

Armenian history: an anarchist perspective

The History of Armenian People and Their Struggle for Social Justice

Armenian Libertarian-Socialist Movement

February 7, 2007

As is the case with any state-controlled historical narrativizations, the history is often de-contextualised and re-contextualised, de-coded and re-coded so as to serve the interests of a particular class. What I have tried to do in this article is to subvert that process and, in effect, to deconstruct that which has been constructed as “Armenian History”.

This article works its way from ancient movements such as Pavlikians, Tondrakiyts, Messalians and Borborits, on to more recent anarchist fragments of Armenian history such as Shaamirian, Nalbandian, Jheon, Atabekian and especially the Anarchist origins of early Dashnaks (ARF). [This article could be of particular interest to anyone interested in Armenian history as well as to academics researching on Anarchist history in the region of Caucasus]

“Who controls the past controls the future, and who controls the present controls the past“. — George Orwell

Throughout all of its history spanning over many centuries the Armenian people have led an uninterrupted struggle for both freedom (against their conqueror: Persia, Arabian caliphate, Byzantium, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks etc) as well as for social justice (against local exploiters).

The geopolitical location did not leave any prospects of developing statehood on the territory of Armenia. For this reason Armenian people found themselves in a constant struggle against conquerors, often with their own efforts since they did not have regular armies.

Life wasn't any less difficult under the exploitation of their own kings, feudals and clergymen.

Thus, in IV-V centuries feudals (nakharar) and the patriarchal throne concentrated in their hands vast territories of land (fertile fields and river valleys, water sources and land resources). Large monasteries also became owners of vast lands. The economic and civic conditions were becoming increasingly unbearable for the peasantry. The peasantry was gradually falling into feudal dependency: the tariffs were rising while the majority of peasants were tied to the land and were not allowed to leave.

In such socio-economic conditions brews a movement of workers against the feudals of nobility and clergy. Peasant uprisings, sometimes adopting the form of heretical movements, were directed against the feudal order and its upholder – the Christian church. At the times of its humble origins in the I-IV centuries Christianity in Armenia was the embodiment of social values

and cultural codes that today approximate to those of anarcho-communism: compassion, non-violence, sharing, mutual aid, cooperative mode of production, direct democracy and communal ownership. Until the pan-national adoption of Christianity, the first Christians were persecuted and therefore formed their own isolated communes (such as Geghard) in the mountains where they could not be found. Today we are very proud of the fact that Armenians were the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301AD, yet rarely do we question the effects of the state religion ever since those ancient times till now. And so in V-XI centuries we see the uprisings of Borborit and Messalian, Pavlikian and Tondrakiyts movements. Though different in form and ideology, all of them carried a similar anti-feudal character. Especially popular were the movements of Pavlikians and Tondrakits.

The Pavlikian movement (VII-IX centuries, named after one of its leaders), like other peasant movements was of a religiously-heretical character. Pavlikians rejected feudal land-ownership, social inequality, the church and its rituals, and the notion of “afterlife”. In essence they protested against the feudal exploitation, and believed that all people should be equal in life as they are equal at birth and death (a principle that must have been unheard of and absurd at the time). Their ranks were rapidly growing with workers and labourers from towns and villages – the oppressed strata of the society. Among mentioned participants we also find some clergymen and small landowners. Apart from Armenians the Pavlikian movement included Greeks, Arabs and Syrians; that is to say, the Pavlikian movement was not restricted by national boundaries and was in many ways a truly Internationalist in its character. The Pavlikians had their own preachers who would travel from one region to another, thus disseminating their ideas. They created their own communities and fought against regular armies. Nevertheless, the military machinery managed to crush this movement, though the Pavlikian ideology could not be eradicated. In the X-th century Pavlikians moved to Frakia (Thraci), where they continued their activities. Their ideas were then spread across Balkans and later European countries where they found a more fertile ground.

In X-XI centuries a new wave of peasant uprisings ignites across Armenia. According to a historian-contemporary, Ohaness Draskhanakertsi, the peasants of Ararat region were fighting with arms against major feudals and manors, thus destroying their castles and property. Another peasant uprising started also in Syunik. After the construction of the Tatev monastery (906AD) the surrounding villages and communities became the property of monks. In protest to this, the peasants led a continuous struggle against the clergymen, which sometimes took forms of an open insurrection. The most bloody of these was the battle in Tsurabert. Here the peasants attacked the monastery and took back its lands and properties. Soon, however, this uprising was crushed. Nevertheless, the Tsurabert population rose again. This struggle continued for many years until in 990 AD the king of Syunik, Vasak, levelled Tsurabert to the ground and silenced whatever population remained.

In X-XI centuries another movement known as Tondrakiyts (after the name of Tondrak village) gained a popular support. The founder of the movement was Smbat Zarekhavantsi – reportedly a well educated and wise man. Tondrakiyts people rejected the notions of soul’s immortality, afterlife as well as the institution of the church, and were supporters of an egalitarian self-determination, which also incorporated the notion of social equality between men and women. To realise their ideals Tondrakiyts people formed their own communes in late-9th – early 10th century, and took part in the uprisings in Ararat and Syunik regions. The Tondrakiyts movement had many similarities with the Pavlikian movement and in essence was its continuation.

However, while the Pavlikian movement was placing its emphasis on the social and national liberation (from Arab and Byzantian occupation), the Tondrakiyts movement had a sharper agenda pertaining to social justice and class struggle.

The history teaches us that the Armenian working people never succumbed neither to the external conquerors, nor to the internal exploiters. It shows that the Armenian people have always and continuously aspired to the ideals of freedom and equality and never bowed to political, ethnical or gender hierarchies and inequalities. These ideas are as old as the world, but to this day they remain progressive and applicable.

Intellectuals, artists, thinkers and activists have played a substantial role in the struggle of the Armenian people. In the second half of the 18th century the Second Armenian Enlightenment started emerging and evolving, which adopted anti-feudal, democratic, revolutionary and deeply patriotic ideology. One of the vivid figures of this movement was Shaamir Shaamirian. In his famous book “The Trap of Ambition” he wrote that individuals are born free and equal, and that no other individual has the right to use violence and exercise authority over him.

“Even among animals there isn’t one central figure that would dominate and control the rest: therefore, it is an insult to our intelligence to be obedient to one person who retains same appearance and qualities as us, though becomes our almighty ruler”.

In a decisive rejection of monarchical order, Shaamirian believed that it is necessary to create “jhoghovarutyun” (the rule by the people): the country must be ruled by a parliament – “The House of Armenians” – where all classes of society would be represented. The elections should be equal and general; a person must be guaranteed with maximum individual freedom and the elitist privileges must be abolished. All posts, including the judges, must be elected – an idea that paralleled that of Bakunin. The church must be separated from the State.

Another prominent thinker and activist later in 19th century was Mikael Nalbandian (1829–1866) – a poet, a writer and a publisher. In his time this revolutionary openly declared:

“Freedom!” – I exclaim.
Should the thunder roar above my head
Neither fire, nor iron would scare me,
Should the adversary fatally wound me,
Should I be threatened with execution or hanging
Or should I end my days being shamed
I would still not stop singing, exclaiming
And repeating: “Freedom!”

Nalbandian’s pursuit was to unify the social and national-liberation struggle with the Russian revolutionary movement. To this end he forged close links with prominent Russian revolutionaries, such as Bakunin, Ogaryev and Herten, who thought quite highly of him. As Ogaryev wrote about him, ‘Nalbandian is a golden soul, his dedication is unselfish, his dedication is naïve to extent of holiness’.

Nalbandian was greatly admired for his efforts in the movement towards creating a national literature that would realistically reflect the aspirations of the Armenian people. In 1861 Nalbandian wrote,

‘We deliberately dedicated ourselves to defending the rights of ordinary people. We will not dedicate our quills and our selves to the rich, who feel invincible behind piles of gold, especially when the power is in the hands of tyrants. But that unfortunate Armenian, that downtrodden, pitiable, poor, naked and hungry Armenian, who is oppressed not only by outsiders and barbarians, but also by his own masters, his own church and ignorant semi-educated persons... this Armenian justly attracts our attention, and it is particularly to him, without any doubt, that we dedicate all our efforts and strengths. Defending the mercilessly violated rights of this Armenian is the true meaning and aim of our existence. And to reach that aim we will not stop neither at prison, nor at exile, and we will serve that aim not only with our quills, but also with arms, if we ever get the honour of taking up arms in this struggle and brighten the cherished ideal of freedom with our own blood..’

In “A Reference Guide to Modern Armenian Literature”, Kevork B. Bardarkjian writes,

Nalbandian attracted attention as an outspoken publicist... whose lively and bold style, at times crude and arrogant, was almost invariably laced with irony ... In both his literary and journalistic pieces, Nalbandian emerges as an unrelenting champion of freedom and equality; a fearless opponent of despotism, imperialism, and serfdom; an interpreter of human life from materialistic positions; a tireless propagandist of enlightenment, science; and scientific approach; a believer in agriculture as the key to prosperity and independence;...

Nalbandian started collaborating with Stepanos Nazaryan (1812–1879, a bright intellectual) in founding an influential periodical, “The Northern Lights” (Hiwsisapayl). He travelled widely throughout European cities: Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, London and Constantinople (he also journeyed to India), meeting and collaborating with fellow anarchists and activists. His passionate activities led to his arrest and imprisonment in St. Petersburg by the Czarist government in 1862. Having been accused of inciting anti-Tsarist sentiments with the distribution of ‘propagandist’ literature, he was eventually exiled (in 1885) to Kamyshen, a remote area over 500 miles south-east of Moscow on the west bank of the Volga in the province of Saratov. He died of tuberculosis in prison a year later.

The ARF – Armenian Revolutionary Federation, also known as “Dashnaktsutyun” was the first political party that Armenians had. But it wasn’t just a political party as we know parties to be today. Instead, it was a federation of intellectual circles springing out of the widespread anarchist movement and, initially, a genuine attempt to systemise the political life in Armenian communities in a way that would put us on a confident path to Socialism. Today Dashnaks, though being members of Socialist International, parade themselves under Nationalist slogans, yet we forget the true origins of Dashnaktsutyun. Dashnaks today would probably be not so proud of the fact that the first Dashnaks were predominantly anarchists. It is said that Khristaphor Mikaelyan, one of the founders, was once a supporter of Bakunin and was always a defender of direct action and self-government (Minassian). Mikaelyan was an icon of freedom in Armenian literature for his militancy and authorship of essays. In those days they marched under the flag that read “Liberty or Death” and indeed one of the first points of the first version of the Dashnak Manifesto set out the goals of the federation to be the “establishment of a free anarchist republic

on the territory of historical Armenia”, while the earliest issues of “Droshak” contain works by Peter Kropotkin.

Another prominent figure, who influenced Armenian politics among Dashnaks and Henschaks, as well as the spread of Anarchist ideas and literature across Europe, was Alexander Atabekian.

The beginning of 20th century (1903–1905), when Russia became the centre of revolutionary movements, was marked by the proliferation of anarcho-communist ideas in Caucasus, which at that time was part of the Russian empire. Major industrial cities such as Kutaisi, Tbilisi and Baku became centres of the anarcho-communist movement. Some of the military operations as well as expropriation of lands and properties were particularly successful. Anarchists of Caucasus were especially active in these operations. They organised armed proletarian brigades – “Red Hundreds”, agricultural communes, workers self-governed collectives and so forth, while various political parties tried to use the movement for their own political targets and direct it in their own trail. November 1905 was marked by the General Strike of Alaverdian workers, which was the largest in its time in Caucasus. Because of good organisation, stubbornness and determination the international collective managed to force the entrepreneurs to satisfy their demands. The revolution of 1905 further fuelled the unrests from the workers and peasants. Armed clashes between the workers and the police took place in Baku and Tbilisi. During the unrests in Tbilisi the workers were even confronted with regular armies armed with machine guns. At the same time we see a strike by the rail workers in Armenia. The rail network virtually went under control of the rail workers who started forming armed battalions for self defence. Soon the authorities sent armies to crush the uprising. Unfortunately, after the December revolution in Moscow was crushed, the movement in Caucasus started to collapse. Nevertheless, boycotts and strikes continued in Armenia and throughout Caucasus even thereafter...

This material is presented in a form of condensed historical excursion in order to remind the reader who our ancestors were, what they really fought for throughout Armenian history. Armenians respect and are always proud of their history, of their historical figures, to whom they construct memorial statues. But are we studying our own history correctly? Are we drawing the right conclusions? Are we gaining the important lesson and experience from studying our history? I don't think so. The history keeps repeating itself and we keep finding ourselves in similar conditions, while the workers keep finding themselves in the miserable conditions. Is it not the time we look back in a new way, and thus start looking forward in a new way as well?

Our movement might be new to Armenian politics, yet our struggles are as old as the history of Armenian people itself. For as long as there is tyranny, oppression and injustice, the people have resisted and will continue to resist until either they become the masters of their own political structures, or until the torch of Freedom is permanently extinguished. The history is not all certain, but given the intensity of this centuries and millennia-old class struggle, there can be only 2 outcomes: **Socialism or Barbarism.**

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