

THE ARMENIAN NATIONALIST-LIBERAL (REORGANIZED HUNCHAKIAN) PARTY IN 1917-1921

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Abstract

The international and political situation that came into existence after World War I dictated to the Armenian political forces to reconsider their programs and practices. The Reorganized Hunchakian Party, which was dedicated to the liberation of Western Armenians and advocated liberal ideas, adopted the name “Nationalist-Liberal”. The Liberals believed that the Armenian state that would unite the Republic of Armenia, Western Armenia and Cilicia, should have a presidential system of government and temporarily accept the patronage of a great power. The party played a significant role in Armenian social and political life in 1917-1921. After the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia, the ideological differences between the Liberals and the Soviet government did not disappear, however, the party’s priority became to help Armenia, which continued after the unification of the Liberals and the Ramgavars.

Keywords: Reorganized Hunchakian, nationalist-liberal party, Western Armenians, liberation, Republic of Armenia

Introduction

Until the 90s of the previous century the history of the Reorganized Hunchakian party (1896-1921) was only superficially covered by Armenian historiography. It was mainly viewed in the context of the history of either the Hunchakian Party or the Democratic Liberal Party (the Ramgavar Party). Active work on the comprehensive study of the history of this national political organization has been carried out especially in the last two decades.¹

This article chronologically covers the activities of the party for the period 1917-1921, i.e. from the February revolution in Russia to the unification of the Constitutional Ramgavar Party and the Reorganized Hunchakians and the establishment of the Democratic Liberal Party (Ramgavar).

After the massacres of Western Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1890s, at the conference of the Hunchakian party in London in 1896, the Western Armenian Hunchakians came into conflict with party leader Avetis Nazarbekyan over theoretical and tactical issues. At the Council of Alexandria in 1898 the opposition formed their own party called the Reorganized Hunchakian. The Reorganized party renounced the

¹ Hovhannisyan 2003: 181-190; Hovhannisyan 2015; Hovhannisyan 2018: 247-260; Vardivaryan 2016: 57-275.

program of the Hunchakians of the propaganda of socialism, declaring that their only main goal was the liberation of Western Armenians from Turkish rule.

At the end of 1914, after Ottoman Turkey joined the Central Powers, the legal activities of national parties had ceased in Turkey. During the war, along with the other Armenian national parties the Reorganized party fought in defense of the Armenian people and suffered serious losses and their local organizations were demolished. After that, until the end of the war the Reorganized party, among other Armenian parties, carried out its activities outside the Ottoman Empire.

The activity of the party in 1917-1921

The 1917 Russian revolutions, the defeat of the German-Turkish bloc in the World War and the resulting events opened a new era of activity for the Armenian national parties.

The Reorganized Hunchakian party operated on a decentralized basis. It had branches in Greece, Bulgaria and France, but the most influential were the Reorganized Hunchakian organizations in the USA and Egypt.

Although the party did not have as many members as the Social Democrat Hunchakians and especially the ARF Dashnaktsutyun, however, it had great intellectual potential. The Reorganized party propagated their ideas through their print media, raising various Armenian national issues.

In 1917-1921 the periodicals of the Reorganized party “Pahak” (Boston), “Aror” (Fresno), “Kilikyan Surhandak” (Adana), “Aragats” (Constantinople), “Haykashen” (Tiflis) and others were published.

The important international-and-political events of the beginning of the 20th century (the Russian revolutions of 1917, the defeat of the German-Turkish bloc in World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the first Republic of Armenia, etc.) dictated to the Armenian political forces to reconsider their strategy and tactics, therefore their programs. In 1917 the “Program-Code of Rules” of the American branch of the Reorganized Hunchakian Party was published in Boston, followed by the draft of the new program of the party.² The new program of the party was published in Boston, in 1919.³

The first noticeable change in the program was the name of the party. The term “nationalist-liberal” was added to the words “reorganized Hunchakian”. It reflected the rejection of the socialist ideology of the old Hunchakians (Social Democrat Hunchakian Party) and on the other hand, it emphasized the party’s national character, its commitment to national ideals. Besides, it was stressed that the party believed in liberal ideas. In the new program of the party, nationalism was separated from chauvinism and the harmful essence of the latter was emphasized.⁴

² Reorganized-Hunchakian. Program materials.

³ Program. Reorganized Hunchakian.

⁴ Reorganized-Hunchakian. Program.

According to some sources, the name of the Reorganized Hunchakian Party was changed on November 18, 1918 in the USA.⁵ The members of the central board of the Nationalist-Liberal Party were Mihran Svazlyan, Hrach Yervand and Lutvig Guyumjyan.⁶ The program declared the liberation of the Armenian people and the establishment of an independent and united state within the borders of their historical homeland as the political goal of the party.⁷

According to the Reorganized Party (hereinafter referred to as the Liberals - G.H.) the structure of the state of Armenia was to be a presidential republic like France or the USA, intertwined with local peculiarities.⁸

It was emphasized that the President of the Republic would be elected by popular vote. It was declared that the party did not accept the revolutionary way of social development. The program pointed out the need for a great power to assume Armenia's mandate. At the same time, it was stated that it should be temporary.

A number of other issues related to nationalism and liberalism, power and class relations, attitude towards socialists, as well as the party's ideological principles were covered in the pages of "Aragats", one of the party's periodicals. Speaking about nationalism and liberalism, Vahan Shahrman, its editor, a well-known party figure, publicist, emphasized that their nationalism did not threaten other peoples, it was a forced step of self-preservation against the genocidal policy of savage tribes. It would also contribute to the preservation of the Armenian national identity for further survival. As for the term "liberal", in Shahrman's opinion it was associated with progress.⁹ At the same time, he emphasized the idea that Armenian nationalism did not contradict the socialists, and at that time there was no need for the Armenian people to be either socialist or anti-socialist, but only to be Armenian.¹⁰ Pointing out Bolshevism, he did not consider it right to concentrate power in the hands of one class, which, in his opinion, would have catastrophic consequences. He believed that the legislative and executive power of the Armenian state should be formed without class discrimination.¹¹

The party took an active part in the establishment of the Armenian National Union of America in March 1917, the president of which became Mihran Svazlyan. The union united the ARF Dashnaktsutyun, the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, the Liberal and the Armenian Constitutional Ramgavar parties, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical churches. The goal of the union was to promote the reconstruction of Western Armenia, to provide assistance to the Armenian diaspora, to gather Armenian volunteers for the Eastern Legion and to carry out pro-

⁵ Ramgavar-Azatakan party.

⁶ Vardivaryan 2016: 233.

⁷ In 1919 the Republic of Armenia was already an established state. Accepting this reality, however, the Reorganized party viewed it as only one stage in the creation of future Armenian statehood. Within the borders of the Armenian state they saw the territories of the Republic of Armenia, Western Armenia and Cilicia.

⁸ "Pahak", September 18, 1917.

⁹ "Aragats", July 19, 1919.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ "Aragats", July 12, 1919.

Armenian propaganda in the USA. During its activity, the union achieved significant success. Only in 1917, 1172 volunteers were recruited; during 1917-1922 about 1 million USD was raised. A large-scale pro-Armenian campaign in the US state-and-political circles had been launched especially by M. Svazlyan, the well-known figure of the union's leading party, who was the representative of the Armenian national delegation of Paris to the USA.¹² The Liberals were seriously concerned about the political situation in Russia. They rightly believed that the Russian revolutions and the dramatic events that followed would have a direct impact on the fate of the Armenian people. It was no coincidence that publications and articles on this subject occupied a large place in the party's print media. The Boston-based "Pahak" newspaper, the main body of the party in the American region, blamed the Bolshevik Party and its leader Lenin for the chaotic situation in Russia.¹³

The newspaper warned the Armenian people to stay away from social movements, which were considered dangerous because they alienated peoples from national ideas and from the consciousness of the nation's collective interests, instead sowing the idea of the priority of class interests.¹⁴ The party was against the class division of the Armenian people, the fragmentation of Western Armenian-Eastern Armenian, rightly believing that national unity was more than necessary to face the dangers threatening the Armenian people.¹⁵

Liberal figure Petros Tepoyan criticized the Bolsheviks for the collapse of the Caucasus front, as well as the Transcaucasian Commissariat, which according to him, did not take practical steps to preserve it. He also criticized the Armenian Mensheviks, who, avoiding being called "nationalists", refused to use the words "nation", "homeland" and "defended the great Russian homeland with the obstinacy of a slave".¹⁶

The party considered the statement of Kerensky, the head of the Russian Provisional Government, to be more in line with the interests of the Armenian people. According to him, the withdrawal of the Russian troops from the Caucasus front would inevitably lead to new Armenian massacres.¹⁷

Addressing the issue of Soviet Russia's attitude to the Armenian issue, "Haykashen" emphasized the fact that although the Lenin government had by decree recognized the Western Armenians' right to free self-determination, however, it remained only a statement, since there was no real force to implement it. The newspaper emphasized the fact that the policy of the Bolsheviks largely facilitated the Russian soldiers on the Caucasian front to leave their positions and expose the front line, which stimulated the advance of the Turkish troops.¹⁸

¹² Vardivaryan 2016: 235.

¹³ "Pahak", September 7, 1917.

¹⁴ "Pahak", September 25, 1917.

¹⁵ "Hayashen", January, 1918: 127.

¹⁶ "Haykashen", November-December, 1917: 44.

¹⁷ "Pahak", September 25, 1917.

¹⁸ "Hayashen", January, 1918: 142.

“Haykashen” considered the fall of Karin a severe blow to the “sacred trial of Turkish Armenia”, considering that its reason was the weak combat effectiveness and low discipline of the Armenian military units. Speaking about the deep roots of these negative phenomena, the periodical put forward a remarkable point of view, writing that for years the Armenian people tolerated a number of ambitious, selfish and opportunist individuals speaking on behalf of the nation to play with the fate of the nation; and their activities had catastrophic consequences.¹⁹

An important event on the way to the establishment of the Armenian statehood was the proclamation of an independent and united Armenia, which took place on May 28, 1919. However, the act of the Government of the Republic of Armenia was not unequivocally adopted by the Armenian political forces. The Liberals accepted it with reservations and did not unequivocally reject it, unlike the Constitutional Ramgavars and the Armenian Populist Party, whose parliamentary faction resigned in protest. Speaking about the issue of the united Armenian government which was widely discussed during that period, the Liberals noted that it was to be formed with the participation of the representatives of the Republic of Armenia and the National Delegation headed by Boghos Nubar.²⁰ They warned the ARF not to form a government based on party principles only.²¹

By the end of World War I, the significant role of the United States in international politics was already noticeable. The Reorganized party sought to use this circumstance to resolve the Armenian question. M. Svazlyan wrote that the Armenian people had made great sacrifices during the war, fighting bravely alongside their allies and presented their just demands to the Paris Peace Conference like the Greeks, Serbs and other oppressed peoples. Svazlyan expected the support of the United States for the success of that process.²²

Welcoming the pro-Armenian position of US President Wilson, V. Shahrman rightly believed that the Armenian people should always be ready for self-defense. Referring to the bitter lessons of history, he pointed out that without one's own strength one could not hope that the Armenian people could establish lasting peace with their neighbors.²³ Back in the spring of 1919 the Liberals expressed concern about the influence the victory of Bolshevism would have on the Armenian issue.²⁴

At the same time, they did not place separate hopes in the anti-Bolshevik forces of Russia. In 1919 V. Shahrman warned that if the Kolchak-Denikin group won the civil war, a constitutional monarchy would be established in Russia, the supporters of which advocated the idea of a united and indivisible Russia, contrary to the national aspirations of the peoples of the Russian Empire.²⁵

¹⁹ “Hayashen”, February, 1918: 121-122.

²⁰ “Aragats”, July 5, 1919.

²¹ “Aragats”, January 19, 1919.

²² “Aragats”, October 26, 1919.

²³ “Aragats”, March 15, 1919.

²⁴ “Pahak”, March 21, 1919.

²⁵ “Aragats”, September 28, 1919.

After the US Senate rejected Armenia's mandate, the main body of the US branch of the Liberal Party wrote that after many disappointments it would be adventurism to anticipate our salvation from Europe again.²⁶

It became obvious that the Liberals were turning their eyes towards Russia. "Pahak" called on the Government of the Republic of Armenia, members of the Armenian delegation in Paris to direct their efforts to normalize relations with Bolshevik Russia.²⁷

Cilicia was of special importance to the Liberals. In the Party plan of 1898, Cilicia was considered the place from where the nationwide uprising for the liberation of Western Armenia was to begin and unfold.

In the spring of 1917, the United States joined the war on the side of the Entente. The National Union of American Armenians offered Jim (Petros) Changalyan, Liberal figure, experienced military man, to leave for Cilicia. Changalyan, who took an active part in the defense of local Armenians from Kurdish hordes in Van-Vasporakan with his American volunteers in 1915-1916, went to Egypt and joined the Eastern Legion. The French command highly appreciated Changalyan's professional and organizational skills, appointing him commander of one of the legion battalions.

The battalion led by Changalyan took an active part in the battle of Arara on September 19, 1918, from where he moved to Adana and was engaged in solving the social problems of the Armenians returning to Cilicia.²⁸

In 1919-1920 the main task of the Armenian national parties in Cilicia was to organize the self-defense of local Armenians against the intensifying attacks of the Kemalists. Their activities were coordinated by M. Tamatyan, the authorized representative of the Armenian National Delegation. The relations between the Liberals and the Constitutional Ramgavars were especially close. The newspaper "Kilikyan Surhandak" of the Nationalist-Liberal Party was published in Adana.²⁹

It should also be mentioned that in the conditions of intensifying Kemalist attacks there still existed inter-party contradictions in the social and political life of the Armenians of Cilicia. In particular, the periodical "Eritasard Hayastan" testified to the conflict between the Liberals and Social Democrat Hunchakians.³⁰

In 1919 the anti-Armenian essence of France's policy on Cilicia became more and more obvious. Liberals condemned the French defeatist stance towards Kemalists in press and rallies.³¹ They pointed to the hypocritical and deceitful policy of France, which, by signing an agreement with Mustafa Kemal, recognized the integrity of Turkey and ignoring the interests of the Armenian people, their devotion to allied countries and the countless casualties during the war, returned Cilicia to Turkey.³²

²⁶ "Pahak", June 15, 1920.

²⁷ "Pahak", June 15, 1920.

²⁸ Vardivaryan 2016: 200-201.

²⁹ Gangruni 1986: 303.

³⁰ "Eritasard Hayastan", May 11, 1920.

³¹ "Pahak", May 27, 1919.

³² "Pahak", June 10, 1920.

The party was watching the expansion of Kemalist-Bolshevik cooperation with concern, considering it a serious threat to the Republic of Armenia. The “Pahak” editorial of May 25, 1920 pointed to the dire political situation in Armenia, which was attacked by both Turkish-Tatar hordes and Soviet troops. In this context, the periodical condemned the May uprising of the Armenian Bolsheviks. Raising the issue of relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan, “Pahak” pointed out the two-faced policy of Georgia and did not believe in the Armenian-Georgian alliance. In the issues of the periodical of 1920 there are many reports about Azerbaijan’s aggressive policy towards the Republic of Armenia. The former was helped by the Turks. Liberals believed that Britain and the USA should provide military assistance to Armenia to counter Turkish-Tatar attacks.³³

Analyzing the relations between the Entente countries at that period, “Pahak” wrote that their alliance was shattered, and the British diplomacy “watched Bolshevik-Turkish” cooperation without action. According to the periodical, the immediate recognition of Lenin’s government by England would hinder the Turkish-Bolshevik alliance and allow Armenia to get out of the difficult situation.³⁴ Although the ideological differences with the Bolsheviks did not disappear after the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia, the factor of the national state became a priority for the Liberals. They considered Soviet Armenia the homeland of the Armenians. The party condemned the 1921 February uprising and demanded that the ARF cease its anti-Soviet activities and renounce its ambition for the political leadership of the Armenian people.³⁵ In 1921 the party had finally turned towards Soviet Armenia. Boston’s “Pahak” praised Chairman of the Armenian Government Alexander Myasnikyan, who worked hard for the establishment of statehood and had great faith in the future powerful Armenia.³⁶

The Liberals declared their readiness to help Soviet Armenia, and propagated the idea in the Armenian communities of the Diaspora through their periodicals.³⁷

The separate activities of the Armenian Nationalist-Liberal and Armenian Constitutional Ramgavar parties clearly showed that there were no significant ideological and tactical differences between them. Based on this, among Armenian intelligentsia who gathered around the Armenian National Delegation in Paris in 1919, a movement for uniting the two parties began. The movement was supported by famous intellectuals Arshak Chopanyan, Arshak Safrastyan, Tigran Kamsarakan, Yervand Aghaton and others.³⁸ The issue was discussed at the Armenian regional Second Congress of the Armenian Constitutional Ramgavar Party held in Yerevan in December

³³ “Pahak”, May 22, 1920.

³⁴ “Pahak”, May 22, 1920.

³⁵ “Pahak”, June 28, 1921, also August 6, 1921.

³⁶ “Pahak”, September 29, 1921.

³⁷ “Pahak”, September 29, 1921.

³⁸ Poghosyan 1987: 15.

1919 where the idea of uniting with the Nationalist-Liberal Party advocating Ramgavar (democratic) principles was adopted.³⁹

In February 1921 the negotiations on unification entered the final stage. The representatives of the parties agreed on the joint program, code and the name of the party.

In September 1921 the negotiations on unification resumed, first in Boston, then in Constantinople. They ended on October 1, and on October 25 the Democratic Liberal party was proclaimed. The official newspapers of the two parties were united under the name "Azg-Pahak". A year later the newspaper was called "Paykar".⁴⁰ Vahan Tekeyan was elected chairman of the central board of the newly formed party.⁴¹

SUMMARY

The international and political events that took place after World War I dictated to the Armenian political forces to reconsider their programs and activities. In 1918 the Hunchakian Party adopted the name Nationalist-Liberal. During the Paris Peace Conference, the Liberals supported the national delegation headed by Boghos Nubar. Its active figures carried out significant pro-Armenian activities in the United States, France and other countries.

In 1918-1920 the party was involved in the reconstruction of Cilicia, hoping that together with Western Armenia it would form an integral part of a united Armenia. Through their press they preached to stay away from the revolutionary-social movements and unite all the forces for the national priority - establishment of the Armenian statehood.

In 1917-1921 the activities of the Liberals and the Ramgavars showed that both parties stood on the same theoretical and ideological platform. After the unification of the Ramgavar and Liberal parties in 1921, the Democratic Liberal party was formed. Although the Democratic Liberal Party maintained ideological differences with the Soviet government, however, helping Armenia came to the fore.

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³⁹ NAA, Artak Darbinyan f., n. 424, l. 1, file 45, l. 6.

⁴⁰ Chizmechyan 1930: 490.

⁴¹ NAA, f. 424, l.1, f.45, p.49.

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