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THE RUSSO-TURKISH AGREEMENT OF JANUARY 26, 1914 IN THE PAGES OF CONSTANTINOPLE ARMENIAN PERIODICALS

Abstract

The Russo-Turkish Agreement signed on January 26, 1914, did not resolve the Armenian Question. The Ottoman authorities invalidated it, thereby preventing the European inspectors N. Hoff and L. Westenenk from commencing the activities stipulated by the document. This course of action was officially justified by the fact that World War I had begun on July 19, 1914, and under wartime conditions, there was no longer a need to implement the agreement. These realities were reflected in the Armenian press published in Constantinople. In particular, the widely circulated daily newspapers *Azatomart* and *Zhamanak* actively covered this issue. They also presented to their readers the expectations and hopes of Armenians regarding the agreement. Opinions varied. Many believed that under the general supervision of the Russian Empire, the agreement would finally safeguard the long-violated rights of Armenians. A significant segment of Armenian society, however, remained skeptical, recalling a number of previously adopted decisions and documents that had in no way contributed to a pro-Armenian resolution of the Armenian Question. *Azatomart* called upon everyone to remain realistic, while *Zhamanak* urged patience and waiting for further developments. Alongside expressing their own positions, these periodicals also addressed the viewpoints of pro-European and pro-Russian groups. Analytical articles conclud-

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ed that, overall, Western Armenians aspired to live a peaceful and secure life in their ancestral homeland. It was noted that although the agreement envisaged reforms in Armenian-populated provinces, the Ottoman government had for decades merely spoken of implementing reforms across the empire, in practice leaving such programs confined to paper.

Keywords: *Russo-Turkish Agreement of January 26, 1914, Azatamart daily, Zhamanak daily, Armenian reform program, Armenian Question, Nikolai Hoff, Louis Westenenk.*

Introduction

On January 26, 1914, in Constantinople, Konstantin Gulkevich, Chargé d’Affaires of the Embassy of the Russian Empire, and Said Halim Pasha, Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, signed the Russo-Turkish Agreement,¹ according to which reforms were to be implemented in the Armenian-populated provinces. This document had undergone a preparatory period of more than two years, the beginning of which may be traced to the re-emergence of the issue of Armenian reforms during the liberation wars of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula in 1912. In September 1912, the European Great Powers and Russia intervened in the adoption of a reform program developed by the Ottoman authorities, which ostensibly envisaged improvements in the Armenian-populated provinces of Van, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, and Trebizond. However, this program was rejected by the National Assembly of Western Armenians and the Patriarchate due to its limited and inadequate provisions. In April 1913, through the efforts of active Western Armenian national and political figures, a draft reform project was prepared and submitted to Mikhail Girs, the Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Russia in Constantinople. It reflected the aspirations of the Armenians, according to which the reform process was to be supervised by representatives of the European powers and Russia. In January 1913, the Young Turk government put forward a counterproposal: to carry out reforms not only in the Armenian provinces, but throughout the entire territory of the Ottoman Empire.² The Great Powers, driven by their geopolitical interests in the region, began negotiating and turning the Armenian Question into a subject of “bargaining.” The reform project for the

¹ History of the Armenian People 1981, 533–534.

² History of the Armenian People 1981, 522–524, 527.

Armenian-populated provinces, presented by Andrey Mandelstam, First Dragoman and adviser of the Russian Embassy in Constantinople and based on the programs of 1880 and 1895, was set against the general reform project developed by the Ottoman authorities. After prolonged discussions, the parties reached a compromise, which ultimately resulted in the signing of the aforementioned Russo-Turkish Agreement on January 26, 1914. In Armenian historiography, the Russo-Turkish Agreement is regarded, in certain respects, as a step forward compared to previous documents concerning the Armenian Question, while it is also rightly noted as a step backward in relation to the initial reform project prepared by Mandelstam.³ It should be noted that the views and opinions of representatives of the Armenian socio-political elite of the time, as well as of the intellectuals grouped around the periodical press, differed regarding the aforementioned document. A significant portion of them did not believe that the provisions of the agreement would be implemented. At the same time, there were also many figures expressing the opposing view, who supported a just resolution of the Armenian Question through the assistance of European powers and the military support of Russia. According to the conviction of many Western and Eastern Armenian figures, under Russian patronage the Armenian people would, at the very least, be spared the threats of physical annihilation, devastation, and plunder.⁴ The *Mshak* daily newspaper, published in Tiflis in 1915, wrote the following in this regard: "Turkish Armenia must ultimately fall under Russian rule, thanks to the victorious advance of Russian troops."⁵ The clash of opinions was most visible in the pages of Constantinople Armenian periodicals.

This document, aimed at improving the living conditions and rights of Western Armenians, had not yet been fully understood by all segments and strata of Armenian society when, under the pretext of the outbreak of the First World War, the authorities annulled it and refused to implement its provisions. The reaction of the Armenian press was particularly noteworthy in that, instead of putting forward proposals or making decisions, the majority of newspapers remained in a state of expectancy. Undoubtedly, censorship played a decisive role in distorting public opinion, prohibiting even the publication of minor reports about the deportations,

³ History of Armenia 2015, 144–145.

⁴ History of the Armenian People 1981, 533–534.

⁵ "Mshak," № 159, 23.07.1915 (see **Hovsepyan** 2024, 142).

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massacres, and plunder of Armenians in Armenian-populated areas, and allowing only official information concerning the wartime situation to be published.⁶

Within the framework of this article, drawing upon the available scholarly literature on the subject, as well as relying on the historical-comparative method and the analysis of publications from two of the most influential Constantinople Armenian periodicals of the 1910s (*Azatamart* and *Zhamanak*), an attempt will be made to present a comprehensive overview of the expectations of Western Armenians from the Russo-Turkish Agreement of January 26, 1914, the actions they undertook, and, more broadly, the views they expressed regarding the Armenian Question.

“Azatamart” and “Zhamanak” on the Russo-Turkish Agreement

There was not a single article in the periodicals *Azatamart* and *Zhamanak* in which journalists expressed a dismissive attitude toward the agreement. The publications clearly reflected the expectations and hopes of these newspapers regarding the agreement and the Great Powers. At the same time, they largely failed to take into account the previous ineffective diplomatic efforts concerning the Armenian Question, which had remained at the level of written and verbal declarations.

It should be noted that the *Azatamart* daily (1909–1915) was the official organ of the Western Bureau of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*) and reflected the party's position on the issue. The *Zhamanak* daily,⁷ by contrast, was not the mouthpiece of any political party. It was distinguished by the independent views of its editorial staff and their associates, although for a brief period (1920–1924) it was published jointly with the Armenian Ramgavar Party's newspaper “*Zhoghovrdin Dzayn*” (The voice of the people) under the title “*Zhoghovrdi Dzayn–Zhamanak*.”⁸

Azatamart addressed the Russo-Turkish Agreement almost on a daily basis, primarily through analytical articles, focusing on developments in the Armenian Question following its signing, as well as on the expectations and disappointments of the Armenian people. At times, it published series of articles on the subject, which were placed on the front page.

⁶ **Kharatyan** 2015, 10–11.

⁷ **Hovsepyan** 2016, 211.

⁸ **Kharatyan** 2015, 242.

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Zhamanak, by contrast, did not frequently address the Russo-Turkish Agreement of January 26, 1914, although from the early months of 1913 it actively discussed the circumstances arising from the reopening of the Armenian Question. By the end of the year, the newspaper had introduced a dedicated section titled "Armenian Reforms." The publications within this subsection were mostly placed on the third page.

These materials, typically written in the genres of correspondence, news reports, and only rarely analytical articles, and characterized by a neutral tone, were primarily informational in nature. However, "between the lines," one could sense the concealed concern of the editorial staff regarding the new developments in the issue of Armenian reforms.

The editors exercised considerable restraint in organizing their work in a country where state officials and the leaders of the ruling Young Turk party were by no means interested in resolving the issue of Armenian reforms. The staff of Azatamart adopted a more radical stance in their approach.

For such positions, the government ultimately took decisive action: on April 24, 1915, it permanently shut down Azatamart and arrested its editor-in-chief, Ruben Zardaryan, along with nearly all members of its staff, sentencing them to death.⁹ During the years of the Armenian Genocide, despite being subjected to the tightened requirements of censorship, the *Zhamanak* daily and several other Constantinople Armenian periodicals continued to be published almost on a daily basis. Following the signing of the Russo-Turkish Agreement of January 26, 1914, the editorial staff of *Zhamanak* appears to have followed the course of events with patience, particularly in connection with the arrival of the general inspectors, the Norwegian colonel Nikolai Hoff and the Dutch diplomat Louis Westenenk, and the activities they were expected to carry out on the ground. In this regard, the correspondences titled "On the Armenian Reforms" and "General Inspector of Armenia Hoff Bey to Visit the Holy Patriarch" were particularly indicative.¹⁰ Although these reports presented to readers details of the visits and meetings of Hoff and Westenenk, not only with Patriarch Zaven Archbishop Der Yeghiayan, but also with the Grand Vizier and the Minister of the Interior of the Ottoman Empire, the newspaper remained silent regarding the issues discussed. The secretaries of these officials had requested that the *Zhamanak* correspondent who had contact-

⁹ Hovsepyan 2003, 44–45.

¹⁰ "Zhamanak," № 1846, 03.07.1914.

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ed them refrain, for the time being, from publishing any material on the subject.¹¹ The newspaper merely reported that the general inspectors of Western Armenia had concluded employment contracts with the government, according to which they were to depart for their posts on July 14, 1914.¹² Hoff was to become the inspector-general of the provinces of Van, Kharberd, Bitlis, and Diyarbakir, while Westenenk was to assume the same position over the provinces of Sebastia, Erzurum, and Trebizond.¹³ This did not take place due to the outbreak of the First World War on July 19, 1914. Until the establishment of censorship dictated by wartime conditions,¹⁴ *Zhamanak* addressed the emerging situation only briefly. In one of its analytical articles, citing the claims of certain Turkish publicists that Armenians allegedly sought to establish an independent state, the newspaper argued the contrary.¹⁵ The periodical asserted that Armenians, as a people living in the common Ottoman homeland, would devote themselves wholeheartedly to its defense. *Zhamanak* had fully translated and published the section of the document about Armenians.¹⁶ It was specifically stated therein: "Armenian soldiers have demonstrated qualities proving that this son of the homeland remains fully loyal to the Ottoman flag."¹⁷ The newspaper published the inaugural encyclical written by Archbishop Zaven on the eve of the war, which was read in all Armenian churches of Constantinople. In it, the Patriarch assured that, thanks to the reform program, the issues troubling Western Armenians would gradually be resolved.¹⁸ Despite the hopes of the Armenian population, Ottoman diplomacy managed not only to skillfully exploit the clash of geopolitical interests and contradictions among the Great Powers, but also to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the First World War. It thereby promptly renounced all previous political and economic agreements with those states, the economic privileges it had previously granted them, as well as the debts accumulated by the Ottoman

¹¹ "Zhamanak," № 1854, 11.07.1914.

¹² "Zhamanak," № 1856, 13.07.1914.

¹³ History of Armenia, 2015, p. 147.

¹⁴ "Zhamanak," № 1881, 08.08.1914.

¹⁵ "Zhamanak," № 1999, 04.12.1914.

¹⁶ "Zhamanak," № 1997, 02.12.1914.

¹⁷ "Zhamanak," № 1997, 02.12.1914.

¹⁸ "Zhamanak," № 1856, 13.07.1914.

Empire. *Azatomart* perceived dangers for the Armenian Question in this new policy.¹⁹

The Reflection of Public Attitudes in the Newspapers Azatomart and Zhamanak

Arshak Vramian, a deputy of the Ottoman Parliament, wrote in the newspaper *Azatomart* that it was necessary to approach the Russo-Turkish Agreement with realism.²⁰ In his article series titled *"The Reform of Armenia and the Inspector-Generals,"* he presented the views of various segments of the public. Addressing those dissatisfied with the agreement, Vramian urged them to also consider opposing viewpoints.²¹ He showed understanding toward those figures who did not believe that this agreement, aimed at meeting the minimal demands of Western Armenians, would be implemented,²² while remaining convinced that its execution was in the interest of international diplomacy.²³ Vramian urged not to express dissatisfaction but to make use of what had been achieved, which in fact could create fairly broad opportunities for the peaceful life of Western Armenians.²⁴ At the same time, he posed the following question: "When will the result come? This is the question to which every Armenian awaits an answer with anxious anticipation."²⁵

E. Aknuni, a prominent figure and contributor to *Azatomart*, dividing the views formed within Armenian society regarding the Russo-Turkish Agreement into two groups, observed the following. According to those who supported the first view, Hoff and Westenenk symbolized a promising future for Western Armenians, whereas adherents of the second approach believed that "a country cannot be transformed by two individuals, and hell cannot be turned into a kingdom through paper programs."²⁶ Aknuni maintained that Hoff and Westenenk would succeed in their work if they were supported by the Ottoman authorities.²⁷ In

¹⁹ "Azatomart," № 1603, 12.09.1914.

²⁰ "Azatomart," № 1547, 08.07.1914.

²¹ "Azatomart," № 1546, 07.07.1914.

²² "Azatomart," № 1544, 04.07.1914.

²³ "Azatomart," № 1544, 04.07.1914.

²⁴ "Azatomart," № 1510, 26.05.1914.

²⁵ "Azatomart," № 1510, 26.05.1914.

²⁶ "Azatomart," № 1494, 07.05.1914.

²⁷ "Azatomart," № 1494, 07.05.1914.

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reality, however, the opposite picture prevailed. In this regard, indicative was the article titled *"Turkey's View on the Armenian Reforms,"* translated and published in *Azatomart* from the French newspaper *Le Temps*. The correspondent of this periodical had spoken about the Russo-Turkish Agreement with a high-ranking official of the Ministry of the Interior of the Ottoman Empire, who asserted that the document was intended to ensure that "the reform program would be implemented not only in the six provinces of Eastern Anatolia, but also throughout Asiatic Turkey; at least, this is the position and intention of the Sublime Porte."²⁸ The newspaper's readers, however, witnessed an entirely different reality: the dispossession of Armenians from their lands and property, massacres, and the falsification of the number of Armenian deputies in parliamentary elections.²⁹

Azatomart presented a letter by Boghos Nubar, head of the Armenian National Delegation, which had been published in translation in the London newspaper *The Times*. In it, he noted in particular:

"Only through the sincere, complete, and unconditional implementation of the reforms will the Armenian Question cease to exist."³⁰ Nubar was confident that the Sublime Porte would implement the provisions of the Russo-Turkish Agreement. However, the guarantees underlying this confidence proved to be illusory, while the Ottoman authorities were, day by day, making their anti-Armenian intentions increasingly explicit.

Conclusion

The newspapers *Azatomart* and *Zhamanak* did not provide an answer to the question of what course of action the Armenian political and intellectual elite would adopt if the authorities failed to implement the provisions of the agreement. The strict censorship established in the Ottoman Empire at the outset of the First World War explains why *Zhamanak* and *Azatomart* did not address the annulment of the agreement, and later also refrained from reporting on the deportations and massacres of Armenians. Published under conditions of imposed relative silence, *Zhamanak* was able to present an objective and impartial account of the anti-Armenian policies carried out in the Ottoman Empire only after the signing of the

²⁸ "Azatomart," № 1435, 21.02.1914.

²⁹ "Azatomart," № 1435, 21.02.1914.

³⁰ "Azatomart," № 1437, 24.02.1914.

Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918.³¹ While each of the European Great Powers, through its manipulation of the Armenian Question, posed to some extent a threat to the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, the materials published in *Azatomart* and *Zhamanak* demonstrate that the aims of Western Armenians were limited to securing their livelihood and preserving their national identity. This is clearly reflected in the following statement by Boghos Nubar in his aforementioned letter to the editor of *The Times*:

“The populations of the Armenian provinces, rejecting all ideas of separation or autonomy, wish only to remain Ottomans. It is sufficient that, through the implementation of the reforms stipulated by the Treaty of Berlin, an end be put to acts of banditry, killings, and land seizures... and that, in this way, security and justice be guaranteed.”³² The newspaper *Tercüman-i Hakikat*, regarded as an official press organ of the Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihat), wrote that the most dangerous bandits resided in Western Armenia, and that the seemingly insignificant conflicts between the local Kurdish and Armenian populations were always “exaggerated under foreign influence.”³³ The Young Turk ruling circles, seeking to preserve the territorial integrity of their state and to prevent foreign intervention, decided to resolve the Armenian Question by emptying Western Armenia, the ancestral homeland, of its Armenian population. The Kemalist authorities that succeeded the Young Turks, in turn, adopted decisions that prohibited Western Armenians who had been deported during the First World War and had survived the massacres from returning to their homeland.³⁴

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³¹ History of the Republic of Turkey 2014, 13.

³² “Azatomart,” № 1437, 24.02.1914.

³³ “Azatomart,” № 1496, 09.05.1914.

³⁴ History of the Republic of Turkey 2014, 78.

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ՄԱՐԻԱՄ ՀՈՎՍԵՓՅԱՆ

Քանասիրական գիտությունների թեկնածու

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**1914 Թ. ՀՈՒՆՎԱՐԻ 26-Ի ՌՈՒՍ-ԹՈՒՐՔԱԿԱՆ
ՀԱՄԱՁԱՅՆԱԳԻՐԸ ՊՈԼՍԱՀԱՅ ՊԱՐԲԵՐԱԿԱՆՆԵՐԻ
ԷՋԵՐՈՒՄ**

Ամփոփում

«Ազատամարտ» և «Ժամանակ» օրաթերթերը պարբերաբար անդրադարձել էին 1914 թ. հունվարի 26-ին կնքված ռուս-թուրքական համաձայնագրին՝ կարևորելով դրա դերը հայկական բարենորոգումների խնդրի լուծման գործում: «Ազատամարտ»-ը դա արել էր գրեթե ամենօրյա կտրվածքով՝ խմբագրականների, վերլուծական հոդվածների, թղթակցությունների միջոցով: Իբրև ՀՅԴ պաշտոնաթերթ՝ այն արտահայտել էր առաջին հերթին կուսակցության դիրքորոշումները և դիտողություններն այդ փաստաթղթի վերաբերյալ: Թեև պարբերականի խմբագրակազմը փորձել էր իրատեսորեն մոտենալ համաձայնագրին, բայց չէր նկատել կամ չէր մատնանշել իշխանությունների ներթաքույց նպատակը. հնարավորության դեպքում Հայկական հարցում հրաժարվել ստանձնած պարտավորություններից: «Ժամանակ» օրաթերթը ոչ հաճախակի էր ներկայացրել խնդրո առարկա թեման: Պարբերականի էջերում համաձայնագիրը լուսաբանվել էր առավելապես լուրի և թղթակցության ժանրերով: Դրանք հաճախ թարգմանություններ էին թուրքական, եվրոպական թերթերի և լրատվական գործակալությունների նյութերից: Որպես անկախ մամուլի օրգան՝ «Ժամանակ»-ը չէր պաշտպանել որևէ կուսակցության տեսակետները: Այս թեմայով հրապարակումներն առանց մեկնաբանությունների էին տպագրվել: Թերթը չեզոք կեցվածք էր

The Russo-Turkish Agreement of January 26, 1914 ...

որդեգրել, թեև զգացվում էր խմբագրության աշխատակիցների մտահոգությունն արևմտահայության ճակատագրի նկատմամբ ու անհանգստությունը՝ հանուն Հայկական հարցի լուծման գործադրվող ջանքերի հաջող ավարտի:

Օսմանյան կայսրության իշխանությունների կողմից 1914 թ. հունվարի 26-ին կնքված ռուս-թուրքական համաձայնագրի չեղարկումը թուրքական դիվանագիտության նախորդ տասնամյակների աշխատանքի հետևանքն էր: Նպատակը Հայկական հարցից և մեծ տերությունների կողմից դրա միջոցով Թուրքիային քաղաքական ու տնտեսական շահարկումների ենթարկելուց ազատելն էր: Այս հարցին նվիրված վերլուծական հոդվածներ չկային «Ազատամարտ» ու «Ժամանակ» օրաթերթերի 1914–1915 թթ. մեզ հասած հավաքածուներում: Եթե եվրոպական մեծ տերություններից յուրաքանչյուրը, Հայկական հարցի շահարկմամբ, ինչ-որ տեղ վտանգ էր ստեղծում Օսմանյան կայսրության ամբողջականության համար, ապա, ինչպես «Ազատամարտ» և «Ժամանակ» պարբերականների էջերում զետեղված նյութերն են վկայում, արևմտահայության նպատակները զուտ նրանց կենսապահովմանն ու ազգային դիմագծի պահպանմանն էին վերաբերում: Իշխող իթթիհատական կուսակցության պաշտոնաթերթերն իրենց հերթին պնդում էին, որ Արևելյան Անատոլիայում (Արևմտյան Հայաստանում) պարբերաբար ծագող «ապստամբական» շարժումները տասնամյակներ շարունակ եվրոպական մեծ տերություններին դիվանագիտական խաղեր վարելու հնարավորություն էին տալիս, ինչը կարող էր վտանգել Օսմանյան կայսրության տարածքային անձեռնմխելիությունը և անկախությունը: Դրան վերջ տալու համար էր նաև, որ թուրքական իշխանությունները հրաժարվեցին 1914 թ. հունվարի 26-ին կնքված ռուս-թուրքական համաձայնագրից և գտան Հայկական հարցի՝ լուծման իրենց պետության համար շահավետ տարբերակ:

Բանալի բառեր՝ 1914 թ. հունվարի 26-ի ռուս-թուրքական համաձայնագիր, «Ազատամարտ» օրաթերթ, «Ժամանակ» օրաթերթ, հայկական բարենորոգումների ծրագիր, Հայկական հարց, Նիկոլայ Հոֆ, Լուի Վեսթենենկ: