

# INTERSECTION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN THE OTTOMAN BORDERLANDS: THE SANASARIAN SCHOOL OF ERZURUM IN RUSSIAN CONSULAR REPORTS ON THE EVE OF THE GREAT WAR

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the Sanasarian School of Erzurum as a contested site in Russian-Ottoman imperial rivalries on the eve of the Great War. Using Russian consular reports, it explores how the school became a focal point of geopolitical struggles, caught between Armenian national aspirations and foreign influences. Founded in 1881, the Sanasarian School was a prestigious Armenian institution, yet Russian authorities viewed it with suspicion, fearing its role in fostering nationalist sentiment and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation influence. The school's strategic location made it a nexus of competing Russian, Ottoman, and German interests, reflecting broader power struggles in the region. This paper argues that the school was not merely a passive recipient of imperial policies but an active participant in transimperial networks, demonstrating how education shaped identity, political activism, and great-power intervention in the contested Ottoman borderlands.

**Keywords:** Sanasarian School, Erzurum, consular reports, education, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire

## **Introduction**

The Russian Empire's relationship with its Ottoman border has been a rich subject for analysis, and this paper seeks to explore a hitherto rarely examined aspect. Russian encroachment in the Caucasus led to conflicts first with Persia and culminated in major territorial acquisitions for the Tsar through the Treaties of Gyulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). As a result, the Tsarist regime absorbed nearly half of the Armenian-populated lands. A series of wars followed which emboldened Russia to push further into the eastern Ottoman borderlands, including Erzurum, the easternmost bastion of the Sultan's empire, with varying degrees of success. Consequently, the vilayet of Erzurum became a shatter zone between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. This geopolitical shift permanently divided the Armenian population, leaving them caught between the two competing empires. Thus, by the late 19th century, Erzurum's

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prestigious Sanasarian School emerged as a site of rival geopolitical and ideological agendas involving Russia, Armenian revolutionaries, and other major European powers in the contested borderland.

As early as after the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, Russia established a consular network in the Ottoman Empire, which significantly expanded during the 19th century due to Russian expansionist ambitions directed against Ottoman territories, despite occasional disruptions caused by subsequent wars. Initially, these consulates focused primarily on protecting commercial interests, but by 1867 they had already assumed diplomatic functions as well.<sup>1</sup> This consular network not only enabled Russia to assert imperial foreign policy interests effectively in border regions but also became a powerful instrument for providing political and religious protection to Christian communities, including the Armenians.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Russian consuls emerged as active participants in the Erzurum vilayet, and their reports sent to the Russian embassy in Constantinople are excellent sources for analyzing the issues outlined above.

Through a detailed examination of these Russian consular reports written in Erzurum and sent to the Russian Embassy in Constantinople, sourced from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), I argue that the Sanasarian School in the Ottoman borderland was a target in the broader geopolitical struggles defining the region during the Eastern Question, as various political actors sought to assert dominance over educational institutions to advance their strategic interests. This article includes 3 major questions that this article seeks to answer:

- How did Russian consular reports reflect a broader Russian policy regarding the Sanasarian School and what were these policies motivated by?

- If such a policy existed, what specific attempts were made to influence this institution, and why were these efforts carried out?

- How did the borderland location of the Sanasarian School render it vulnerable to interference from great powers, and specifically, how was this geopolitical vulnerability perceived by Russia through its consular mission in Erzurum?

Building on this context, the borderland location of the institution requires scrutiny, as it helps the researcher explain certain intellectual phenomena present in Sanasarian from a Russian consular point of view, due to its position on the periphery, such as exposure to great power meddling and interventionism, as well as the facilitating nature of the porous Ottoman-Turkish borders in enabling intellectual transfers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Petrunina 2023: online

<sup>2</sup> Zonova 2011: 173-183.

<sup>3</sup> Bartov & Weitz 2013: 1-2.

The study of the latter aspect is complemented by the analysis of the interconnectedness of Russian, German, Armenian self-defense groups', and other foreign actors' transimperial agendas shaping local affairs. It also aims to highlight the multidirectional transfer of ideas among these actors which demonstrates that the Sanasarian School, including its teachers and students, was not merely a passive recipient of imperial policies but an active agent in the reconfiguration of power and identity in the region.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, this research seeks to deepen our understanding of how the operations of a local institution reflected global state antagonism amid the transformative era on the eve of the Great War.

### **The establishment of the Sanasarian School and Russian-Armenian relations in the 19th century**

Undeniable that the establishment of the Sanasarian School was a true transnational undertaking in itself. Mgrdich S. Sanasarian, a notable supporter of Armenian education, was born in Tiflis in 1818 to an Armenian family from Van, where he attended the famous Nersesian School.<sup>5</sup> He later resided in St. Petersburg and played a pivotal role in shaping the school's vision while generously contributing to its establishment.<sup>6</sup> Sanasarian (or, as Russian sources refer to him, Sanasarov) was an adamant supporter of educating Russian Armenians and was driven by his commitment to education and progress. However, his efforts to establish a secular benevolent society in 1865 were hindered by the Russian authorities. Despite his argument that educating Russian Armenians in commerce would secure Russia's superiority over external Armenians and reinforce its geopolitical dominance, his plans were rejected. This is unsurprising as throughout the 19th century, Russia was trying to prevent the formation of a modern cohesive Armenian transimperial state identity that could jeopardize Russia's control over Armenian territories in Transcaucasia and possibly destabilize Western-Armenia too. Therefore, Sanasarov's idea was doomed to failure from conception, as the authorities feared it would foster Armenian self-reliance and weaken loyalty to the state.<sup>7</sup>

After the 1878 Russo-Turkish War, the Armenian Question gained international attention, prompting Western Armenians to emphasize national consciousness and rights. Ottoman Armenians saw schooling as key to their national and intellectual awakening. It was in this climate that Sanasarov's endeavors eventually paid off, and on October 1, 1881, the Sanasarjan School opened its doors. The Sanasarian School opened in 1881-1882 with 19 pupils. By 1886-1887, enrollment had risen to 158, including 35 scholarship recipients, and it graduated its first class.<sup>8</sup> A meticulous

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<sup>4</sup> Werner & Zimmermann 2006: 30-50.

<sup>5</sup> Low 2024: 70.

<sup>6</sup> Tarbassian 1975: 103, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Riegg 2020: 142-145.

<sup>8</sup> Tatoyan 2024: online

selection process identified promising Armenian students from both Eastern and Western-Armenia who were subsequently sent to European universities to further their education, guided by the understanding that they would return to Armenia and play a vital role as educators in the Sanasarian. This initiative exposed the students to European political ideas, which coupled with the acquisition of various languages during their studies enhanced their access to the currents of European politics.<sup>9</sup>

While foreign influence certainly enriched Armenian perspectives and positively contributed to the broader intellectual landscape of Armenian culture, it also posed a threat to the Russian administration, as these tendencies seemed to undermine its control over the Armenian communities within its borders. This control was channeled through the Armenian Apostolic Catholicos of Echmiadzin, who served as the representative of the dispersed yet spiritually united Armenian communities on both sides of the Russo-Ottoman border.<sup>10</sup> The penetration of various religious denominations could potentially challenge the dominance of Echmiadzin, and thus Russia, in Western Armenia by proselytizing ideas that counter Russian ambitions in the region. This concern becomes evident in a specific instance in 1882 when the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, A. Nelidov, forwarded a report from the Russian consul in Trabzon in which highlighted that, following the Treaty of Berlin (1878), Western representatives were actively promoting "the idea of Armenian identity to erode the sense of sympathy for Russia among Turkish Armenians". Simultaneously, the consul stressed the significance of institutions like the Gevorkian seminary in Etchmiadzin and the Lazarevskiy Institute in Moscow as bearers of crucial spiritual and cultural links for Ottoman-Armenians with Russia.<sup>11</sup>

Elaborating on the Lazarevskiy Institute and comparing it with the Sanasarian reveals a broader theme in the Russian Empire's Armenian policy, which raises the question: what made the Lazarevskiy Institute favorable in Nelidov's eyes? The Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages fostered Armenian integration into Russian society while serving imperial interests as it trained Armenian youth for diplomacy, administration, and academia. It became a hub for Oriental studies which equipped officials with Turkish, Arabic, and Persian skills crucial for Russian interests. While advancing Russian policies, it also contributed to Armenian national awakening as it allowed for Armenian-Russian intellectual exchange which bridged the gap between the Armenian diaspora, the Russian Empire, and the East.<sup>12</sup> For example, Garabed Yeziantz, a friend and colleague of Sanasarov in the Sanasarian School project, also attended the Lazarevskiy Institute in Moscow,<sup>13</sup> as did Mikayel Loris-Melikov.<sup>14</sup> Both were important figures who exemplify the integration of Armenians into the Russian elite.

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<sup>9</sup> Tarbassian 1975: 103.

<sup>10</sup> Werth 2006: 203-204.

<sup>11</sup> GARF, f. 568, op. 1, d. 157, l. 1-11. 1882.

<sup>12</sup> Torkunov 2015: 9-22.

<sup>13</sup> Low 2024: 70.

Contrary to the Lazarevskiy Institute, the Sanasarian School quickly lost favor in the eyes of Russian policymakers. As its charter dutifully proclaimed that "the purpose of the Sanasarian School is to educate Armenian children in accordance with the spirit and canons of the Armenian Apostolic Church...", one might assume this would meet the criteria for an "acceptable" institution for Russia.<sup>15</sup> But, a clear indication of the Tsarist administration's apprehension towards the Sanasarian School remained and is evident in a confidential correspondence originated from the de-facto governor of Transcaucasia, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Freze. In this correspondence, Freze expressed his disapproval of the board of the Erzurum school. In his views, the two "Turkish-Armenians" teachers who were employed there were "Russo-phobic and hated everything that was Russian" and were "close to the Armenian revolutionaries, whom they accepted as their own students." In addition, another criticism was that the school, which was funded by Russian-Armenian donations, taught French and German but not Russian.<sup>16</sup>

### **Russian suspicion of the Armenian Revolutionary Movement and the role of the Sanasarian School**

The quoted source implies that Armenian revolutionism in any form, whether within or beyond Russian borders, was highly unsettling for Russia and something it actively sought to get rid of. Armenian self-defense groups had been sprouting across Western Armenia since the 1860s<sup>17</sup>, but revolutionary activities intensified following the 1877–1878 Russo-Turkish War, the internationalization of the Armenian Question, and the failure of reforms to improve Armenian living conditions.<sup>18</sup> Russia feared the spread of revolutionary sentiment and secessionist tendencies within and along its borders. In the post-war years, some Russian consular reports from Erzurum described Armenian revolutionaries as products of Western "nihilistic and antisocial ideologies," which, they claimed, were "causing social decay" in Armenian society and fueling Armenian separatism.<sup>19</sup>

Russian consuls in Erzurum maintained strict scrutiny over the Sanasarian as an educational stronghold, particularly because Russian authorities were well aware of its influence on young Armenian minds. After all, one of the first self-defense groups in Western-Armenia, the *Bashdban Hayrenyats* (The Defenders of the Fatherland) was established in early 1881 at the Sanasarian in Erzurum, just a year after the institution was founded in 1880. However, in 1882, the local Ottoman administration uncovered

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<sup>14</sup> Önel 2019: 169-170.

<sup>15</sup> Najaryan 2017: 98.

<sup>16</sup> GARF, f. 102, op. 308, d. 201, l. 27 - 28. 23 July 1904.

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, Arslan & Taškiran 2006: 41-42.

<sup>18</sup> Ketsemanian, Kurt, Sarafian 2020: 138.

<sup>19</sup> AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, d. 1628, l. 123-128. 15 July 1883.

the organization, highlighting the heightened vigilance surrounding Armenian nationalist movements in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Despite crackdowns on Armenian self-defense movements, the Ottoman administration could not curtail their development. The Hamidian massacres—during which tens of thousands of Armenians perished—ushered in a new era of revolutionary activity. The Dashnaktsutyun<sup>21</sup> emerged as the dominant force in the revolutionary struggle, surpassing the Hnchak, due to significant shifts in its *modus operandi*.<sup>22</sup> By the time of the rise of the Young Turk regime in 1908, the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) gained political recognition and strengthened its position as the most vocal advocates for Armenian interests within the Ottoman Empire's political sphere.<sup>23</sup> By cementing their alliance with the CUP<sup>24</sup> (Committee of Union and Progress), the Dashnaktsutyun became the focus of growing Russian suspicion that accused them of spreading revolutionary ideas among the Armenian population. According to Russian consul A. Shtritter, the Sanasarian school had become a target of the ARF's propaganda campaign. He claimed that a strong “Dashnak current” had taken root in the school and had successfully influenced the students.<sup>25</sup> Its strong influence was certainly present in the Sanasarian before the report was written as prominent figures of the 1890s ARF activities Vartkes Serengiulian and Karekin Pastermajian were also the graduates of the school.<sup>26</sup>

### **ARF influence and turmoil around the Sanasarian School**

After the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, a dispute arose between the school's Constantinople-based board of stewards and the Erzurum-based board of trustees. The stewards opposed the involvement of the ARF youth in the school, while the Erzurum Armenian authorities and trustees, dominated by members of the Dashnak party, sought full control over the school's administration.<sup>27</sup> Concerned about the growing influence of the Dashnaktsutyun and the next generation of students, the board of trustees in Constantinople, removed A. Khachaturyan, the Dashnak member director, and replaced him with a – as the consul identified him – “a *neutral Russian nationalist*” named K. Abulyan (Apolian). Before Abulyan's arrival, rumors circulated that his life

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<sup>20</sup> Moumdjian 2012: 24.

<sup>21</sup> The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), or Dashnaktsutyun, is an Armenian nationalist and socialist political party founded in 1890 in Tiflis, Russian Empire.

<sup>22</sup> Libaridian 2011: 92.

<sup>23</sup> Der Matossian 2020: 79-80.

<sup>24</sup> The Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was a revolutionary secret society and political party that led the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and established constitutional rule in the Ottoman Empire, and later dominated its politics until its dissolution in 1918.

<sup>25</sup> AVPRI, f. 180 op. 517/2 d. 2682, l. 13-14. 1 March 1912.

<sup>26</sup> Kaligian 2017: 56.

<sup>27</sup> Tatoyan 2024: [online]

would be in danger if he insisted on suppressing the existing school direction. To ensure Abulyan's safety, the *vali* of Erzurum was asked to intervene by the Russian consulate, despite the Dashnak party denying any involvement in terrorist activities anymore. Upon Abulyan's arrival at the Sanasarian, he was met with silence from both teachers and students, who turned their backs on him. As a result, Abulyan did not visit the school again.<sup>28</sup>

Due to the protests and the revolutionary atmosphere at the school, Constantinople decided to temporarily close the school and remove the teachers. The incident caused concern among the local Armenian population, and Reverend Grigoris Balaklyan was sent from Constantinople to investigate the matter and resolve the conflict. However, somewhat controversially, before conducting the investigation, Balaklyan held early exams and dismissed both teachers and students associated with the Dashnak. When Balaklyan announced the school's relocation to Sivas, the local Armenians were greatly dissatisfied as many wished to continue their studies. Led by member of the ARF, a crowd marched into the courtyard to protest the evacuation of the school. They brought back the carried-out items and locked the door.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these actions, the trustees in the capital announced that lower grades would start in Erzurum and Sivas, but this failed to reassure those who had reached high school level, as they now had to find a school elsewhere. The Russian consulate condemned these decisions as overly strict, irrational, and detrimental to Russia's interests. According to the Russian consular reports, the Dashnak party had an opportunity to demonstrate that they represented local Armenian interests, even if this led to the downfall of the so-called "Old-Sanasarian".<sup>30</sup>

One intriguing aspect of this case is the Russian consulate's apparent protective stance towards Abulyan and their request to the *vali* for his safety. This suggests that the Russian consulate attached great importance to ensuring a "Dashnak-free Sanasarian school", which may have prompted their intervention in the board of trustees to launch a top-down cleansing of Dashnak members. As if the situation had escalated somewhat unexpectedly, the board of trustees decided to close the school, which angered the local Armenians whose future was endangered by the excessive measures taken by the investigators from Constantinople. This ran counter to the objectives of Russia, which sought to assert its influence over the Armenian community by ensuring the presence of a more pro-Russian stance. However, Russian attempts to consolidate the Sanasarian school backfired and resulted in significant turmoil in Erzurum. This outcome may have strengthened the support for the Dashnaktsutyun, which was able to position itself as the champion of Armenian interests in the face of adversity, while the Russian consulate was left a problem unsolved.

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<sup>28</sup> AVPRI, f. 180 op. 517/2 d. 2682, l. 13-14. 1 March 1912.

<sup>29</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2682, l. 45-46. 20 August 1912.

<sup>30</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2682, l. 45-46. 20 August 1912.

Despite giving approval for the school to be relocated from Erzurum to the Surp Neshan Monastery of Sivas, the Catholicos directed the trustees to initiate the establishment of a new school in Erzurum. In compliance with this instruction, the trustees resolved the disputes concerning school properties. In 1912, the Educational Council of Erzurum, along with Artashes Rostomyan (Stepan Zorian, Rostom), Inspector-General of the Armenian National Schools, jointly recognized the necessity of establishing a secondary school in the region. Subsequently, they decided to reopen the Old Sanasarian School, simply renaming it as the "New Sanasarian."<sup>31</sup> However, over time, non-partisan Armenians in Erzurum reportedly became increasingly dissatisfied with the ARF's control of the New-Sanasarian School. According to Consul Aleksandr Alekseevich Adamov, this dissatisfaction stemmed from the school's administration, led by Rostom, failing to maintain discipline among students, which resulted in unruly behavior and moral misconduct on school premise.<sup>32</sup> Rostomyan had perhaps long been under the scrutiny of the Russian administration, given his active role in persuading Dashnak members to agitate the population in the South Caucasus during the 1905 revolution.<sup>33</sup>

Recognizing the need to remove the ARF committee from the school's management, the Armenian community appealed to Bishop Sempat of Erzurum, who was also one of the school's board of trustees. The growing chasm between the bishop and the party stemmed from a school administration demand to cover a 420-lira deficit for 1913–1914. Adamov reported that the Armenian National Assembly, mostly composed of members of the Dashnakstutyun, approved the 2,135-lira budget, with 1,000 from the national treasury and the rest from tuition, income, and donations. However, parents who doubted the school's instructors enrolled their children elsewhere, which reduced tuition revenue and caused the shortfall.<sup>34</sup> During the National Assembly's discussions on addressing this deficit, attended by members of the Dashnak party, they aimed to compel the school administration to immediately present the school budget for the upcoming academic year. Their intent was to approve it and, in turn, maintain control of the school within the ranks of their party. Bishop Sempat's proposed solution to address this issue was considered inadequate, especially in light of the growing Dashnakstutyun exclusionary movement among the non-partisan Armenians in Erzurum, which sought to entirely remove Dashnak members from the school.<sup>35</sup>

The Russian consulate in Erzurum consistently expressed disapproval of the school, perceiving it as having an anti-Russian orientation due to the Dashnakstutyun. Adamov consul specifically mentioned Gabriel Noradunkyan, the chairman of the

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<sup>31</sup> Tarbassian 1975: 106.

<sup>32</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70. 3 June 1914.

<sup>33</sup> Berberian 2019: 9.

<sup>34</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70. 3 June 1914.

<sup>35</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70. 3 June 1914.



committee of trustees, in this negative context. He also emphasized that, despite being informally acknowledged as under the unofficial patronage of the Russian consulate, the Sanasarian operated independently of direct control by the Russian general consulate since its inception. Adamov conceded that the consulate's influence was so limited that it could not even enforce the inclusion of the Russian language in the school's curriculum.<sup>36</sup>

### **Russian concerns of German influence in the Erzurum borderland**

The questions surrounding the Sanasarian became especially pressing for Russia in August 1913, when the local newspaper of the CUP reported on the upcoming opening of the German consulate in Erzurum.<sup>37</sup> The consulate in Erzurum could now easily coordinate its activities with another important center for German reconnaissance, the German Consulate in Tiflis, which maintained a strong network of agents and contacts among Russian officers and was suspected of organizing an anti-Russian insurgent movement among the local Muslim populations.<sup>38</sup> Adamov consul's assessment suggested that the newly appointed German consul in Erzurum aimed to counterbalance Russia's influence within the Armenian community in the region. Consequently, the Russian consulate grew significantly concerned when reports surfaced that certain local representatives of the ARF were considering aligning with Germany. Allegedly drawn to socialist ideals—a recurring criticism in Russian consular reports on Armenian revolutionaries—they sought German protection for Western Armenian territories, which heightened the Russian consulate's vigilance regarding the situation.<sup>39</sup>

For instance, regarding the re-establishment of the Sanasarian School, Adamov conveyed the following ideas to the embassy in Constantinople:

*“Thanks to this arrangement, the teaching staff and students, long before it was taken over by the Dashnaks, were imbued with anti-Russian ideas, particularly in the context of general Armenian dissatisfaction with our government's policies regarding the Armenian church's properties in the Caucasus. Given the variable moods in Armenian circles, we should take advantage of the return of the Old Sanasarian School to Erzurum to influence the direction of its policies, ensuring open patronage of this school funded mainly by Russian money. This is especially necessary because there are many reasons to fear that the school will not become a hotbed of German influence, following the example of the New School, thanks to the closer relations of the German consul with the Dashnaks.”*<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup>AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70. 3 June 1914.

<sup>37</sup>AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2684, l. 116 – 126. 12 September 1913.

<sup>38</sup> Öno1 2009: 169-170.

<sup>39</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2684, l. 116-126. 12 September 1913.

<sup>40</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70. 3 June 1914.

To curb the spread of German influence, it was crucial for the Russian consulate to appoint a school director aligned with Russian interests. This was particularly significant due to the backgrounds of the school's three former directors—Abulyan, Matatyan, and Sogikyan—all of whom had received their higher education in Germany or Austria. For instance, Sogikyan graduated from a German university. Given their educational backgrounds, they were regarded as potential conduits for German influence.<sup>41</sup> Based on Adamov's reports, Consul Anders from Germany collaborated with Sogikyan, who was allegedly the owner of Anders's residence in Erzurum. He reportedly received a monthly payment from the German consulate to promote "pro-German propaganda" at the school, though Adamov did not specify what this entailed. Adamov's assessment suggested that the newly appointed German consul aimed to counterbalance Russia's influence within the Armenian community in the region. The Russian consulate grew significantly concerned when reports surfaced that certain local representatives of the Dashnak party were considering aligning with Germany. Allegedly drawn to socialist ideals—a recurring criticism in Russian consular reports on Armenian revolutionaries—they sought German protection for Western Armenian territories, which heightened the Russian consulate's vigilance regarding the situation.<sup>42</sup>

The Russian consulate consistently viewed the possibility of Sogikyan assuming the role of the school's director with concern. This apprehension stemmed from the trust he reportedly enjoyed from Noradunkyan, to whom he was believed to provide detailed reports on developments within the Armenian community. Adamov argued that Sogikyan had considerable influence—so much so that even Bishop Sempat regarded him as a potential threat. There were fears that Sogikyan might portray the bishop in a negative light to Noradunkyan, potentially jeopardizing Sempat's candidacy for the patriarchal seat. Consequently, the Russian consulate considered Noradunkyan's potential appointment of Sogikyan—not only as director but even as a teacher upon the school's return to Erzurum—as undesirable for Russian interests. As Adamov put it:

"(...) Removing him from school activities would facilitate our task in influencing the direction of the said school."<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, Consul Adamov also suggested ways Russia could influence the school. He argued that a Russian government subsidy ranging from 600 to 750 rubles should be allocated to introduce Russian language instruction, especially since the school had long taught French and, with financial support from the German consul Anders, had recently introduced German language instruction under Sogikyan. However, the current director of the New Sanasarian School, Rostomyan, had begun teaching Russian on Adamov's advice. Despite this, the consul was dissatisfied, claiming that the instruction was not being taken seriously enough. At the same time, he

<sup>41</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2684, l. 116-126. 12 September 1913.

<sup>42</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2684, l. 116-126. 12 September 1913.

<sup>43</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70, 3 June 1914.

expressed his concern that donations from Russia meant to support Armenian schools in Turkish Armenia should not be spent without the consulate's knowledge and approval, particularly to fund schools with an anti-Russian orientation—possibly alluding to the undesirable influence of the Sanasarian School for Russia.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

Russian plans to provide financial support to the Sanasarian School never materialized due to the onset of the Great War. Even Russian archival records from the Erzurum consulate make no mention of the Sanasarian after June 1914, making it difficult to reconstruct Russian perspectives on the institution further on. However, the key findings arising from this analysis are the following:

First, the archival records suggest that Russia never had a consistent approach toward the Sanasarian or other educational institutions as a means of expanding Russian influence within Armenian communities, despite internal consular correspondence repeatedly emphasizing the perceived detrimental influence and meddling of the Great Powers in Armenian revolutionary activity and general Armenian sentiment toward Russia. Although Russian authorities feared excessive Western influence and the transborder exchange of ideas they identified as “socialist”, and thus foreign, intrusive and destructive toward Russian interests, Tsarist foreign policy seemingly lacked the capacity to intervene effectively in Ottoman affairs or exert meaningful control over the Sanasarian's direction.

Second, the study points out Russian concerns that the Sanasarian School had strong connections with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. As a result, Tsarist authorities viewed the school with suspicion as they feared that it fostered Armenian nationalist sentiment that could undermine Russian control over Armenians in both the Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire. Russian officials sought to control Armenian education in Erzurum to reinforce loyalty to the Russian Empire and thereby stabilize the borderland. Despite Russian diplomats closely monitoring the affairs of the Sanasarian School and attempting to curb perceived nationalist influence by influencing appointments and educational policies, their efforts ultimately failed and remained largely theoretical.

Finally, by the early 20th century, Russia became increasingly concerned about German influence in Erzurum and the wider Ottoman Empire. Russian consular reports indicate that German diplomats sought to cultivate ties with Armenian groups, possibly as a counterbalance to Russian influence in the area. The heightened alert regarding the German consular presence is evident in frequent Russian consular reports, highlighting Russia's priority of securing the shatter zone between the Ottoman Empire and Russia, and underscoring the reconfiguration of power structures in the Ottoman borderland resulting from the emerging German presence.

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<sup>44</sup> AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517/2, d. 2685, l. 66-70, 3 June 1914.

Overall, the case of the Sanasarian School demonstrates how education in borderland regions could become deeply politicized. Nevertheless, with the onset of the First World War, the Turkish government conscripted students and younger teachers, resulting in the discontinuation of the Sanasarian School of Erzurum. Following this, the buildings were confiscated and transformed into a military hospital during the war.<sup>45</sup> During its operational period, the Sanasarian School functioned as a true cross-border institution in the Ottoman Borderlands, serving as a site where conflicting interests clashed. As a result, it was exposed to a diverse array of influences, with various actors seeking to support, benefit from, or exploit its operations. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Armenian life greatly benefitted from its presence and its destruction caused irreplaceable loss of cultural value.

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<sup>45</sup> Tarbassian 1975: 106.

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