

BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

To cite this book review: Ahmet Can Öktem, “The Memoirs of Arshavir Shiragian: The Life Story of an Armenian Patriot or the Confessions of a Terrorist?”, *Review of Armenian Studies*, Issue 49 (2024): 159-168.

Received: 26.06.2024

Accepted: 27.06.2024

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THE MEMOIRS OF ARSHAVIR SHIRAGIAN: THE LIFE STORY OF AN ARMENIAN PATRIOT OR THE CONFESSIONS OF A TERRORIST?*

(ARSHAVIR SHIRAGIAN'IN ANILARI: BİR ERMENİ VATANSEVERİN
HAYAT HİKÂYESİ Mİ, YOKSA BİR TERÖRİSTİN İTİRAFLARI MI?)

Title: Bir Ermeni Teröristin İtirafları (The Confessions of an Armenian Terrorist)

Author: Arşavir Şıracıyan (Arshavir Shiragian)

Published: Kastaş Yayınları, 1997

ISBN: 975-7639-66-X

Language: Turkish

Number of pages: 329

Abstract: *Born in Istanbul in 1900, Arshavir Shiragian was an Armenian who closely witnessed and participated in the activities of the Dashnaktsutyun as a youngster. In his book, Shiragian narrates his memoirs before and after the assassinations he carried out as part of Operation*

* This is the revised English translation of a Turkish-language book review titled “Bir Ermeni Teröristin İtirafları” (“The Confessions of an Armenian Terrorist”) that was originally published in the 75th issue of the *Ermeni Araştırmaları* journal: Ahmet Can Öktem, “Bir Ermeni Teröristin İtirafları”, *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, Sayı 75 (2024), 189-197.

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Nemesis. He began writing his memoirs in 1965 and his book was published in English by his daughter Sonia Shiragian three years after his death in 1976 with the title “The Legacy: Memoirs of an Armenian Patriot”. Shiragian’s memoirs were translated to Turkish from the 1982 French edition titled “La Dette de sang: Un Arménien traque les responsables du génocide 1921-1922” (“The Blood Debt: An Armenian Tracks Down Those Responsible for the Genocide, 1921-1922”) and published in 1997 and 2006. The writer describes the numerous struggles and dangers he faced, the various phases within his tasks, his radical beliefs, and the different Dashnak members he worked with. In this book review, explanations will be made regarding the Dashnaksutyun and Operation Nemesis. Additionally, there will be comments on some examples of the numerous slurs and accusations against Turks, false and controversial statements, and striking parts of the memoirs.

Keywords: *Arshavir Shiragian, Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun-ARF), Operation Nemesis, Terrorism, Anti-Turkish Propaganda, Blue Book, Vahé (İhsan) Essayan, Sait Halim, Bahattin Şakir, Cemal Azmi*

Öz: *1900 İstanbul doğumlu bir Ermeni olan ve Taşnaksutyun’un faaliyetlerine gençlik yıllarında yakından tanıklık eden ve katılan Arşavir Şıracıyan, kitabında Nemesis Operasyonu kapsamında gerçekleştirmiş olduğu suikastların öncesi ve sonrasındaki anılarını anlatmaktadır. Şıracıyan hatıratını 1965 yılında yazmaya başlamış, kitabı ise ölümünden üç yıl sonra, 1976’da kızı Sonia Şıracıyan tarafından İngilizce “The Legacy: Memoirs of an Armenian Patriot” (“Miras: Bir Ermeni Vatanseverin Hatıratı”) başlığıyla yayınlanmıştır. Söz konusu hatıra kitabı, 1982 tarihli ve “La Dette de sang: Un Arménien traque les responsables du génocide 1921-1922” (“Kan Borcu: Bir Ermeni Soykırımdan Sorumlu Olanların İzini Bulup Yakalıyor, 1921-1922”) başlıklı Fransızca baskısından Türkçeye çevrilerek, 1997 ve 2006 yıllarında yayınlanmıştır. Yazar kitabında karşılaşmış olduğu birçok zorluğu ve tehlikeyi, görevlerindeki çeşitli süreçleri, radikal inançlarını ve birlikte çalışmış olduğu değişik Taşnak üyelerini anlatmaktadır. Bu kitap tahlilinde Taşnaksutyun örgütü ve Nemesis Operasyonu konusunda açıklamalara yer verilecek, ayrıca kitapta Türklere yönelik çok sayıda göze çarpan hakaret ve ithamların, yalan ve tartışılır açıklamaların, hatıratların dikkat çeken kısımlarının bazı örnekleri verilir, üzerinde yorum yapılacaktır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Arşavir Şıracıyan, Ermeni Devrimci Federasyonu (Taşnaksutyun-EDF), Nemesis Operasyonu, Terör, Türk Karşıtı Propaganda, Mavi Kitap, Vahe İhsan Eseyan, Sait Halim, Bahattin Şakir, Cemal Azmi*

Introduction

Born in Istanbul in 1900, Arshavir Shiragian was an Armenian who closely witnessed and participated in the activities of the Dashnaktsutyun as a youngster. In his book, Shiragian narrates his memoirs before and after the assassinations he carried out as part of Operation Nemesis. He began writing his memoirs in 1965 and his book was published in English by his daughter Sonia Shiragian three years after his death in 1976 with the title “The Legacy: Memoirs of an Armenian Patriot”. Shiragian’s memoirs were translated to Turkish from the 1982 French edition titled “La Dette de sang: Un Arménien traque les responsables du génocide 1921-1922” (“The Blood Debt: An Armenian Tracks Down Those Responsible for the Genocide, 1921-1922”) and published in 1997 and 2006.

The reader could initially think of this book as a classic detective story. However, Shiragian, who carried out arms procurement, espionage, and assassination missions on behalf of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun-ARF), presented himself in his book as determined, resourceful, cunning, fast-adapting, well-acting, and elusive, as if he was the protagonist of a spy thriller. This spy will have many encounters with security staff in different places and circumstances, both from afar and up close. The reader will repeatedly feel the presence of ambition, duty, struggle against difficulties, national pride, anxiety, risk, danger, luck, drama, and similar attention-grabbing themes in various situations. It is conceivable that such passages could have been written to stir sympathy and excitement in the reader, as well as to legitimize political assassination.

In addition to the author’s radical beliefs, the different experiences, circumstances, difficulties, and dangers in his memoirs will probably lead to confusion and skepticism for some readers. It is stated that Shiragian began writing his memoirs in 1965. The timing of the book is noteworthy, as it coincides with the re-emergence of the Armenian Question on the agenda of world public opinion. If Shiragian did not start writing his memoirs during the Operation Nemesis period and did not use reliable sources in the preparation of his memoirs, this would be grounds for doubts regarding the book’s reliability.

The Dashnaktsutyun and Operation Nemesis

When Arshavir Shiragian was a young boy, the Shiragian family home became a meeting place for Dashnak leaders. As a child, he was given tasks of transporting and storing weapons and gathering information from outside sources (p. 45). Within the scope of Operation Nemesis, he was the murderer who carried out the assassinations of Vahé (İhsan) Essayan, Sait Halim Pasha,

Dr. Bahattin Şakir and Cemal Azmi. In the relevant literature, the acts of Operation Nemesis are referred to as the “Second Wave of Armenian Terrorism”. These “revenge” attacks of the Dashnaksutyun were executed to “punish those responsible” for the decisions taken on 24 April and 27 May 1915, which the Armenian people claim constituted genocide.

Having closely followed Dashnak beliefs and practices at a young age, Shiragian became a defender of the radical Armenian cause and an enemy of the Turks. He shared his beliefs about the Dashnaksutyun and the Turks with the reader in many passages. One of his comments provides insight into these beliefs:

“During the war, we had hidden a certain amount of weapons. The leaders of the Dashnak Party wanted us to take them out of the places they were stashed, clean them, and transfer them to safer locations. We had to do this secretly. The newspapers were already looking for ways to justify the massacres. If the Turks caught us red-handed while transporting the weapons, they would, as usual, distort the facts and declare that the Dashnak Party’s antagonistic stance had forced them to commit these massacres. Of course, they would never take into account the fact that these weapons had been kept in Constantinople [İstanbul] throughout an entire war without being used even once. In fact, even today, they deny responsibility for the massacres. They seem to have forgotten the events that took place during the war. Official Turkish History, on the other hand, makes absolutely no mention of the extermination of one million two hundred thousand unarmed and apolitical Armenians, the vast majority of whom were farmers, artisans, and merchants, who were massacred along with their women and children as an atrocious price for being Christian Armenians.” (p. 88)

Considering the manifesto of the Dashnaksutyun, the past activities of its members, the content of its newspapers, as well as the military and economic conditions in the Ottoman Empire at the time, it would be unreasonable to believe Shiragian’s view that the Dashnaks from Istanbul had never used the weapons they had hidden and would never use them. It is clear that the Manifesto of the Dashnaksutyun, published in 1891, was a declaration of war against the Ottoman Turkish authorities. The Dashnaks’ acts of terrorism were motivated both by the perceived need for revenge and self-defense, but also by a desire to provoke retaliation by the Turks in order to encourage Armenian support and the intervention of the Western great powers.¹ Karekin

1 Michael M. Gunter, *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 61-62. For more information on the Dashnaksutyun’s program and bylaws, see Halil Özşavlı, “Ermeni Milliyetçilik Hareketlerinin Doğuşu Taşnak-İttihat Ve Terakki İttifakı”, *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, Sayı 41 (2012), 160-170.

Pastermadjian, one of the terrorists involved in the attack on the Ottoman Bank in 1896, led Operation Nemesis in the early 1920s. The official news outlet of the Dashnaksutyun, the *Droshak* (Flag) newspaper, openly supported terrorism.² The “Execution Bureau”, with which Shiragian was in contact during his assassination missions, was established in the building of the Dashnak newspaper *Djagadamard* (War Front) (p. 87). The author was also convinced that the Dashnaks had set up their own tribunals and sentenced alleged criminals to death, since no other body similar to the post-Second World War era Nuremberg Tribunal was organized at the time (p. 141).

The author wrote that he was considered public enemy number one by the Turkish police, yet even in times of danger, he never thought of using his gun against innocents. He claimed that he never wanted to be a murderer and that he never shot law enforcement officials simply for doing their duty, including the Turkish police. He also alleged that the Dashnaksutyun, of which he was a member, did not have a total extermination plan akin to the alleged Ottoman Turkish plan (pp. 221-222). Considering the actions of Dashnaksutyun against Armenians who did not support them and dissident Dashnak members, such statements, which may arouse sympathy in some readers, will raise suspicion. For example, some Armenian clergymen, such as Priest Der Kasbar Vartanian, were killed for opposing the Dashnaks’ activities. On the other hand, other Armenian clergymen, such as Bishop Mesrop Ter Movsesian, were involved in extortion and massacres of Turkish police and gendarmes, and ordinary Armenians who did not follow the Dashnaks’ instructions.³

Various Slurs and Accusations Against The Turks

In many pages of this book, written by a Dashnak terrorist, one will find harsh insults and slander against the Turkish people as a whole. In a comment he made about Policeman Eşref, one of the interesting characters in his book, he noted that Eşref was “unusually intelligent for a Turk”. He wrote that although Eşref had been following Shiragian for years and had set traps for him, he was always on the losing side (p. 207). It can be said that Shiragian portrayed himself in his book as a prey with a superior intellect to that of his hunter. According to the author, he had a strange and even condescending relationship

2 For more information on the *Droshak* (Flag) newspaper, see Jean-Louis Mattei, “‘Droshak’ Newspaper: A Newspaper That Openly Supported Terrorism”, *Review of Armenian Studies*, Issue 31 (2015), 232-237.

3 For more information, “The Roots Of ‘Nemesis’ And The Background Of Radical Armenian Nationalist Terrorism”, *Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Analysis No: 2023/11, March 11, 2023, <https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-ROOTS-OF-NEMESIS-AND-THE-BACKGROUND-OF-RADICAL-ARMENIAN-NATIONALIST-TERRORISM>

with Eşref. He also wrote that he had spent a lot of time with Eşref and that he always treated him “like a little sister” (p. 207). Considering that traditional Turkish and Armenian family structures (which resemble each other) attribute a protective status to (especially young) female members of the family, Shiragian’s view of himself as a “big brother” in relation to the “little sister” Eşref tells a lot about Shiragian's opinion of himself and Turks in general. The author was also aware of his reputation among the Turkish police, stating that he had repeatedly baffled them (p. 116) and that it would take an ingenious trap to catch him (p. 222).

The author also referred to the “Blue Book”, which was prepared by the British Propaganda Office during the First World War by James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, and contains a significant degree of anti-Turkism and historical distortion. When mentioning the Blue Book, Shiragian propounded the methodology of the “horrors and atrocities” inflicted on Armenians by the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Ottoman Special Organization), which he claimed was composed of “thousands of sadists who knew neither conscience nor law”. Although the narratives in the Blue Book contained some important details about the Armenian Relocation and Resettlement and the 1915 Events, the majority of the atrocities described were based on hearsay. The Blue Book does not contain any evidence to prove the responsibility of the Ottoman Turkish government for the massacres that took place. Moreover, in a private letter written in 1966, Toynbee admitted that “the British Government’s purpose in asking Lord Bryce to compile the Blue Book was propaganda”.⁴

Sections That May Cause Suspicion for the Reader

The author’s use of a bloody handkerchief hidden in his pocket to pretend to have tuberculosis and escape a police interrogation (pp. 143- 144), and the section where Tefvik Azmi, Rüstem Recep, and Münir Bey were sitting on a bench in Italy and talking, while the author managed to sneak very close to the bench in order to follow and listen to them (p. 156) are examples of various parts with questionable realism.

One of the sections that may seem surprising, suspicious, and even familiar to some readers will be found in the pages regarding the assassination of Sait Halim. According to the author, when Sait Halim Pasha’s horse carriage stopped, Shiragian entered the carriage, shot the Pasha, and when the horses start running, Shiragian hit the Italian coachman with the butt of his pistol (p. 185). However, Italian newspapers on the assassination wrote that the

4 Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey – A Disputed Genocide* (London: The University of Utah Press, 2005), 137-139.

coachman Guglielmo Fiori testified that Shiragian fled the scene immediately after the assassination.⁵

As noted in the introduction, the reader will find that Shiragian had multiple encounters (sometimes up close, sometimes at a distance) with security staff on various occasions and in different circumstances. These encounters include a police station, a port, his departure from a crime scene and subsequent return to the scene of the assassination, and various police checkpoints. For example, in Germany, the author rented a room close to Cemal Azmi's house, only to find out afterwards that the landlady's son was the Deputy Chief of the German Secret Service. Although he felt fear and misfortune at first, he thought that being a tenant in the house of an intelligence officer would be useful to him (p. 237). Despite his poor German, the author gained the confidence of the Deputy Chief, Herr Sack, by using a dictionary. They spent a lot of time together and became friends. Herr Sack took part in the investigations into the assassinations of Bahattin Şakir and Cemal Azmi. He informed Shiragian that an Armenian named Berberian with an extensive file was arrested as a prime suspect. Shiragian learned from his Dashnak friends that Berberian's face was very similar to his. Interestingly, according to the author's account, Shiragian left Berlin a month after the assassination and before that, Sack did not see either Berberian at the police station or the photograph of Shiragian brought to Germany from the Ottoman Empire by the Turkish Secret Service (pp. 288-289, 294, 302). The passages about the German Sack in the memoir bring to mind the scenarios of detective/espionage movies (like a detective character who does not suspect the criminal under his nose) and raise the reader's suspicion.

Two incidents that occurred between the author and Policeman Eşref will raise eyebrows. In the first one, a police patrol, in which Eşref takes part, arrives at the Shiragian house and starts to search for fugitive Armenians hiding in the house. After a long search, the officers leave the house without any results. However, Eşref returned to the house on the same day and entered the room where the secret room of the house was located. While Eşref was looking at the wall, behind which the fugitive Armenians were hiding, the author dropped a crate in the room on his foot and pretended that his foot was broken, thus dissuading Eşref from his mission (pp. 75-83). In the second one, the author, during a time after the murder of Vahé (İhsan) Essayan, who was considered a traitor by the Dashnaks, saw Eşref in the next seat while shaving at the barbershop. After they greeted each other, the author drew his pistol and ensured that Eşref did not move from his seat until the end of the shaving, and paid for them both after the shaving was over. An interesting dialogue took

5 Mevlüt Çelebi, "İtalya'da Ermeni Terörü: İtalyan Basınında Sait Halim Paşa Suikastı", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, Güz 2022, Sayı 106: 499.

place between them and the author asked Eşref not to leave the barbershop for five more minutes and to go straight home without visiting the police station (pp. 207-209).

Another surprising part is the one in which the author was about to be arrested or killed by the Turkish Secret Service members he encountered in Bulgaria. Coincidentally, the police inspector who arrived on the scene and later helped the author to escape was a member of the Revolutionary Macedonian Party, a friend of the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Dashnaktsutyun, and someone who had worked with one of the founders of the Dashnaktsutyun, Kristapor Mikaelyan⁶ (pp. 308-319). Thanks to the help of this policeman, who was a Macedonian nationalist, opposed to the Ottoman Turkish rule and sympathetic to the Armenian cause, the author managed to escape from the hands of the Turkish Secret Service.

Several Impressions

Although this book, written by a Dashnak terrorist, contains false, one-sided, and controversial information, it is a useful source of first-hand accounts of the Dashnak movement, the radical Armenian nationalist mindset, and some details of the murders perpetrated by these radicals.

The reader who first reads the words “confessions” and “terrorist” in the Turkish title may be misled into thinking that the author regretted his past activities. Shiragian, a radical Armenian nationalist terrorist, made it clear to the reader that he was proud of his assassinations and other activities. For example, he confessed that when he left Berlin he had to lie to the German family he had lived with and use the people he loved. However, he then brushed off the sentimentality and wrote that his only regret was that he was not able to assassinate Enver and Cemal Pasha as well (p. 305). It should be kept in mind that the book may have served as an inspiration for the third wave of radical Armenian nationalist terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s against Turkish diplomats and family members for the purpose of promoting the Armenian genocide claims in the world public opinion.

When one thinks of the unveiling of the monument dedicated to the Nemesis terrorists in Yerevan on 25 April 2023, this book written by an obvious terrorist will come to mind. The fact that such a monument was inaugurated, that the

6 For more information on Kristapor Mikaelyan, see Ahmet Can Öktem, “Co-Founder of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and One of the Precursors of Armenian Terrorism: Kristapor Mikaelyan”, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2021/34, April 14, 2021, <https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/CO-FOUNDER-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-REVOLUTIONARY-FEDERATION-AND-ONE-OF-THE-PRECURSORS-OF-ARMENIAN-TERRORISM-KRISTAPOR-MIKAELYAN>

ceremony was attended by artists, academics, and descendants of the Operation Nemesis terrorists, and that it took place during the period of the Türkiye-Armenia normalization process, indicates that sympathy towards terrorism among radical Armenians still persists at a dangerous level.

Initiatives such as the construction of monuments in memory of terrorists are a reflection of the fact that the perception of the “enemy” and the feeling of hatred in Armenia and the Armenian diaspora are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Armenian people. These ingrained beliefs of radical Armenians make Armenia stand out among the examples in the world with regards to the establishment of national identity based on hatred.

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