

## THE ARMENIAN LEGION <sup>1</sup> (1916-1920)

**Gasparyan R. H.**  
*PhD in History*

The First World War, the unprecedented global conflict in the memory of a few generations, will remain as such for decades to come not only for its major catastrophes and tragic consequences but also for the most horrendous crime - the Armenian Genocide - the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first mass ethnic extermination and expulsion. The crime, which can never be condoned, was committed with the Great Powers' connivance, taking advantage of the confrontation between them<sup>2</sup>.

Pursuing the goal of creating a pan-Turanian state, the Ottoman government had plotted to, on the one hand, prevent the Great Powers from interfering in Turkey's internal affairs with the excuse of improving the conditions of Christians in general and the Armenians in particular, and, on the other, deprive the Armenian active elements of their capital assets, economic power and progress - all that the people had acquired over the years, thanks to their entrepreneurial skills and enthusiasm. With these ends in view, the Ottoman government, chiefly the Young Turk party leaders, determined to "solve" the Armenian question by annihilating the whole nation<sup>3</sup> to get rid of the major obstacle in their way. To further their aims, the Ottoman authorities were intent on exploiting WWI to their own advantage.

During the course of this calamity, our people again displayed great strength of will, tremendous fighting spirit and a desperate craving to live and survive, all of which are embodied in heroic self-defense battles and voluntary movement, which indeed are unforgettable episodes of our history. Many courageous Armenians, witnessing indescribable scenes of rampant carnage and regarding atrocious acts of brutality as sufficient grounds to punish the evildoer for hitherto unheard-of anguish, threw themselves into a fight against the infamous enemy. Tens of thousands of Armenians fought within Russian, British and French armies.

---

<sup>1</sup> The updated translation of the article Հայկական լեգիոնը (1916-1920 թթ.) – Հայկական բանակ (The Armenian Army), 1996, N 1, pp. 3-15

<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the Allied (Entente) Powers - France, Great Britain and Russia - were the first to condemn the Armenian Genocide in their Joint Declaration (May 24, 1915): "... new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization..." ([http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.160/current\\_category.7/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.160/current_category.7/affirmation_detail.html) Beylerian A., Les grandes puissances, l'empire ottoman et les Arméniens dans les archives françaises (1914-1918): recueil de documents, Paris 1983, p. XLIII & document N#41; PRO, FO 371/2488/51010, 28 May 1915; History of the United Nations War Crimes Commission and the Development of the Laws of War, London, 1948; Shabas W.A., Genocide in International Law, Cambridge, 2000, p. 16) (edit.)

<sup>3</sup> The genocide was committed against the Armenian nation as in its Motherland –Western Armenia and Armenian Cilicia, as well as in other parts of the Ottoman Empire (edit.).

As early as 1914 volunteer troops largely comprised of Western, Eastern and Diasporan Armenians began to form on the initiative of the Armenian national parties. Encouraged and headed by the Russian authorities, the volunteer troops were part of the Russian army and showed great valour on the battlefield.

Famous for glorious victories, outstanding and skillfully conducted military operations, and, alas, tragic events, the Eastern Legion – later renamed Armenian – has its own place in the history of the Armenian voluntary movements. The vast majority of the soldiers in the Legion were Armenians.

The history of the Armenian Legion has its prehistory. On May 16, 1916 representatives of Great Britain and France signed an accord, the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement in London. According to this secret agreement, which marked the beginning of disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Cilicia and Southern Armenia were to be ceded to France by law of supremacy and Britain was allocated control of the oil-rich region of Mesopotamia, chiefly Palestine and Transjordan<sup>4</sup>.

There was an urgent need for fighting force at the Syrian-Palestinian front to undertake this formidable mission. The Allied Powers, therefore, started to recruit Armenian and foreign volunteers and the French authorities put forward a plan to form a separate Armenian unit.

On October 27, 1916, at the French Embassy in London a consensus was reached between Sir Mark Sykes, Georges Picot and Poghos Nubar Pasha, President of the Armenian National Delegation. Poghos Nubar was notified of a joint Anglo-French resolution to surrender Cilicia and Southern Armenia to France. The other item on the agenda was the issue of forming the *Eastern Legion*. Poghos Nubar was assured that Armenians' participation in military action would help fulfil the people's aspirations of creating an autonomous state in Cilicia afterwards. Once the war had ended, the Legion - to be comprised of Armenian and Arab (Syrian) volunteer conscripts - was to become the core of a planned future Armenian Army in the region<sup>5</sup>. "In response to this proposal, Poghos Pasha declared that they were ready and willing to supply new recruits, should their blood to be shed in the fighting bring freedom to their Homeland"<sup>6</sup>. Poghos Nubar then demanded guarantees for Cilicia's autonomy and formal assurances of the right to combat their centuries-old enemy, claiming recruitment of a higher proportion of volunteer conscripts under the French flag. To this - Georges Picot gave his word of honour. As a result, an agreement was concluded according to which Armenian volunteers would fight only against Turks - for the long-awaited liberation of their Motherland – and France would take steps to ensure the autonomy of Cilicia<sup>7</sup>.

At the time, this episode was perceived by a number of short-sighted politicians as the beginning of Cilicia's liberation and independence under French protection, disregarding - intentionally or otherwise - the duplicity of the Great Powers' policies. The

<sup>4</sup> Հուշամատյան մեծ եղեռնի, Բեյրութ, 1965, էջ 832:

<sup>5</sup> Սահակյան Ռ.Գ., Թուրք-ֆրանսիական հարաբերությունները և Կիլիկիան 1918-1921 թթ., Երևան, 1970, էջ 113:

<sup>6</sup> Պոյաճյան Ս.Հ., Հայկական լեզիոնը, Ուտթթթթթթ, 1965, էջ 7:

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

words of G. Picot, who served as High Commissioner in Syria and Armenia, were circulating among the Armenians: "Cilicia will be granted administrative autonomy under the auspices of France after the victory of the Allies."<sup>8</sup> Ringing true in the beginning and arousing immense enthusiasm among Armenian survivors of the massacres, those words would turn out hollow and false later on. It seemed as though the people's old gaping wounds would be healed and pain would be soothed, and with the Armenian sun up and strong again, they would soon be able to start life anew in their Homeland. The day of reckoning for age-old massacres, humiliations and violence seemed so tantalizingly close...

The forthcoming autonomy was eagerly awaited by all. Filled with boundless enthusiasm, hundreds of young men would hurry to join the French armed services hoping that their participation in the fight would expedite this highly desirable moment.

On the very day the consensus was reached, October 27, 1916, Poghos Nubar sent Arakel Bey Nubar, his son in Cairo, a telegram wherein Arakel was entrusted with the task of expanding the voluntary movement. "In accordance with my letter dated October 6 concerning the matter of volunteer conscription and the official guarantees granted thereafter that our national aspirations will be met as soon as the Allies are victorious, I leave you responsible for necessary measures to be taken to stimulate and facilitate recruitment of as many volunteer conscripts as possible"<sup>9</sup>.

The thing to notice is that the voluntary movement in the Armenian communities abroad started as early as 1914 on the initiative of the Armenian national parties, evolving two years later into a whole series of major activities. Thus, on November 12, 1914, the Armenian Democratic Liberal (Ramkavar) and Social Democrat Hnchakian Parties leaving aside all the disagreements and fierce opposition between them, met in Boston, US, to determine that relief troops shall be promptly dispatched to the war zone through the US-Armenian National Organization to help the Armenian voluntary units<sup>10</sup>. Apart from this issue, the representatives of the aforementioned parties also resolved to launch a movement in the Armenian communities in the US and elsewhere in support of the ready- to- fight volunteers in defense of the Motherland, if the initiative was approved by the Allied Powers. In 1915-1916, S. Sapah-Gulian from the Hnchakian Party and Democrat Apah Petrossian got together to continue the mission in the Armenian community of Egypt. After a series of negotiations with the admiral of the French fleet - at anchor in Port Said - they recruited a volunteer troop to be trained by French naval officers but, for some reason, the squad disbanded shortly<sup>11</sup>.

The British authorities in Egypt wished to move Armenian liberation-fighters from Svedia/ Musa Mountain (Dagh) to Selanik as labourers but they refused to obey, as far

<sup>8</sup> Du Viou Paul, *La Passion de Cilicie. 1919-1921*, Paris, 1954, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Պոյաճյան Տ.Հ., Հայկական լեգիոնը, էջ 8-9:

<sup>10</sup> They had already been fighting in the Motherland against Turkish troops (edit.).

<sup>11</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցոյց, Ա տարի, կազմեցին Նվարդ Ասպետ և Արամ Ասպետ, Կ.Պոլիս, 1922, էջ 28:

as “A Svedian soldier would decline to perform as a labourer, for he only desired to act in his capacity as combatant and fight against Turks”<sup>12</sup>.

On November 15, 1916, the French Ministry of Military Affairs passed a resolution calling for establishment of the *Eastern Legion*, which the French government officially announced on November 26 (Decree #7/966-9/11). The Legion, with French officers in command, was to be assembled by national and religious identity, and the training of Armenian and Syrian Arab recruits - to be held in Cyprus. A foreign Legionnaire, unlike a French conscript, would not receive any compensation or termination wages when wounded or discharged. Armenians and Syrians serving in other army units could be entitled to join the Eastern Legion only with a special permission. French Armenians would be recruited and immediately sent to Cyprus. The French Consulate in Port Said was in charge of the military conscription. Recruits from other places would arrive in Le Havre or Marseille first, with the certificates - identification documents - from French consuls, and would depart for Cyprus afterwards. Volunteers from Asia travelled to Cyprus via Port Said. Travel expenses were covered by a conscription committee whilst the French government took care of other expenses like mobilization and clothing<sup>13</sup>.

The early fighters of the Legion were the Armenian volunteers with extensive military experience and insights that they had gained in dreadful battles of Musa Mountain. In the words of one of the participants and witnesses to those tragic events, Armenian Legionnaires were “fully fit and ready for such movement”<sup>14</sup>. Their joy was ineffable, their souls were anxious and yearning for sacred parental homes. Yesayi Yaghoubian, the leader of the Battle of Musa Mountain in 1915, and nearly 600 Svedian fighters in a short space of time entered the First Armenian battalion of the Legion which was stationed in Cyprus. According to the French naval officer Tiran Tekeyan, Musa Mountain Armenians, who had undergone military training earlier in Port Said under the direction of the French navy officer Benoit D'Azy, left for Cyprus as already well-qualified combatants. Soon, they were followed by 300 Egyptian Armenians and 236 former Turkish army prisoners of war (POWs); about 800 more young people were enlisted into the Legion after S.D. Hnchakian Party's call-up.

In November 1916, Colonel Louis Romieu, appointed Commander of the division, arrived in Cairo to deal with on-the-spot issues of the Legion's formation. He would meet frequently with members of the Armenian National Assembly of Egypt, and, as a result, an agreement was reached, at board level this time, that the Legion should fight only in Cilicia and the Palestinian front. In the presence of Arakel Bey Nubar and others, a letter of M. Briand, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, was made public. In the letter, M. Briand “affirmed” the earlier arrangement made between Georges Picot and Poghos Nubar to give back Cilicia to Armenians in due time.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Պոյաճյան Տ.Հ., op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցույց, Ա տարի, էջ 29:

The First battalion of the *Eastern Legion* (comprised of the Armenians from Svedia and Egypt, as well as Armenians who were former POWs of the Turkish army) was speedily established. At the end of November, the battalion was transferred to Cyprus and deployed in a coastal wilderness area called Monarga. The news spread like wildfire and caused great excitement among Armenians in Cilicia and elsewhere. Smitten with grand illusions and sincerely believing in hollow pledges of support given by the Allies, people were willing to assist with the matter of liberation of Cilicia every way possible - some by fighting in the hot spot, others by making financial or moral contributions. Many took up arms giving heed to the calls of their kin and the dictates of their souls. They took up arms bound and determined to seek revenge for sisters who had been brutally raped and crucified, for sons and daughters viciously beaten and butchered, for hundreds of thousands of Armenians martyred for their native land, faith and for homes burgled and defiled. Here is an example of the outrages committed by Turkish butchers: "Legionnaire Misak Havountchian was stunned by gruesome tortures and suffering of a great many deportees he had witnessed all the way from the Strait of the Dardanelles to the burning deserts of Palestine. Heartbroken, he had stifled a flame of wrath inside, vowing vengeance on the foe. And now, there came a chance and sergeant Misak, full of vigour and getting into his volunteer garb, united his strength with that of his compatriots for the sacred oath"<sup>15</sup>. It was, no doubt, this unquenchable desire to win back their native land and water and re-settle in their Homeland that increased fighting spirit and hope for victory. Now it was about time American Armenians gave fresh momentum to the campaign. Military conscription in the United States - very much like everywhere else - was run by the Armenian national parties. S. Sapah-Gulian and M. Damadian under direct instructions from Poghos Nubar moved to the US in the summer of 1917 to recruit volunteers, whom French ships carried to Cyprus. The first ship with a 90-man company aboard - mostly the natives of Kessab and Tigranakert - set a course for Cyprus on June 9, 1917. Before long, the Second and Third battalions were established. Sadly, out of 5000 volunteers recruited in the US, for some reason, only 1,200 ended up travelling to Cyprus and the Legion thus numbered 3,000<sup>16</sup>.

Upon arrival in Monarga, the volunteers were split up into battalions, companies and squads and were kitted up with uniforms, weapons and ammunition. Their situation was tough, however. There was rightful discontent among the newcomers at the crude and condescending attitude that junior and non-commissioned officers would display. What is more, French commanders would initially involve the Armenian contingent in construction work, which raised a storm of protest. The volunteers maintained that they had not at all got there to perform construction tasks<sup>17</sup>.

Soon, however, the training was under way. The volunteers were intensively drilled in all aspects of military procedure: shooting and target practice, running,

<sup>15</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցույց, Ա տարի, էջ 38:

<sup>16</sup> Թաթարյան Մ. Ա., Կամավորի մը հուշերը, Անթիլիաս-Լիբանան, 1960, էջ 7: Պոյաճյան Ս. Հ., op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Պոյաճյան Ս. Հ., op. cit., pp. 63-64.

manoeuvres, physical exercise and military formation. Armenian volunteers worked hard, looking forward to a chance to pit their strength against the enemy forces.

Before long, the recruits were faced with other, more pressing concerns. A large number of Armenian volunteers with extraordinary military knowledge and achievements, who deserved to hold at least junior - if not senior - officer positions, were conspicuously neglected by the French commanding officers. Even those who had held various ranks in the US were promoted to sergeant or lieutenant here only in several months time. Tchan (John) Shishmanian, deputy commander of the company, was among the first to receive the rank of officer.

Days, dull and dreary, were following the usual pattern when all of a sudden the command to assemble an expeditionary corps was issued. "We have forgotten straight away all the old aches and yesterday's discontents and despair which were succeeded by great determination and fervour to win or die in this war of liberation," Legionnaire Tigran Boyajian relates in his memoirs<sup>18</sup>.

The ship with the First battalion aboard set sail at the end of April, 1918, followed by the Second battalion on May 9. Then, one part of the Third battalion set off for the Castellorizo Island while another part of it remained in Cyprus under the command of officer Chino to be called in as an aid force if need be. One more company was dispatched to the Ruad Island not far from the shores of Syria. Later, all the detachments were transferred to Beirut and Cilicia<sup>19</sup>.

Disembarking in Port Said, the Legion travelled southwards by train in the late afternoon of May 18 and temporarily encamped nearby the At-Tih Plateau of Ismaillia. On July 12, the Legion moved on to Mejdal where 250 Arab troopers joined the army. It is notable that there were three battalions comprised of Armenian volunteers, alongside an artillery unit and machine-gun company-over 4,000 in total<sup>20</sup>.

To remain unnoticed, the Legion would advance under cover of darkness. On August 25, the journey was resumed and five days later the army pitched camp close by Rafat, located 4-5 miles away from the front<sup>21</sup>. The Palestinian front stretched from Haifa (slightly north of the Mediterranean Sea) to Jordan. Led by the German General Liman von Sanders, Turkish troops were 50,000 (with 300 cannons) facing 76,000 Allied troops with 500 cannons commanded by British General Edmund Henry Allenby. Allenby's army was reinforced by Colonel de Piepape's French detachment (7,000 soldiers) with three artillery batteries and Le Bon's cavalry company. The Eastern Legion was part of de Piepape's detachment<sup>22</sup>.

On the night of September 14, leaving Rafat and advancing towards the battleground, the Legion reached the front line and was positioned at the front of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 93:

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 93-94.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> Du Viou Paul, *La Passion de Cilicie. 1919-1921*, Paris, 1954, p. 59.

Anglo-French army, in the proximity of Arara, “where the Armenian Legion adorned with laurels of victory would enjoy a resounding triumph”<sup>23</sup>.

With the troops deployed effectively on the Plain of Sharon to the north of the port of Haifa, General E. Allenby intended mounting an all-out attack on the enemy positions located in the mountains. Colonel de Piepape’s detachment was assigned to occupy the seashore. The Eastern Legion was garrisoned on the coastal hills to the right, in the immediate vicinity of Arara (between Jerusalem and Nablus). After a series of successful manoeuvres, Allenby’s 35,000 infantry regiment with 400 cannons was concentrated along a fifteen-mile front (against 8,000 enemy forces with 130 cannons). The Eastern Legion was to launch the first assault<sup>24</sup>.

The Battle of Arara, so eagerly awaited by the Armenian Legionnaires for months on end, broke out in the early hours of the morning of September 19 (4:30 a.m.). An unbending will to conquer and high hopes for the future along with great mental torment urged fearless warriors on glorious deeds. Under the command of B. Azan, Fouroutie and J. Shishmanian, the Second battalion unleashed a barrage of grenades followed by heavy aerial bombardment and a massive attack afterwards, which Turks tried to resist with a hail of machine-gun fire from the heights of Arara. Unafraid to confront death, the Armenian brave heart volunteers pushed forward, reached the enemy positions and with another assault, which the enemy was unprepared for, captured Mount Arara<sup>25</sup>. One of the battle participants recalls, “The knavish enemy, unable to resist the retributive bayonets, was put to flight, abandoning all of its best positions”<sup>26</sup>.

The Turks had to withdraw to the second line of defences. They tried to keep the formidable opponent at a secure distance by continuous machine-gun fire. The fighting persisted throughout the night. However, “the Armenian soldier would charge at the enemy even if he had to face hell...” He ought to take revenge for “the perpetual flame which had been burning the hearts of Armenians for ages”<sup>27</sup>.

By 11 a.m. the cannonade had weakened and the first stage of the battle was over. The seeming noonday peace on the battlefield was abruptly shattered by the Turkish artillery fire. The enemy mounted a counter-attack in an attempt to win back the lost positions. With the enemy fire continuing to rain down, the Armenian brave souls lunged forward and a violent clash broke out. Unable to resist the overwhelming pressure, the attackers fled in terror, surrendering more positions to the Armenian Legionnaires. “The Turks who had shown “courage” and “skills” slaughtering unarmed men and women and defenceless children, stepped back faint-heartedly at the sight of the mighty weapons of Armenian warriors, withdrawing to the second line of defences”, recounts volunteer M. Tatarian and then continues, “Countless leaflets spread around

<sup>23</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցույց, Ա տարի, էջ 39:

<sup>24</sup> Պոլյանյան Ս.Հ., *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>25</sup> Թաթարյան Մ.Ա., *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Պոլյանյան Ս.Հ., *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

by British craft reported that the enemy would be faced with a 60,000-strong army on the front line, which threw Turks into total confusion. Our number, in fact, was not as great as the misleading information would suggest but our dauntless way of struggle would not let down”<sup>28</sup>.

At 5 in the afternoon the Legionnaires launched a sudden offensive which proved quite successful. The battle lasted for more than an hour and a half and ended in a humiliating defeat of the Turkish army. The second and third enemy defensive lines were immediately seized. Here is a brief yet highly descriptive account of this episode from one of the battle participants, “September 19, 1918 turned out to be another day of great heroism and glory. The Armenian soldiers had amply fulfilled the weight of expectation placed on them by furiously attacking the enemy, ignoring its bullets and bombs and forcing it into ignominious retreat within just one day, from dawn to dusk...”<sup>29</sup>.

It was approaching midnight when the First battalion replaced the second on the front line, ready to attack in the early morning. With the break of dawn, however, it turned out that the terror-stricken enemy had fled the battleground. A contemporary wrote, “The ‘Yildirim’ (‘Thunderbolt’) Turkish army unit backed off before the Armenian Legionnaire’s hand of steel and was soon in full retreat, puffing and trembling with fear”<sup>30</sup>.

On the day of the battle, the Armenians had 21 killed and 76 wounded (two of the latter died from serious wounds two days later). Gourgen Tchiltchian, Hovhannes Kouyoumdjian, Misak Havountchian and many others died as national heroes<sup>31</sup>.

The following day, the Algerian (French) and Indian (British) detachments launched flank attacks with the result that the Turkish-German army, surrounded by three sides, was forced into retreat. The enemy surrendered its strategically important positions, which led to the collapse of the Syrian-Palestinian front.

The Battle of Arara appeared to be a devastating blow to the Ottoman Empire before it finally crumbled into dust. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Turkish army units, securing the Palestinian front, were crushed on September 25, and the 4<sup>th</sup> one - on September 30. On October 1, advancing towards Damascus, the Allied troops occupied it, and then, joined by a company from Monarga, took Beirut on October 6, and finally Aleppo on October 26. Having covered more than 250km, the Armenian contingent fought on the front lines showing great courage and outstanding examples of self-sacrifice. Twenty-five of the Armenian Legionnaires were awarded with “Military Cross” medals by the French High Command. “I am proud to have had the Armenian detachment under my command because they fought brilliantly and played a crucial role in the victory”, General E. Allenby remarked in his telegram to Poghos Nubar on October 12, 1918.<sup>32</sup> Undeniably, thanks to the Armenian Legionnaires, the route from Mejdell Yaba (the Legion’s encampment site after the Battle of Arara) to Damascus and Aleppo was now made available for use by the Allies.

<sup>28</sup> Թաթարյան Մ.Ա., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Հայաստանի Հանրապետության պատմության կենտրոնական պետական արխիվ (further ՀՀ ՊԿՊԱ), ֆ. 161, ց. 1, գ. 60, թ. 11:

<sup>30</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցույց, Ա տարի, էջ 39-40:

<sup>31</sup> Պոլյանյան Ս.Հ., Հայկական լեզիոնը, էջ 124:

<sup>32</sup> Հուշամատյան մեծ եղեռնի, էջ 897:



After a series of heavy defeats, the war was lost for Turkey. The soon-to-fall Ottoman Empire agreed to a ceasefire with the Entente Powers and, on October 30, 1918, the Armistice of Mudros was signed on board HMS "Agamemnon" in Mudros harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos (northern part of the Aegean Sea). Under the terms of the truce, followed with partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was obligated to promptly demobilize its army, pulling the troops out of Cilicia by December 18, yield up all the ammunition, deliver prisoners of war and Armenian deportees over, and ensure safe passage for British and French warships through the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus out to the Black Sea.

At the end of 1918, two Turkish divisions were deployed in Cilicia - the 2<sup>nd</sup> not far from Adana and the 7<sup>th</sup> to the north of the Armenian Gate (Mt. Amanus). One more regiment was garrisoned in Antioch. None of them, however, could serve as a major force because of mass desertion and despair. On November 24, 1918, unable to resist the enemy, Turks began to retreat towards the north. Hamelin, Commander of the French troops in Syria and Palestine, was ordered to pursue the enemy and - should his army strength and capacity allow it - occupy Cilicia by February 1, 1919<sup>33</sup>.

It is noteworthy that on November 15 the Eastern Legion was renamed "La Légion Arménienne" (The *Armenian Legion*) by the French government's decision, and a Syrian legion was formed<sup>34</sup>. According to the order issued the same day by the Ministry of Military Affairs, the whole Armenian Legion was to be relocated from Beirut to Cilicia to liberate the region. With one more battalion assembled in Beirut, the number of Armenian Legionnaires would now reach 5,000.

The Armenian Legion joined the campaign within French divisions<sup>35</sup>. The Armenian contingent was lucky and honoured to be the first to enter Cilicia. The First and Third battalions of the Legion disembarked in Alexandretta as early as November 21, 1918. Later, on December 14-16, the Second battalion and part of the Third battalion arrived in Mersin. Shortly afterwards, the whole Third battalion broke enemy resistance and based in Mersin, Misis and Tarson while the Second battalion took control of some eastern Cilician towns. Substantial forces were garrisoned in the cities of Marash and Aintap. According to the French historian P. Redan, the Legion was constantly reinforced by new recruits and if Armenians dwelling in urban areas had no particular military reputation, "Armenians from mountainous regions distinguished themselves as intrepid combatants whose courage would often bring great credit to the Legion"<sup>36</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the Allied troops had captured Cilicia by December 20, 1918. The British General Leslie soon arrived in Adana with the 19<sup>th</sup> overland brigade to institute the establishment of the British military rule in Cilicia that was to run until November, 1919. The British military power was succeeded by the French power and Colonel E. Brémond was then appointed Chief of the French supervision in Cilicia.

<sup>33</sup> Bremond E., *La Cilicie en 1919-1920*, Paris, 1921, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Redan P., *La Cilicie et le Problème Ottoman*, Paris, 1921, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75:

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

After the Armistice of Mudros, Cilicia was resettled by about 150,000 Armenians who were hoping for a safe and prosperous life under French protection. However, Cilicia's fate - Cilician Armenians' in particular - had been predetermined by a project designed in the course of negotiations (December 5-6, 1919) between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Georges Picot, High Commissioner for Syria and Armenia. It provided a solid foundation for the Franco-Kemalist prospective rapprochement (the treaties ratified in London and Ankara on March 9, 1921 and October 20, 1921 respectively). Following its political and economic interests and intending to retain Syria as well as win a number of concessions, France ceded Cilicia and, whether intentionally or otherwise, became complicit in a new tragedy of Cilician Armenians. Subsequently, 25,000-30,000 Armenians were slaughtered and the survivors were sent into exile, the way full of horrors and dismay.

Mustafa Kemal's decision to wage war in Cilicia was not at all accidental. In accordance with "The National Pact" adopted in Ankara on January 28, 1920, and the decisions taken at the Erzurum and Sebastia (Sivas) congresses, the Kemalists aimed at preserving the Ottoman Empire's "territorial integrity". From the standpoint of the Turkish nationalistic attitude, the mere existence of Armenians was threatening to Turkey's independence and "territorial integrity" as the Armenian nation was consistent in the solution of its rightful demand desiring to restore Armenian statehood for which Armenians would struggle to the last man to gain self-determination and rebuild their lives in their ancient Homeland. Furthermore, during the years 1919-1920, as a result of the Armenian genocide, of the territories of Western Armenians' Homeland, only Cilicia remained relatively densely populated by Armenians, who would bend their efforts seeking political autonomy which had been guaranteed by the Great Powers at the highest level. Besides, it was more facile for the enemy to undertake military action against France with its minor forces<sup>37</sup>.

Thus, in January, 1919, the Kemalists, in collaboration with the Young Turks, took up positions along the front line covering the greater part of Cilicia. The situation grew increasingly tense in the city of Marash (January-February, 1920) with a population of 20,000 Armenians, who, together with nearly 500 Legionnaires (most of the First battalion, part of the Second battalion and the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> companies of the Third battalion), fought back with great valour, inflicting a number of defeats on the enemy forces. The Legionnaires Gevork Haroutiunian, Tovmas Abrahamian, Smbat Shahnazarian, who acted brilliantly in these fights, would over a few days beat off the Turks' attacks on St. Sarkis Church<sup>38</sup>. Under Setrak Kherlagian's command, 30 Armenian Legionnaires showed great strength of will, defending the city's Catholic Church to rescue lives of 3,700 compatriots sheltering there from the enemy<sup>39</sup>. It is

<sup>37</sup> In 1919 the French troops in Cilicia and Syria numbered about 20,000, reaching 70,000 in 1921 (Гранкур К., Тактика на Ближнем Востоке, М.-Л., 1928, с. 42).

<sup>38</sup> Գալուստյան Գ., Մարաշ կամ Գերմանիկ և հերոս Ջեյթուն, Նյու Յորք, 1934, էջ 810-811:

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 814-816.

worth referring to the French writer Clément Grandcourt's opinion of an Armenian Legionnaire: "He is a valiant warrior and a great patriot, who shows a commendable zeal, persistence and wits defending his hearth and home"<sup>40</sup>. The struggle, however, turned out to be completely useless and unnecessary. On February 11, the French Command gave the order to retreat and the city was ceded to Turks shortly thereafter. Over 13,000 Armenians were killed and the remaining 8,000 people were deported from their native land by the Kemalist authorities<sup>41</sup>.

After the fall of Marash, the Kemalist movement in Cilicia was developing even more extensively. As M. Anderson mentioned, "the nationalists demonstrated their power driving the French forces out of the region by February."<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of 1920, the situation was getting more and more tense in Adana and the surrounding areas. Later that year (in July), full-scale warfare was waged by Kemalists. It is necessary to mention that due to the adverse political circumstances, the French Military Command embarked upon mobilizing an Armenian contingent - knowing full well what a reliable and valuable ally the Armenian armed forces would be. The French authorities<sup>43</sup> were able to liberate Adana and its surroundings from the enemy largely owing to the Armenian Legionnaires and new volunteers<sup>44</sup>.

The Battle of Hajin - a truly heroic struggle - broke out on March 14, 1920. The town remained besieged for seven months, during which Sarkis Jebejian, Aram Kaidzak (Aram the Lightning), Mihran Kayan, Mesrop Shekherdeman and many others fought unequal battles against enemy forces ten times as many. With a severe shortage of materiel and ammunition, they would successfully resist the enemy onslaughts, hoping for urgent aid, which had been repeatedly promised by Cilicia's French authorities and the President of the Armenian National Council in Cilicia, M. Tamatian. The first and second expeditionary forces mobilized for Hajin relief were suspended right away by the French Military Command, and then, to make matters worse, were disarmed and expelled from Cilicia. Hajin was left alone, hence doomed to destruction. Then, on October 15, 1920, the Kemalist troops invaded the town and put 8,000 Armenians to the sword. 387 people only, guided by Aram Kaidzak, were able to break through the enemy siege ring and reach the French zone<sup>45</sup>.

Fighting Turkish slayers in Aintap - as well as elsewhere - Armenian Legionnaires performed miracles of courage. In the battle that lasted for nearly a year (April 1, 1920 - February 8, 1921), the Aintap Armenians with the help of the French army units survived through violent and savage passions of the Turkish slaughterers. Later, however, when Cilicia was surrendered to Turkey, the Armenians were forced to flee

<sup>40</sup> Гранкур К., *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Փալուստյան Գ., *op. cit.*, pp. 810-811.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson M., *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*, New York, 1966, p. 362.

<sup>43</sup> In 1919 the French troops in Cilicia and Syria numbered about 20,000, reaching 70,000 in 1921 (К. Гранкур, *op. cit.*, p. 42).

<sup>44</sup> Կիլիկյան տարեցույց, Ա տարի, էջ 186, P. Redan, *La Cilicie et le Problème Ottoman*, pp. 106-108.

<sup>45</sup> Սահակյան Ռ.Գ., *op. cit.*, p. 180.

their homes again. Overall, “With high expectations of justice, full of hopes and aspirations, the Armenian volunteer set foot on Cilicia’s holy lands, covered with blood of his kith and kin. His biggest ambitions had now completely evaporated and his life in Cilicia was precarious and hopeless. The enemy was able to receive-or buy -sympathy from the victorious Allies. The latter had chosen to betray not only the warriors under their protection, but also the survivors of expulsion whose number grew daily reaching a hundred thousand in Cilicia’s principal city, Adana, liberated by Armenian volunteers”<sup>46</sup>.

Given that Cilicia was going to be ceded to the Kemalists by the French military authorities, the existence of the Armenian Legion was no longer favourable for them as it might engender “major hindrances”. Therefore, the Armenian national-political forces, in their turn, conjecturing the probable sequence and logical end of events, declared Cilicia’s independence under French protection and formed a government on August 4, 1920. The following day, however, the newly-formed government was dissolved by the French authorities and Turkey took its chance to resort to genocidal actions again.

The issue of the Armenian Legion was now at the top of the agenda. The “Moor” had done his duty, the “Moor” could go. The French authorities began to cut down on the number of soldiers in the Legion. Subsequently, 3,500 Legionnaires (out of 5,000) were discharged at the beginning of 1920. On August 19, 1920 the order of demobilization of the Armenian Legion was signed by General Gouraud, French High Commissioner and Commander in the Middle East, General Dufieux, Commander of the First army unit, who replaced Lieutenant Colonel Romieu, Colonel Flye-Sainte-Marie. Further, Shishmanian’s Armenian militia was disbanded, followed by the disarmament of the Akharcha second expeditionary corps for besieged Hajin on September 22, 1920. General Gouraud in his August 19<sup>th</sup> message to Armenian Legionnaires cynically observed, “By calling for the disbandment of the Armenian Legion, France will be exempt from the arrangement which was generously signed in 1916 and 1917”<sup>47</sup>. Not a word more! All the generous promises and pledges had been consigned to oblivion.

The Armenian Legion, nonetheless, accomplished its historic mission. The legendary heroes of the Legion not only contributed enormously to the triumph of the Allied Powers by conducting flawless military operations on the Syrian-Palestinian front, but also thwarted the Kemalists’ plans to completely annihilate Cilician Armenians, thus ensuring more or less secure migration of their compatriots, helping them to survive the Armenian Genocide, while many were brutally murdered during massacres and deportation.

***Translated from Armenian  
by M. Yandian***

<sup>46</sup> ՀՀ ՊԿՊԱ, ֆ. 161, ց. 1, գ. 60, թ. 13:

<sup>47</sup> Պոլսահայտն S.Հ., op. cit., p. 376.