

1921 February rebellion as a manifestation of Armenian war of independence

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Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia declared their independence in the spring of 1918. After the signing of the Armistice of Compiègne and the annulment of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that had been agreed upon between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers, the Soviet Red Army started a campaign to capture the areas that had belonged to Russia. Armenia had to fight two enemies – the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the one side and Soviet Russia on the other. Turkey attacked Armenia in the autumn of 1920. Even though Soviet Russia had signed a treaty with Armenia in August, the Armenian Bolsheviks, supported by the Red Army, proclaimed the Soviet Republic of Armenia in November and began Sovietization of the country, accompanied by repressions against Armenian national politicians, military leaders and intellectuals. As a result of an uprising that began in February 1921, the Bolsheviks were ousted from Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, but the counter-offensive of the Red Army in April restored the Bolshevik rule in Armenia.

Sovietization of Armenia

In 1917, after the February and the October Revolution in the Russian Empire, Transcaucasia de facto became independent from Russia. By the following year, the region was independent de jure as well. On 22 April 1918, the independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic was proclaimed, and by the end of May the republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan declared their independence.

Independence for Armenia was hard to achieve. The Armenian nation had to fight against Turkish invaders in Sardarapat, Bash Aparan (today Aparan) and Gharakilisa (today Vanadzor). After the victorious battles,

Armenia was able to declare independence. However, Armenia and the two other Transcaucasian republics did not last long. Russian Bolsheviks started an aggressive policy of conquering the lands of the former Russian Empire, after achieving victory in the civil war.

Transcaucasia had a central place in the Bolshevik imperial project in the South, not least because of the Bolsheviks' interest in possessing the oil of Baku.

At the end of April 1920, with the support of the Red Army, Azerbaijan was sovietised. In the autumn of 1920, Kemalist Turkey attacked Armenia. This was the fight of the Republic of Armenia for independence and for survival, as the Turks had continued the genocide that was begun in 1915.

The Turkish attack on Armenia provoked Russia, even though it had concluded the Tiflis agreement with Armenia on 10 August 1920. Armenia's sovietisation was carried through in a short time.

In the process of Armenia's Sovietization, Soviet Russia began its alliance with Kemalist Turkey. The Turks were satisfied with the Sovietization of Armenia, because Soviet forces entering Armenia increased their security, and they could concentrate their forces in the East against the Entente. Relations with Kemal and the Muslim world was more important for the Soviet government than relations with Armenia.¹ The Sovietisation of Armenia was important for the authorities of Soviet Russia for establishing a direct land connection with Kemalist Turkey.

Russia and Turkey had agreed to attack Armenia. According to that agreement with the Soviets, the Turks had to reach Sarighamish,² but in fact they moved beyond Sarighamish in violation of that agreement. The Kemalists were able to convince the Bolsheviks in Moscow that it would be easier to carry out a revolution in the Eastern countries with their help and "relying on multi-million Muslims of the East, drown British leadership in India and other countries"³

¹ Ruben Darbinian (Ռուբեն Դարբինյան), „Հայ քաղաքական մտքի դեզերումները” [Hay k'aghak'akan mtk'i degerunnerë (Wanderings of the Armenian political thought)], Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*) (July 1923): 128.

² National Archives of Armenia (Հայաստանի ազգային արխիվ, henceforth NAA) 144.2.25, 94.

³ Hambardzum Terterian (Համբարձում Տերտերյան), „Հայաստանի Հանրապետության և Խորհրդային Ռուսաստանի բանակցությունները: Լեւոն Շանթի պատուիրակությունը“

The Armenian Bolsheviks were naïve to think that Kemalist interference in the Sovietization of Armenia was in favour of Armenian and Turkish people. President of the Armenian Revolutionary Committee, Sarkis Kasyan, writes that with the Sovietization of Armenia, the “solidarity and consensus of Soviet Armenia and labouring Turkey” held the victory.⁴

Due to the jointly organised attack on Armenia by Kemalist and Bolshevik forces, the Government of the Republic of Armenia had no other choice but to resign, put down all credentials and concede authority to the ‘lesser evil’ of Soviet Russia.

In 1920, during the Turkish-Armenian war, having the support of Soviet Russia, the Kemalists won against the Armenian army. Taking advantage of the situation, on 29 November 1920, the previously formed Armenian Revolutionary Committee entered Yerevan from the north-eastern part of Armenia and proclaimed Armenia a Soviet Republic.⁵

On 1 December 1920, in a meeting involving the Government of the Republic of Armenia, the Parliamentary Faction of Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutyun (ARFD) and the ARFD Bureau, it was decided to authorise Drastamat Kanaian (Dro) and Hambadzum Terterian to hold negotiations with the representative of Soviet Russia, Boris Legrand, about the handing of power over to the Bolsheviks.⁶ The negotiations were held with the principle of guarantee of maintaining the independence of Armenia.⁷

On 2 December 1920, the Yerevan agreement was signed between Boris Legrand and government representatives of the Republic of Armenia. It supposed a peaceful transition of power from the ARFD to the Bolsheviks. The following were defined as the main principles for the

[Hayastani Hanrapetut'ian ev Khorhrdayin Rusastani banaktsut'yunnere. Levon Shant'i patvirakut'yune (Negotiations of the Republic of Armenia and Soviet Russia: Levon Shant's delegation)], Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*) (May 1954): 10.

⁴ Sarkis Kasyan (Սարգիս Կասյան), *Ընտիր երկեր* [Ĕntir yerker (Selected works)] (Yerevan: Hayastan, 1967), 181.

⁵ NAA, 113.1.1, 1.

⁶ NAA, 119.1.248, 1–2.

⁷ Աշոտ Հովհաննիսյան (Ashot Hovhannisian), Համազգային կրիզիսը [Hamazgayin krizisè (Pan-National crisis)] (Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1926), 26.

transition of power: before inviting the elected Assembly of the Councils, the power had to be handed temporarily to the war-revolutionary committee, which had included 5 communists and 2 left-revolutionaries (pro-Russian ARFD members), and the ARFD and all the non-Bolshevik socialist party representatives should be spared from political persecution for previously fighting against the Communist party, and Soviet Russia should guarantee the independence of Soviet Armenia.⁸

The dispositions of the ARFD concerning the recognition of the Republic of Armenia, signing a peace treaty with Turkey, not allowing civil war, as well as having a representative in the new government were accepted on 1 December at the mutual conference of the ARFD Bureau, Parliamentary faction and the Government.

On 2 December, the leader of the Transcaucasian Communists, Georgy (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze, wrote to Lenin and Stalin from Baku: “News has just arrived from Yerevan that Soviet power has been proclaimed in Yerevan”.⁹ The leader of the Bolsheviks, Vladimir Lenin, answered welcoming “Soviet Armenia that had been liberated from the imperialist yoke”.¹⁰

The Soviet Armenian historiography proclaimed the Yerevan agreement as the capitulation of the ARFD government.¹¹ In the post-Soviet era, the agreement acquired new significance from a foreign-policy point of view, as according to the agreement of 2 December, Soviet Russia and Armenia had been allies.¹²

⁸ Alexander Khatisian (Ալեքսանդր Խատիսեան), „Հայաստանի Հանրապետության ծագումն ու զարգացումը“ [Hayastani Hanrapetut'ian tsagumn u zargatsume (The Origins and Development of the Republic of Armenia)], Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*) (October 1926): 101–102.

⁹ Georgy Ordzhonikidze (Գրիգորի Օրջոնիկիձե), Ընտիր հոդվածներ և ճառեր [(Ĕntir hodvatsner ev charer (Selected articles and speeches)] (Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1950), 35.

¹⁰ Vladimir Lenin (Վլադիմիր Լենին), Երկերի լիակատար ժողովածու [Yerkeri liakatar zhoghovatsu (Full collection of works)], vol. 31 (Yerevan: Hayastan, 1980), 350.

¹¹ Samvel Alikhanian (Սամվել Ալիխանյան), Սովետական Ռուսաստանի դերը հայ ժողովրդի ազատագրման գործում (1917–1921թթ.) [Sovetakan Rusastani derĕ hay zhoghovardi azatagrman gortsum 1917–1921 (The role of Soviet Russia in the liberation of the Armenian people in 1917–1921)] (Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1966), 197.

¹² Karen Khachatryan (Կարեն Խաչատրյան), Հայ-ռուսական հարաբերությունները 1920–1922թթ. [Hay-rusakan haraberutyunnerĕ 1920–1922 t't. (Armenian-Russian relations in

Summing up the reality of the Armenian authorities handing power to the Bolsheviks, we can generalize the following:

- By handing power over to the Bolsheviks, the ARFD leaders had hoped to spare the Armenian people from new massacres at the hands of Turkey, with the support of Soviet Russia,
- With the Sovietization of Armenia, members of the government had expected to have Soviet Russian support for restoring the economic situation in Soviet Armenia,
- One of the main conditions for the peaceful Sovietisation of Armenia is maintaining Armenia's independence.
- In the Sovietisation of Armenia the key factor was the pro-Russian disposition of the country that had developed over previous centuries.

The violence committed by the Bolsheviks and the causes of the February Rebellion

Unfortunately, the Bolsheviks did not keep their promises. Shortly after the Sovietisation of Armenia, the Bolsheviks began to actively fight against the representatives of the former authorities and their supporters. On 6 December 1920, a special committee was established by the Armenian Revolutionary Committee for the fight against “counter-revolution, speculation and crimes”¹³

On 3 December 1920, a number of the members of the Government of the Republic of Armenia had been arrested on their way to Tiflis, including Hamo Ohandjanian, Ruben Darbinian, Koryun Ghazarian, Hovhannes Qadjaznuni and others. Later, around 600 officers of the Armenian army were also arrested and exiled to Russia from Baku. Armenian intellectuals were humiliated, Armenian peasants were robbed. Banks were nationalised and considered a state monopoly.¹⁴

1920–1922)] (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2007), 50.

¹³ «Կոմունիստ» (*Communist*), 9 December 1920.

¹⁴ *Ղեկրդեաների և կրասնանների ժողովածու* [Dekretneri ev Hramanneri zhogovatsu (A collection of decrees and orders)], vol. I (Etchmiadzin, 1921), 9–10.

The independence of Armenia was violated in every field. The Soviet currency was put into circulation with a special decree, and those who did not accept it were punished.¹⁵

Due to the decree of 20 December of the Armenian Revolutionary Committee, “The Digest of Laws of the Russian Empire” (*Свод законов Российской империи*) was abolished in Armenia with all changes that the Russian Provisional Government, Transcaucasian Sejm, Council of Armenia, the Parliament and Government had made. In its place, the laws of Soviet Russia were considered to be valid in the Armenian SSR with changes and additions that the Armenian Revolutionary Committee and other authorities had made.¹⁶ The decrees by the Armenian Revolutionary Committee were meant to strengthen the proletariat dictatorship and at the same time expand and intensify the International Socialist Revolution.

If the authorities in the newly proclaimed Soviet Russia were councils (soviets) of labourers, soldiers and peasants, then in Armenia the revolutionary committees became the authority.¹⁷ On 15 January 1921, a supreme revolutionary tribunal was set up. Its decisions were final and were to be carried out within 48 hours, except for capital punishment cases, which the revolutionary committee had to approve.

Due to the unjust and harsh policies of the new authorities, the people lost patience and in February 1921 an uprising began. On 18 February, rebellious forces entered Yerevan. Soviet authorities and the army had evacuated the capital.¹⁸

The Committee for the Salvation of the Fatherland was created headed by Simon Vratsian after conquering Yerevan, and this was supposed to control the country until the formation of the government.

¹⁵ «Կոմունիստ» (*Communist*), 22 December 1920.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1920.

¹⁷ Ararat Hakobyan (Արարատ Հակոբյան), «Ռուսաստանի ու Հայաստանի խորհրդայնացման գործընթացների և միակուսակցական վարչակարգի հաստատման պատմական մի քանի գուզահետներ» [Rusastani u Hayastani khorhrdaynacman gortsent'acneri ev miakusaktsakan varchakargi hastatman patmakan mi k'ani zugaherner (Some Historical Parallels of the Processes of Sovietization and the Establishment of One-Party Regime in Russia and Armenia)], *Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես* = *Historical-Philological Journal* 1 (2014): 49.

¹⁸ Richard G. Hovannisian, “Simon Vratzian and Armenian Nationalism,” *The Armenian Review*, vol. 23. no. 1 (1970): 30.

On 18 February, in his first address to the nation, he made an order to obey the rules, carry out all the instructions of the committee.¹⁹ Independence was restored on part of Armenia, and that lasted a month and a half.

The many causes of the February revolution were:

- First of all, the violation of the terms of the 2 December agreement by the Bolsheviks was disappointing for the population. Mass arrests of intellectuals as counter-revolutionaries had raised a huge wave of dissatisfaction among people.
- The policy in favour of war by the Bolsheviks, which was led with brutality and unauthorised dispositions, had damaged the already miserable social conditions and was a disappointment for the people.
- One of the main reasons for the national rebellion was ignorance and lessening of the notion of independence.
- The inability of the Armenian Bolsheviks to regulate territorial issues with neighbours was equally important.

Defining the February Rebellion as a War of Independence

In the following, the article will argue that the February rebellion of 1921 was a struggle for independence.

As we have mentioned above, after imposing Soviet laws in Armenia, the main cause for dissatisfaction was the disrespect of the terms of the agreement of 2 December 1920. “The independence of our country *was diminished*. The entire country was under Cheka”, wrote the official paper of the ARFD Droshak (author’s emphasis).²⁰

Apparently, the conditions of the Yerevan agreement had no value for the Armenian Bolsheviks. While the agreement that was signed with the Bolsheviks gave hope to the Armenian revolutionaries that Armenia will

¹⁹ NAA, 37.1.9, 5.

²⁰ «Դրօշակ» (*Droshak*) no. 2 (1926), 38.

be able to continue its independent and democratic development, but the first steps by the Bolsheviks in power caused despair.

Reassessing the February Rebellion 10 years later, the journal *Droshak* wrote: “The Bolsheviks had promised to respect the sovereignty of Armenians, and had recognised Armenian independence. Some time later it became obvious that the Revolutionary Committee with the leadership of Kasyan was just lawless, and the real power in Armenia was with the Yerevan-Baku telegraph, to which the commanders of the 11th Army units sent orders and instructions, and with the leadership of vice-king of Caucasus Ordzhonikidze. Armenia had become a conquered country, a small Russian county. The Armenian people saw and understood that the promise of independence from the Bolsheviks was just a lie”.²¹

The lack of independence or self-sufficiency stemmed from a policy of confiscation. The communists of Armenia, not having their own plan, were repeating the experience of Soviet Russia, the brightest example of which was the practice of war communism.

The strange part was that the policy of war communism in Armenia began to be practised only when Russia had given it up.²² Despite the fact that war communism had no justification, Armenia’s newly appointed Bolshevik authorities had decided to practice it on the spot. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia called the Armenian peasants to bring bread for the Red Army with their own means of transport.²³ Therefore, among the reasons for the February rebellion, were the arbitrary actions of many Soviet authorities that were being realised “for the state and revolutionary needs”, in disregard of the independence of Armenia.

The arbitrary arrests and abuses practised by the Bolshevik authorities also provided reason for the February rebellion. The Armenian Bolsheviks considered the necessity of the arrests to root out ‘counter-

²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1–2 (1931), 2.

²² Vladimir Ghazakhetsyan (Վլադիմիր Դազախեցյան), „Զեկայի գործունեության առաջին տարին Հայաստանում“ [Chekayi gortsuneut‘yan arajin tarin Hayastanum (The first year of activity of the Cheka in Armenia)], *Բանբեր Հայաստանի արխիվների* (*Bulletin of Armenian archives*) 1, (2011): 48.

²³ «Կոմունիստ» (*Communist*), 14 December 1920.

revolutionaries' and neutralise all abusive elements. This 'definition' had also brought forth dissatisfaction among the people. Cheka was the main entity responsible for the arrests, and had been obeying Moscow.

Many had expressed their dissatisfaction to the members of the government and other high-ranking officials.²⁴ The fact that some of the arrested people were transported to prison in vans, and others had to walk to Yerevan was especially humiliating.²⁵ In times of independence, no other power would ever humiliate their former leaders.

The last prime minister of the Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) Simon Vratsian writes that from the very first day the necessity of shootings was discussed at Cheka. Even the names of those that had to be executed were pointed out: former government and parliament members Ruben Darbinian, Sergei Meliq-Yolchian, Hamazasp Srvandztian, Bakhshi Ishkhanyan and others.²⁶ According to Vratsian's writings, one can assume that the Bolsheviks had planned to kill the detained politicians. Arrests of former high ranking politicians already revealed the real intentions of the Bolsheviks, especially that the detained people were leaving Armenia and were no danger to the authorities. The arrests and attitude towards the arrested politicians showed an escalated level of violence.

On 20 December 1920, by the decree of the Soviet Armenian Revolutionary Committee, Suleyman Nouri was included in the revolutionary committee as a Muslim.²⁷ Nouri had participated in the ongoing massacres. Ruben Darbinian notes in his memoirs that on 13 February Armenian and Russian guards were exchanged for Turks for the purpose of executing the imprisoned, and were seen as more trustworthy for the Bolsheviks.²⁸

²⁴ Arshaluys Astvatsatrian (Արշալույս Աստուածատրեան), „Փետրուարեան ապստամբութիւնը“ [P'etrvaryan apstambut'yune (The February Revolt)], Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*) 2 (1968), 39.

²⁵ Simon Vratsian (Միմնն Վրացեան), „Յուշեր մօտիկ անցեալից“ [Husher motik antsyalic (Memories from the near past)], Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*), Monthly, December 1923, 69.

²⁶ Հայրենիք (*Hairenik*), November 1923, 63–73; December 1923, 70.

²⁷ NAA, 116.1.2, 31.

²⁸ Ruben Darbinian (Ռուբեն Դարբինեան), *Երկեր* [Yerker (Works)], vol. A (Beirut: Hamazakayin, 1972), 563.

Appointing Suleyman Nouri as a People's Commissar of Justice, and previously including him in the revolutionary committee, was one of the biggest mistakes committed by the Bolshevik authorities.

Regardless of how the Bolshevik authorities had tried to show that Muslims were also included in the government in Armenia, they had to take two important facts into account. The Armenian people had suffered much loss at the hands of the Turks and despite Nouri's membership of the communist party, his appointment caused tension due to his nationality. Besides, despite the simple fact of his party membership, the Turkish official was keen on committing violence against Armenians. That was the reason why the punishment of many opposition members was entrusted to Suleyman Nouri. Therefore, to prove their ideological loyalty to the Russian authorities, the Armenian Bolsheviks even appointed the 'national enemies' of the Armenian nation to high-ranking positions.

In January 1921, due to the decision of the Russian Communist Party Politburo, the plenipotentiary of Soviet Russia's delegation for the Caucasian battlefield, Gevorg Atarbekyan (also known as Georgy Atarbekov), arrived in Armenia. The latter had terrorised the Northern Caucasus via Bolshevik means and had made a name for himself as a vicious striking-revolutionary.²⁹ He had tried to use his Russian 'revolutionary experience' in Armenia – copying his actions from Russia and reached the stage where the Extraordinary Commission (Cheka) made decisions to sentence people to death in concentration camps, at a time when there was no such rule in Armenia, only in Soviet Russia.

Sending Atarbekyan to Armenia probably had the purpose of restricting violence. Soviet Russia's Bolshevik authorities had also tried to strengthen the power of their party. The wickedest of all the violations of the Bolsheviks was the arrests of intellectuals. Atarbekyan considered the talk of some Armenian Bolsheviks about not arresting Armenian intellectuals merely academic.

²⁹ See more about this: Nikolay Yefimov (Николай Ефимов), „Atarbekov – odin iz zacinščikov krasnogo terrora“ (Атарбеков – один из зачинщиков красного террора (Atarbekov – one of the instigators of the red terror)), *Вопросы истории (Voprosy istorii)* 6 (2000): 130–136.

The actual violation of independence was also the attitude of the authorities towards the Armenian army and its servicemen. Taking power in Armenia, the Bolsheviks had decided to withdraw Armenian servicemen from Armenia and diminish the Armenian army. Deporting Armenian servicemen to Russia was brought forth by Leon Trotsky, who had suggested that they should be replaced with Russians.³⁰ The People's Commissar for Military Affairs, Avis Nurijanian, considered the exile of Armenian officers a Russian action.³¹ The arrest and deportation of Armenian officers took place right after the Sovietisation of Armenia. The initiative belonged to the central Soviet Russian power and was committed by the 11th Army commanders, with the participation of Armenian communist authorities.³²

In order to humiliate the Armenian army even more forcefully, the Bolsheviks deported the former government member and army commander Dro to Russia, which raised questions among the people.

On 24 January 1921, Armenian officers were deported from Armenia. The nation did not tolerate the inhumane attitude of the Armenian Bolsheviks towards the national army and servicemen, who were ready to die for the motherland. The Armenian Bolsheviks forced the people to face the necessity of rebellion against the deepening the revolution of peasants and labourers.

The newly emerged Bolsheviks of Armenia had also mocked the notion of Armenian independence in general. The most sacred notions for Armenians had been subjected to mockery.³³

Besides independence, other national values were also scorned as outdated conceptions. The Armenian tricolour and hymn “Our Mother-

³⁰ *Genocid armjan: otvetstvennost' Turcii i objazatel'stva mirovogo soobščestva. Dokumenty i kommentarii* (Геноцид армян: ответственность Турции и обязательства мирового сообщества. Документы и комментарии) (Genocide of Armenians: liability of Turkey and obligations of the world community), edited by Prof. Yu. Barsegov, vol. 2, part 2 (Moscow: Gardariki (Гардарики), 2003), 337.

³¹ «Կոմունիստ» (*Communist*), 29 January 1921.

³² Vladimir Ghazakhetsyan (Վլադիմիր Դազախեցյան), «Հայ սպանների արքարը 1920–1921թթ.» [Hay spaneri ak'sorë 1920–1921 t't' (The exile of Armenian officers in 1920–1921)], *Բանբեր Հայաստանի արխիվների* (*Bulletin of Armenian archives*) 2 (2003): 32.

³³ «Դրոշակ» (*Droshak*) no. 2, 1926, 39.

land” were banished as counter-revolutionary symbols. They were replaced with the red banner of the Bolsheviks and the “International” of the proletariat.

The policy of the Bolsheviks had driven the Armenian nation to armed struggle against Soviet Russia to restoring its independence. The rebellion was defeated, however. The Bolsheviks conquered Yerevan on 2 April 1921 with the help of the Soviet Red Army; however, thereafter they adopted a milder policy towards the people and intellectuals.

The 1921 February rebellion was a significant event in the history of the Armenian nation and is to be considered a manifestation of the Armenian quest for independence.

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