

ASALA & ARF 'VETERANS' IN ARMENIA AND THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH REGION OF AZERBAIJAN

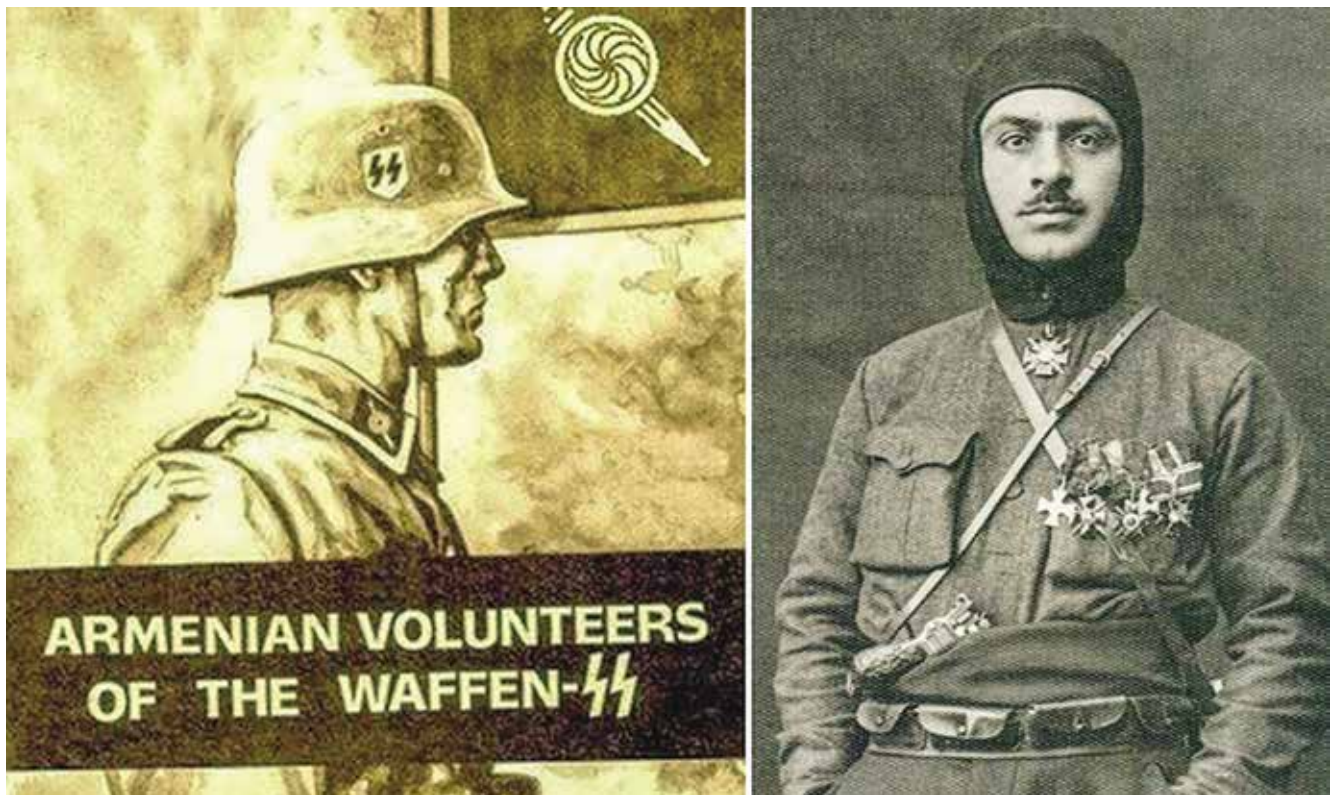
Conclusion. See the beginning in IRS- Heritage, 3 (35) 2018

Emblem of ASALA



By 1990, Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh were, arguably, the only two places in the world that former ASALA terrorists could safely go, and not fear pursuit, in one form or another, and it seems that most of them did, indeed, eventually end up in Armenia (36). Not all of the ASALA veterans took up arms, however. Some like, Alex Yenikomshian, former director of the Monte Melkonian Fund and the current Sardarapat Movement leader, who was permanently blinded in October 1980 when a bomb he was preparing exploded prematurely in his hotel room, were not capable of actually participating in the fighting (37). Others, like Varoujan Garabedian, the terrorist behind the attack on the Orly Airport in Paris in 1983, who emigrated to Armenia when he was pardoned by the French government in April 2001 and released from prison, arrived too late (38). Based on the documents and material available today in English, there were at least eight ASALA

Poster of the Armenian Legion in the troops of fascist Germany and photograph of Garegin Nzhdeh – terrorist and founder of Tseghakronism



veterans who can be identified who were actively engaged in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (39), but undoubtedly there were more. Detailed information on these individuals, with the obvious exception of Monte Melkonian, however, is still virtually non-existent.

Vazken Sislian, one of the four ASALA terrorists to occupy the Turkish embassy in Paris in 1981, was the first, as far as we know, to arrive in Armenia sometime in early 1990 (40). The second, and by far the most famous today, was Monte Melkonian, who arrived in Yerevan in October 1990 (41). Less than three weeks later, but unbeknownst to Melkonian, his former close comrade, confidant and friend, the French Armenian Levon Minassian, entered the Armenian SSR (42). Mardiros Jamgotchian, one of ASALA's original members and the terrorist who assassinated Yergüz Mehmetin Geneva Sava on June 9, 1981, followed in 1991 (43). The other four known ASALA agents to have arrived into the Armenian SSR in time to engage in combat were: Tavit Tavitian, another close associate of Melkonian; Araham Khamissian, and, finally, two brothers from Iran, only identified as Vahig Sh. and Masis Sh. (44).

There is little information on the activities of Sislian, Vahig Sh. and Masis Sh., other than that they were in Armenia and fought in Nagorno-Karabakh, and only slightly more on Levon Minassian. Minassian led a mili-

tia group of approximately 50 men, and played a major role in the assault and occupation of the Kelbajar region in the spring of 1993 (45). Mardiros Jamgotchian, after first spending time as French translator in Nagorno-Karabakh, fought alongside Melkonian. He would later join the Armenian Ministry of Defense, where he would rise to the rank of commander and become a special aid to the Defense Minister. Apparently, however, he quit his position and for reasons unknown emigrated to the United States shortly thereafter (46). Tavit Tavitian and Araham Khamissian, however, were not so lucky. While also working for the Armenian Ministry of Defense, Tavitian and Khamissian, were allegedly operating photo shops, restaurants and an illicit import/export business on the side, which included selling Russian weapons to Iran. Khamissian was murdered first, execution style, in August 1996, and Tavitian was murdered in October 1997, allegedly by the same firearm (47).

The most infamous Armenian terrorist who landed in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh is without question the Armenian national hero, both literally and figuratively, and California native, Monte Melkonian. In English alone, there are at least two books on his writings, a biography written by his brother, and countless articles and references to him (48). In the span of less than three years, Melkonian rose from leading a militia group of

seven soldiers to commanding a force of between 3,000 to 4,000 troops and fifty tanks, and was involved in most of the major battles in Nagorno-Karabakh Şuşa khand except Kojaly for (49). By almost all accounts, Melkonian was a brilliant individual, gifted in languages, and a natural-born military leader, well-known for his honesty, integrity and compassion, even for Azerbaijanis, and has been described as an “idealist seeking justice”. (50)

There is, however, a much darker side to Monte Melkonian, which should at least call into question some of the adulation described above. His most notorious act with ASALA was the assassination of Galip Özmen, the administrative attache at the Turkish Embassy in Athens, Greece, and nearly his entire family in July 1980. Özmen’s wife and 16-year old son were wounded, but survived the attack, but both he and his 14-year old daughter did not (51). His activities in Nagorno-Karabakh were likewise marred by at least two events. The first was the massacre of 38 civilians and POWs by men, if not under his orders, then at least under his command at Karadaghlu (52). Another incident involving his militia, this time during the assault on Kelbajar, left at least 15 civilians dead, although it is claimed the civilians were driving a military transport, and thus were indistinguishable from combatants (53). In June 1993, a chance encounter with an Azerbaijani patrol ended his life (54). While he has been included here with the other ASALA operatives, it must be noted that there were persistent rumors that by the time he arrived in Armenia, Melkonian was working for the ARF, and “paying off the debt” he had incurred when the ARF saved his life during an internal ASALA dispute in Lebanon (55). Melkonian’s family has denied this allegation (56). Interestingly, Armenian President Ter-Petrosyan’s attendance at Melkonian’s state funeral prompted a rather perplexed telegram from the U.S. Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, to the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan asking for an explanation why the president attended the funeral of a known international terrorist. He also asked: “Is ASALA regarded as a legitimate entity in Armenia?” (57) There is no record of a reply from Yerevan, but one can assume that the answer was yes, and if Secretary Christopher had known then that Ter-Petrosyan himself had personally arranged the entry visas into the Soviet Union for both Monte and his ASALA comrade Levon Minassian (58) he would not have needed to ask the question.

The ARF’s New Chapter. The case of the ARF and its veteran terrorists was very different from that of ASALA.

Whereas ASALA was merely in the terrorist business, the ARF was, and is, a much more diversified organization. In addition to its terrorist and paramilitary branches, it has maintained the Armenian Relief Society, the Armenian Youth Federation, the Homenetmen Armenian General Athletic Union, the Hamazkayin cultural foundation, a number of newspapers throughout the world, a monthly journal, and a publishing house, as well as its North American lobby groups, the Armenian National Committee of America and the Armenian National Committee of Canada. The ARF’s terrorists, while also extreme nationalists who murdered without remorse, appear to have been only “part-timers”: young men and women recruited through the ARF Youth Federation, who were trained and used for one specific purpose, and then reinserted back into the ARF network and the Armenian community, where they were protected (59). Thus, when the time came to deactivate the Armenian Revolutionary Army, it was able to provide a much smoother transition for the leaders and permanent operatives of the ARF’s terrorist wing, as well as for those terrorists in the pipeline for future assassinations and assaults, to civilian or non-violent roles.

For those ARF terrorists that could not, or would not, adjust to a non-violent occupation, Nagorno-Karabakh offered them a chance to continue to fight, and they did so willingly. Unfortunately, while it is well known that the ARF played a major role in training and financing the militias that fought in Nagorno-Karabakh, and provided a large percentage of the volunteers, it is nearly impossible to identify, separate and track the involvement and careers of individual JCAG or ARA veterans in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and a comprehensive analysis of the role of ARF militias in the war is beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, however, there is an interesting footnote to this story. There is evidence that after being dormant for a number of years the ARF terrorist-wing reappeared briefly in the early 1990s, both outside and inside of the Caucasus.

In January 1993, the FBI sent out what appears to be its last and most comprehensive analysis of the entire range the ARF’s internal politics, organizations and activities, including its terrorist and paramilitary operations, to all of the major FBI Field offices in the United States and to the FBI liason in Canada. In it, sources confirmed to the FBI that while the JCAG/ARA had received no orders from the new ARF Bureau leadership, no plans for a resumption of attacks in the United States, and that the efforts of the ARF were focused on Nagorno-Karabakh,

Victims of ASALA terrorist acts

the organizational infrastructure of the terrorist group remained intact. The source even gave the FBI the name of the individual who was the head of its three-man leadership committee. (60) There are two primary reasons why an inactive terrorist organization would keep its leadership and infrastructure in place: to either credibly threaten a resumption of attacks, as a means of political leverage; or to facilitate the resumption of attacks. There is evidence that both scenarios took place.

Western governments had come to not only fear Armenian terrorism, but also to pay careful attention to threats of blackmail from ASALA and the ARF. Throughout the 1980s, a number of captured terrorists were either released or given light sentences due to threats of violence. This may have been what the ARF was attempting to do in 1992, when the Justice Commandos released a statement to the press for the first time in years, threatening to resume attacks (61). Shortly afterwards, the U.S. State Department was convinced that there was a credible assassination threat to Azerbaijani President Elchibey

when he visited the United Nations in the fall of that year (62). Fear is a very powerful negotiation tactic. It is also possible, however, that ARF terrorism actually resumed in the early 1990s. Even though it was widely ignored in Western media outlets, and no credit was ever taken by an organization, Azerbaijan had suffered a rash of terrorist attacks in the early 1990s. In 1991, a bomb went off on a bus traveling between Azerbaijan and Georgia; in 1992, an explosion occurred on a ferry between Baku and Krasnovodsk; an undated attack on a Moscow to Baku train; in 1994, a bomb attack at the Baku rail station in February, killing 3; in March, a bomb went off on a train in the Baku subway system killing 13 and critically wounding dozens more, very similar to the bomb that exploded in the Moscow subway in 1976 which was attributed to Armenian extremists in the Soviet Union and a bomb was found on a train at the Baku station; and, finally, in April a bomb exploded on another Moscow to Baku train, this time in Dagestan, 100 km from the Azerbaijani border, killing six. In total, 24 killed and over

“Offices” of ASALA in various European countries existed almost legally



90 wounded in these attacks. According to a U.S. State Department telegram, a group of Azerbaijani speaking Armenians, who had the ability to move freely around Baku without arousing suspicion, had been sent to Lebanon for terrorist training (63).

It also seems that these groups were operating out of Dagestan, which would explain the train explosion in April 1994 (64).

Conclusion. The full extent of ASALA and the ARF's terrorists' involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may never be known. That some former members of ASALA participated in the conflict is without doubt, however, and each of these men joined the irregular militias deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh to fight a war that Armenia officially denied. Undoubtedly, their contributions to the war effort were considerable; these men were experienced fighters with impeccable reputations, who had already been fighting the Turk underground for over a decade. The ASALA veterans fought in many of the decisive battles of the conflict, but were also present for many of appalling atrocities. Despite these contributions to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, however,

the former terrorists got back much more in return. After years on the run, they found not only a place of refuge, but a country that embraced them. At least one rose to the rank of commander, and become a recognized national hero and saint to Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and to the diaspora. Three others were rewarded with positions in the Armenian Defense Ministry. Their participation in the Nagorno-Karabakh war absolved them of their past sins, many of which were grave. The ARF's participation is murkier, and must wait for more documentation, evidence and admissions before we can begin to write a proper history of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is not just the actions of the ARF's terrorist wing and paramilitary militias that need to be analyzed, however, but rather the entire scope of the organization's involvement in the conflict, from the politicians, relief organizations, arms dealers, lobbyists to even the editorial letter writers.

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ASALA terrorists were openly trained in the Middle East in the early 1990s



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ASALA is always propagandized at state level in Armenia



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