one killed, made the one injured disappear and the issue was closed...».²⁸

Such activity disunited the people and they were not able to organize their self-defense.

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²⁶ Mshak, April 21, 1913, N 84.

²⁷ Mshak, April 24, 1913, N 86.

²⁸ Armenak Yekaryan 1947: 155.