

TURKISH MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE CAUCASUS FOLLOWING THE 1917 RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: THE BATTLE OF SARDARABAD AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract: *The Caucasian front was one of the major fronts on which Ottomans fought in the First World War. With the withdrawal of Russia from the war because of the Revolution in 1917, the Ottoman Empire gained the opportunity to take back the territories it had lost during the war, even those it had yielded to the Russians prior to the war. However, there were those who opposed that, among them the Ottoman and Russian Armenians. Furthermore, the Ottomans' aim to be operative in regional politics was not shared by their ally, Germany, let alone the Allied Powers. Therefore, the fighting and the loss of lives in the region did not end when the First World War came to an end. Aspiring to found a great state and encouraged and incited by the international conjuncture, the Armenians continued their military and terrorist activities to make their own homeland a territory where they were a minority group. But the Ottoman state did not allow this to happen. The Armenians were forced to retreat from the territories they had occupied. In a few months, the Ottoman forces were in the vicinity of Yerevan. Fearing that they would lose everything they possessed, the Armenians put everything they had into these battles. Among all the battles in the region, the Armenians attached special importance to those fought on the front in Serdarabad. This study will try to examine the views of the Turkish sources regarding these events and the repercussions, and try to determine why the Armenians had attached such importance to the fighting on that particular front.*

Key Words: *First World War, the Caucasian Front, the battle of Serdarabad, Turkish Armenian Battles, Armenia.*

Introduction

The First World War was the greatest and final war fought by the Ottoman Empire. During this war which brought the Empire to an end, Ottomans fought all-round battles on several fronts against different states or groups of states, while the Ottomans also had to combat against internal problems within their borders and against the Allied countries since several components of the Ottoman nation participated on the side of

their rivals. Fighting on such different places and platforms led to the already socio-politically, economically and militarily weakened Bab-ı Ali (Ottoman Government) to be left exhausted and devastated. The Caucasian region was one of the important regions that the Empire had fought on despite its weakened stance. This front also contained problems that arose from the complex ethnic structure of the Caucasus.

With the Ottoman Empire entering the First World War in 1914, the Armenians, who strived for a long time to achieve an independent state, cooperated with the Russians who were situated on the front of the Allied Powers and occupied many cities in the Eastern Anatolian region. Armenians' anticipations which had serious national expectations came to a standstill due to the re-emerging conditions following the October Revolution in Russia. However, despite everything, the Armenians did not give up on their expectations. Therefore, after the Russian withdrawal, in order to maintain and resist any possibility of loss of occupied territories, the Armenians fought "to death" on all conditions, places and platforms using all types of instruments. When forced to retreat, the Armenians left these territories ruined.

During their retreat, the Armenians actually had no expectation of defeating the Ottoman army. They were aware that this expectation was unrealistic. Their anticipation was to resist as long as they could with the remaining ammunition from the Russians and therefore, when the Allied Powers would defeat and bring the Ottoman Empire to heel, to be present at the table where the Ottoman territories would be shared. Conditioned on such important expectations, the Armenian militia never hesitated in violating the law of arms as all types of massacre, atrocity and ethnic cleansing widely took place in the region.

During this period, in many places and at different times, hundreds of clashes took place between the Ottoman forces and Armenian militia. One of these clashes has been viewed by the Armenians as carrying critical importance. This war which took place at the end of May 1918 was fought in the region of Serdarabad.¹ Today, this region is close to the border of the Republic of Turkey and there exists a city located at the center of the region with the same name – Sedarabad – and which is 65 km. of distance to Yerevan. The Armenians have bestowed such great importance upon the May 1918 war in this region that each year they celebrate the anniversary of this "victory". Moreover, they have not abstained from building a victory monument and opening a museum in Serdarabad. Thereby, the battle has gained sacredness.

In this article, the political-military aspects of the battles taking place in the region of Serdarabad will be analyzed from the viewpoint of Turkish sources. Is it really the case that the Turkish army suffered a great defeat in Serdarabad and the Armenians were victorious as they have claimed? The answers to this question will define the limits of this article.

¹ In some sources, the name of this city is written as Sardarabad/Sardarapat. However, we have preferred to use Serdarabad.

The First Invasions in the Caucasian Region, the Russian Retreat and Peace Talks

Following the entry into the First World War, the battles fought by the Ottoman Empire on many different fronts led to defeat and loss of territory. Among the fronts where the greatest losses were given, the Caucasus came at the very top. As a result of the many losses given due to the cold weather during the Battle of Sarikamish in the winter of 1914-15, the 3rd Army was completely devastated. Therefore, the Russian armies supported by the Armenians conquered Van, Erzurum, Muş, Bitlis, Trabzon and Erzincan. However, the political unrest in Russia prevented the deepening of the invasions. Moreover, the events starting in March 1917 and developing thereafter, led to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The natural result of this Revolution was the disintegration in these areas resulting in the decision to withdraw. While the Russians were withdrawing from the occupied territories, they did not take the Armenian troops along with them. Instead, the Armenians were reorganized and were even provided with the remaining weapons and ammunition. Even more, it seemed that the Russians left the Ottoman territories to the Armenians by appointing Armenian administrators during the Russian administration. Taking into account that some Russian officers remained for the dispatching and administration of Armenian forces, it would not be wrong to state that the actual support given to Armenians by the Russians continued on all platforms.

Although the Russians invited all parties to the war to make peace, when these efforts proved unanswered, they appealed to Germany for peace mediation. The Russian delegates coming together with German, Austro-Hungarian, Turkish and Bulgarian authorities signed a general armistice in the city of Brest-Litovsk. Upon the news that negotiations were conducted on all fronts fought with Russians, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Minister of War Enver Pasha requested from the 3rd Army Commander Vehip Pasha to make an armistice proposal to the Russians. The anticipated response did not come from Russia, but from the TransCaucasus Commissariat in the beginning of December 1917.² According to this, the Ottoman Empire's request for a ceasefire was accepted.

The Ottoman-Russian delegations coming together in Erzincan to discuss the conditions of the armistice finally signed the treaty on 18th of December 1918. Thereby, the Ottoman-Russian war which started in October of 1914 came to an end.

Following the Armistice of Erzincan, the parties came together again in Brest-Litovsk to complete the peace negotiations. These talks starting in December 1917 could only be concluded in three stages and signing was only possible on 3rd of March 1918. The Ottoman Empire was the sole beneficiary of this peace agreement. Thus, the Ottoman Empire not only gained the territories lost during the First World War, but also Kars, Ardahan and Batum known as "elviye-i selase", lost during the Ottoman-Russian War of

2 Ibrahim Ethem Atnur, *Osmanlı Yönetiminden Sovyet Yönetimine Kadar Nahçıvan (Nakhchivan from the Ottoman to the Soviet Administration - 1918-1921)*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Atatürk Univ. Atatürk Principles and Revolution Hist. Inst. Erzurum, 1996, p. 2.

1877-1878. This agreement actually meant going back to the Ottoman borders before the Ottoman-Russian War. Another important aspect of this agreement was that the Ottoman army was liberated on the Caucasian front. Thereby, Turkish troops gained the ability to march all the way into the inner regions of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Moreover, an opportunity was obtained in preventing the English army located in Iran to join with the Armenians. This opportunity also meant the emergence and consolidation of an independent state of Azerbaijan.

With the Armistice of Erzincan, the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Eastern Anatolian territories worried those Armenians who desired for a long time to establish an independent state in this region. However, they still did not abandon those aspirations. After all, Russian and Armenian Bolsheviks had already been making plans that these territories would not be left to Turks, but to the Armenians.³ Thus, Armenians assumed administrative control and began to work towards the fortification of the areas that the Russians evacuated. Fortification did not only entail strengthening the seized fortresses and cities militarily. It also meant the creation of a demographic structure and changing this structure in a way most convenient for the envisioned state. For this reason, massacres, atrocities and all types of torture were instruments widely used. The absence of any authority that would prevent Armenian forces also contributed to the development of these tragic events.

The massacres and atrocities Muslims were subjected to were continuously voiced by the Ottomans. Although the 3rd Army Commander Vehip Pasha appealed to the Russian General Odishelidze to stop the oppression and massacres inflicted upon Muslims, no solution was reached. When the second stage of the Brest-Litovsk talks came to a deadlock due to the Russian attitudes, Germany declared that it will carry out an operation, causing Enver Pasha to order Vehip Pasha to liberate Turkish territories under Russian invasion.⁴

The Operation of the Ottoman Army⁵

The Turkish troops entering into operation on 12 February 1918 progressed without encountering much military resistance. A day later, on February 13, Erzincan and Mamahatun (Tercan) were liberated. On February 19, when the 5th Caucasian Division took back Bayburt, the 2nd Caucasus army corps re-conquered Trabzon and Gümüşhane which was in the hands of the Georgians. Although the Armenian forces retreating from Eastern Anatolia had built a base camp near Erzurum, they were not able to halt the Ottoman advance. Eventually, following Andranik's decision to evacuate on March 11, Erzurum came under the control of the Turkish forces on March 12, 1918 after three

3 Ibrahim Ethem Atnur, *Osmanlı Yönetiminden... (Nakhchivan from the Ottoman...)*, p. 2.

4 Ibrahim Ethem Atnur, *Osmanlı Yönetiminden... (Nakhchivan from the Ottoman...)*, p. 5.

5 For the progression, troops and clashes of the Ottoman forces see: Attachment 1.

years of Russian domination. The arrival of General Andranik to the region had not changed the situation either. From now on, the main goal of the Armenian forces in the region was the evacuation of Armenian community and troops.⁶

The presence of the Ottoman army in the region created such disturbances among the Armenians responsible for massacres and atrocities that those remaining on the Eastern part of Erzurum started to go beyond the TransCaucasus border without waiting for the Turkish army to arrive. Some forces of the newly created Armenian army were responsible for this evacuation.

The activities of the Armenian army were far from being conducted according to a strategic plan. They were only positioned according to the requirements of that specific day.⁷ This strategic depth should not have been expected from the Armenian forces who were accustomed to gang wars and who usually fought against civilians or militants rather than soldiers. Under the command of General Nazarbekian desiring to maintain control over a large area, although the Armenian army was mostly composed of Armenian officers, young and talented Russian officers were also present among them. Moreover, a battalion was formed by these Russian soldiers who fought beyond the established Armenian forces.⁸ The withdrawal of the Armenian forces and the evacuation of cities meant the commitment of more massacres and atrocities. First, the evacuated cities were burned and destroyed. Then, the lives and properties of the Muslims settled on the Armenians' route were violated.

Upon the Brest-Litovsk talks coming to a standstill on February 10, 1918, the TransCaucasus Commissariat proposed the conduction of peace talks with the Ottoman Empire and Tbilisi was chosen as the city in which these negotiations would take place. However, on February 23 during the first session, members of Seym⁹ declared their decision to the Ottoman Government that the talks would be held in Trabzon in which the delegates will depart immediately. However, the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty on March 3rd led to protests among the TransCaucasus Government. The main reason for this reaction was that with this treaty, Kars-Ardahan and Batumi was left to the Ottomans. The Ottoman Government wanted the ratification of this treaty by the Caucasus Commissariat. The 3rd Army Commander Vehip Pasha was so confident about this ratification that in a telegraph sent to the Commander in Chief of the Caucasus armies on March 10, 1918, he inquired when the areas granted to the Ottomans with this treaty would be returned to them.¹⁰ However, when the Ottoman Empire's determination on this subject was understood, the Caucasus Commissariat

6 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas Sınırdaki Harplerin Tarihi (History of the Wars on the Turkish Caucasian Border)*, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966, pp. 429-430.

7 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas... (History of the Wars...)*, p. 430.

8 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas... (History of the Wars...)*, pp. 430-431.

9 Transcaucasia Parliament

10 İbrahim Ethem Atnur, *Osmanlı Yönetiminden Sovyet Yönetimine Kadar Nahçıvan (Nakhchivan from the Ottoman to the Soviet Administration - 1918-1921)*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Atatürk Üniv. Atatürk Principles and Revolution Hist. Inst. Erzurum, 1996, p.6.

expressed that it was ready for negotiations. These negotiations (March 14 – April 1918) which started with Turks sending their representatives to Trabzon were interrupted from time to time. When the Caucasus delegation did not change their stance on Evliye-i Selase, Huseyin Rauf Bey issued an ultimatum on April 6, demanding for the recognition of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Caucasus Commissariat to declare that it is independent from Russia. In response, Chenkeli, the head of the Caucasus delegation declared that they accepted the treaty. However, this treaty was not ratified by Seym.

On the one hand, political negotiations were being made while on the other hand, the military operation was continuing at full speed. The 37th Division took control of Batumi after the battles made on 13-14 April. The operation continued under the command of the 1st Caucasus Army Corps, Colonel Kazım (Karabekir) Bey who was in charge of conducting the war in the areas of Sarikamish and Kars. Armenian forces holding their resistance in many places up to Kars always had to withdraw each time. Sarikamish and Kağızman were among the regions being liberated. Kazım Bey who started the operation with the command of Yakup Şevki Pasha, destroyed the Armenian resistance in Selim on April 22nd. Kars, with its fortified fortress, was a place to gather all Armenians for resistance who had the ability to fight. The ammunition remaining from the Russians was enough to continue the war. The remaining population had retreated towards Gyumri-Yerevan with their belongings. Therefore, in order to prevent casualties, Kazım Karabekir adopted a military strategy in which the city would be conquered by being besieged. During this process of besiegement, Armenian General Nazarbekian requested a ceasefire twice. However, Kazım Bey who assessed this as an effort to gain time wanted immediate action in order to prevent the transfer of the weapons and ammunition to other areas.¹¹

Upon Vehip Pasha expressing his opinion on the immediate handing over of Kars, Kazım Bey began negotiations with the Armenians. When Colonel Morel during negotiations with Kazım Bey comprehended that the fortress of Kars was under siege and the Turkish army was determined, the Armenians accepted to hand over the control of the city to the Turks. The Ottoman Army entered the city on April 25. When taking into account the weapons, ammunition and supplies left by the Armenians, it can be understood why they wanted to gain time and were persistent on the emptying of the storages.¹²

11 For the activities of the 1st Corps in this region see: Nasır Yüceer, *I. Dünya savaşı'nda Osmanlı Ordusunun Azerbaycan ve Dağıstan Hareketi, Azerbaycan ve Dağıstan'ın Bağımsızlığını Kazanması (Azerbaijan and Daghestan Operation of the Ottoman Army during WWI, Azerbaijan and Daghestan Gaining Independence)*, 1918, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 2002, pp. 24-28; Genelkurmay Başkanlığı, *I. Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi: Kafkas Cephesi (Turkish War During WWI: the Caucasian Front)*, Vol:2, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1993.

12 Nasır Yüceer, *I. Dünya Savaşı'nda... (Azerbaijan and Daghestan Operation...)* p.25 ATASE archive; BDH. Koll. K. 3955.H-100, 108 F. 1-41, 1-4; W.E.D Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas...(History of the Wars...)*, p.435; For the weapons, ammunition and supplies left by the Russians see: Antranik Çelebyan, *Andranik Pasha*, İstanbul: Peri Yayınları, 2003, pp. 221–223.

The Turkish Army in the East of Arpa River

The Turkish army settling in Kars hastened the peace negotiations. The peace negotiations that came to a standstill in Trabzon started again in Batumi on May 11. However, Vehip Pasha expressed that those regions that were subject to negotiations were taken by force and therefore could not be negotiated further during the talks, so new conditions and new proposals should be discussed. What this meant was the following:¹³

1. The invasion of the regions of Ahiska, Ahilkelek and Gyumri by Turkish forces.
2. Handing over the Gyumri-Nahchivan-Julfa railway line to Turkish control.
3. All Caucasian railways to be used by Ottomans as long as the war with England continues.

In fact, the Ottoman requests reflected prospective Ottoman policies in the region. Among the Ottomans' political aims were to keep control of aid given to Baku, block Armenians from contacting the British stationed in Iran, prevent the disintegration of Azerbaijan, prevent the massacres and atrocities committed against Muslims in the region,¹⁴ make sure that a strong Armenian state is not established in the areas inhabited by Muslims, and a more pragmatic request of facilitating smoother acceptance of their proposals in order to make peace. In the short run, they were aiming at carrying out a policy to keep Caucasia and Azerbaijan under control, while in the long run their purpose was to establish a Central Asian axis including India and Afghanistan. Therefore, the 3rd Army Commander Vehip Pasha ordered his forces to cross over to the Eastern part of Arpa River on May 15, 1918.

The invasion of Gyumri on May 16 was influential in the TransCaucasus Government to accept the Turkish proposals in the talks taking place in Batumi. Moreover, the Gyumri-Julfa and Gyumri-Tblisi railway was taken under control. However, more importantly, to conduct a military operation in Azerbaijan, it was imperative to conquer Karakilis which controlled the strategic cities extending towards Yerevan, Gence, Tblisi and Kars. This way, it would become possible to prevent the establishment of solid positions in this region (Karakilis and Delican) by those Armenians withdrawing from Gyumri.

Upon the request of Enver Pasha,¹⁵ the 1st and 2nd Caucasus Army Corps began moving towards Karakilis, Serdarabat, Tblisi and Yerevan. Although the main goal was to take over Karakilis, Tblisi and Yerevan would also be kept under pressure.

13 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas... (History of the Wars...)*, pp. 435-436; Joseph Pamiankowski, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Çöküşü 1914-1918 I. Dünya Savaşı (Fall of the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918 WWI)*, Istanbul: Kayhan Yayıncılık, 1990, p. 321.

14 In a speech delivered in Batum by Cemal Pasha who went there for the peace negotiations, reinforces this subject once again. Antranik Çelebyan, *Andranik Pasha*, Istanbul: Peri Yayınları, 2003, p. 272.

15 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol:2, p.514 ATASE, No.4/3671, Kls. 2919, F.3-10.

The Ottoman forces, together with the 1st Army Corps under the command of Kazım Karabekir and the 2nd Army Corps under group commander Yakup Şevki Pasha began their operation on May 20 to bring the region under control. The activities in the South were given to the 1st Army Corps, while the task of invading Karakilis was given to the 2nd Army Corps.

The 11th Caucasus Division connected to the 2nd Army Corps was not able to conquer Karakilis until May 27.¹⁶ Although the Turkish army was able to push back Nazarbekian's forces on 21-22 May in which the Armenians were statistically superior, just as on May 24, the army was forced to withdraw to the region of Hamamlu. In response to this withdrawal of the 9th Division, the 5th Caucasus Division continued its progression and forced the forces of Andranik to retreat. However, when Karakilis could not be seized by the time desired, the task was given to Kazım Karabekir. Following the violent clashes taking place on 26-28 May, the 9th and 11th divisions conquered Karakilis on 28 May.¹⁷ Losing most of its forces, Nazarbekian had to withdraw to Delican. A day later, the forces of Andranik also retreated to the same region and met with Nazarbekian.¹⁸

The fall of Karakilis positioned as the center of the North, worried the forces of Silikian who were deployed at the South of Yerevan. The Silikian Turks, who believed that they were being surrounded from the North, started their attack on 18-19 May from the south of Aras and ambushed Dro, the bandit leader, together with his 1000 forces on Başabaran passage. The duty assigned to the 1st Army Corps active in the South and administered by Kazım Karabekir was to control the Güzeldere-Avdi Bey line on May 20 and to move towards Serdarabad with at least one military battalion until a serious resistance was encountered.¹⁹

The regions targeted for May 20 was reached without any resistance. Only in the area of Karzak did clashes take place. The battalion of Zihni Bey who was moving forward in the area of Serdarabad, advanced all the way up to Alagöz Station and Mahtaka line. Without much resistance, on May 21, the troops achieved their goals they had targeted. However, the battalion of Zihni Bey fighting against Armenian forces composed of 600 infantrymen and 250 cavalrymen invaded Serdarabad.²⁰

16 For the battles in this region and Nazarbekian's organization of the battle see: W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas Sınırdaki Harplerin Tarihi (History of the Wars on the Turkish Caucasian Border)*, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966, pp. 439-441.

17 For the reasons in the delay of conquering Karakilis see: Nasır Yüceer, *I. Dünya savaşı'nda Osmanlı Ordusunun Azerbaycan ve Dağıstan Hareketi, Azerbaycan ve Dağıstan'ın Bağımsızlığını Kazanması (Azerbaijan and Daghestan Operation of the Ottoman Army during WWI, Azerbaijan and Daghestan Gaining Independence)*, 1918, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 2002, p. 28.

18 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas Sınırdaki Harplerin Tarihi (History of the Wars on the Turkish Caucasian Border)*, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966, p. 441.

19 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol: 2, p.515 ATASE, No. 5/2743, Kls. 3955, H-110, F.1-20, 21.

20 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol:2, p. 516 ATASE, No. 5/12510, Kls. 4070, H-108, F.1-20; ATASE, No. 5/5649, Kls. 3941, H-23, F.1-15.

Ottoman armies stationed in the South were ordered to stay at their position as of May 21 and not to conduct further operations in order to contribute to the peace talks.²¹

The political meaning of this command is that the Ottoman State did not want to conquer the Yerevan region. The entire aim of the State was to control the train route and thus, to supply the necessary aid to Baku on time. Therefore, from time to time, they did not refrain from declaring their operation plans openly to the TransCaucasus Government. Even more, Vehip Pasha together with the Undersecretary for the Ministry of Internal Affairs Abdulhalik Bey, came to Gyumri in order to discuss problems face to face with Nazarbekian. However, this meeting did not take place since Nazarbekian never showed up. In response, a warning letter signed by Yakup Şevki Pasha was sent to Nazarbekian.²²

May 21st generally passed in tranquility. In the territory of Celaloğlu, the Armenian forces left the city to the Turks without even waging a battle. However, Armenian attacks continued against the troops of the 11th Caucasus Division and Zihni Bey. The Armenian forces gaining superiority caused the battalion of Zihni Bey to withdraw 4 km. to the north of Serdarabad. Therefore, the 1st Hunter Battalion was put under the battalion's order.²³

The Armenian offensive conducted on May 26, 1918 with 2000 infantrymen, 200 cavalrymen, 6 cannons, and 3 machine guns against the battalion of Zihni Bey positioned 6 km. to the north of Serdarabad was driven back. Moreover, Armenians were compelled to use shellfire in order to dissuade the soldiers trying to escape. But, Armenian pressures continued non-stop. On May 27, the battalion of Zihni Bey was forced to withdraw to the southern border of Aşniyak under the pressure of the 2500 Armenian troops, although without further nuisance. On the other hand, the retreat of Zihni Bey's forces to the north came as disturbing news for the Ottoman headquarters. This retreat was already beginning to create a dangerous situation for the Group Command Headquarters.²⁴

Due to this situation, some forces under the authority of Hacı Hamdi Bey were recruited to the battalion of Zihni Bey in which they would take on the administration and manage the operation in the Serdarabad front. While the Armenian forces were attempting to surround the forces of Zihni Bey on May 28, the forces of Hamdi Bey who were on their way to assist Zihni Bey were confronted with Armenian attacks. The Turkish forces were victorious, but aid to Zihni Bey's battalion could not be delivered on time.²⁵ On 29 May, the Turkish forces continued to control the Alagöz station-Boyunludağ line.

21 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol:2, p. 516 ATASE, No. 5/2743, Kls. 3955, H-111, F.1-27; ATASE, No. 5/5649, Kls. 3941, H-23, F.1-11, 13, 14.

22 For the details of the letter see: General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol: 2, p. 521.

23 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol: 2, p.517 ATASE, No. 5/2743, Kls. 3955, H-110, F.1-14.

24 For the archival documents on this subject see: General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol: 2, p. 519.

25 General Staff, *Kafkas Cephesi (the Caucasian Front)*, Vol:2, p. 521 ATASE, No. 5/2743, Kls. 3955, H-117, F.1-7; ATASE, No. 5/5649, Kls. 3941, H-24, F.1-6.

The clashes were to continue for some time, but the 12th Turkish Infantry Division which remained inactive joined with the 11th Caucasus Division by crossing Aras. Eventually, on 7-9 June, the Serdarabad, Etchmiadzin and Uluhanlu train stations had come under Turkish control.²⁶

Considering their military and political results, is it possible to see these wars in the region of critical importance so as to continue argumentative elements of independence and identity? Specialist on wars on the Caucasus front, W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, gives a precise answer to this question. “This way, General Silikof and bandit leader Dro – in a way which could be said to be modest – secured the Armenian victory in the Turkish-Armenian war which started off in a complicated way and lasted for three weeks. In this operation, Turks had devoted four divisions, but it could not be said that a serious Armenian resistance has taken place which would have delayed the Turkish goals in the Caucasus. A serious diversion operation could only be possible with the help of the political maneuvers of the Georgian leaders and not by the so-called courageous decision of Armenians to continue the war”.²⁷

Concerning the insurgency made simultaneously by Nazarbekian, Silikian, Daniel Beg Pirumian and Dro, Armenian historian Ter Minassian also puts forth a similar conclusion: “Armenians have halted the Turkish military movement towards Yerevan not militarily, but with a moral victory...”²⁸

However, several other researchers cuts across the boundaries of exaggeration. In an article published in 1919 by A. Vandouny entitled “Les Arméniens dans la Guerre mondiale”, it is argued that Armenians were able to compel the Turkish forces to withdraw all the way up to Gyumri.²⁹ Yet, other pro-Armenian researchers do not agree in such a view of the incident.

Stories of heroism became legendary in a short time and all researchers utilized these myths as their main source. The pivotal role in legendary-making is bestowed upon the major achievements by the religious men during war times and the orations of the politician-warrior commanders. However, it is known that among these orations, commanders like Silikian who do not know Armenian also existed.

The Need for Victory and Internal Rivals

While peace talks were taking place, the emerging political developments, Seym’s decision to disintegrate on May 26 and a few hours later, the Georgians’ declaration of

26 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas Sınırdaki Harplerin Tarihi (History of the Wars on the Turkish Caucasian Border)*, Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966, p. 442.

27 W.E.D. Allen-Paul Muratoff, *1828-1921 Türk Kafkas... (History of the Wars...)*, pp. 442-443.

28 Anahide Ter Minassian, *La République d’Arménie*, Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1989, p. 78.

29 A. Vandouny, “Les Arméniens dans la Guerre mondiale”, *La Revue de Paris*, July-August 1919, p. 891.

independence with the support of Germans, which was followed by Azerbaijan's declaration of independence on May 27 created stirrings on the Armenian front. By accepting the Turkish ultimatum, Armenia also declared its independence a day later. This independence did not satisfy the Armenians, because contrary to what they imagined, they had to be contended with an area of 11,000 km² rather than the prospective Great Armenia.³⁰ It could have been possible to accept this situation as a temporary and fortuitous development and to achieve their aims in the upcoming phases. However, the new state emerged as a result of the imposition of Turkish forces. This was an event which could not be forgotten. Therefore, the independence had to be established upon a new event. For the removal of this unpleasant incident, a "great victory" was required. Serdarabad, where the closest military events took place, would be a good example.

It was also necessary to find an answer to the question of why the Armenians accepted the Turkish ultimatum following this "victory": The news of the victory of Serdarabad was not delivered to the negotiating delegation. Thus, the agreement was signed upon this misinformation. Andranik Chelebian explains this situation in the following way.³¹ "When the Armenian delegates in Batumi sent the letter on 29 May at 7 o'clock, an hour before the ultimatum, in which they expressed their acceptance of the Ottoman conditions, they were unaware of the victory in Serdarabad".³²

"This so-called independence was temporary. According to Hayk Khocasaryan, this was a way to fool one's self in a humiliating manner. The anniversary of the so-called independence which was imposed by the Treaty of Batumi is going to be a ridiculous way to fool one's self. However, just then, the victory of Serdarabad constituted the other half of the declaration of the Armenian independence..." Actually, at the center of the discussions were the day of independence and the event which would be based on this day. "Anyhow, the victory of Serdarabad and the beginning of the life of Eastern Armenia as a state had to be chosen among one of those days. If the first session of the Government of Eastern Armenia or the Armenian National Council in Tblisi chose 28 May as the day of independence of the Republic of Armenia and the day of the Serdarabad victory, then why are arguments breaking out for ten years within the Armenian press? It is incomprehensible!" "If the date of the Serdarabad victory and the beginning of the Eastern Armenian state was imposed by others as another date, would this have been better?"³³

What was troubling and unacceptable for the Armenians was on the one hand the idea that Turks had allowed the creation of an independent Armenian state, while on the other, they acknowledged giving up on the territories they had claimed within the Ottoman

30 Anahide Ter Minassian, *La République d'Arménie*, Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1989, p. 81.

31 Antranik Çelebyan, *Antranik Paşa*, İstanbul: Peri Yayınları, 2003, p. 272.

32 For the knowledge of the Armenian delegation in Batumi concerning the Serdarabad victory see: Anahide Ter Minassian, *La République d'Arménie*, Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1989, p. 80.

33 Antranik Çelebyan, *Antranik Paşa*, İstanbul: Peri Yayınları, 2003, p. 272.

borders.³⁴ This was a situation which could never be accepted. Therefore, warriors like Andranik never accepted this and never gave up on their hopes of “Great Armenia”.

Modern researchers, for many different reasons, used information, especially knowledge still existent in the memories of those participating in the war, without feeling the need to verify their truth. Serge Afansyan’s article entitled “La Victoire de Serdarabad, Arménie 21-29 Mai 1918” constitutes one of the best examples for this case. In these types of writings where the human psychology’s own battle is not taken into account, conclusions were not reached as a result of the military and political reflections. C.J. Walker displays his objectivity by stating that “Just when the Armenians have taken initiative and have been viewed as having a capacity to push back the Turks all the way up to Gyumri and even Kars, Silikan has received an order for a cease-fire from Nazarbekian”.³⁵

The role of the Armenian Church in contributing to this victory should also be emphasized. First of all, the arrival of Turkish forces to the borders of Yerevan and the risk of losing holy cities, including Etchmiadzin, created great anxiety not only among Armenians, but also among the members of the Church. For this reason, religions men first worked in the recruitment and sustenance procurement, and then participated in wars themselves by coming to the fronts. Thus, heroisms were first told in a more mystical atmosphere. Secondly, a desire for victory was satisfied in order to attribute holiness to the process of gaining independence. Today, the Armenian Diaspora and church celebrates this day as a national victory. Moreover, the Armenian churches in the Diaspora have added this day to their list of days to be celebrated and have dedicated a large section for this matter in their yearly organized programs. It is also known that the “victory” of Sedarabad is included in the holy days to- be-celebrated list of 2003 of the “Saint-Jean-Baptiste”³⁶ cathedral in France (Paris) belonging to Armenians.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of Armenians from Eastern Anatolia and Turkish forces being positioned at the front of Yerevan in a very short time period is not a situation which could easily be accepted. Therefore, it is possible to say that Armenians have increased their resistances in May 1918. However, the main reason which triggered this resistance was not to drive out the Turks by defeating them. It was only to gain time until general peace was made and the allied powers accepted the text which would disintegrate the Ottoman Empire. This way, the principle of establishing a great state provoked by nationalism and the Church would become possible with the support of Western states.

34 Antranik Çelebyan, *Antranik Paşa...*, p. 274.

35 Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 254-255.

36 For the May 2003 program see: <http://www.acam-france.org/pratique/eglise-calendrier/calendrier2003.htm>

Compared to other regions, it can be said that the resistance in this region was greater. However, it is not possible to talk about a military activity which could be described as a “great victory”. Conveying the successes of the posts, which have been used in many wars on many fronts and which will never change the results of the war, as a great victory and comparing it with the war of the Persian Armenians is incomprehensible. Moreover, the Ottomans did not want to conquer the whole of this region. They believed that this would not be politically correct. Therefore, one could only talk about an Ottoman state which used activities that would ease its regional policy.

In the region, many frontier wars have taken place. Therefore, assessing the subject based on only one war would be incorrect. Anyhow, many military activities on many fields and thus, a few complexities have come about. Thus, only mentioning the battle of Sardarabad and its victory is not possible. Moreover, it is clear that evaluating the regional wars as a whole and as encompassing a period will create more subjective results. Talking about the Armenians participating in the war and the successes and failures of the state leaders of that time, they have found it more suitable to mention the victory instead of examining whether the policies used possessed a means-end correlation. Throughout the development of Armenia emerging as an independent state up to today, this policy and understanding has not been abandoned.

