A NEVER-ENDING FICTIONAL NARRATIVE: ARMENIANS OF MUSA DAGH

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During a recent visit to Armenias Musaleran Heroic Battle Memorial Complex, Olivier Decottignies, Frances Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Yerevan, made some historically controversial and inaccurate statements:

> They were fighters and fought, of course, the French naval forces helped the Armenians. The majority of the young people from Musaler were in the French army, they continued to fight alongside the French army. Mutual cooperation is a symbol of courage and cooperation. I would argue that our relations are very old, we, both the people of Musaler and the French, have old memories, and I am very happy today, both as an ambassador and as a French citizen, to be here to celebrate the 110th anniversary of Musaler together with the people of Musaler.

Like many commentators, the French ambassadors remarks on the Musa Dagh events are inspired by the fictional novel of Franz Werfel, which was consistently and mistakenly used by journalists, academics, and politicians as a primary source of the Musa Dagh insurgency of World War I. However, in a well-researched and well-documented study of the events, Professor Kemal Çiçek (*The Armenians of Musa Dagh, 1915 □□□□□ A Story of Insurgency and Flight*, [Lexington Books, 2020]) carefully dismantled this fictional narrative using archival sources, especially the personal accounts written by the Armenian rebels themselves.

From Çiçeks meticulous study, as well as from many other sources, it becomes clear that the Armenian tragedy stemmed from the Armenian cooperation with the Entente Powers (Russia, Britain and France) during the war years. Indeed, it is more appropriate to term the Armenian actions in this region as betrayal rather than heroism.

As early as October 1914, the British Consul at Aleppo noted that the local Christian population would welcome an Allied invasion. Armenian groups of the region were in contact with the Allies Powers and had volunteered to support a possible disembarkation at Alexandretta [Iskenderun], Mersina, or Adana and promised that valuable assistance could also be provided by the Armenians of mountainous districts, who, if supplied with arms and ammunition, would rise against Turkey.

Shortly after the Ottoman Empire entered the war in 1914, British and French naval forces shelled the harbor of Iskenderun and other coastal towns in Cilicia. Following these assaults, the Armenians thought that the Allies would set up a second front by landing

soldiers at Iskenderun or Mersin. A force like that could cut off the Baghdad Railway, which was about 40 miles from the shore, devastating Ottoman troops in Palestine and Mesopotamia who depended on it for supplies.

Boghos Nubar, Chairman of the Armenian National Assembly, told a French diplomat that Armenians, constituting 40 percent of the population of Iskenderun, were ready to support a French occupation of the Ottoman Empire. Boghos Nubar also assured Sir John Maxwell, a senior British military commander that in case of a British landing, that his compatriots in Cilicia would greet the British soldiers as liberators and would offer them perfect and total support. In his own words, Boghos Nubar admitted how he hoped to organize the rebellion in the region:

> [A]t the beginning of last November 1914, I applied to the British military and civilian authorities in Egypt and suggested that they land troops and occupy the Cilician shore and the ports of Mersin and Iskenderun as well as the plains of Adana. I promised to bring, upon their occupation, to the armys disposal a large number of leaders well-acquainted with the country, interpreters and lobbyists, whose mission would be, amongst others, to lead the Armenian population of the highlands into rebellion. Thus, they would bring their help to the Allies, on the condition that the latter would provide the Armenians with the necessary arms and ammunition.

In December 1914, there was a notable rise in Allied naval operations, and British landing parties were met with enthusiasm by the local Armenians, who offered them valuable guidance. Diplomatic reports from foreign countries verified the successful landing of Armenian agents, who arrived onshore to enlist the local population of Cilicia in opposition to the Ottomans.

From 14 December 1914 to the beginning of February 1915, the British battleship *HMS Doris*, commanded by Captain Frank Larkin, attacked the Gulf of Iskenderun. Larkin's ship landed men who cut a telegraph line and demolished five bridges among others. On 27 December, Larkin noted that the [Ottoman] Armenian railway officials [were] themselves smashing the electric batteries on the lines with particular satisfaction. Larkin also took onboard Armenian nationalists from the region and benefitted from them by obtaining intelligence. In January 1915, the French battleships *Requin* and the *D'Entrecasteaux* conducted similar operations targeting Iskenderun and Mersin. During the February 1915-August 1915 period, Iskenderun was bombarded four times, Mersin twice, and Dörtyol, Tarsus, and Adana once each.

In each of these attacks, the British and French made use of Armenian agents, obtaining critical military intelligence as Armenian groups maintained direct communication with the British and French naval forces. The threat of an amphibious invasion remained a constant worry for the Ottoman military. Moreover, since the autumn of 1914, numerous clashes took place between Ottoman units and Armenian terrorist and guerrilla factions, with frequent attacks on Ottoman garrisons in regions such as Zeytun.

Meanwhile, a delegation of Hunchaks reached Tiflis and reported to the Russian military command in early April 1915 that Armenian partisans were ready to rise all over Cilicia.

The Hunchaks claimed that no less than 3000 armed revolutionary cells had been created in the region and with the Allied provision of arms and ammunition, the rebellion would be ignited.

It was only after these and similar developments expanded all over Anatolia that the Ottoman Government decided to take preventive measures against the Armenians and adopted the Relocation and Resettlement Law of May 1915. In other words, the Armenians of Musa Dagh in Iskenderun, like their brethren all over Cilicia, had engaged in cooperation with the enemies of their own state and conducted treasonous activities long before the Ottoman Government had taken any steps towards them. Therefore, the cliché fictional narrative that the Armenians in this region rose in rebellion only to defend themselves from the relocation is historically inaccurate. It would be a modest expectation to expect that a French diplomat should handle historical events more factually and fairmindedly.

Fortunately, some Armenians had been more candid about the accomplishments of their compatriots. Gabriel Noradounghian, an Ottoman Armenian who, like many other Armenians, had risen high in the Ottoman Foreign Service during the previous quarter-century, and who had actually served as Ottoman Foreign Minister 1912-1914, was one of those. In 1921, he told Lord Curzon the following candid facts that confirms many Armenians joined the enemies of their state in their invasion of the country: The people of Cilicia fought in the ranks of the Allied armies for the liberation of that country.

**Picture: French Ambassador Olivier Decottignies during his visit to the aforementioned battle memorial complex – Source: ArmenPress*

About the Author :

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