

Emergence of Armenian Committees

From 1870 on a number of associations and committees were established with a dream of founding an Armenian state in eastern Anatolia.

The first committees were the "Black Cross" and "Armenakan" at Van and "The Protectors of Homeland" at Erzurum. Their activities failed to be effective and remained restricted, at least at the beginning, to their areas for great majority of Armenians who had been living in peace and prosperity, without any complaints, under the Ottoman rule did not pay much attention to them.

Between 1870 and 1880, "Araratlı" was founded at Van, "School Lovers" and "The East" at Mush and "Nationalist Women" at Erzurum. Later on Araratlı, School Lovers and the East were combined to create the "United Armenian Association." The Armenakan Party was the first revolutionary political party. The purpose of this party was to found an independent Armenian state through revolution. To achieve this end it endeavoured to bring all Armenians together, to disseminate revolutionary ideas, to raise money and get arms and organise armed bands. Information about how to use arms and lessons of military tactics were given by the Russian Consul Major Kamsaragan in the Armenian School at Van. (*Louise Nalbandian: The Armenian Revolutionary Movement. Los Angeles, 1963, pp. 97–98.*)

Upon the failure to incite the Ottoman Armenians to rise up against the state by means of such associations established within the country, Russian Armenians were made to establish organisations abroad. Hinchak was founded in 1887 at Geneva, Tashnak in 1890 at Tblisi. They were told that their aim should be to liberate Anatolia and Ottoman Armenians.

Armenian historian Louise Nalbandian writes about the activities of the Armenakan Party as follows:

"The known activities of the Party comprise the attack on Turkish security men of the band members Hovannes Agripasyan, Vardan Golashyan and Karabet Kulaksizyan who had put on them Kurdish clothes, various murders, assaults on tribes, murder of Nuri Effendi, a policeman at Van, participation together with members of Hinchak in the Van uprising in June 1896, skirmishes of an armed band of 200 people under the leadership of Avetisyan with tribesmen and Assyrians in the vicinity of Karahisar Mountains aided by armed bands of Tashnagsagan and Homeland organisations..." (*Louise Nalbandian : op. cit., pp. 94, 97-98.*)

As for the activities of the Hinchak Committee, Nalbandian writes as follows: "Provocation and acts of violence were required in order to excite the people. It was necessary to provoke the people and thus compel the enemy to take retaliatory actions. Confidence of people towards the Hinchak Committee was to be secured through acts of violence. Consequently prestige of the Ottoman government would be weakened and every kind of effort was to be made for its total disintegration." (*Louise Nalbandian : op. cit., pp. 110 – 111. See: Esat Uras: Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi. [The Armenians in History and the Armenian Question]. 2nd printing. Istanbul, 1976, pp. 432 – 439 for the Program of the Revolutionary Hunchak Party prepared in 1886 and printed in London in 1887.*)

Another Armenian historian, Papazian, says about the Tashnag Committee that

"The objectives of the Committee were the acquisition through rebellion of political and economic freedoms for the Ottoman Armenians, elimination of officials and traitors in the government, destruction and damaging of official buildings and plundering." (*K. S. Papazian: Patriotism Perverted. Boston, 1934, pp. 14-15; Esat Uras: op. cit., p. 450.*)

Captain Clayton, British Consul at Van, points out in his Report (*Foreign Office (FO), 424/107, No: 194, Annex –1.*) dated October 12, 1880 that he received information to the effect that

associations were set up in the Russian Armenia with the aim of shipping arms and ammunition to the Ottoman Armenians that agents were hired for the distribution of arms. Clayton reports in November that Armenians were preparing themselves for an uprising and that an American missionary informed him that arms were continuously coming from Russia. (*Foreign Office (FO)*, 424/107, No: 185 and 212.)

Captain Everett, British Consul at Erzurum, asserts in his report dated November 24, that information to the effect that arms were collected in Russia was beyond doubt. (*Foreign Office (FO)*, 424/107, No: 213.)

One of the power foci lying behind the curtain, which was related to the rise of the question of orient, and to the formation of Armenian revolutionary committees is Russia.

In a report submitted to his government in 1876, the British Ambassador Sir Elliot in İstanbul reports as follows:

"A high positioned Armenian, not connected to the Ottoman Government, came and told me that all these events occurred at the instigation of Russians. This news is in conformity with the information I have had from other sources.

"Lord Edgar Granville, one of the British foreign ministers of the period, said in brief that "Armenians' revolt against the Ottoman state did not happen spontaneously. For not a single Armenian act took place in Turkey until Russians laid hands upon Armenians." *Sadi Koçuş: Tarih Boyunca Ermeniler ve Türk-Ermeni ilişkileri. [Armenians and the Turkish-Armenian Relations in History]. Ankara, 1967, p. 79.*

As can be clearly seen from what has been written by Armenian authors and historians as well as by western diplomats, the objective of Armenian committees and the armed bands that they assembled was nothing but establishing an independent Armenian state by starting uprisings against the Ottoman state in various places of Anatolia and trying to bring about the collapse of it.

The Armenian Committees and armed bands started implementing this program and staged various uprisings on different dates. First initiatives came from the Hinchaks, to be followed by the Tashnaks later on. The feature common to all attempts to revolt was that those who had come from abroad planned them all.

The report sent by the German Ambassador Saurma to his Ministry on October 6, testifies to the activities of Armenian committee members: "All attempts to rise up have been organised by Armenian revolutionary committees as foreseen in their programs." (*German Archives. Die Grosse Politik, Band: X, No: 2428 (mentioned in Kâmuran Gürün: Ermeni Dosyası). [The Armenian File]. 3d edition. Ankara, 1985, pp. 153-154.*)

The Armenian church was another factor exhorting Armenian committees and bands to rise up against the Ottoman state. The Armenian historian Pasdermadjian points out to the importance of the Armenian Church as follows: "The Armenian Church is the body housing the soul of the Armenian nation waiting for revival." (*Hrand Pasdermadjian: Histoire de l'Arménie. Paris, 1949, p. 290.*)

Yet another historian, Boyajian, asserts that "No history of Armenians, no matter how comprehensive it may be, can be considered a full history telling the true life of Armenians if it does not tell about the Armenian Church in the same degree. The Armenian nation and the Armenian Church are so intertwined that it is not possible to discuss one of them without touching the other." (*Dickran H. Boyajian: Armenia: The Case For a Forgotten Genocide. New Jersey, 1972, p. 84.*) The Armenian Church was defined by the Armenian patriarch, M. Ormanyan, as "the visible soul of the lost country." (*Yves Ternon: Les Arméniens : Histoire d'un génocide. Paris, 1977, p. 34.*)

The close relationship of the Armenian Church and Armenian clergymen with the Armenian question, its involvement in the formation of Armenian Committees and armed bands and in their being armed have been explained by Gevand Turyan, an Armenian bishop and an Ottoman citizen, as follows: "Religious communities had long become revolutionary hearths of the Armenian revolutionary parties and most diabolical plans had been drawn up there. Religious centers had become warehouses of arms and hearths of plots. Religious leaders had been exhorting the people to rise up against the state with their speeches and writings, people that had trusted them. They did not preach any more the teaching of the Gospel and utter noble words in their sermons. Rebellion had replaced loyalty and righteousness in their sermons, hatred and revenge had taken the place of humanity. Meanness and ignominy were preached in place of high morality. Religious leaders presided over festivities, meetings and ceremonies organised by revolutionary committees." (*A Qui la Faute? Aux Partis Revue Arménien. (Publication de la Revue Dadiar). Constantinople, 1917, pp. 40-41.*)

The Armenian Church had become the ground in which not only the animosity to Turks but also the Armenian nationalism flourished. The greatest support to the Church in the awakening of the Armenian nationalism "was provided by the Great powers. It was Russia in particular from among the Great Powers that first opened the Armenian file in diplomacy." (*M. Kemal Öke: Ermeni Meselesi. [The Armenian Question]. İstanbul, 1986, p. 91.*)