

THE ARMENIAN VOLUNTARY MOVEMENT IN THE RUSSIAN COLLECTION OF DOCUMENTS

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Abstract

The fact that Ottoman Empire was in a hostile group in the World War I raised hopes among almost all Armenians that the Entente powers would defeat the enemy and Western Armenia would eventually gain autonomy under Russian patronage. The issue of Armenian reforms reopened by the Russian government on the eve of the war inspired such hope. The Russian side promised to make reforms, even give autonomy to Western Armenia, if the Armenians organize volunteer militia units. That was the main reason why the Armenians quickly responded to the call of the Russian official authorities to organize volunteer groups. It is evident that there were people in the Armenian national parties, political, religious and social circles who were categorically against the Armenian volunteer movement.

Keywords: First World War, Caucasian front, Armenian volunteer movement, Western Armenia, N. N. Yudenich, H. Zavyan, Andranik, Dro, Vardan, Keri, Hamazasp.

Levon Lisitsyan¹, a participant of the volunteer movement and the secretary of the military history department of the “Commission for the Damages of the Armenian People from the World War”, formulated the support and participation of Armenians in the volunteer movement as follows.

1. Distrust and complete disappointment from Ottoman Empire,
2. They were convinced that massacres of Armenians were inevitable,
3. Voluntary forces can prevent mass killings,
4. The belief that the Armenian Question can be solved only with international intervention was too widespread in the society.
5. Armenia has experienced combat forces that are ready for battle,

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¹ For details see Zakaryan 2022: 49-76.

6. Historically, Armenians have always supported Russians during the wars against the Ottoman Empire, etc.².



Levon Lisitsyan (1892-1921)



**Rostom
(Stepan Zoryan, 1867-1919)**



**Ashot Hovhannisyan
(1887-1972)**

The volunteer movement, in turn, threatened the Ottoman Armenians, because it would give the Young Turks an opportunity to take revenge against the Western Armenians and put an end to the Armenian Question. Such a threat was sounded on the eve of the war from the lips of Tala'at Pasha, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Ottoman Empire. The Western Bureau of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation was the first to speak out against the volunteer movement, whose opinion was voiced in Tiflis by Vardan (Sargis Mehrabyan). The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) prominent figures Rostom (Stepan Zoryan), Dro (Drastamat Kanayan) and others had a similar approach to the matter.

Prominent historian Ashot Hovhannisyan, referring to the passionate attitude of the above-mentioned figures against the volunteer movement, said: "That tactic, anti-volunteer, was correct. But everything has its own dialectic, logic. If the decisions are outdated, they should be changed."³

The "dialectic" mentioned by the famous historian became the main reason why those opposing the volunteer movement were forced to completely change their attitude and engage in the formation of groups. This is greatly facilitated by the propaganda carried out by the viceroyalty not only among the Armenians, but also among the entire population of the region.

In this article, we will consider the collection of documents⁴, which is a joint work of Russian and partially Armenian archives, where there are documents about Armenian volunteer druzhinas⁵, the analysis of which will be the basis of this article.

² NAA, fund 428, inv. 1, list 2-3, sheet 428.

³ NAA, fund 1086, inv. 4, list 7, sheet 1086.

⁴ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020.

⁵ Voluntary military units are known as group, regiment and army, and in official writings as druzhina.



Georgian Military Road (1911)

During the last three centuries, especially in the wars of the 19th century, when Russia found itself in a difficult situation on the western front, it always moved its forces from the south, from the Caucasus, to the west. The territory was abandoned several times and then re-conquered by the Russians. For the Russians, the main front was the European one, and the Caucasian one was considered secondary. The mentioned tactics was repeated at the beginning of the First World War as well as later.



Andranik (Ozanyan, 1865-1927)

In the war with the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Supreme Command would be guided by the strategic plan developed on June 26, 1910⁶. The 3rd version of the plan came into operation, according to which Ottoman Turkey entered the war later, as part of a rival group. In this case, it was planned to transfer most of the troops from the Caucasus to the European front⁷, and even in case of failure, surrender almost the entire Transcaucasia, protecting only the oil center Baku and the Georgian Military Road⁸.

The combat operations of the Armenian volunteer units on the Caucasian (Russian-Turkish) front can be conventionally divided into three phases: 1. from the autumn of 1914 to the spring of 1915, 2. from the spring of 1915 to the summer, 3. from the summer of 1915 to the beginning of the autumn of 1916. In order to manage the movement, recruit the groups and maintain contact with the Russian command, an "Armenian Voluntary Groups Organizing Agency"⁹ was established.

⁶ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 343.

⁷ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 994.

⁸ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 343.

⁹ Sahakyan 2023.



The Caucasian Front (1914)



The Caucasian Front (1914-1916)



Reconnaissance aircraft (Caucasian Front)



Volunteers are leaving for the front



75-year-old volunteer Father Grigor on his way to the front



Sanitary unit of Armenian volunteers



Battle of Sarikamish (December 1914-January 1915)

In January 1915, public-politician, ARF member Yakov Zavriev (Hakob Zavryan), who was involved in the formation of groups, made a report on the first stage of the Armenian volunteer movement. He notes that the formation of Druzhina took place in difficult conditions. For the first time, Armenian public and political organizations were undertaking a large-scale, previously unknown, project. The command of the Caucasian army assumed that the Turks would enter the war only in the spring of 1915¹⁰, but on October 16, 1914, the Turks began military operations. Preparations have to be stopped and quickly formed groups are sent to the front.



Turkish prisoners of war



Inspection of Turkish strategic weapons (Caucasian front)

¹⁰ Artizov et al. (eds) 2020: 250.



General M. A. Przewalski
(1859-1934)

H. Zavryan writes about the first stage of the volunteer movement, from September 1914 to January 1915.¹¹ He presents the battles waged by the groups and covers the battles of groups III and IV in more detail. H. Zavryan clarifies that the reason for the senseless loss of the III Druzhina and the Cossacks during the overnight stay on December 8, 1914 was the negligent service of the Cossack watchmen. It is noted because the military assistant (deputy) of the viceroy, General A. Z. Mishlaevsky declared the volunteers guilty.¹² About 30 volunteers and more Cossacks were killed.¹³ At the same time, we have at our disposal the order after December 27, issued by acting commander of the 1st Caucasian Army Corps, General M. A. Przewalski, where he emphasizes the courage and self-sacrifice of Armenian fighters and Commander Hamazasp Srvandztiants.¹⁴



Keri (A. Gavafyan, 1858-1916)

H. Zavryan presents the military career of Keri (Arshak Gavafyan) in IV Druzhina. The volunteers successfully carry out a reconnaissance operation that the Russians failed to do. Druzhina stood out in several battles, 16 killed and 28 wounded¹⁵ and was awarded by the commander of the 1st Caucasian Army Corps, General G. E. Berkhman's praise.¹⁶ On December 9, the IV Druzhina and the Russian detachment found themselves in a difficult situation during the general Turkish attack. After heavy battle, Keri managed to get not only his people out of the encirclement, but also the Russian soldiers.¹⁷ For joint operations, Keri turned to the commander of the Olti detachment, General V. D. Gabaev, however, the latter refused on the grounds that he had no idea about

Armenian volunteers and offered to leave Kars. Unlike Gabaev, the headquarters of the Caucasus Army highly appreciated the battles of the IV Druzhina, Keri was awarded the Georgiev II degree gold, and his assistant M. Arzumanyan with III degree silver medals.¹⁸

¹¹ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 250-260.

¹² Materials H. Y. For the history of the H. Y. Federation. ZA. vol. 2015: 174.

¹³ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 257.

¹⁴ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 257-258.

¹⁵ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 258.

¹⁶ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 133-134.

¹⁷ The total volunteer loss was 106 killed and 44 wounded, see NAA, fund 57, inv. 5, list 29-30, sheet 57.

¹⁸ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 260.



General G. E. Berkhman
(1854-1929)

Summarizing the participation of Armenian groups in the first stage of combat operations, H. Zavryan notes that there are 5 combat and one reserve Druzhina. Of them, I was located in Persia, II and V in Kanaker (today in the north of Yerevan), III in Kaghzvan, IV in Kars and the reserve in Tiflis.

After the victory in Sarikamish, the viceroy approved the draft of the new positions of the Druzhina, which would consist of 4 companies, each with 237 people.¹⁹ He was the Chief of Staff of the Military Station, General N. N. Yanushkevich reported that the volunteers were armed with 3.000 Russian three-line²⁰ and 2.000 “Mannlicher”²¹ combat rifles.



General V. D. Gabaev
(Gabashvili, 1853-1933)



“Mannlicher” (M1895)



Russian “Mosin” rifle

¹⁹ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 272-274.

²⁰ It is also known as “Mosin”.

²¹ Militia units, rear military units and the navy were mainly armed.



The triumph of the Russian army in Erzurum (February-March 1916)



H. Zavryan (Zavriev, 1866-1920)



General P. I. Averyanov (1867-1937)

On February 17, 1915 H. Zavryan meets with the head of the recruiting department of the Russian army, General P. I. Averyanov, asking the volunteers to provide 10 to 15 thousand rifles. The general refuses, arguing that the army also needs weapons, but offers to try to buy from abroad, promising to raise 1 to 2 million rubles for the purchase.²²

²² Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 823.



Fighters of the 1st Labinsky Cossack Regiment



Terek Cossacks (Caucasian Front, 1914-1918)



Self-defenders of Van (April-May 1915)

In the May 20 report, the deputy chairman of the Armenian Central National Bureau H. Khununts informs Catholicos Gevorg V that the number of volunteers is 5.000 and they are divided into five squads. He notes that the II, III, IV and V groups were united and formed three battalions with thousands of soldiers and received the name of the Armenian Ararat regiment, the commander of which was Vardan (S. Mehrabyan). The battalions were led by Dro, Hamazasp and Keri. With the direct participation of the regiment, it became possible to liberate Van, and after the battle of Dilman, the 1st Druzhina moved to Van.



**Gevorg V Surenyants (1847-1930),
Catholicos of All Armenians (1911-1930)**



**From left to right: Vardan (Sargis Mehrabyan, 1867-1943),
Hamazasp (Srvandztians, 1873-1921), Dro
(Drastamat Kanayan, 1883-1956)**



The command staff of the Caucasian army: in the first row, the third from the left is the commander of the Caucasus Army, General N. N. Yudenich. In the first row, fourth from the left, the commander-in-chief of the Caucasian Front and viceroy of the Caucasus, general, grand prince N. N. Romanov (junior).



Strategic cannons (Erzurum, February 1916)

H. Khununts noted that they were negotiating with the military authorities to increase the number of volunteers to 10.000, but despite the friendly attitude of the headquarters of the Caucasian Army, it was not possible due to the catastrophic lack of weapons. He considered it important to send Armenian intellectuals to the occupied places, who with their presence and participation would not only help the local Armenians, but also act as mediators between the Russian military authorities and the local population. This would make it possible to avoid possible misunderstandings, because the locals did not speak Russian and did not know Russian laws. He said that they were waiting for the viceroy's permission to start working.²³



General A. Z. Mishlaevsky
(1956-1920)

In the order of February 19, A. Z. Mishlaevsky, the commander of the 4th Caucasian Cossack Division located in the north of Persia, General F. G. Chernozubov informed that the Persian envoy complained about the looting carried out by Armenian, Assyrian refugees and volunteers. There was a clash with the Persian Cossacks in Atrpatakan, during which there were casualties. He demanded to take immediate measures to stop the illegalities and to report to him²⁴. The so-called "looting" Armenians and Assyrians are residents of Atrpatakan, who lost their property during the retreat of December 1914 and were now trying to return the looted.

²³ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 842.

²⁴ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 819.



**Commander-in-Chief of the
Caucasian Army and Viceroy of the
Caucasus I. I. Vorontsov- Dashkov
(1837-1916) with his daughter**

On March 4, 1915, the headquarters of the Caucasus Army in a letter addressed to Alexander Khatisyan, the mayor of Tiflis, warned that the articles about the volunteers in the Armenian press exaggerate their battles, and in some cases, the successes are attributed exclusively to the volunteers, thereby reducing the participation of other military units. It is recommended that the articles and telegrams covering the battles be sent by those serving in the Druzhina. Posts should be unbiased and present events impartially.²⁵



General V. F. Dzhunkovsky (1865-1938)



General N. N. Yanushkevich (1868-1918)

On April 29, comrade (deputy) of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Russia and commander of a separate gendarme corps, General V. F. Dzhunkovsky reports General N. N. Yanushkevich that the leaders of the ARF and prominent fighters, as well as “Andronik” (Andranik - R.S.)²⁶, the leader of Armenian terrorists, have come to the Caucasus. According to the gendarme's information, the ARF has decided to demand a number of privileges after the end of the war. He concludes that the Armenians “... are preparing to act against Russia with a strong momentum in order to achieve (Western Armenia - R.S.) autonomy by force, for which the ARF is preparing a basis to start

²⁵ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 299.

²⁶ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 827.

propaganda among the Caucasian troops about the distribution of land to the soldiers, with the goal that this action will provoke a military mutiny.”²⁷



Group 3 on his way to the front



Keri's 4th volunteer Druzhina

²⁷ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 829.



Military orchestra of Armenian volunteers

At the beginning of the war, weapons were distributed to the population of some border regions, including Armenians, which, however, remained in the hands of the locals after the failure of the Turkish attack. V. F. Dzhunkovsky declared: "People who are aware of the affairs of the Caucasus persistently claim that Armenians need weapons not to protect themselves from an imaginary enemy, but for the future."²⁸



Turkish infantry during the campaign

Yerevan province.³⁰

According to V. F. Dzhunkovsky, the Armenian Druzhina did not represent serious combat units. According to some officers, they were just gangs robbing the Muslim population. According to him, the Druzhina could be the basis for the uprising²⁹. The general informed about the illegalities committed by Armenians and Greeks against the Muslim population of Kars region and

²⁸ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 832.

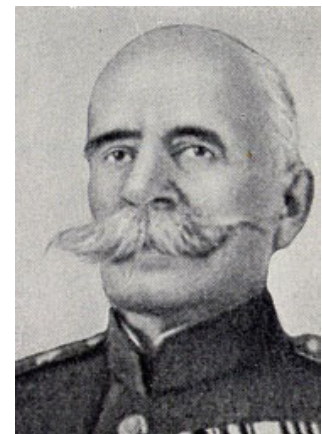
²⁹ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 833.

³⁰ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 834.

In the report, the general writes about the coming “revolution” that Armenians can start and will take the territories occupied by Russians. He assures that there are no “revolutionary” moods among Georgians and Caucasian Tatars, but it is necessary to take urgent measures so that the Armenian “revolution” does not become an example for them. At the initiative of V. F. Dzhunkovsky Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia was gradually preparing to dissolve the Armenian Druzhina.

The first attempt was made on May 15, when the Ministry of Internal Affairs questioned the need for Armenian Druzhina based on “state interests” and the desire to maintain “friendly” relations between the peoples of the empire. It was proposed to collect the rifles from all Druzhinas, including the Georgian one, because the army was in great need of firearms and to stop the formation of Druzhinas. According to the military historian, General N. G. Korsun, the headquarters of the Caucasian Army, was right to appeal the order, which was “equivalent to the dissolution of the Armenian Druzhina who were in battle with the enemy and had shown valuable fighting qualities.”³¹ An interim decision was made to stop the formation of the Armenian Druzhina, apart from the existing seven volunteer formations, and not to arm them with three-line rifles.³²

In his turn, I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov noted that it was impossible to take the three-line rifles from the Armenian and Georgian Druzhinas in the battles from April 24, 1915, replacing them with morally outdated “Berdan” rifles³³, which the people of the East treated with contempt.³⁴ Instead, he denied that around five thousand Armenian volunteers may pose a threat to the government, as they are far from their native borders and under the command’s control. He gave the following reasoning, even if Van was returned to the Turks, “the Druzhina members will be the core of the fight against Turkey in peacetime and that’s where the Armenian element in general will go.”³⁵ Instead, he considered it wrong to ban the formation of new Armenian Druzhina, which would cause mistrust among Armenians, besides, it was planned to send the newly formed Druzhina to the distant places of the front, where they would not pose any threat to the state.³⁶



General N. G. Korsun
(1876-1958)

However, V. F. Dzhunkovsky continues to accuse Armenians citing much wrong information. Thus, on April 27, in the report sent to N. N. Yanushkevich, it was said that in the Armenian congresses and assemblies it was decided to carry out such

³¹ Korsun 1940: 189, Appendix 4.

³² Korsun 1940: 189, Appendix 4.

³³ In 1898-1899 it was withdrawn from the Russian arsenal and sold as a shotgun, costing 18 rubles.

³⁴ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 846.

³⁵ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 846.

³⁶ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 846.

propaganda and activities as to encourage the Russians to attack the main centers of Western Armenia, in the directions of Van and Erzurum.³⁷



Berdan N 2 rifle

Thus, it can be concluded that the Armenian Druzhinas were in the center of attention of high-ranking Russian officials and V. F. Dzhunkovsky fulfilled the government's order to create the myth of Armenians being untrustworthy and revolutionary. In his memoirs published later, he saw a different threat: he considered Transcaspian Muslims and Caucasian Tatars³⁸ dangerous, and there was no word or hint about revolutionary Armenians.

The July retreat of the Russian army in 1915 dealt a heavy blow to Armenia. Inexplicably, the Russian army left Van-Vaspurakan without any real danger. The two Armenian Druzhinas, III and IV, fighting and being deprived of regular supply, retreat along the southern shore of Lake Van and reach Northern Persia. On August 10, General-Quartermaster of the Caucasian Army Staff, General P. A. Tomilov reports N. N. Yudenich that the troops of Keri and Hamazasp came to Dilman, completely disorganized and tired, and asked to go to Yerevan for reorganization, but the corps commander refused.³⁹ The decision provoked the dissatisfaction of Hamazasp volunteers, which was suppressed by F. G. Chernozubov. The use of violence was negatively received by local Armenians and Armenian refugees. However, F. G. Chernozubov believes that it was necessary to allow the volunteers to go to Yerevan, by which we would get rid of very serious complications.⁴⁰

³⁷ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 330-331.

³⁸ Dzhunkovsky 1997: 575.

³⁹ Artizov *et al.* (eds) 2020: 403.

⁴⁰ The same document was published by the Turkish author M. Perinchek (Perinchek 2011: 116-117). In his published document it remains unknown the reason why Dilman became Dilijan (Perinchek 2011: 116). We should note that the title of the book does not correspond to the content.



General F. G. Chernozubov (1863-1919)



General P. A. Tomilov (1857-1948)



General P. P. Kalitin (1853-1927)



General N. N. Baratov (1865-1932)

In turn, P. A. Tomilov suggests either sending the Druzhina to Van or disbanding them. He also refers to the commander of the 1st "Caucasian Army Corps, General P. P. Kalitin's report that undocumented Armenian Druzhinas armed with combat rifles are coming to some regions and ordered to arrest them. It is believed that the volunteers are either from the 6th Druzhina of General N.N. Baratov's detachment, or more likely, they are the civilian population, which, like after the Sarikamish operation, came to the battlefield to procure weapons. P. A. Tomilov considers it necessary to immediately arrest such persons.⁴¹

In the August 11 report, the acting Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Army, General D. M. Bolkhovitinov, informs P. A. Tomilov about the contents of N. N. Yudenich's order addressed to P. P. Kalitin and F. G. Chernozubov. The commander orders to act as follows in case of meeting armed Armenians, if they were handed over to the court-martial, if they

⁴¹ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 404.

were armed locals, they should be imprisoned for three months or fined 3.000 rubles for hiding weapons. If caught during a robbery, hand over to a court-martial.⁴²

N. N. Yudenich orders: "Armenian Druzhinas are not a special privileged army, so do not show them any mercy. They must do exactly what they are ordered to do without objection - in case of disobedience to our orders, to take away their weapons, equipment and state goods, and to disband the Druzhina. In case of disobedience, subjugate by force..."⁴³ However, the Russian command did not go to the disbandment of the Druzhina, as it felt the need for them for the time being.

In the report of May 31, 1915, P. I. Oganovsky informs N. N. Yudenich that the Armenian volunteers who were committing a robbery in the Van region shot at the Russians, who forbade them to carry the stolen goods.⁴⁴ About this incident P. I. Oganovsky was told by General A. M. Nikolaev. On July 19, Vorontsov-Dashkov addressed Gevorg V and expressed his confusion regarding the above mentioned. Instead, he notes that A. M. Nikolaev reports one thing to the command, and A. Khatisyan reports the opposite. I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov informs that he ordered to investigate and find out the truth, besides he strictly forbade confiscating weapons from Christians, except three-line rifles.⁴⁵ The investigation was never finished, because I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov was replaced as viceroy by N. N. Romanov, who was looking for ways to make friends with the Kurds and dissolve the Druzhinas.

A. M. Nikolaev partially represents the reality. In reality, the volunteers were helping the locals to find kidnapped women and children, property and domestic animals from the Kurds. The manager (governor) of the temporary department of Van and liberated provinces Aram Manukyan repeatedly alerted the command, the Tiflis Armenian National Council about this. Moreover, the Cossacks often sponsored the Kurds transporting the stolen goods, accompanying them, in exchange for which they probably received some money or goods. Residents of one of the villages of Van province opened fire on the approaching group of Kurds, but did not notice the Cossacks who were with them. Nothing is said about the losses, but three Armenian peasants were executed. The military court hanged an Armenian spying for the Turks.⁴⁶

In almost all Russian-Turkish wars, the Russians tried to win over various Kurdish tribes to their side, but in vain. One of such testimonies was on May 19, 1915 in General L. M. Bolkhovitinov's report to General Y. N. Danilov⁴⁷. The Kurds considered the Russians their enemies and continued to fight against them and obeyed only when they were in a difficult situation or were severely punished, but when there was a chance they resumed their attacks.

⁴² Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 404-405.

⁴³ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 405.

⁴⁴ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 374.

⁴⁵ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 858-859.

⁴⁶ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 859.

⁴⁷ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 840.



Officers of the Kurdish Hamidieh Regiment



Kurdish Hamidiehs

The Kurdish issue worried General N. N. Yudenich, the commander of the Caucasus Army. As early as February 1, 1915, in the report sent to the viceroy, he writes: "It is necessary to solve this problem forever and finally, or to make the Kurds our enemy, in that case it is clear from whom the danger threatens, or to neutralize them by making them neutral."⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the Russian high command failed to appreciate the Armenian volunteers, the vast majority of whom were from Western Armenia, knew the terrain, the tactics of the Kurds, and could be the main force that would significantly neutralize the anti-Russian actions of various Kurdish tribes.

Already at the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916, it became clear that the government was going to dissolve the Armenian volunteer groups. There were several reasons why the government refused to give autonomy to Western Armenia, finding that it would be wrong for the minority Armenians to lead the majority Muslims after the mass massacres and genocide. In fact, the Russians did not want to grant autonomy to the Western Armenians, rather they planned to settle Western Armenia, especially the Alashkert Valley and the plain of Mush field with Russians and Cossacks. In such conditions, when the basic rights of the Armenian population were violated, the volunteer Druzhina, despite their small number, could pose a certain threat to the implementation of these programs.

The participation of volunteer Druzhina in 1914-1916 also had a positive meaning. Owing to them, a large number of Armenians were saved. Only the example of Van-Vaspurakan, when the Ararat regiment, against the will of command, rushed to save the besieged Van, then Vaspurakan, is quite enough.

⁴⁸ Artizov *et al.* 2020 (eds): 818.

Participating in combat operations as part of the Russian Caucasian Army, the volunteers gained experience in conducting modern warfare, which helped them defeat the enemy and save Armenia from final destruction during the heroic battles of May 1918.

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