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Anahide Ter Minassian

Anarchism in Armenia

1994

Excerpted from “The Role of the Armenian Community in the Foundation and Development of the Socialist Movement in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1876–1923”

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Anarchism never had many followers among the Armenians, although the Dashnak tradition claims that Christapor Mikaelian, one of the three founding fathers of the ARF, used to be a Bakuninist and remained a partisan with a firm belief in direct action and decentralization all his life. The only Armenian anarchist to have a memorable career was Alexandre Atabekian — of whom the IISH in Amsterdam preserves some data classified under his real name.

Like the Georgian anarchists K. Orgeiani and Varlam Cherkezov, A. Atabekian was probably born in the Caucasus. He spoke European languages, Russian and Armenian. In 1891 he was in Geneva, where he was frequently seen in the company of Kropotkin, for whom he cherished a profound admiration all his life. As a young doctor of medicine he was at the head of a circle of Russian students putting out anarchistic propaganda under the name of Anarchistic Library (in Russian),¹ including several pamphlets on Bakunin, Kropotkin, Enrico Malatesta and others.

The correspondence of Atabekian shows that he played an active part in the European anarchist movement in the 1890s.

¹ P. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton, 1967, p. 38.

He knew Max Nettlau, Elisée Reclus, Jean Grave and Paraskev-Stoyanoff and maintained contacts with anarchists and socialists of Russian, French, Italian and Bulgarian origin. His activities were focused on the propaganda of anarchistic ideas by publication and distribution of fundamental texts. In 1921 he sat at the head of the bed in which Kropotkin lay dying and was a member of the committee that supervised the latter's grand funeral in Moscow that February. It was to be the last public manifestation of the anarchists that the communists allowed. In 1929 he disappeared during the very last action against the anarchists in the USSR.²

Alexandre Atabekian had also tried to promote anarchistic ideas among his Armenian compatriots. The publication of *Hamayank* (Commonwealth) in Resht (in Persia) was attributed to him. The title of this journal is most revealing with respect to the anarchistic views of its editor. The date — 1880 — is remarkably early. He was undoubtedly also responsible for the publication of another *Hamayank*, printed in Paris in 1894 but edited in London.³ The ideology of the journal — of which five issues were published — was indisputably anarchistic, paying special attention to the Armenian question and the Ottoman Empire, although the journal was also very interested in the international revolutionary movement in Russia, Italy, Spain, Poland and France.

Hamayank was of the opinion that the Armenian people had entered a revolutionary phase. Subjected, in the Ottoman Empire, to ferocious economic exploitation and the inhumanity of a despotic system, the Armenian farmers, reduced to proletarians, left Armenia in great numbers to 'sell their labour in Baku, Batum, Bolis, Greece, Romania and as far as Amer-

² P. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 244.

³ These precautions illustrate that the anarchists were under continuous surveillance. A certain Minassiantz sent a letter from Ruschuk (Bulgaria) on 18/30 January 1894 in which he wrote to Atabekian that he had received 'his *Hamayank*' in good order.

ica'.⁴ Hamayank acknowledged the necessity of a revolutionary struggle for the 'communalization' of the land and self-rule as the means to create freedom and well-being for Armenian farmers.⁵ Nevertheless it was wary of European interventions in the Armenian question, condemned die 'centralism' of the Armenian revolutionary movement⁶ and denounced the oppressive nature of all government.⁷

⁴ *Hamayank*, 1894, no. 1.

⁵ *Hamayank*, 1894, no. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.* This was a veiled critique against the Henschak centre.

⁷ *Hamayank*, 1894, no. 2.

Publication dates of *Hamayank* (Commonwealth):

no. 1 January 1894

no. 2 March 1894

no. 3 May 1894

no. 4 September 1894

no. 5 December 1894

The journal was published in Armenian in Paris by the 'International Printers'. The address of the editors was given as: W. Voynich (*Hamayank*) 3 Iffley Road, 3 Hammersmidi, W, London. The publication is available at the Mekhitharist Library in Vienna

Tides of the series:

Anarchistic Publications [in Armenian] [on the tide page in Osmanli Turkish: 'Authorized by the Ministry of Education']

no. 1. *Among the farmers* (Paris, 1893)

no. 2. *The speech of Sofia Bardina* (Paris, 1893)

no. 3. *Political rights* (Paris, 1893) [translation of a work by Kropotkin]

no. 4. *The destruction of States* (Paris, 1893) [translation of a work by Kropotkin]

no. 5. *Anarchism* (Paris, 1893) [translation of a work by Kropotkin]

no. 6. *To brother farmer* (Paris, 1893) [translation of a work by Elisée Reclus, a dialogue between the author and a farmer concerning the agricultural ideas of die anarchists]

no. 7. *The reason why we are revolutionaries* (Paris, 1894) [translation of a work by Jean Grave]

no. 8. *The revolutionary minorities* (Paris, 1894) [translation of a work by Kropotkin]

no. 9. *Vartkes, Satires* (Paris, 1894)

In parallel with this, the publication, from 1893, of anarchistic works in the Armenian language — mainly translations preceded by short introductions — was carried out in the same way as that of the Anarchistic Library in Geneva. Several allusions in his correspondence seem to indicate that Atabekian had tried to distribute pamphlets in Istanbul and Izmir, but his attempts to form an anarchist movement in the Ottoman Empire were in vain.

However, a pamphlet written in French on the occasion of the Socialist Conference in London shows that there still were a number of Armenian 'libertarians' in 1896. Denouncing the complicity of the European powers in the Hamidian massacres, it announced the 'dawn of the Social Revolution' in the Orient.

With the exception of no. 9, these publications are available at the Nubarian Library in Paris.