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NIKOL AGHBALIAN'S MINISTERIAL LEGACY (1919–1920)*

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Introduction

Nikol Aghbalian (1873–1947) was Minister of Public Education and Culture of the First Republic of Armenia for less than a year, but he built a remarkable legacy, as outlined in the following pages, based on published documents and press materials.¹

For more than half a century, from the 1890s until his death, Aghbalian polished and developed his multifaceted personality as an experienced educator, an accomplished Eastern Armenian literary critic, a skilled philologist and linguist, a conscientious party worker, and a well-forged publicist and editor. In a letter addressed to poet Hovhannes Tumanian in 1904, Aghbalian, then 29-years-old, quoted the lines of another poet, Avetik Isahakian (“The lute does not allow me

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to become a warrior, / The sword doesn't allow me to become a troubadour"), to add his own interpretation: "Now it has become mine: teaching doesn't allow me to become a writer; writing doesn't allow me to become a breadwinner..."² In the same year 1904, Aghbalian, already a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, had become well-known as a disciplined party worker and a talented public speaker. For more than a decade, his educational, intellectual, public, and editorial activities went hand by hand until the member of the Armenian National Council who had handwritten the Declaration of Independence on May 30, 1918, was elected a representative to the Council (Parliament) of the first Republic of Armenia in August 1918.

Ministerial activities

In this century of specialization and quest for continuous certification, it is noteworthy that Aghbalian's qualifications were summed up by his diploma from the Nersessian Lyceum of Tiflis and his two years at the Gevorgian Lyceum of Holy Etchmiadzin. He also attended he followed university courses in Moscow (1899–1900), Lausanne and Paris (1906–1907), but without graduating. Aghbalian, who finished the plan of founding – and practically founded – Yerevan State University, did not have university degree to back up his extensive educational experience, administrative abilities, and encyclopedic knowledge. However, after the coalition government of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Armenian Populist Party came to an end in June 1919, he was the best candidate for the portfolio of Minister of Public Education and Culture, which he fulfilled until the government reshuffle that came during the Bolshevik uprising of May 1920. In those days, he had been dispatched to Kars, where his talents of speaker and organizer prevented the bloodshed. After the Buro-

² Աղբալյան 2003, 40.

Government led by Prime Minister Hamo Ohanjian came to power in May 1920, he returned to his parliamentary seat, without ever avoiding to do works unbefitting to his vocation, such as the supervision of the collection of rice and abandoned assets in Sharur-Nakhijevan³ and the purchase of wheat to satisfy the requirements of the ministries of Welfare and Public Health.⁴

Aghbalian put his abilities to the service of an effective ministry. His activities encompassed the reform and expansion of the existing educational system, as well as the sponsorship and development of cultural initiatives.

Due to the state of belligerence, school life had come to full stop in 1917–1919. In 1919 Armenia had 135 elementary and 10 high schools with a student body of 14,000 and a faculty of 500⁵. In the term of one year, figures grew three times; in 1920 there were 420 elementary and 22 high schools with 43,162 students and 1,283 teachers. Those numbers did not include about 60 schools belonging to the Muslim, Russian, and Greek minorities.⁶ In April 1920 Aghbalian started the implementation of an educational reform, which would replace the old parochial schools with a six-year elementary system based on a secular, progressive approach. The program of elementary schools would include Armenian language, mathematics, history, geography, natural sciences, health, painting, music, physical education, and handcrafts. Aghbalian had formulated the main lines of his educational approach in a lecture on “Democratic Education” he gave on December 13, 1919 at the eighth literary evening of the Armenian Literary Society of Armenia.⁷

³ See Simon Vratzian’s article in «Այդ», 1949, No. 3.

⁴ «Յանաջ», 1920, թ. 219.

⁵ **Hovannisian** 1982, 310–311.

⁶ **Hovannisian** 1982, 310.

⁷ For an extensive summary, see «Յանաջ», 1919, No. 69.

Out of a population of 1.1 million Armenians in Armenia, 170,000 were of school age, but there were 50,000 students.

Of course, the acute lack of means and the substandard level of the infrastructure were great hurdles, but Aghbalian counted on the support offered by the executive and legislative powers, to which he continuously made recourse with demands of many types: to raise the meager salaries of teachers and keep most of them exempt from military service;⁸ to provide scholarships and school supplies, and to offer breakfast to low-income students in some faraway districts. He also inaugurated a teacher training college in October 1919.⁹ Aghbalian was also well aware of the situation of the Armenian schools outside Armenia, particularly in Tiflis and Baku, and made an allocation of 1,5 million rubles to them, which was approved by the government in December 1919.¹⁰

Aghbalian undertook a campaign of public instruction to fight the widespread lack of school education and literacy among adults. This included six-month courses of Armenian language and mathematics in three levels, which were held four times a week for six hours, as well as free evening lectures on a variety of subjects, from Armenian literature and history to law and health. The lecture series were held in ten cities, and the draft law submitted to the Parliament clarified that “everyone can attend the courses without discrimination of religion, nationality, and gender.”¹¹ The ministry also sponsored accounting classes, for which the only requirement for participants was to have finished the fourth grade of high school.¹²

⁸ «Հայաստանի ծայն», 1919, No. 6.

⁹ «Ասպարէզ», 1919, No. 593.

¹⁰ «Յառաջ», 1919, No. 80.

¹¹ Աղբալյան 2003, 218–219.

¹² «Յառաջ», 1919, No. 78.

Aghbalian's predecessor, Gevorg Melik-Gharageozian (Armenian Populist Party), had submitted a project to establish the University of Yerevan with four divisions, which was approved by the Council of Ministers in May 1919.¹³ The immediate opening of the Faculties of Armenian Studies and Law was planned for September 1919. The jurist Yuri Ghambarian, who had managed higher education institutions in Paris and Tiflis, was designated rector of the University.¹⁴ Ghambarian submitted a list of tentative faculty members and asked the ministry in October 1919 to start advertising the opening of the university.¹⁵ However, the opening was delayed by the lack of appropriate facilities, which forced a temporary move to Alexandrapol,¹⁶ where the official opening ceremony was held on January 31, 1920. In his opening speech, Aghbalian was sufficiently realistic: "Although our country lies in ruins and our people are mired in poverty, we are founding a higher education school". But he was also optimistic: "We are rebuilding our home and founding temples of education without thinking about what our enemies think about us, those enemies who have always destroyed what we have built; we have the belief that this time the ship of the Armenian nation will sail through the storm undistressed". As the situation of the republic showed, the demand to move with attentiveness, Aghbalian declared, had to be paired with the need to keep up with life: "Not all dangers have gone away for us, and we still need to keep the sword in our hand, but it is already time to pick up a pen with the other hand."¹⁷ Classes started the next day with eight

¹³ On Melik-Gharageozian's activities in the foundational phase of the University of Yerevan, see **Պետրոսյան** 2019.

¹⁴ «Ասպարէզ», 1919, No. 579.

¹⁵ «Յառաջ», 1919, No. 19, 23. Advertisements were published in early November 1919 (see «Հայաստանի ծայն», 1919, No. 10).

¹⁶ «Հայաստանի ծայն», 1919, No. 7. See also «Յառաջ», 1919, No. 66.

¹⁷ «Յառաջ», 1920, No. 26.

professors and 200 students. The university moved to Yerevan in the fall of 1920.¹⁸

Aghbalian showed the same indefatigable and unbreakable will in pursuing the cultural advancement of the former backward periphery of the Czarist empire. Many of his initiatives had only taken their first baby steps when the Soviet regime was established in Armenia, but they became the basis for the institutional development during the Soviet period, even it went essentially unrecognized or underestimated for obvious and well-known reasons. Among those we may mention the Institute of Research and the Museum of Ethnography,¹⁹ the National Library,²⁰ the Department of Antiquities,²¹ the National Conservatory of Music,²² the Art Exhibition as the beginning of the National Gallery, and the National Theater and the Theater Workshop.²³ In 1919 theater actor and director Ovi Sevumian (1876–1920) was sent to Constantinople to engage and train new actors for the National Theater and to bring new students to the Theater Workshop. Aghbalian appealed to the A.R.F. Central Committee of Constantinople to ensure support for this project.²⁴ Unfortunately, Sevumian passed away in 1920 during his mission.

Shahan Natalie (1884–1983), an influential representative of the A.R.F. from the United States, had arrived in Yerevan to participate in the party's Ninth World Assembly, held in October-November 1919. Aghbalian wrote a letter dated November 6, 1919, asking Natalie for help to obtain books of law, history, language, and literature for the

¹⁸ «Հայաստանի ծայն», 1920, No. 106.

¹⁹ Աղբալյան 2003, 238.

²⁰ Աղբալյան 2003, 207.

²¹ «Յառաջ», 1919, No. 74.

²² Աղբալյան 2003, 217.

²³ See also Hovannisian 1996.

²⁴ Աղբալյան 2003, 205.

university, Armenian publications for the State Library, scientific books for their translation into Armenian, books on school management, photographic materials to use in photographing monuments, etc.²⁵ He also wrote to the American Committee for the Independence of Armenia to secure their support for Natalie, and made an appeal for assistance to Armenian-Americans.²⁶

The hegemony of the Russian language in all realms of daily life had been one of the characteristic features of the Czarist period. The government of the Republic had directed its language policy to impose the employment of the Armenian language in all public dependencies and expand its use throughout the territory of the country. On July 5, 1919, the Ministry of Public Education established a two-month course of Armenian for all government employees of both sexes.²⁷ In October 1919, at the request of the Council of Ministers, Aghbalian submitted a project of annual courses of Armenian language and calligraphy for government employees and prospective candidates, to be held in six weekly hours, four times a week, on four levels, according to the language abilities of the participants.²⁸ He also suggested the creation of a committee of translators, which would undertake the translation into Armenian of the draft bills submitted to the Parliament and the documents published by the ministries, as well as the production of unified terminology for official language. It is worthwhile to quote the grounds for this project, where the experience of Western Armenian was also mentioned:

“If we take into consideration that German literary language was produced by officials and that our Western Armenian language has a comparative wealth and regularity due to more than sixty years of

²⁵ Աղբալյան 2003, 223–224.

²⁶ Աղբալյան 2003, 224–226.

²⁷ «Ասպարէզ», 1919, No. 577.

utilization and cultivation in national offices, the great importance that the cultivation and regulation of official language has not only for government, but also for public life and literature will become self-evident.”²⁹

It would have been very strange if literature had not come under Aghbalian’s wings. In a letter addressed to the historian Leo (Arakel Babajanian, 1870–1932) on October 31, 1919, he wrote: “I try as much as possible to ensure protection for literature. I am entering in next year’s budget a modest credit to provide continuing assistance to emeritus and fledgling literati, on the account that their annual bread and shelter will be ensured or, in another way, that they will be able to work freely for three months in a year. Indeed, you will be the first among those literati.”³⁰

Aghbalian was the honorary president of the Literary Society of Armenia. Two weeks before, on October 16, at the second event organized by the Society, he delivered his lecture, “Yeghishe Charents as the Newest Poet,” where he highlighted the literary value of the 22-year-old unknown poet, who would become one of the greatest names of Armenian literature.³¹ The follow-up is well-known: in late October, Charents, who was a teacher in one of the villages of the Kars district, arrived in Yerevan after hearing about this lecture. He introduced himself to Aghbalian, who gave him a position at the ministry with a modest salary, which would allow Charents to continue his creative work.

After the end of his ministerial tenure, Aghbalian lectured once again in June 1920 at an event of the Literary Society. His subject was “The Future of Armenian Literature.” As he pointed out to the second

²⁸ Աղբալյան 2003, 214.

²⁹ Աղբալյան 2003, 210.

³⁰ Աղբալյան 2003, 222.

class status of Armenian literature during Russian rule, he stressed the importance of a national state: "In the terrible conditions of the present, the future of Armenian literature is more hopeful than in the normal conditions of that time, because a sacred statehood of its own exists for the Armenian people, with which being related, they create values out of nothing. The government of Armenia is a caring force that must think of the well-being of the Armenian people and create reliable conditions for the future of Armenian literature."³²

Six months later, the independence of Armenia came to an end. Soviet Armenia would create the conditions for educational and cultural flourishing according to the criteria of the official ideology along the lines of totalitarianism. At the same time, it would condemn Aghabalian and his legacy to oblivion, only to reopen the winding road to their resurrection on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet regime. That road has been substantially widened throughout the past three decades.

Conclusions

While better known as a literary critic and scholar, Aghabalian's public service throughout his life was equally remarkable. His achievements during his tenure as Minister of Public Education and Culture of the First Republic of Armenia, carried out with limited resources and hard work, have kept their relevance and may still be a source of inspiration in current critical times.

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³¹ «Հայաստանի ծայն», 1919, No. 9.

³² «Ժողովուրդ», 1920, No. 94.

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Ամփոփում

Սոյն համառօտ անդրադարձը Նիկոլ Աղբալեանի վաստակին, իբրեւ Հայաստանի առաջին հանրապետութեան Հանրային Կրթութեան եւ Արուեստի նախարար (Հոկտեմբեր 1919 – Մայիս 1920), հիմնուած է տրամադրելի տպագիր փաստաթուղթերու եւ լրագրական հաղորդումներու վրայ եւ ուղղուած է այդ ժառանգութեան որոշ էջեր թարմացնելու:

Աղբալեանի իրագործումները՝ սակաւ միջոցներով ու անխոնջ աշխատանքով, ինչպէս եւ այդ գործի ետին կանգնած մարդկային որակը, դեռեւս իրենց արդիականութիւնը կը պահեն եւ ներշնչումի աղբիւր կրնան ըլլալ ճակատագրական այս ժամանակներուն:

Քանայի քաներ՝ Հայաստանի Հանրապետութիւն, Նիկոլ Աղբալեան, կրթութիւն, կրթական բարեփոխում, մշակոյթ, գրականութիւն, Թիֆլիս:

Вардан З. Матиосян, *Восточная пресвитерия Армянской Апостольской церкви, Нью-Йорк, к.и.н.* Министерские заслуги Никола Агбаляна (1919–1920)

Резюме

Это краткое исследование о достижениях Никола Агбаляна на посту министра народного просвещения и культуры Первой Республики Армения (октябрь 1919 г. – май 1920 г.) основано на доступных печатных документах и газетных сообщениях и направлено на обновление некоторых страниц этого наследия.

Достижения Агбаляна в условиях ограниченных средств и неустанный труд, а также его человеческие качества по-прежнему сохраняют свою актуальность и могут быть источником вдохновения в эти роковые времена.

Ключевые слова: Республика Армения, Никол Агбалян, образование, реформа образования, культура, литература, Тифлис.