

RECORDS OF VARDAN OF KHANASOR ON ARMENIAN-TATAR CONFRONTATIONS OF 1905-1906

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Abstract

The article presents the activities of Sargis Mehrabyan (Sergey) who is known as Vardan of Khanasor, one of those who devoted his life to the liberation of Armenia and an active participants of the Armenian-Tatar confrontations which took place in 1905-1907 in the Caucasus.

Keywords: Vardan of Khanasor, Armenian-Tatar confrontations

Sargis Mehrabyan (Sergey), who is better known as Vardan of Khanasor, Vardan, Vahe Syuni, and in songs as Lion of Shatakh,¹ was born in Shushi on August 10, 1867. In 1885 he finished the Diocesan School of Shushi.²

After finishing school, he moved to Baku, where his brother worked as an assistant chemist in an oil field owned by the Rothschild brothers. He was hired as a laborer in the same oil field most likely through his brother.



Rothschild oil refinery in Baku

In 1888 he was conscripted into the army and served in Goris, Alexandropol. As a graduate of a diocesan school he was to serve not 4 but 3 years.³ During this time he continued to read various literature, especially about the figures of the Bulgarian liberation movement, Raffi's novels, etc. Under their influence he became so encouraged that on April 8,

1890 he decided to go and see the historical capital of Ani with 8 soldiers from Shushi. Then they found out that Sargis Kukunyan planned an invasion, in which he took part.

¹S. Mehrabyan is better known as Vardan of Khanasor, Vardan, Vahe Syuni and in songs as Lion of Shatakh. See Vracyan 1992 (ed.): 3. The research was carried out within the framework of the joint scientific project (code 20RF-103) funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of RA and Russian Foundation of Basic Research (RF).

²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 80 rev.

³NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 80 rev.

At the end of 1890 he came to Yerevan, and with the help of the representative of the ARF Dashnaktsutyun he received a Persian passport and went to the village of Ghalasar of the Salmas county of Persia.⁴

In September, 1894 he crossed the country with a weapon transporting group and then returned to Persia. In Atrpatakan, he disguised his liberation activities by introducing himself as a servant of an educational inspector. The position allowed him to freely roam the Armenian villages and carry out the party's instructions.

After some time he settled in Tabriz. With great respect Vardan remembered the local teaching group (which included women) and the cultural activities. He noted: "They (the teachers – R.S.) kept in close contact with the people, organized performances, meetings, parties... They brought the women and girls of Tabriz to the square, made them participate in the performances... These teachers had left the high salary of the Caucasus and received a rather modest salary there".⁵

In a safe place not far from Tabriz, with Sako of Sevkar they tested "Mosin" rifles, which fired with smokeless gunpowder. Vardan was satisfied with the weapon, but Sako preferred his "Berdan № 2" rifle. According to Vardan, "Mosin" "was both very strong and shot very far, and these were very great advantages for a fight. The fact that I was a soldier and Sako was not, also played a role here".⁶

In May 1895, with 22 people he crossed from Salmas to Van. At that time, Turkish-Kurdish attacks on Armenians had begun in Vaspurakan, so it was decided to task Vardan with organizing the self-defense of the Armenian population. They carried out propaganda activities in the villages, persuaded the villagers to buy weapons and repel the Kurds who robbed them. The Hayduks emphasized that the Armenians "could be liberated if everyone was well-armed, consolidated, united, did not betray, was not afraid; and in case of a general uprising the Europeans would intervene and give us freedom. That's what we believed and that's what we told the people".⁷

Referring to the battles of 1890s, Vardan and his comrades-in-arms were convinced that Western Armenians could be liberated and could have the chance to get freedom as Bulgaria had done. "We ... put our lives at the service of the Armenian people, we sacrificed the purest, most selfless, educated, best comrades capable of sacrifice, the elite of the Armenian people, large numbers of victims in different parts of the country".⁸

Returning from Van-Vaspurakan, he settled in Baku and start working in the oil field of the "Caspian Company".⁹ While there, Vardan continued his propaganda

⁴NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 81.

⁵NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 82.

⁶NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 43. Vardan tested his rifle in the battle with the Kurds and deliberately left several fired bullets. The Kurds became confused when they found the bullets unknown to them, as they had never seen such a thing. Various myths were told from village to village "as if the bullet of that rifle went after a man and could even go circuitously", NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 45 rev.-46.

⁷NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 50.

⁸NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 75.

⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 16.

activities. Among the laborers and employees in the oil fields there were groups organized by the ARF Dashnaktsutyun, in front of which he spoke, presenting the situation in the country.¹⁰ According to Vardan: “My poor mother complained, saying: “You have come, but I don’t see you much”¹¹. Vardan was so inspired by the liberation struggle that he even demanded that his mother donate the gold coins on her coronet to buy weapons.¹²

He carried out similar activities in his hometown Shushi. He mentioned that the wives of the rich people of Shushi were active, and they also participated in the meetings and “were ready for any kind of material support”.¹³ The women raised money to buy horses and rifles and give them to Vardan and his friends.¹⁴ Margar Zhamharyan, the son of one of the rich men of Shushi, want to join the Hayduks, but his father forbade him. He sent his son to Germany, where he studied medicine. Unfortunately, he died during the Armenian-Tatar confrontations of 1906.¹⁵

When Vardan was leaving Shushi, the ladies gave him a surprise gift - a gold watch. At first, Vardan tried to refuse, but in vain. He noted that “during the Khanasor expedition the watch showed the time of the attack in the dark”.¹⁶

They crossed the Khodaapharin Bridge from Artsakh to Persia, but before that, with the help of a Turk, they had their weapons taken to the Persian territory. It was more dangerous when they were passing through Karadagh.¹⁷ The local Turks focused their attention on the new “Mosin” rifles of the Hayduks, which they wanted to seize. According to Vardan: “Our saviors are our courage and our clothes”.¹⁸

As Vardan noted, there were two opinions on the future activities of the party. The first was defended by the Western Armenians, who believed that the uprising in the country would force the European powers to intervene in favor of the Armenians. The others, on the contrary, considered it necessary to punish the Kurdish Mazrik tribe for massacring the retreating people of Van in 1896. This action could also attract the attention of Europeans.¹⁹

The accumulation of the large number of Hayduks in Salmas was impossible to hide. Both the Turkish authorities and the Kurds understood that the Armenians had undertaken something, but what it was, remained unknown. As Vardan recalls: “The Kurds were sending us news: why aren’t you coming, why are you late, we do not have money, we do not have weapons. They were referring to the youth coming from Van

¹⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 5.

¹¹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 79 rev.

¹²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 79 rev.

¹³NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 9 rev.

¹⁴NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 9 rev.

¹⁵NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 10.

¹⁶NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 10 rev.

¹⁷ Gharadagh, Karadagh, Sia-Kuh (the Armenian Highland) –a khanate in Persarmenia between Lake Urmia and the Araks, one of the regions of Vaspurakanin the Middle Ages. See more details in Hovsepyan 2009; Jhangiryan 2021.

¹⁸ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 11.

¹⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 1.

who were massacred, robbed, all their weapons and the huge amount of gold were stolen from them. They wanted to say come now so that we can kill you, take your weapons and ... your money”.²⁰

Vardan informs that Vazgen’s²¹ group of 40 people was in Salmas, including “future Andranik, who was there as an ordinary, inexperienced soldier”.²² In his memoirs he highlights the fact that the Armenians of Salmas did not spare anything, they hosted and supported the Hayduks. At the same time he mentions that there were never cases of betrayal by the people of Salmas.²³



Yeprem Davtyan



Armenak Yekaryan

Vardan was elected the head of the operation of Khanasor, and Hovsep Ishkhan was his deputy²⁴. There were 275 Hayduks, 25 of whom were led by cavalier Sargis. Vardan notes: “In the cavalry group there was Yeprem,²⁵ dictator during the future Persian²⁶ Revolution, who played a significant role in Persia”.

²⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 1 rev.-2.

²¹Teroyan Tigran (Vazgen, 1873-1898), a figure of the liberation movement, poet, Hayduk, member of the ARF. See more details about him in Sahakyan 1998: 22-27.

²²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 2 rev.

²³NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 43 andrev.

²⁴ Arghutyan Hovsep (Yervand, Tasho, Ishkhan, Ishkhan of Khanasor, Yervand Ghazaryan, 1863-1925), a figure of the liberation movement, member of the ARF, commander of the 7th volunteer squad.

²⁵Davtyan Yeprem (Yeprem khan, 1859-1912), a figure of the liberation movement, Hayduk, member of the ARF. He participated in S. Kukunyan’s campaign (1890). He participated in the Persian Revolution. He was the Chief of Police of Tehran (1909), then of the country (1910). He personally led a number of military operations.

²⁶ He refers to the revolution in Iran that took place in 1905-1911, which turned the country into a constitutional monarchy. As a result, Persia was divided between Russia and Great Britain (1907).

The expedition was joined by a group of Armenakans led by Armenak Yekaryan²⁷ who were going to Van.²⁸

On July 25, 1897, Vardan led the Khanasor expedition²⁹ against the Kurdish Mazrik tribe. According to Vardan: "That invasion made a strong impression on the Kurdish tribes".³⁰ The Ottoman authorities, who were aware that the Hayduks had come from Salmas, demanded that the Persian government hand them the participants of the invasion. In their turn, the Persian authorities were forced to give in and to intensify violence against Armenians. Armenian merchants were in a particularly difficult situation. According to Vardan, one of them, an old man, approached the gathered Hayduks and rebuked them, saying: "What did you do? You put dirt in the basket, you left us in deprivation".³¹

To get out of the situation, they decided to choose the lesser evil. They handed several innocent boys over to the Persians, who in their turn handed them over to the Turks, who arrested them. According to Vardan: "But then we learned that they were not particularly harmed".³²

The above-mentioned allowed Vardan to cross to Nakhichevan with a few people, to Yerevan, then to Etchmiadzin, where they found out that Khrimyan Hayrik wanted to meet with them. The Hayduks were introduced to His Holiness. He inquired about crossing the border, the attitude of the Russian authorities. M. Khrimyan said the following: "I hear you have killed several Kurds, now go and stay calm, go into the cocoon like the caterpillar, calm down and let's see what comes next".³³ And when Vardan objected, saying that it was not several Kurds, but 300 people, the Catholicos closed the issue by saying: "Well, well".³⁴

The purpose of the expedition was not only to take revenge on the Mazrik tribe, but also to pave the way for importing weapons and sending Hayduk groups to the country. "This incident also gradually changed the attitude of the Kurds towards the Armenians. They started helping Armenian weapon transporters by working as guides (*vallad*), knowing full well that otherwise the Armenian avenger's bullet would spare no one".³⁵

According to S. Vratsyan, after 1898 "Vardan is a well-known figure in the Atrpatakan region. He is one of our most experienced Hayduks. Courage and intelligence are concentrated in him".³⁶

²⁷ Yekaryan Armenak (1870-1925), a prominent figure of the liberation movement, member of the Armenakan and then of the Armenian Constitutional Ramgavar party. He was the military commander of the self-defense of Aygestan (April-May 1915), investigator and organizer of the provincial-regional police in the province of Van (June 11, 1915).

²⁸ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 3 rev.

²⁹ Fischer 1897a: 106-108; Fischer 1897b: 112-119.

³⁰ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 11.

³¹ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 11 rev.

³² NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 12.

³³ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 12 rev.

³⁴ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 8, p. 12 rev.

³⁵ Melkonyan *et al.* 2010 (eds.): 568.

³⁶ Vratsyan 1992 (ed.): 7.



A group of fighters of the Khanasor expedition. Vardan is in the center.

On the way, they were joined by one of the Armenian meliks of Karadagh, who described in detail the self-defense battles of the local Armenians. Arriving in Tabriz, they witnessed the feverish speed with which the local weapons workshop “Khariskh” was working. Weapons and ammunition were transported to Salmas by trusted people.



In the villages of Gavar, young people received military training. At that time, the ARF center was located in the village of Kalasar.³⁷ Vardan states that the Persian authorities were not only aware of the weapons workshop, but were also sending “Chassepot”,³⁸ which was in their army’s arsenal, “to be adapted to another bullet. Our people undertook that task and were successfully making the transformation”.³⁹

³⁷NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 7, p. 12 rev.

³⁸ Chassepot - a French single-barrel rifle that was in the armament of France from 1866-1874. After the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), 20,000 of those rifles were sold to Persia.

³⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 62.



The French "Chassepot" combat rifle and bayonet

After the Khanasor expedition, in 1898-1899 he was in Tiflis, then in Baku, where he lived with his brother. In order not to be wanted by the Russian authorities, he decided to "take advantage of the peaceful situation, report himself to the military command and continue the rest of his service".⁴⁰ He continued his service in Dilijan, where he served at the office of the military unit through an acquaintance officer. He was demobilized after about 10 months of service.⁴¹

In 1898-1899 he began writing his memoirs, called "Memoirs", which ended with the Khanasor expedition and consists of about 400 manuscript pages.⁴² The memoirs began to be published in "Droshak", but in the meantime Vardan continued to work on the manuscript, so he wrote a letter to the editorial office asking them to stop printing, as he was making some additions. Then he confessed: "I did not have time to expand,⁴³ so the memoirs got lost in Constantinople, and my manuscripts, which were at our house in Baku, were taken by the government during a search".⁴⁴

During the Soviet years, Vardan was probably unaware that Simon Vratsyan had published his memoirs including the years 1894-1896 in the "Hayrenik" magazine.⁴⁵

S. Vratsyan, the publisher of Vardan's memoirs, gives some clarifications. Vardan's memories were found at the office of the ARF Dashnaktsutyun. The notebook had the following inscription: "Transcribed by Vahe Syuni, July 10, 1901".⁴⁶ S. Vratsyan mentions that they were four thick notebooks, but it is clear from the manuscript that there are other handwritings besides the author's handwriting. From this he concludes that the "Memoirs" was written earlier.⁴⁷

In 1901 Vardan settled in Baku and for some time "led a self-contained, secluded and isolated life".⁴⁸ In 1903,⁴⁹ during his stay in Baku, a Russian reporter by the surname of Simbirsky came to Vardan and was very interested in the Armenian question and the Armenian liberation struggle. At his request, Vardan told about his past

⁴⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 14.

⁴¹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 14 rev.

⁴²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 14 rev.

⁴³ Make additions.

⁴⁴NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 14 rev.-15.

⁴⁵ Vratsyan 1936: 58-76, № 1, 85-115, № 2, 124-140; Vratsyan 1937: 100-119.

⁴⁶ Vratsyan 1936: 59.

⁴⁷ Vratsyan 1936: 59.

⁴⁸ Vratsyan 1992 (ed.): 7.

⁴⁹ Probably in 1908.

struggle. Simbirsky visited Vardan every night and carefully wrote down his memories, but when Vardan learned of the death of his comrade-in-arms Sako of Sevkar (Sargis Tsovanyan, 1870-1908), he refused to cooperate further with the reporter. Sako and Vardan were close friends, which is evidenced by the Memoirs: “We were very close friends... Sako made a condition, he said: “Vardan, if I die sooner, you will come to bury me, and if you die sooner, I will come to bury you”⁵⁰. Vardan remembered their agreement with pain, but failed to fulfill the promise, because Sako of Sevkar had fallen victim to a contagious disease, cholera.⁵¹

The III General Assembly of the ARF Dashnaktsutyun held in Sofia in February-March 1904 decided to step up its activities in Cilicia. The Assembly instructed Simon Zavaryan to implement the decision, and Vardan was to support. They went to Cilicia to “engage in the revolutionary organization of the Highlands”.⁵² Vardan first of all start to procure weapons and ammunition. Initially, 3 rifles and 2 pistols were bought and transported to Ayntap.⁵³ Vardan believed that the liberation struggle in Cilicia could succeed only with the active involvement of the locals, so he considered finding a “capable Turkish-Armenian figure” a priority.⁵⁴

The IV General Assembly of the ARF Dashnaktsutyun (February-March 1904) discussed carrying out liberation activities in the Highlands – in Cilicia. It is known that before that there had been figures like Mikayel Ter Martirosyan (Mar),⁵⁵ Hayk Tirakyan (Hrach) and Mkrtich Hatikyan (of Pontus). Later, other figures were sent there, who founded ARF organizations. In 1904 Simon Zavaryan and Vardan were sent on a business trip to Cilicia, where they “had to deal with the revolutionary organization of the Highlands more closely and thoroughly”.⁵⁶ S. Zavaryan left first, but not for Cilicia, but for Beirut to study the situation. After a while, he informed Vardan that his presence was needed. Vardan received a passport from Mikhail Nakashidze (1844-1905), the governor of Baku and on August 24, he left Batumi for Constantinople by boat, arriving there on August 31. From there they left for Geneva, where they arrived on September 7.⁵⁷

In the editorial office of “Droshak” he got acquainted with the information received from Cilicia, got some idea about a place unknown to him. More detailed information was provided by Sarhat, who was called “Doctor”. He reported that at a meeting in Beirut, it had been decided to procure about 500 rifles, bullets and dynamite and sent

⁵⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 15 rev.

⁵¹ The Memoirs were published later. See Simbirsky 1916, № 16, c. 2-6, № 17, c. 3-6, № 18, c. 2-5, № 19, c. 8-11, № 20, 4-7, № 21, 4-8.

⁵² Materials 2007: 178.

⁵³ Materials 2007: 222.

⁵⁴ Materials 1985: 255.

⁵⁵ See more details about him in Gasparyan, Sahakyan 2015: 197-233.

⁵⁶ Materials 2007: 178.

⁵⁷NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 18.

them to Cilicia.⁵⁸ Vardan was against that plan, considering that first it was necessary to go to Cilicia, get acquainted with the situation, and then take practical steps. His opinion, however, was not accepted. He had to agree to the decision of buying 100 rifles and suitable bullets and sending them to Cilicia.⁵⁹

On October 20, 1904, they traveled to Paris with Rostom (Stepan Zoryan) to buy weapons, where Vardan got acquainted with Pierre Quillard,⁶⁰ editor of the newspaper "Pro Armenia".⁶¹ Here they found out that the most favorable place to buy firearms was Greece, so on October 27 they left for Greece by boat.⁶² In Athens they managed to buy Gras⁶³ combat rifles, several thousand bullets and tools to charge them.⁶⁴ The task of transporting the weapons and ammunition was more difficult, but they managed to reach an agreement with a Greek smuggler who promised to transport it to the necessary place for money.



"Gras" combat rifle

On November 18, he left for Alexandria, where he arrived two days later. After meeting with party friends in Alexandria and giving some instructions, he was to cross from Beirut to Cilicia. To avoid unnecessary dangers, Vardan obtained a passport of a Persian citizen named Yukhanna Yaghub, an Assyrian who was allegedly a carpet merchant.⁶⁵

Vardan confessed: "I have never entered Turkey legally and I have never thought as much as I do now. I keep thinking about what answer I should give during the interview. I am preparing myself, I keep repeating that I am from Tabriz, my father's name, my mother's name who I have buried, etc., and as I do not know Assyrian, I will say: "I have left since I was little", etc."⁶⁶ S. Zavaryan was to be waiting for him in Beirut, at the hotel "Oriental", but as it turned out, he was in Adana. After some time Vardan managed to contact one of his party friends, Simon Shatikyan from Trabzon.

⁵⁸NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 18.

⁵⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p.18 rev.

⁶⁰ Quillard Pierre (1864-1912), French poet, public figure, author of works on the Armenian Question.

⁶¹"Pro Armenia" weekly newspaper in French (1900-1914), published in France. The editor-in-chief was Pierre Quillard.

⁶²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 19.

⁶³ "Gras" combat rifle, a single-barrel, made in France (1874).

⁶⁴NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 19 rev.

⁶⁵NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 22 and 22 rev.

⁶⁶NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 22 rev.

After getting acquainted with the situation in Beirut and especially in Cilicia, Vardan learned that there were no ARF organizations in either Aleppo or Cilicia. As he put it: “There are no people, there are only words, names, nothing else”.⁶⁷ Vardan had to report the above to Geneva.

Vardan noted the following about Aleppo: “Aleppo is a rather big, commercial city. The climate is hot, the city has lack of water. The city has a so-called small European part, several good buildings, a city clock in the center”.⁶⁸



The famous Aleppo clock
in Bab al-Faraj square

After Aleppo he went to Kilis, then to Ayntap, where the representative of the ARF Dashnaksutyun was Avo of Yerznka. Ayntap was considered the headquarters of the ARF in Cilicia, but after studying the situation Vardan expressed the opposite opinion. According to him “Avo was an idle person, he did not engage in anything and lived on the money of the organization. He had some friends but there was nothing much in them”.⁶⁹

During the meetings, it became clear that the Ayntap organization was nothing much, but several hundred rifles were demanded from the party. To verify his suspicions, Vardan resorted to trickery, reporting that part of the weapons was already in Ayntap, so it was necessary to move them to a safe place.

According to his testimony: “Everyone was stunned, and no one was able to take any steps in that direction”.⁷⁰ After learning all this and other details, Vardan confessed: “Seeing them, the people of Vaspurakan rose in my estimation, I missed the people of Van”.⁷¹

However, Vardan believed that it was possible to operate in Cilicia, given its geographical location. It was suitable for transporting weapons, ammunition and fighters. In his opinion “A gunshot here is more audible, more noticeable than the many heroic battles of Armenia, which are lost in obscurity”.⁷²

On the way back, in Beirut he met S. Zavaryan and learned from him that on March 17, 1905, K. Mikayelyan was killed while testing a homemade bomb.⁷³

Being fully occupied with Western Armenia, the ARF ignored the issues related to Eastern Armenians, especially the organization of self-defense. The clashes that started

⁶⁷NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 24 rev.

⁶⁸NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 27 rev.

⁶⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 28. Vardan mentions that due to the financial support of the party Avo received medical education and started condemning the Dashnaksutyun. See NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 30 rev.

⁷⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 28 rev.

⁷¹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 29 rev.

⁷²NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 33.

⁷³NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 32 rev.

in February 1905 and were escalating were unexpected for everyone⁷⁴ being provoked by the Russian authorities. The possibility was ignored when there was information that in late 1903 “the government called on the Turkish beys to help against Armenians, but the latter refused”.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the government continued the provocations, the pro-government Russian press prepared future clashes with anti-Armenian articles, publishing fabrications and misinformation.⁷⁶ The clash of February 6, 1905 in Baku was a signal for attacks on the Armenian population to begin. Muslim subjects of Russia were supported by fellow believers and compatriots of the Ottoman Empire and Persia.⁷⁷ The self-defense of the Armenians in the Caucasus administrative government and then viceroyalty was mainly assumed by the Dashnaktsutyun, whose “central figure of organization was Rostom”.⁷⁸ Vardan stated the following: “Dashnaktsutyun as a fighting party, as the embodiment of the demands and wishes of the Armenian people could not be in the role of a spectator; the peace-loving preaches and initiatives were useless and whether they wanted to or not, they had to lead the movement”.⁷⁹ The party appointed Vardan “general leader of Karabakh, from Gandzak to the Meghri region”.⁸⁰

A-Do gave a unique description of Karabakh, Shushi,⁸¹ according to which Artsakh is a fortress, “where Shushi, sitting like a sharp-winged eagle, rules with a certain pride over the territories lying in front”.⁸²

Arriving in Shushi, Vardan convened several meetings with his party friends and prominent local citizens, where he first instructed them to avoid fighting, but to prepare for self-defense. Shushi was divided into several defense districts, district governors were appointed, whose responsibilities included the organization of positions, arming of fighters, their food supply, etc.⁸³

On May 12, 1905, the Armenian-Tatar conflict started in Nakhichevan, and according to A-Do “This was, however, not a clash, but an attack, murder, robbery, which spread to all the Armenian-populated villages of the Nakhichevan region”.⁸⁴

⁷⁴ Back on January 5, 1888, two Armenians were killed by a Sultan Bey in the Yerevan market. Apparently, the day was not chosen by chance. A fuss started, during which more than ten Armenians and Tatars were killed. Instead of punishing the murderer, the authorities sentenced five Armenians to different sentences ranging from 4 to 12 years. See A-Do 2013: 30-31.

⁷⁵ See Materials 2007: 303-304.

⁷⁶ Melkonyan et al. 2015 (eds.): 19.

⁷⁷ Melkonyan et al. 2015 (eds.): 20.

⁷⁸ Melkonyan A. et al. 2015 (eds.): 21.

⁷⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 33 rev.

⁸⁰NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 36 rev.

⁸¹ The total population of Shushi was 33 thousand, of which 18 thousand were Armenians, 14 thousand were Tatars and 1 thousand were other nationalities. See A-Do 1907: 148.

⁸² A-Do 2013: 152.

⁸³NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 37.

⁸⁴ A-Do 1907: 116.

When it became clear to the ARF Dashnaksutyun that the clashes were organized by the authorities, in July 1905 they hurried to entrust the self-defense of Shushi⁸⁵ to Vardan⁸⁶ as the “military plenipotentiary of that region”.⁸⁷ He was accompanied by Mrav,⁸⁸ Khecho (Khachatur Amiryany-Gorgyan), Kaytsak Arakel (Tigran Abajyan), Sako of Sevkar, Sepuh (Arshak Nersisyan), Hamazasp (Srvandztyants), Kotoyi Haji (Hakob Kotoyan)⁸⁹ and others. A military body was established to organize the resistance. In 1905 the Armenian population of Shushi suffered heavy losses as the Tatars were joined by the army whose “vicious actions reached such proportions that the Armenian women of Shushi had to address the Empress with a long telegram”.⁹⁰

The regressive press did its part in provoking clashes in Shushi, deliberately publishing misinformation. On August 8, 1905 a provocative telegram sent from Shushi was published in the newspaper “Caspj” which said: “At 3 o'clock in the morning, three Armenians with big shoes (emphasis added by us – R.S.) and with fluffy hats and daggers, tore apart a lantern and ran away”.⁹¹

In a letter dated August 10, 1905, probably addressed to the Eastern Bureau, Vardan predicted the possibility of a potential clash and demanded that weapons and ammunition be sent urgently. Similar instructions were given to the provinces. Patrol or mobile groups were organized.⁹² If such issues were relatively easy to resolve, however, the issue of weapons remained unsolved. Vardan noted: “Our people were not used to weapons, the Turks were used to those weapons. And the process of our arming was under pressure and violence”.⁹³

There were other incidents as well, after which an Armenian-Tatar conflict broke out in Shushi on August 16-22, 1905. Vardan stated: “They fight in the houses, from positions built in the yards, the fight continues day and night”.⁹⁴ The inhabitants of the provinces came to the aid of the enemy. Unlike the Tatars, part of the urban Armenians

⁸⁵ The city was divided into two parts. The upper district was inhabited mainly by Armenians, and the lower district by Tatars. NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 38.

⁸⁶ Vardan's candidacy was proposed by Nikol Duman. See Gevorgyan 2010: 321. According to S. Vracyan: “Vardan is a little hesitant, while Nikol Duman is decisive and astute”. See Vracyan 1992 (ed.): 7-8.

⁸⁷ Materials 2007: 304.

⁸⁸ Zhamharian Margar (Mrav, 1877-1905), fedayeen, avenger, ARF figure. He served in the Russian army, studied in Germany for some time. He united and formed the first committee of the ARF Dashnaksutyun in Artsakh (1904). He was a member of the Central Committee for the Caucasus self-defense. He died during the defense of Shushi (1905).

⁸⁹ Kotoyan Hakob (Kotoyi Haji, 1864-1915), figure of the liberation movement, fedayeen, member of the ARF. He took part in the Sassun uprising (1904), the Iranian revolution (1906-1908), he was the head of the self-defense of the Armenians of Mush (1915).

⁹⁰ A-Do 2013: 132. In his report to the Vienna Assembly, Vardan mainly positively assessed the attitude of the military: “I must say that in our regions the state soldiers and officers generally sympathize with us”. See Materials 1985: 92.

⁹¹ A-Do 1907: 147.

⁹² Gevorgyan 2010: 325.

⁹³ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 37.

⁹⁴ NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 38 rev.

and their families found shelter in the barracks of the Russian garrison. Vardan records: "In the beginning, I had a high opinion of the courage of the citizens, their ability to fight, but during the fight I saw that I was wrong".⁹⁵

In its turn, the Russian army in the city was divided into two parts: the soldiers and officers of the Turkish district were fighting for them, and those in the Armenian district were fighting for the Armenians. Vardan emphasizes the heroic, selfless work done by the pupils helping to prepare food, heal the wounded and refill cartridges.⁹⁶ Sanitation groups were organized to treat and care for the wounded and sick. District governors set up military canteens, from where food and water were taken to the fighters in the positions. The connection between the military body and the positions was maintained by couriers. Special groups delivered bullets to the fighters and replaced them if necessary. Intelligence groups were stationed in the canyons near Shushi and monitored the movement of the enemy, etc.⁹⁷

On the first day about 20 Armenians and Tatars were killed.⁹⁸ The latter developed a new tactic of attacking the houses of Armenians, setting them on fire.

During August, when the enemy was able to set fire to a part of the Armenian district, groups of arsonists were organized, which included even 14-year-old teenagers. There were also groups of firefighters consisting of residents, who had two fire trucks, water in barrels and the appropriate tools.

The clashes showed that the most preferable weapons were "Mosin" combat rifles and "Mauser" pistols, which were initially scarce.⁹⁹ Besides, some of the people of Shushi were not accustomed to fighting and at the slightest pressure of the enemy they quickly retreated, leaving the positions. Vardan cites an example when he had to fight alone against 6 to 7 Tatars. Margar Zhamharyan,¹⁰⁰ a brave fighter from Shushi, came to the rescue and was killed during the fight. The battle in the positions continued fiercely. The positions passed from hand to hand, houses were constantly set on fire.¹⁰¹

On August 18, a large number of Tatars from Aghdam came to help. The Armenians, respecting the order of the deputy governor, did not shoot anymore, and the Tatars seized the opportunity to attack the people of Shushi. The authorities left the Armenian district without protection, declaring that the Armenians should take care of their own protection. According to A-Do "This was the best way to make them fight and this was the tactics adopted by the government".¹⁰² One of the evidences of that was the official statement denying the information about the clashes in Shushi.¹⁰³

⁹⁵NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 39.

⁹⁶NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 39.

⁹⁷ Gevorgyan 2010: 364-365.

⁹⁸ A-Do 1907: 153.

⁹⁹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 38 rev.

¹⁰⁰ A-Do 1907: 156.

¹⁰¹NAA, f. 402, l. 2, f. 1, p. 40.

¹⁰² A-Do 1907: 155.

¹⁰³ A-Do 1907: 157.

On August 20, the Armenians were able to put to use the old, smoothbore cannon. The shot fired from it did no harm but caused such a thunder and smoke that “the Turks raised a white flag and asked for reconciliation, which took place the same day”.¹⁰⁴

After the reconciliation, the parties investigated the losses of those several days. Hundreds of houses had been burnt, including the Mariamian school, 20 shops belonging to the church and the theater. 100 Armenians had been killed and twice or thrice as many Turks. The enemy had property losses of 30 thousand and the Armenians- of more than 5 million roubles.¹⁰⁵

In the spring of 1906 Rostom came to Shushi. His presence was necessary to solve many problems and to enable Vardan to go to the provinces. Rostom’s presence of two months was positive. He not only strengthened the ARF structures, but also helped to solve “a number of very important issues related to self-defense. With the support of masters in Shushi, including Kosti (Kostandin) Hambartzumyan, he made and tested bombs and missiles”.¹⁰⁶ Together they were able to repair or restore “three 2-inch¹⁰⁷ cannons, two 3-inch¹⁰⁸ cannons - again made by our master and two Turkish 5-inch¹⁰⁹ cannons”.¹¹⁰

On July 12-22, 1906 the second clash took place in Shushi. On the morning of July 12, the body of Sahak Mirzoyants from Shushi was found. Authorities arrived at the scene, but the Tatars opened fire on them. An exchange of fire began. After two soldiers were killed by the Tatar fire, General Goloshchapov ordered to open artillery fire on the Tatar district. The enraged Tatars opened fire on the general’s house and accused him of “allegedly joining the Armenians and bombing and slaughtering them mercilessly”.¹¹¹

Before that, the enemy, taking into account the previous year’s experience of clashes, had taken steps to completely encircle the city, depriving the Armenians of food supplies. In response, the Armenians of Askeran not only blocked the supply route of the Turks, but also severely repulsed the raiders advancing from Aghdam, significantly easing the situation of the struggling people of Shushi. The clashes showed that the enemy was preparing for a new, bigger operation.

On July 13, the fighting continued more intensely, but without the intervention of the army. Particularly fierce fighting was taking place in the Armenian villages of Karintak and Ghaybali. The repulse of the raiders rushing from Aghdam to Shushi by the Armenians of Askeran greatly contributed to the resistance of the people of Shushi.

¹⁰⁴A-Do 1907: 156.

¹⁰⁵ A-Do 1907: 156.

¹⁰⁶ Gevorgyan 2010: 361.

¹⁰⁷ 1 inch equals 2.54 cm or 25.4 mm. In fact 2.5 inches, corresponding to a diameter of 63.5 mm.

¹⁰⁸In fact 3 inches, corresponding to a diameter of 76 mm

¹⁰⁹In fact 5.5 inches, corresponding to a diameter of 140 mm.

¹¹⁰ Gevorgyan 2010: 361.

¹¹¹ A-Do 1907: 164.

On July 14, on account of a written application by Tatar doctor Mehmandarov and the mediation of Goloshchapov, the fire was stopped. Bilateral negotiations took place, during which the Armenians presented their demands:

- “1. Destroy two Turkish positions,
2. Prohibit armed groups or separate armed people from entering the city,
3. Stop the boycott,
4. Materially provide the family of Sahak Mirzoyants, who was killed by the Turks before the fighting,
5. From now on, remove all provocateurs from Gandzak province,
6. Open a 45-arshin-wide¹¹² street on a neutral ground, on the border of the Armenian and Turkish districts, where state institutions are located”.¹¹³

However, at night the shooting resumed. Houses were set on fire on both sides.

Mutual clashes resumed on July 15. The Armenians were able to oust the enemy from one of their important positions, Diktan Ghurun, after which the Tatars were forced to resume peace talks, which were unsuccessful as they refused to destroy the positions of Gohvar Agha and Haji Valiyev. After the Armenians occupied the latter position, the Tatars again asked for peace, which lasted for five days. According to A-Do “During those five days, Armenians never doubted there would be peace”.¹¹⁴

On July 20, at the suggestion of one of the officers of the 154th Infantry Regiment of Derbent that arrived in Shushi, General Goloshchapov pulled out the Armenian fighters from Aghamirzyan’s burnt house, and the Tatars took their place there. On July 21, the Tatars fired from that position on government soldiers standing between them and the Armenians, killing one soldier and wounding two.¹¹⁵ As it turned out later, getting help from the provinces, the Tatars wanted to restore the shattered positions and resumed the attacks. The battles continued for a whole day and finally ended on July 22 with the signing of a peace agreement. During the battles, 24 Armenians were killed, 102 were wounded and the casualties of the Tatars were twice as many. More than 200 houses were set on fire, most of which belonged to the Tatars.¹¹⁶

After the fighting, the authorities sent one battalion to Shushi, consisting of 17 officers and 2 doctors. The number of soldiers was 570.¹¹⁷

According to Vardan, unlike 1905, in 1906 the Armenians of Shushi were relatively more organized and armed, they had accumulated some combat experience. Vardan noted: “The war was successful, there was no looting, the citizens continued their trade peacefully, and on the borders the war continued”.¹¹⁸ Initially, the Armenian population in Artsakh was confused, mainly pursuing defensive tactics, as there were not enough

¹¹² 1 arshin is 0,711 meters.

¹¹³ «Aliq», July 29, 1906, № 75.

¹¹⁴ A-Do 1907: 166.

¹¹⁵ «Aliq», July 25, 1906, № 71.

¹¹⁶ A-Do 1907: 167.

¹¹⁷ «Aliq», July 19, 1906, № 66.

¹¹⁸ Materials 1976: 92.

weapons and ammunition, and the civilian combat groups did not have enough experience. Taking advantage of the favorable situation, the Caucasian Tatars adopted offensive tactics, constantly attacking, killing and robbing Armenians.

The Caucasian Tatars were a serious fighting force. The nomadic life had taught them to quickly orient themselves in the area, to withstand the changes of the weather, to move quickly, to endure various hardships, etc., which the people of Shushi were “deprived of”. That was the reason why Vardan was forced to bring fighters from the provinces and to defend the Armenian district of Shushi with their help.

The situation changed in late 1905 when the Armenian population got some combat experience, weapons and ammunition,¹¹⁹ after which at the end of the same year the Caucasus Regional Assembly of the Dashnaksutyun decided to launch offensive operations.¹²⁰ The fanatical Muslim mob in Shushi received a serious counterattack from the Armenians, after which the mob no longer took active action.

According to Vardan’s report presented to the IV General Assembly of the ARF Dashnaksutyun on March 14, 1907, it can be inferred that about 30 of the 100 weapons in possession of the population were unfit for use.¹²¹ Significant sums of money were necessary to procure assault rifles and ammunition. Thus, on the eve of 1904, one single-barrel “Berdan № 2” combat, non-repeating rifle cost 25 roubles, and a repeating rifle “Mosin” - 35 roubles. One “Mosin” bullet cost about 3 kopecks.¹²² After the start of the Armenian-Tatar clashes, there was an unprecedented rise in firearms prices: “Mosin” cost about 300 roubles, “Berdan № 2” - 150 roubles and one bullet - 20-50 kopecks.¹²³ The Dashnaksutyun committee in Shushi provided 100 thousand bullets to the self-defense forces during the fighting.¹²⁴ It should be noted that the annual profit of Eastern Armenians, the overwhelming majority of whom were peasants, was about 60 roubles. It is noteworthy that the number of family members could be up to 10 people.

In a number of cases, violence was used against the people of Shushi who did not want to perform military service or combat duty, or buy weapons, and the rich were forced to provide some money for the needs of the self-defense.¹²⁵

During the battles in Artsakh, particularly in Shushi, the Armenian side tried to find common ground and stop the fighting. Vardan and Sako of Sevkar believed that even victories economically destroyed the Armenians, as a result of which the youth was forced to leave for the cities to earn a living.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ The people of Shushi had about 300 rifles, and the ARF had accumulated 200 rifles and 250,000 bullets. See Materials 2007: 304.

¹²⁰ Materials 2007: 304.

¹²¹ Materials 1976: 91.

¹²² Materials 1985: 112.

¹²³ Materials 2007: 393.

¹²⁴ Materials 1976: 91.

¹²⁵ Materials 1976: 91.

¹²⁶ Materials 2007: 394.

According to Vardan, during the Armenian-Tatar clashes of 1905-1906, the greatest danger was posed by government troops armed with cannons. According to him, it was possible to fight against the army if they were not supported by the local Tatars.¹²⁷

During the fighting, the enemy spread various misinformation, which forced the Catholicos of All Armenians Mkrtych Khrimyan to write a letter to Ahmad Shah, the Crown Prince of Iran, denying the massacres of the Persian subjects and asking him not to allow the massacres of Persian Armenians.¹²⁸

In a report presented to the ARF General Assembly in Vienna on April 20, 1907, Vardan and Sako of Sevkar described the enemy as follows: "Let us be careful and not mock our opponent's power. They are more military and stronger than we are (the Armenians are whiny and quick to despair, even in case of success). If Dashnaktsutyun had not been around and had not taken the situation into their hands, the Turks would have destroyed the Armenians".¹²⁹

The internal enemies posed a serious threat to the self-defense of the Armenians of Artsakh.¹³⁰ Among them were Hatam Bey and his brother Shamil, residents of the village of Kyatuk in Varanda. To put an end to the brothers' traitorous actions, Vardan met Hatam Bey and tried to persuade him, but he remained unshakable. Eventually, on Vardan's orders, the brothers were shot in their village.¹³¹

According to historian Hamlet Gevorgyan, Vardan was in favor of defensive tactics. As Mikayel Varandyan described "Vardan was gentle, with a soft heart, sometimes a little hesitant, indecisive... when he was the commander-in-chief in Karabakh, he often rejected the appeals of his friends to act against the enemy by the principle of eye for an eye, to burn this or that Tatar village, to destroy the mob..."¹³² Hamazasp was also dissatisfied with Vardan's tactics. He demanded to attack first and intimidate the enemy.¹³³

The same author states that after learning about the atrocities committed by the Cossacks in the Khachen and Varanda regions, Vardan instructed the commanders of the combat groups to attack the Cossacks if they continued their illegal actions.¹³⁴ Thus, it can be concluded that Vardan did not want to further strain the relations with either the authorities or the military, or with the local Muslim population.

After the first Russian revolution began to decline, the authorities invented the so-called "case of the Dashnaktsutyun" and started the persecution and arrest of the

¹²⁷Materials 1976: 92.

¹²⁸ Khachatryan 2011: 28.

¹²⁹ Materials 2007: 394.

¹³⁰ According to Ruben's apt definition "If there were no traitors and informers among the nation, the government with its measures would become powerless, and even its secret police would become useless". See Ruben 1952: 96.

¹³¹ Gevorgyan 2010: 345.

¹³² Gevorgyan 2010: 344.

¹³³ Gevorgyan 2010: 346.

¹³⁴ Gevorgyan 2010: 351.

participants of the Armenian-Tatar clashes which made Vardan leave Shushi. At the beginning of the winter of 1907 Vardan left Artsakh for Baku, to his brothers, where he was informed that he would take part in the IV General Assembly of the ARF to be held in Vienna in February. He arrived there on February 25.¹³⁵

In the report presented at the assembly in Vienna, Vardan and Sako of Sevkar made an important suggestion: they consider it necessary to exchange lands with the Tatars, “so that the Armenian provinces could be forever united with each other...”¹³⁶

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned could not be realized; and we have to admit that this issue remains unresolved to this day and causes a lot of complications.

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¹³⁵ He presents to the assembly the details of the Armenian-Tatar fighting in Shushi. See Materials 1985: 91-93.

¹³⁶ Materials 2007: 396.

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