

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE GLORIOUS
STRUGGLE OF VAN-VASBOURAGAN**

PART I

By Onnig Mukhitarian

1967

Translated from the original in Armenian

By Samuels S. Tarpinian

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DEDICATION

TO THE EVERLASTING MEMORY OF MY COMRADES IN ARMS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR OUR DEFENSES, NOW DEPARTED, WHO TOOK UP ARMS TO HEROICALLY FACE THE ENEMY AT AIKESDAN, SHADAKH, PESANDASHD, HAIOTZ-TZOR, KHARAGONIS, TIMAR AND THE OLD CITY AND, IN THIS WAY SAVED 180,000 ARMENIANS FROM TOTAL ANNIHILATION AT THE HANDS OF THE MERCILESS GENOCIDAL TURK.

GLORY TO ALL!

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FOREWARD

Let us be glad that we have this book.

Let us be grateful to Onnig Mukhitarian for putting down in the Armenian language his account of what happened, and to Samuel S. Tarplnian for translating it into English, for we know that such accounts hold us to our history, as our connection to our country fades away In the dispersion.

Our ties to our truth soon enough break, and are replaced by ties to the new realities of wherever we happen to have taken new root. We are all of us Americans whose parents or grandparents or great grandparents happened to have been Armenians born in Armenia. So what? So who needs to be interested in any of that, here and now?

Well, of course there is something to be said for living where you are, and the Armenians of America have demonstrated a rather impressive ability to be Americans.

And yet they don't seem to relinquish totally their connection with who they were, with Armenia, a memory, or a geographical and political reality.

Well who were the first Armenians in America, one by one, from each of the famous cities of Armenia?

They were the people who refused to be absorbed, assimilated, wiped out, effaced by the people around them, among them, with them In their daily lives.

These people called themselves Turks, and were themselves an assimilation of a dozen or more peoples of both Asia and Europe. They had a government In Constantinople, and that government was biased in their favor, which gave them a feeling of dominance, even of superiority, and a sense of power. Turks were Turks, and while Constantinople insisted that Armenians were citizens of Turkey, too, and therefore enjoyed equal rights, along with Kurds, Circassians, Georgians, Greeks. Jews, and a good half dozen other peoples numerous enough to be identified racially, Syrians and Assyrians, for instance.

This theory about equal rights for all minorities in Turkey, in the Ottoman Empire, in Anatolia, in the Sublime Porte, whatever we choose to call it, or whatever it

chooses to call itself, was reasonable enough in intention, but altogether unreasonable in practice.

To this day Constantinople, now Istanbul, and Ankara, the capital of Turkey, and all Turkish intellectuals, politicians, journalists, educators, patriots, poets, writers, philosophers, all of the articulate Turks go right on insisting that the theory of equal rights for all citizens is substantiated by a living reality. And they disavow all evidence to the contrary.

And this evidence to the contrary, insofar as the tiny Armenian minority in Turkey today is concerned, is overwhelming in its glaring clarity.

This is fascinating, but it doesn't help the Armenians who remain Armenians in Turkey. Indeed, it has thrust a good many of them so deeply into assimilation as to be virtually no longer Armenians.

What's wrong with this, then?

Well, of course nature, at any rate, loves it.

There is no reason in the world for Armenian boys and men not to marry Turkish girls and women, and to bring up children as Turks, not Armenians.

Don't Armenians in America do the same thing?

If nature loves this easy exchange of identity, something doesn't. Something abhors it, and whatever this something is, whatever it may be said to be, tribe, family, tradition, culture, spiritual muscle, language, art, music, character, and all of the ineffables that are in the reality of the abstraction of the Armenian race, all this grieves about the exchange of the long past in favor of the short present.

Everybody fights, in one dimension or another, when such grieving is unbearable. This book is about the fight of the people of Van against the Turkish government in 1915.

The fight was collective. It was systematically arranged, organized, and controlled. And that's how nations continue as nations.

When the fight is waged, and the waging fails, when the war is lost, all who have not died in the fight feel a deep wound in the depths of their souls. A scar is there, the scar of the loser, a man is a survivor of a people who were denied their own country,

who were driven out or driven into something like forgetfulness, in favor of simple practicality to survive as an individual, never mind the tribe, at all.

And even worse things happen: the survivor who does not repudiate his character, his identity, his nationality, notices that Armenians are disliked, are mocked, are ridiculed, are hated.

This in turn drives the survivor to self-hatred, as Michael J. Arlen deduced in *Passage to Ararat*.

Yes, this is true, or true enough to permit or compel the Armenian to say: I belong to a people who are hated, and I myself experience self-hate.

That's for starters. And having made that start, the survivor is able to move out, and to supplement this simple acknowledgement with further truths: under the same circumstances, another people would have suffered the same experience, with the same consequences. I am other things, as well, and these things are now the real things.

Our truth encourages us to be proud of ourselves fully, and as we are—nobody is better. This book reminds us our truth. To me it is a better Armenian story than the *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, but let's hope nobody gets busy and spoils it in a movie.

WILLIAM SAROYAN

Fresno, California

April 1978

INTRODUCTION

I was eye witness to the struggle of 1915 in Van and participated in it as secretary to the Defense Council. At the very outset, it was the desire of Aram (Leader of the Dashnak Organization) to transmit to future generations the inspiring epic of the titanic struggle and the anxiety and endurance it exacted. By order of the Defense Council, I kept a detailed diary of daily occurrences, adding to them my own interpretation.

After the forced exodus into Caucasus of the Armenian population of Van, I have reexamined all reports, and have obtained additional details from various leaders of the resistance and those that personally took part in its various phases. This enabled me to present the following detailed and documented history of the glorious self defense of the Armenians at Van.

I have been fortunate in this task by the fact that Aram himself proofread the script. I have attempted, also, to present facts and documents in the belief that, in the final analysis, these are more eloquent than my own evaluation of the situation.

In these days of hopelessness and crushing sorrow, it is hoped that the reading of the story of the defense of Van will once again instill hope and courage in our hearts to carry on the struggle until a radiant future for us is secured.

With the desire to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of this valiant defense, I have now published my memoirs as a separate book.

Onnig Mukhitarian

Sofia, Bulgaria

March, 1930

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The translation into the English language of the first published account of “The Heroic Struggle of Van-Vasbouragan” by Onnig Mukhitarian was decided at the 1966 Delegates Convention, in Detroit, of the General Society of Vasbouragan. During 1948-49, the Armenian Review published the first English translation by Hrair Baghdoian, it being a verbatim rendering of the original. This question has been discussed during previous conventions, with the feeling that the existing translation was not altogether satisfactory. However, this was not meant to be a reflection on the quality of the translation.

During the past two decades, several very valuable volumes have been published, in Armenian, giving the history, customs, tradition, legends, monuments, and the overall culture of particular provinces or areas which had been completely devastated by the Turks during the First World War. Similar undertaking by the General Society of Vasbouragan had been the subject of serious discussions at several of the conventions. Several factors militated against this type of undertaking; the complexity and magnitude of the task involved great expense, the fact that many scholarly works exist both in Armenian and foreign languages about its history and archeology, and the fact that these researches are being and will be actively continued in the future. Underneath all these deliberations the feeling exists among us of Vasbouragan origin that, though momentarily interrupted, the history of Vasbouragan will continue to adorn its pages with splendid achievements in the future.

Several other works have appeared since the publication of Onnig Mukhitarian's book in 1930. A comprehensive volume was published on the subject by the Compatriotic Union of Vasbouragan at Tabriz, Persia, also in 1930. In addition the “Memoirs” of Armenag Yegarian, “The Heroic Defense of Van” by Rev. Arsen Georgizian, “The Heroic Self Defense of the People of the Old City of Van” by Haig Gossoyan, as well as several novels based on this theme by Zarzand Darian, Gourgen Mahari, Mugurdich Khranian, ect., have added to our literary heritage. Unfortunately, varying degrees of partisan bias can be seen in practically all of these works. In their

zeal to add accolades on their favorite heroes and arrogate all merit to their own party, the authors seem to have missed the substance of the event.

The choice of Onnig Mukhitarian's and Haig Gossoyan's works for translation is justified on the ground that both were eye witnesses and participants, both kept a diary in which events were recorded in chronological order, and both are more statistical and better documented.

In the present translation we have attempted, as far as possible, to avoid military term, insofar as the Armenian resistance forces are concerned, to accentuate the fact that these were people, and not an organized military force. In self defense, they had to take up whatever arms they possessed, against a brutal and stupid government. While adhering closely to the text, your translator has deemed it advisable to modulate certain paragraphs devoted to personal adulation and has left out the party label of the fighting forces, as irrelevant.

Identical documents in both works have been included in Part I only with reference notes in Part II for the sake of brevity.

PREFACE

The Heroic Defense of Van is a lasting tribute to the valiant sons of VASBOURAGAN whose indomitable courage and a willingness to die for their Fatherland were the dual traits that proved to be the salvation of the Armenian Nation.

Authors of many nations have perennially penned the praises of these descendants of Haik and justifiably so, for had it not been for their tenacious Vanetzi spirit and burning love of country, Armenia would never have survived.

Because of the honor it tenders these truly great heroes, the Central Executive Committee of the General Society of VASBOURAGAN gratefully acknowledges the effort of those who in some way contributed to the ultimate publication of this book.

The Committee is mindful of the personal sacrifices various individuals made to become contributors to this volume and is lastingly grateful to them.

In most book publications credits are freely given and The Heroic Defense of Van shall be no exception.

Samuel Tarpinian, who translated ONNIG MEKHITARIAN'S book to produce this volume, must head the list of those being credited, for his patience and skill have given us a record of lasting importance.

Heartfelt appreciation is expressed to the great William Saroyan, Pulitzer prize winning novelist for thought-provoking Foreword to this work.

Bedros Toukhanian, the artisan, is responsible for the photographs that appear throughout the book.

Kegham TAZIAN, artist, sculptor and teacher fashioned the art work that graces the translated effort.

HAIGAG GOSSOIAN and Father OSHAGAN MINASSIAN provided the invaluable source material.

Dr. Richard BOOLOOTIAN and Leila Johnson comprised the editing staff.

Sarkis Kassouny had the book printed.

It is hoped that new generations of Armenians, VASBOURAGAN or otherwise, will be inspired by the heroic actions of a generation of compatriots whose deeds of valor may never again be equaled.

It is finally hoped that the blessed memories of these brave heroes of Van never pale in the memory of the Armenian Nation-the Nation they so loved and fought so heroically to defend.

It is firmly believed that even the rains of a thousand years could not now diminish the recorded valor of these noble men of Van.

Conditions
Prevailing In Vasbouragan
During The Period
September 1914
To May 1915

Chapter I

Turkish-Armenian Relations

The participation of Turkey in the First World War exposed Armenians to the worst vicissitudes of the gigantic clash.

Preceding the declaration of war, Armenians all over Turkey responded to mobilization with exemplary patriotism. Military men of the highest rank praised Armenian soldiers as most dependable and patriotic, while Turkish dailies extolled their morale and dedication in the protection of the common fatherland. The Armenian soldier had earned this distinction through his distinguished participation in the Italo-Turkish and the Balkan wars. Enver Pash lavished praises on the sector of the army. Nevertheless this same Pasha later became one of the arch plotters and executioners of the entire Armenian population within the domain of the Ottoman Empire.

Thousands upon thousands of Armenian young men of military age reported for enlistment as soon as rumors of war became persistent and the government resorted to general mobilization. They marched with bands playing, and the red flag with white crescent flying above their heads. Similar processions took place in all of the Armenian towns, villages and hamlets throughout Vasbouragan.

During the period of mobilization, the Armenian marketplace of Van freely contributed to the supply department of the Turkish army. Goods worth millions were piled in the government warehouses without prepayment and often, without even a receipt. The Armenian storekeeper and merchant provided the Turkish army with its every need, from hats to shoes. The Armenian artisan and craftsman, be he tailor, shoemaker, blacksmith, mason, goldsmith, or engraver, donated individual or collective services to the army. The already overburdened populace willingly participated in public contributions of bread, flour, fats, wool and other essential material for the war effort.

The entire weight of the war especially fell upon the Armenian peasants. With an inborn spirit of hospitality, they shared their meager supplies with soldiers leaving for the front and with Turkish gendarmes and police who stopped at their huts under

various pretexts. But these gendarmes “legally,” capriciously, and often savagely, despoiled the Armenian peasants of all their possessions. They confiscated not only grain and cereal, but also oxen and cows, and horses and flocks. In fact, all they had became the property of the Turkish government.

Under these circumstances the Armenian village became economically exhausted, facing inevitable famine and ruin. With all available hands serving in or for the Ottoman army and the harvest confiscated for its use, the Armenian village was being made to look like a ghost town¹.

Armenian physicians, without regard to age or citizenship, rendered great service in the armed forces. The Armenian pharmacist, likewise contributed his services while his stock of medicine was taken over by the Turkish Red Crescent.

Even before the outbreak of hostilities the attitude of the Turkish government towards the Armenian people and Armenian soldiers, who volunteered all assistance and did not shrink from any sacrifice, was not only discriminatory, but outright inimical.

Eventually it became plain that, under the guise of military necessity, the Turks aimed to ruin utterly the economy of the well to do Armenian towns and villages. Without regard to methods, the Turkish Military Council, with a small army of big and petty officials, confiscated all, while higher authorities gave them their blessing instead of punishing them.

The status of the Armenian soldier in the army was even worse. He felt discriminated against at every step. Overworked, abused, savagely beaten and shot on the smallest suspicion, his lot was similar to those miserable slaves that helped build the pyramids. He was constantly exposed to insults, and his race, language and religion held up to ridicule and denigration. The dutiful Armenian soldier was the last to be cared for when it came to food, clothing and shelter.

The attitude of the Turkish government was fast deteriorating, and after the declaration of war, it resorted to outrageous acts of cruelty and murder. The country was plunged into a state of anarchy. Traffic between villages and towns came to a stop. Individual murders and looting gave way to mass murders and wholesale plundering everywhere, beginning with the more distant sections of the country. Kurdish brigands

were reorganized and put into active duty by the Turkish government. Armenian villages were being constantly “searched” as a pretext for cruel beatings, repression, murder and looting.

During November, 1914, the Russian army advanced slightly along the eastern boundaries of Van. This was enough to inflame the Turks with added hatred towards Armenians. In order to implement the policy of total annihilation of Armenians, Turkish rulers, particularly Jevdet Bey, military governor of the eastern military zone, started to massacre innocent and defenseless Armenian villagers. Following the withdrawal of the Russian army from Sarai, the inhabitants of Avzarig and Akhorig as well as adjoining villages were put to the sword to the last man. Peasants from other villages in the area escaped to Van, destitute, hungry, and without shelter. Similar events took place at Bash Kale.

The entire Armenian population of Bash Kale was massacred immediately following the retreat of the Russian army. No one was spared because of age or sex. The good looking women and girls were brought to the Shamiram Turkish ward in Van to be auctioned off and to serve their bestial lust. Some ten thousand Armenians were massacred at this time. Not one village was left standing, not one home left intact, not one soul alive except the “fortunate” few that escaped to Van Aikesdan taking refuge in its streets and cellars after horrendous experiences. About this time the Armenian population of Alashgerd were being delivered the same fate of wholesale extermination.

In this preconceived and well-planned scheme for Armenian massacres, the total obliteration of the Armenian soldiery was contemplated, at first partially, then totally. First, they were systematically disarmed; then Turkish militiamen received secret orders to do away with them. The unburied corpses of Armenian soldiers were discovered in the Khoshab and Arjag regions.

The fate of the Armenian peasants was appallingly tragic. These hardworking people had to give up plowing the land and its harvest in order to bear arms. Yet they witnessed the plundering and the burning of their own villages, the massacre or the flight of their loved ones, the disarming and the disappearance of fellow soldiers, the approach

of the devastating tornado engendered by men for whom they had come to sacrifice their own lives.

In all of the Armenian sections of the province of Vasbouragan an atmosphere of frightful anxiety prevailed. Turkish militia engineered repeated clashes at Timar: at Ererin village in the same section, Turkish police and gendarmes opened fire on the unarmed and innocent villagers, pretending to search for arms, and killing more than a dozen people. Unable to stomach barbaric injustices, the villages resisted and a fight ensued. The overwhelmed and terrified population escaped to nearby villages and eventually to Van. A squadron of Turkish regulars arrived, ostensibly to reestablish order and to punish the offending militiamen. Instead, they pillaged the entire village, including the village church, and auctioned the spoils in the open markets of Van. Most of the homes in the village of Ererin were set on fire and the outstanding personages were brought to Van, imprisoned and put in irons.

In order to incite a clash at the village of Bairak, in Timar section Turkish police resorted to violence. The government sent regular troops and two cannons; they murdered a dozen men. Bairak and nearby villages were pillaged and put to the torch. The dispossessed, shelterless, and persecuted inhabitants flocked to the city. The Turkish government appealed to Aram and the Vramian to intervene to “help reestablish tranquility in the land” which later proved to be a ruse to cloak other treacheries it was brewing.

Aram and Vramian demanded the recall of troops from the region of Timar and indemnities paid to villages for the unjust plunder and murder. The government accepted the fact that “partial injustices have taken place by unconscionable soldiery and that compensation would be made.” But, of course, the Turkish government did not carry out its promises.

The situation along the southern boundry of Vasbouragan was as bad. In Garjgan, innocent Armenians were murdered. In the village of Pelu, district of Gavash, Turkish police returned, pretending extended search, but looting and burning the village. A feeble attempt at resistance was enough for them to sack the place completely. Horror stricken peasants fled to neighboring villages and saw their homes go up in flames. Not

one stone was left standing in the ten villages in the region of Gargar by the bestial Turkish police who also pursued the villagers up the snow clad mountains.

Concurrently, serious incidents of killings, plunder, arson, and clashes were taking place in the region of Haiotz-Tzor and Shatakh.

On the slopes of Mount Varak, three corpses were found; one was that of an unknown Armenian peasant, the other two were notorious Kurdish brigand chiefs. It was presumed that the Armenians, in self- defense, had slain the brigands that tried to waylay them. Others argued this was another trick of the government to invent grounds for further atrocities. The government ordered a thorough search of the monastery, arrested the shepherds and servants and threatened to burn down the whole monastery.

The government maintained a semblance of calm for a short period in reply to Aram's and Vramian's repeated pleadings. Three weeks later, on the pretext of investigating these incidents, it ordered the nearby village of Shoushantz occupied and had a detailed, though fruitless, search made. Yet the outstanding men among the villagers were arrested and put in the city jail, where they were subjected to beating and indignities. One of the villagers died in consequence. Unable to endure further confiscations and violence of the police, the terrorized population of Shoushantz fled to the city. The Turks looted everything and sold the livestock in the city markets. All attempts at intercession by Aram and Vramian met with no response. Three days after the forced occupation, the villagers were allowed to return to their village, which was now nothing but a heap of ashes.

As they approached the vary doors of the city, events were taking a turn for the worse. At the square of Norashen, the most densely populated Armenian ward in Aikesdan, Turkish police shot down a young man named Manoog, then opened an indiscriminate fire at passengers in the streets and school children. A fourteen year old schoolboy was shot to death.

¹ According to law, men between 20 and 45 years of age were subject to military service. Due to the ignorance of the law on the part of peasants and the high-

handedness of Turkish conscription officials, practically all able bodied men 17 to 45 were taken.

Chapter II

Certain Documented And Statistical Facts

The following seven villages in the lower Gargar administered by the governor of Bitlis; Tatzoo, Yeghekiş, Arpentz, Hogortzoo, Dzgôr, and Voriz were pillaged and burned within six days, February 13 to February 18, 1915. Half of the inhabitants fled to Moks, the rest to Gavash. There were 1,938 of these homeless, hungry, and unfortunate souls. Among those who travelled to Gavash three persons died due to exposure to winter cold, and most had frost bitten feet. The “Mudir” (governor) of Shenitzor, under the pretext of enforcing conscription, visited Gargar in company of 24 policemen. At the village of Yeghekiş, he summoned Armenian aldermen of all the villages of the district and had them severely beaten. The aldermen from Khntzorood and Halitz died under the bastinado causing great sorrow and indignation throughout Gargar.

Also on February 13th, about a dozen policemen stopped at the village of Hogortzoo where they attempted to torture and molest the women. The villagers, who already had heard of the death of the aldermen, attacked and killed four of the police. In the village of Dzgôr where Turkish officials attempted similar provocative acts, two policemen were killed. On the basis of these incidents the “Kaimakam” (the next higher official to Mudir) instructed Sheikh Said Ali to plunder and destroy all Armenian villages. At the sight of this bloodthirsty horde, the peasants of Gargar resorted to self-defense; they retreated, fighting and evacuating the villages. Vrushing Galoust, a loved and respected person, was killed.

The massacres at Sarai took place within the same few days. The “Kaimakam” ordered his police to precede to the village of Avzarig to conscript bearers for carrying fat to Sarai. A dozen of the peasants were pressed into service; two of these bearers were murdered as the group reached within a couple of hundred yards of the village. Returning to the village, they began to kill and plunder mercilessly. Sixty-three males and sixty-four females, some of them mere children, were butchered in a few hours.

Most women were raped before being killed. Only twenty-one males and four females escaped. They marched in the severe cold of the winter, barefooted, hungry and scantily dressed. On their way to Persia by way of Kara-Deren, some died of exposure, while others were abducted and forcibly proselytized into Islam. Very few were able to arrive at Salmasd, in Persia.

In view of this horrible tragedy, repeated appeals were made by the Armenian Prelacy, by Vramian, deputy in the Ottoman Parliament, and by the peasantry at Sarai, to the acting governor Sherif Bey to have the culprits punished. His attitude was evasive; he declared the stories lacked credibility, that the “Kaimakam” of Sarai had disclaimed any knowledge of them, and that the situation was confused due to the withdrawal of Russian forces from the region.

The rest of the Armenian villages in the region of Sarai were subject to similar acts of massacre, looting, and rape. Turkish police forced the male inhabitants of the village of Azdig to travel to Sarai ostensibly to help in the building of a Turkish barrack. While this was going on, Tahar, son of Hussein, compelled the male population of the other villages to join this group. Next the police separated the able bodied men, and, leading them some distance from the village, shot them all to death. With the assistance of the Kurds returning to the village this beastly mob finished the task of exterminating the rest.

The same day that atrocities were being perpetrated in the village of Avzarig and Asghig, another mixed group of Turkish police and Kurdish brigands entered Hasan-Tarman village and indiscriminately slaughtered one-hundred persons. This band also put ten Armenians from Tash-Oghlou village to the sword.

Also at this time, the ten Armenian families and some one-hundred people of Kara-Tzorig, were ravaged and massacred. Only two men survived; the young women were kidnapped by the Kurds.

Through coded orders from the governor, Kurdish brigand bands invaded the village of Nazaren on December 28, 1914. Here they murdered seven men, one women and two girls. They carried away more than one-hundred head of cattle, six thousand bushels of grain, and over fifteen thousand pounds of butter, fats, cheese. They robbed

the church to the bare walls. The terrorized population escaped to other villages and perished

On January 3rd, 1915, an army officer, accompanied by a number of gendarmes ordered the evacuation of the village of Satmans in the name of the governor. It took them four days to arrive at Gresh. Twelve infants were frozen to death. The remaining 120 people were ordered to remain in Gresh for three days. Here they were subjected to all sorts of indignities; those who could, escaped to other villages and to Salhane. This attempt cost the lives of eight men and women and five children. The ancient and prosperous village of Satmans was left in ruin. The gendarmes and the Kurds carried away two thousand head of cattle, two-hundred buffaloes, and all of the food stuff.

This policy of extermination and the extent of the bestiality will be recounted in the following verified incidents.

Women of the Avzarig village had buried the many dead in and around their village, but the “Kaimakam” of Sari compelled two old Armenian peasants to exhume all of them and lay them in the open fields where wolves and jackals could devour the remains. The same “Kaimakam” ordered evacuation of the entire population, including infants, old men and women, of Hasha-Tamran, Tash-Oghli and Kara-Tzor Armenian villages, in the severe cold of January, and have them driven into the ice and snow of the mountains. They first killed the village priest, Vartan, by first cutting his ears, then his nose, then gouging out his eyes. The wife of the martyr was forcibly married to Mahmed, one of the servants of Hussein Bey. The Kurds also snatched babies from the arms of their mothers, flung them to the ground, stuffed their tiny mouths with rubbish to silence them and suffocate them to death.

With the intent to provoke incidents, Turkish gendarmes entered Pelou, an Armenian village in the district of Gavash. They attempted to shoot down a young revolutionary. To avoid bloodshed he tried to secret himself in one of the houses. The gendarmes, assisted by a Kurdish brigand chief, surrounded the house and kept it under rifle fire. The revolutionary escaped after killing one of the attackers in self- defense.

This was cause enough for the “Kaimakam” of Vosdan to arrive in Pelou with a detachment of gendarmes, arrest a number of innocent people, burn down six homes, and kill four others through merciless beating. The raging flames of the burning homes attracted some three-hundred Kurds, who plundered the village while the peasants were trying to put out the fire. In utter despair, the villagers resorted to self-defense. The fight lasted all day. The once prosperous village of Pelou of one-hundred and thirty families was plundered and reduced to a heap of ashes, and the inhabitants expelled. An investigating committee, including deputy Vramian and Munir Bey, agreed the real culprit had been the “Kaimakam” of Vosdan, Shukry Bey, who instead of being punished, continued in his post.

In the course of the same week Kurdish mobs attacked the village of Atanantz in the district of Haiotz-Tzor. Already informed of the fate of Pelou, the peasants here put up a resistance and repulsed the attackers by killing their leader, Khurshid Agha. The same investigating committee was dispatched here. All evidence pointed to the culpability of the same Shukry Bey, the “Kaimakam” of Vosdan. Vramian succeeded in uncovering a letter by Shukry Bey to Hussein Agha of Satmans, blaming the latter for non-participation in the attacks against Armenians.²

The first attempt to incite trouble in Shatakh failed. The gendarme commissioned to kill two of the leaders, Hovsep Choloyan and Samuel Mesrobian, had a change of heart at the last minute and returned the murder weapon to Gora Bey.

A second attempt was made against the person of Bedros of Khumar. An old and experienced revolutionary, he was loved and respected by both the Armenian and Kurdish peasants whom he had, on many occasions, defended against the grasping Kurdish lords. He was invited to come to the police station and there treacherously murdered. To cover up the crime, the police started to shoot at random and telegraphed to Shatash stating that Bedros and a number of revolutionaries had attacked the police station and that he was killed in the skirmish. The ensuing investigation brought out the true facts.

The simultaneous massacres at Aghpag, Sarai and Alashgerd, the pillage and burning of the villages in the Timar region, the provoked clashes in Haiotz-Tzor,

Gavash, and Gargar, and the treachery at Shadakh, revealed a plan of systematic extermination of the entire Armenian population of Vasbouragan. Appeals to countermand the orders were censored or pigeonholed. It was impossible to communicate with the outside world; it was impossible to get through to Constantinople. The Armenian Prelacy was refused permission to ask for relief, from the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople, for the tens of thousands of displaced and starving people. The coded telegrams by Vramian to Ottoman Parliament were never forwarded.

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation, in its convention at Erzerum, had resolved to serve the Ottoman fatherland faithfully in this hour of crisis. Armenian leaders, whether ecclesiastic or temporal, exhorted patience and sacrifice.

² The incidents at Haiotz-Tzor and Sarai are recorded in the book by Henri Barbe, titled "The Land of Terror." Information therein has been furnished by Seignior Spordoni, the Italian Vice-Consul.

Chapter III

The Memorandum Of Vramian (In Code) To The Cabinet In Constantinople

“During the past four months an abnormal situation has been created in the attitude of the government towards Armenian people. Local officialdom are not properly concerned about this situation.

“The deplorable incidents at Garjgan and Gavash, as tragic as they are, did not produce any change in this attitude.

“From the very first day I arrived in Van, I deemed it my sacred duty to make an impartial diagnosis of the situation and to point out remedies. At this moment, there is overwhelming evidence that I was not wrong in my assumptions; therefore, I entreat you to give the points raised herein your serious consideration.

“There are four interlocking causes to the present abnormal situation: (a) desertions, (b) disarming of Armenian soldiers and gendarmes, (c) incidents that threaten the existence of the Armenian people, (d) the declaration of “Jihad” (Moslem Holy War) and the wrong interpretation placed upon it by the people.

“Desertion by Armenians, after general mobilization, is due to three fundamental reasons: (a) those over 24 years of age have had no military training at all, (b) those under 24 years of age were unable to endure the extreme shortages in food and clothing due to our precipitous entry in the war, (c) the religious needs of our men were not merely neglected but a contemptuous attitude has developed. Even the worst criminal enjoys the privilege of spiritual solace; why deny it to our soldiers?

“At the beginning, desertions by Armenians were rare and had the above mentioned grievances been remedied, there would have been no desertions. Instead the government engendered an atmosphere of distrust, caused incidents of far reaching terror. The proclamation of “Jihad” helped give desertions a political intent. Thus, the disarming of Armenian soldiers and gendarmes could not fail to create a stifling atmosphere of suspicion, deteriorating the relations between the Armenian and the Moslems elements. The facts are (a) Armenian soldiers are being used as beasts of

burden deeply hurting their human and racial feeling, and also degrading them in the eyes of their Moslem companions. (b) These disarmed Armenian soldiers are being guarded by Moslem soldiers and, being unarmed and forced to work among highly excited Moslem people, their lives are in constant jeopardy. There are persistent rumors of Armenian soldiers having been shot, drowned stabbed or otherwise made to disappear particularly at or near the battle fronts of Garin or Iran. (c) The disarmed Armenian soldiers have been removed from their regions and sent to unknown destinations under various pretexts.

“(d) All Molems elements, particularly the Kurds 16 to 60 years old, have been issued arms under the guise of their being in the militia. These were entrusted with police and gendarmery authority and became domineering and restrictive, (e) These militiamen committed depredations in Armenian villages. The militiamen of Timar provoked the incidents at Aliur, Khavantz and Amiug villages. The militia, headed by an army officer and a squad of soldiers from Bitlis, committed the murders and plunders in Garjgan, Pelou, Nanigantz, Untzak and Yeghis villages. The mass maltreatment of Mukhguner and its despoliation were done by militiamen led by Omer Agha. On their way to the front the six-hundred strong militia force, under Pshare Chato, spread terror and devastation in Manazgerd and regions northeasterly of Van. The depredations of Kurdish “volunteers” was temporarily halted by the protests of the German Consul there. Kurdish militia completely ransacked the twelve Armenian villages in Silvan, province of Dikranagered (Diarbekir).

“(f) Notorious Kurdish chiefs with a record of many crimes were released from prison, issued additional arms and allowed to stay in areas heavily populated by Armenians; Mehmed Emin, Moussa, and Kassim Bey were among those released.

“(g) The large number of desertions from the army of armed Kurds. The mountainous regions of Van and Bitlis abound with such deserters.

“(h) The stationing of Kurdish Hamidie among Armenian villages caused wholesale plunder and ransacking of them. Thus, the squad under Saturn Bey pillaged Hassan-Tamran, Akhorig, Boghaz-Kessen, Hazara, Man tan and Bzdig villages.

“(i) In spite of formal denials the massacres at Bash-Kale, Akhorig, Avzarig, Hassan-Tamran, Hazara and Tash-Oghlou are facts.

“One cannot fail to conclude that for Armenians’ security of honor, of life, and of property has disappeared. The government has assumed a posture of mistrust towards Armenians, thus aggravating the already tense relations between Armenians and the Kurds.

“Security of honor, life and property transcend all other rights. They are as sacred as they are natural. A government that is rational, conscionable, and sane cannot compel the Armenian to enter the labor battalions beset by danger, and be prevented to serve his country honorably. This is being done while, every minute, his family is exposed to the murderous whims of his semi-savage neighbors.

“Whereas the Moslems disregard “Jehad” and desert the battle front, we believe it to be unjust to scorn the Armenian as a deserter, particularly because he is denied the very instrument by which he can serve best, his rifle.

“Whereas, there are many justifiable reasons, whether social, religious or political in character;

“Whereas there is constant danger to the homes and hearths of the men in the labor corps, as evidenced by happenings in the provinces of Van, Bitlis, Erzeroum and Diarbekir;

“Whereas the many thousands of Armenians in the army are being stopped from rendering useful service on the one hand and are not available to till the land for the next harvest, resulting in catastrophe;

“Therefore it is evident that unless circumstances resulting in desertion are corrected very soon we will be confronted with the grave evil of mass brigandage. It is only natural for any human being, driven by hunger and pursued by the law, to resort to brigandage in order to save their lives or to find a piece of bread.

“I wish to submit the following propositions to the careful consideration of the central government:

(1) To keep under sums only those classes which have seen military service during the years of 1910 to 1914;

(2) Classify Armenian soldiers as gendsumes, stationed in their own area, until such time as confidence can be reestablished between Armenians and the government;

(3) Establish a reasonable head tax to relieve men over 24 from military service and the present degrading tasks assigned to them;

(4) Discover the culprits for the mass murder of Bash-Kale, Akhorig, Azvarig, and Hazara and punish them in accordance with the law.

(5) Immediately enforce the laws concerning village guards which was planned during the governorship of Tahsin Bey. All Kazas and Nates (major and minor territorial subdivisions) are aware of these laws.

(6) End the search for arms among Armenians; they have the right to own arms as long as the semi-savage neighbors, the Kurds, have not been disarmed.

(7) Pay adequate indemnity to families who have lost members in the massacres, and recover and return plundered goods to their rightful owners.

(8) Turkish militia should be issued arms only at the fighting front. They should not be allowed to pass through or to sojourn in villages. They should not be entrusted with the duties of gendarmery.

(9) Recover and return all property belonging to the pillaged churches. Allow women and girls, forced to embrace Islam, to return to their families, as well as allowing men who have been proselytized by threats and terror to return to their original faith.

“The above proposals are motivated with a desire on my part to put an end to present abnormal situation, to quell fears and suspicions among Armenians, and to foster confidence among them towards the government. Certainly nothing is to be gained by trying to cover up the facts that Armenian soldiers are being disarmed, that these unarmed men are being treated as slaves, that massacres and pillages are taking place and that Armenians in general are being treated with unwarranted severity. We cannot help but be reminded of the black dates of 1895-1896 under Sultan Hamid II.

“The confidence engendered by the establishment of constitutional regime and assurances of safety were not sufficient to really forge an indissoluble tie between the two races for their mutual and economic benefits. Unfortunately, Turkey under the constitution, was unable to redress the wrongs which Turkey under despotism had

perpetrated. The massacres at Adana, unresolved land questions, and others, forced Armenians to suspect and to sense the omens of an infernal plan for their total extinction. The unfortunate participation of Turkey in the war forestalled all hope and endeavor towards amelioration.

“To fight this war, it is necessary to strain all of our physical and spiritual forces. To this end the government proclaimed “Jihad” to stir up the Moslems elements. The Armenians had a right to expect that the New Turkey, with the view of inflaming their patriotism, would assure them of equal rights and privileges. We had all the more reason to expect that the government itself would carry out the reforms after the abrogation of the “Capitulations” and the return home of Messrs, Hoff and Westeneng.

“The Holy War had no appeal for the Kurd who deserted in droves. It could have no appeal for the Christian Armenian.

“Plans for general and positive reforms appeal to Armenians, but all our pleas fell on deaf ears. The grave political mistake of considering Armenians as step sons is repeated. Now it is perhaps our last opportunity to inculcate the idea and the consciousness of the brotherhood of Turkish and Armenian races.

“I propose therefore that the Kalifate proclaim, without delay, the satisfaction of these very modest requests. To this end it will be necessary to negotiate with the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople and with Armenian political parties. I wish to make the following suggestions:

(a) The number of Armenian deputies in the Ottoman Parliament shall be proportioned to their number and elected by the Armenian population.

(b) The Administrative Councils in the six Armenian populated provinces shall have 50% Armenian representation.

(c) Armenians shall constitute 50% of all other officials in the above six provinces.

(d) In these six provinces, in all departments of government, the Armenian language shall be on equal footing with Turkish language.

(e) The Armenian school shall enjoy the same rights and privileges as government supported schools, with an educational tax to be collected by the government from Armenians, and turned over to the Armenian Prelacy.

(f) An adequate number of Armenian young men shall be selected for training in the highest military institutions to serve as officers, their number to be in proportion to the number of Armenians under arms.

(g) Put an end, once and for all, to the encroachment of “Efka” (Islam’s ecclesiastical property laws) and to recognize the indisputable rights of Armenians to their community properties.

(h) Resolve all land disputes and return to the Armenians the lands which have been unjustly seized from them.

“For a long time the government by “Ittihad” has recognized the justice of the above, and similarly demands them as elementary human rights. Had these principles been practiced, they would have created an era of mutual trust and friendship, unprecedented in history; they would have had a most beneficial influence upon Armenians beyond the borders, in Caucasus. It would have integrated the hopes and aspirations of Armenians all over the world with the fate of the Ottoman Empire.

“It has been my desire, Your Excellency, to make an impartial analysis of the political situation in the six Eastern provinces. In the name of the general welfare of our common fatherland, I beg of Your Excellency to study this analysis with the thoroughness and open mindedness it deserves, rather than the usual “Istila” (acknowledgement of receipt of the memorandum).”

“Most respectfully yours, “

“Onnig Tertzagian-Vramain”

“Deputy from Van”

February 27, 1915

Van-Aikesdan

Chapter IV

The Ignoble Conspiracy

The initial reaction of the government to the pleas of Vramian, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the rest, was to appoint Jevdet Bey as governor of Van. Jevdet Bey had been the sub-governor (Mutessarif) of the region of Hekkiary. He was the person who had organized the massacres at Bash-Kale during the past months. He entered Van with a contingent of some 2,000 regular troops, equipped with held and mountain artillery, all withdrawn from the fighting fronts. He hastened to extend a friendly hand to Aram and to Vramian who had come to meet him. He expressed the government's, as well as his own, "gratitude" for the latter's efforts in pacifying the villages of Gavash and Vosdan and in finding just solutions for the critical developments in Timar.

Only a few days after his arrival, the nature of Jevdet Bey's plans became obvious. With undue haste and severity he demanded the conscription of all the Armenian male population between the ages of 18 and 45 into labor battalions. This was a transparent device to cover up his plans for their wholesale slaughter in far away Kurdish regions; at the same time this would deprive the rest of the population of all means of resistance. Events and incidents occurring almost daily left no room for doubt.

Although certain of the diabolical intents of Jevdet Bey, repeated attempts were made by Vramian, Aram and the Armenian Prelacy, to have Armenians serve in the fighting forces, rifle in hand, to fight and to die for the common fatherland. These appeals were based on the constitutional rights of Armenians and had been honored during the previous war; nevertheless, both the central government and Jevdet Bey categorically refused to accede. In a last desperate effort to save Armenian youth from labor battalions, which factually meant sending them to be slaughtered, it was offered to redeem them from service by the payment of forty-three Turkish Liras in gold.

However, Jevdet did agree to one compromise. Instead of all reporting at once, he agreed to have five-hundred men report each week to be dispatched immediately,

without arms, to areas near the frontiers, providing the entire force was delivered within two months.

The sensitive youth of Van could not subscribe to the spirit of these negotiations. It considered unarmed enlistment debasing to national honor, intolerable on the one hand, and utterly ruinous to the best interests of both the government and the Armenian people on the other. The more impatient and hot headed elements openly expressed their distrust of the government and insisted on resistance now rather than submission to sheepish slaughter later. They were caustic in castigating the “cautious and conservative” policy of their leaders, and reminded them, again and again, of the disastrous consequences of exactly such policies during the massacres of 1895 and the events of 1908 when the government was allowed to seize the great quantities of arms and ammunition. They demanded a voice in the shaping of our course in this hour of crisis, they demanded a meeting with the leaders. The meeting took place on the 15th of April, 1915, at the headquarters of “Ashkhadank” press. The three leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Aram, Ishkhan, and Vramian attended the meeting. Ishkhan was content to give a few words of advice, Aram was tensely silent but Vramian took upon himself the task of defending the policy of caution. Calm and with prophetic insight, he made the following statements, among others, which characterize the extreme anxiety of the times and the supreme nobility of his idealism.

“You talk about conspiracies by the government and I know one of these days my dead body will be found somewhere along Khach Poghan. I realize the five-hundred men we have promised to deliver to the government as a first step is like condemning them to an uncertain fate, perhaps to death. But it is not for us to start, or to signal, the unleashing of the murderous tempest which, like yourselves, we are convinced will burst upon us soon, in spite of all our attempts for peace and all our concessions. Our sole purpose is to survive this tremendous blow with minimum loss of life. Better that Vramian perish. Better that one Ishkhan be assassinated, than to let five-hundred men in the labor corps be exposed to inevitable death. Indeed, let one whole district perish through fire and sword for the sake of saving the majority, the backbone of our being. Only the moment when the enemy presses its sword at the collective neck of our race,

and all other avenues are closed to us, no one will dare to blame you for resorting to arms in self-defense.”

The audience was deeply impressed by Vramian’s inspiring talk. The fiery leaders pledged to continue loyalty to the idea of protecting the collective existence of the race by the way of self-sacrifice. Representatives of all political parties, national organizations and the Prelacy convened at Norashen church on the 14th of April, 1915, and resolved to meet the demands of the government for a periodic supply of men for the labor battalions. The first contingent was to be sent to Arjesh for building roads. The assembly also resolved to issue a proclamation, in the name of Bishop Yeznig Nergararian, as vicar of the Prelacy, inviting the people to perform their “civic duties.” They appointed a special committee to take the census of males between the ages of 18 to 45.

Following is a copy of the proclamation:

“Armenian Community:

“According to the latest decree by the government since the entry of the Ottoman Empire in the war, Armenian are now required to serve in agricultural and road building tasks. However, due to the rigors of the season and other causes, some of the Armenian soldiers have failed to be at their posts.

“Now that the season for plowing and road building is at hand and confident that both the government and your national authorities have taken all precautions to safeguard your lives, your honor, as well as the welfare of your families, we urgently advise the community to respond, without delay, to the government’s demands and hasten the performance of their duties as citizen.”

“God Bless You.

Vicar of the Prelacy of Van Bishop Yeznig Nergararian”

“April 15, 1915 Prelacy of Van”

All the pleas and concessions found no response. The city of Van was becoming more and more like an armed camp. Jevdet Bey had withdrawn two thousand regulars from the battle lines; the city was teeming with hordes of Kurdish brigands, with their followers, mounted and on foot. In addition, two thousand militiamen were on hand. Further, the government issued arms and ammunition to Turkish residents of Van between the ages of 15 and 80 years. Twelve pieces of artillery were stationed at strategic points. All this was being done at a time when crucial and bloody battles were taking place at the Russo- Turkish front...

The situation was even worse in Shadakh. Here Hovsep Choloyan, principal of the parish schools and a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, was insidiously arrested. All negotiations, by local Armenians to free him, failed. Events took place more precipitously at Shadakh, thus forewarning the people of Van and of the whole province.

The state of siege and the events there were unknown at Van. On April 14th, teacher Dikran, for the first time brought news from Shadakh and a report from the revolutionary committee, that the events at Shadakh described in detail proved the criminal intent of the government, and asked for help.

Jevdet Bey invited Aram and Vramian to call on him on the 16th of April. He requested that, accompanied by Turkish policemen, they proceed to Shadakh forthwith for the purpose of terminating the troubles there. Jevdet Bey requested particularly that Ishkhan, "whom both Armenians and Kurds highly respected," be a member of this mission.

Upon their return, it was decided to have Ishkhan, along with several bodyguards, leave for Shadakh that very evening in the company of the Turkish chief of police and his retinue of police officers. It took but a few minutes for Ishkhan to get ready. With him were three of his most devoted comrades, Vahan Khranian, Kotot Boghos, and Mihran Der Markarian, a native of Shadakh. All three were vehemently opposed to the policy of appeasement adopted by Aram, and Vramian and Ishkhan had some difficulty in persuading them to accompany him on the mission. In bidding farewell to his friends, one of the men, Vahan, said, "Again we are being led into a trap,

to certain and useless death, but do not be deceived.” The day following the departure of Ishkhan, the committee appointed to take census was busy registering the names of the first five-hundred young men for the labor corps.

The schools were open on this the 17th day of April; also open were the shops at Khach Pghan, Arark and Norashen sectors. A number of merchants and tradesmen from Aikesdan had left for their places of business in the old city.

The intense tension created by the incidents at Shadakh was subsiding. The appointment of Ishkhan as peacemaker compelled the most suspicious to concede to the wisdom of compromise and a policy of appeasement, in spite of the gross injustices by the government, and sacrifice as necessary to preserve the existence of the race... It proved to be the deceptive calm before the storm.

The chiefs of police, of the precincts of Khach Poghan and Arark, were instructed by Jevdet Bey to inform both Vramian and Aram of their wish to meet him at 10;00 A.M., April 17th.

Vramian was the first to receive the message, but was unaware that Aram also had been asked to report. He secreted all important papers and statements of accounts, as well as thirty pieces of Turkish gold liras in a drawer. He also left a note for Aram, informing him of his departure to meet the governor, and reminding him of the decision not to go together in order to avoid being arrested at the same time. Reflecting on his premonition of impending death and his knowledge of Aram's compelling desire to know and evaluate all events, regardless of the dangers involved, this last note of Vramian's was destined to have crucial importance for the defense of Van.

The police chief at Arark was not as successful in locating Aram. He had left home to visit the editorial staff of the Ashkhadank daily and then to proceed to Vramian's house for the customary evaluation of the current situation. He was at the latter's home when the police informed him of the governor's request; he had noticed the note in the meantime. He sent the messenger away, promising to leave shortly. He wanted to wait for the return of Vramian. He waited for Vramian's long overdue return; then the police chief returned to impress Aram with the urgency of the governor's request. Agitated and angry, Aram jumped in a carriage, directing the driver to take him

to the old city, posthaste. Another Armenian carriage driver returning from the old city noticed this and, driving his carriage head on, stopped the other. The driver jumped out and ran to Aram exclaiming, “For God’s sake Aram, where are you going?” Have you not heard that Ishkhan had been assassinated on his way to Shadakh? Don’t you know that Vramian is under arrest? Do not go, for heaven’s sake.” Shocked by the news, Aram escaped through orchards and returned to the premises of Ashkhadank, he miraculously escaped the trap laid by Jevdet.

Upon arrival, Jevdet Bey informed Vramian that the government had demanded his return to Constantinople the same evening. His remonstrances as to the inviolability of his person as a member of the Ottoman Parliament, and other protests, went unheeded; he was placed under arrest.

Unconfirmed reports of Ishkhan’s and his companion’s murder were widespread. The news of Vramian’s arrest and the extraordinary manner in which Aram had been sought left no room for doubt that the rumors were true.

A report by Joseph Khlghatian received by the Central Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation of Van, described the assassination.

“Ishkhan and his three companions arrived at Hirj village on Friday, late at night. They preferred to stop over at their old friend’s, Kiarim Oghly Rashid’s home. While enjoying the supper and the hospitality of their Kurdish host, with their weapons laid away, twelve armed brigands rushed in and killed all four. The brigands had been sent from Van, by order of Jevdet Bey, to carry out the sinister mission.

“I am informed that the bodies were thrown in a well after thorough mutilation. Their arms and horses have been expropriated. Armenian peasants have been massacred, as was to be expected, and only one fellow escaped.

“It looks like it is our turn now. Many thousands of armed Kurds, mounted and on foot, from Nordouz and Khishab have blocked all the roads in Haiotz-Tzor. The Kurds are led by Lezgi, son of Shajir Agha. We are preparing to defend ourselves, but there can be no hope of success in view of the preponderance of enemy strength. We severely lack both men and arms...Farewell.”

April 17, 1915 Haiotz-Tzor

“Cordially yours,
Hovsep Khlghatian”

Vramian’s admonition of a few days ago had been fulfilled. The moment had arrived. Pursuing the policy of yielding further was not only insane but was also contrary to the spirit of the Federation as well as to the sentiments of the intrepid youth of Van. The two great men who had been exhorting caution and forbearance had themselves been its tragic first victims. The death of Ishkhan and the disappearance of Vramian were important factors in organizing and inspiring the youth of Van. Their assassination shocked the timid and the brave alike. They all concurred; the only way to survive was to resist.

Hmayag Manoogian, an eyewitness and participant in the fighting in Van gave the following evaluation of the effect of the news of Ishkhan’s death on the people of Van.

“The sudden and tragic death of Ishkhan and the surrounding circumstances furnished the needed spark. Everybody, whether old or young, male or female, partisan or neutral, reactionary or revolutionary, felt, with an explosive force, that there could be no other choice than armed resistance. The choice was instinctive and elemental; it did not need the persuasion of inspired speeches, nor was it the outcome of counseling and ballots. Ishkhan's death was the cause of the unification of all our capabilities for a single objective. It molded an irresistible will to survive and to conquer. Petty anxieties were forgotten, personalities and quarrels laid aside, as collective effort became the overpowering obsession. Despair and defeatism vanished and the God of Victory spread its wings over the youth of Van.”

To this I add my own reflections, as recorded in my diary, only a few hours after the news of Vramian’s arrest.

“I arrived at Norashen in great haste. Here it looked as if a gigantic tremor had demolished the buildings forcing the people of Aikesdan into the streets. They seem to be awestruck suffering from uncontrolled hysteria.

“This mob, at times, converges into a group to listen to the latest foreboding news, then disperses in all directions in fear and in anger. Further on, I notice mobs surging, one after the other, like the waves of the sea. Some are running hither and dither, lost in sweat. Where are they going and why? Shop doors are being locked and muffled preparations are being started in cellars. Groups of young men, stripped for action, cross the streets and orchards; when they meet they whisper a few words and hurry on. There are throngs of people in the streets and women and children watch from open doors and windows. Some are crying, some are lost in somber thought, some are pallid with fear, while others are happy for they disdain death and are anxious for the impending crisis.

“I directed my steps to the house of Sahag Bey crossing the orchards of Aghesatzor. Here I met a group of youth openly armed with Mauser pistols, ready to move to Khach Poghan to prevent any treachery by the enemy. Standing by the garden gate, the mistress of the house helps her two young daughters to evacuate the contents. They move the furniture, bedding, etc., to hiding places. The owner of the house, Manoog Agha Gosbarian, is consulting with the defense leader to determine the most likely directions of enemy attacks and the best ways to counter them. Manoog is a man of experience and his house has a history of its own, as it was here, in 1908, that the revolutionary’s bomb felled the traitor, Davo of Dher.

“Dickran, the leader, is already busy constructing ramparts. Seven or eight youngsters, some 17 to 18 years of age, armed with Mauser pistols, are his assistants. They clamor for rifles. A light hearted bunch, they sing and dance while helping to build defenses. One of these is Levon Shaljian, a jovial youth, a ham actor, who led his fellow students in dancing and singing;

“To mountain Varak let us repair
Ishkhan has come with Mauser”

“They are working, singing, dancing, and frolicking, and waiting for the moment when the first enemy bullet whistles through the air as the signal to avenge the death of Ishkhan.

“I proceed to Khach Poghan, meandering through many orchards. Here Nalbandian’s orchard was crowded with young men, some armed, the rest unarmed; it looks like whoever could, had arrived. These had not been advised of the tragic news and were busy discussing strategy. They are a radiant and pleasant lot, happy that, finally, the chance has come to fight back and avenge the death of their self-sacrificing and optimistic leaders.”

Chapter V

The Prelude

Aram, who had miraculously escaped certain death by the ingenious trap laid out by Jevdet, now instructed his party members and the community to be on the alert for sudden assaults by the Turks. In order to gain a little time, the Italian vice-consul, Signor Spordoni, was requested to meet with Jevdet to find out reasons for Vramian's arrest, Ishkhan's assassination, and the beleaguered state of the city.

The other members of the delegation were; Dr. C. Ussher, American missionary, Gevork Jidechian, Chairman of the National Council, and Avedis Terzibashian, a merchant.

The delegation presented itself to the governor; it described the apprehension and anxiety pervading the Armenian community of Van, and explained that, as always, Armenians are now willing to submit to all lawful demands by the authorities. They requested that channels be opened for direct contact with the Minister of the Interior and the Armenian Patriarchate at Constantinople, to find a solution to the existing problems and hence clear up the intolerable atmosphere. Further, they queried the governor about the reasons for Vramian's arrest, pointing out the fact that while it could be of no possible benefit to the government, it was sure to arouse suspicions among Armenians. They also inquired whether or not the rumors about the death of Ishkhan were true, inasmuch as he undertook the mission at the behest of the governor and was accompanied by his police chief and twelve policemen. Finally, Jevdet Bey was asked about the reasons behind the strict military seige being maintained in and around the city.

Jevdet's answers to these momentous questions were evasive. He declined to set Vramian free because, he claimed, the order came from Constantinople. As to Ishkhan's assassination, he stated he had dispatched soldiers to arrest him; if he resisted he was sure to be killed. He denied the existence of a state of seige, claiming he had nothing against the people and liked Aram personally, whom he would like very much

to meet again. The governor advised the delegation not be unduly alarmed and to wait for his forthcoming plans.

The delegation conveyed these cynical answers to Aram; the last hope for a peaceful solution was shattered.

The urgency of the situation prompted indefatigable Aram and his assistant, Gregory of Bulgaria, to frenzied activity. Defense positions were set up hurriedly wherever Turkish attacks were anticipated. Some of the defenders possessed arms, but those lacking arms were classed as reserves. By the 17th of April, the following strong points had been established: Khach Poghan, Sahag Bey, Arark, Yeni-Mahla, Arijoghly, Avoyi Dar, Ourpat Creed, Taza Karez, Hanguisner, Shan Tagh, and small Kanderchi.

The night of April 17th was calm; Armenians were on guard at their positions. The following day, Sunday, as during the previous night, Armenians living in sections adjoining Turkish quarters, fearing impending massacres and pillage, evacuating their homes, and moving to the interior of Armenian quarters and to American and German compounds where they were well received.

Turkish soldiers occupied the Armenian church and school buildings at Arark and the British consulate during the night of April 18th. All three buildings were substantially built, occupied a commanding position and were a great menace to Armenians. This movement had been detected in time. There was strong desire to frustrate them, but Aram forestalled it. He would wait until Turks initiated the attack, because he wanted to have some idea of their plan and to save a little time to complete the line of defenses.

The National Coalition Assembly convened again on the 18th of April. It was decided to appeal to the governor once again in the forlorn hope of relaxing tensions. Herr Sporri, the German missionary, joined members of the former delegation for this mission.

At this interview, Jevdet was curt and crude, but more explicit. He rejected all requests for Vramian's release; instead he demanded the surrender of all Armenians between the ages of 18 and 45 and of all arms within the next twenty-four hours, on pain of demolishing all of Aikesdan. He concluded the interview by informing both Dr.

Ussher and Herr Sporri of his decision to send fifty soldiers to each of their compounds for the protection of their lives and property. “What has been started must be carried to completion. I do not wish to hear another word about this ungrateful and traitorous people. Yes, we must carry through what has already been started.”

Dr. Ussher reminded the governor that Aram would oppose his sending soldiers to either the American or the German premises. “In my opinion, it is not necessary because Armenians will never harm us, the same as your soldiers... but if you insist, then send them.”

The delegation returned dejected, and without one ray of hope. All contact with the government was now ended. “Let us die with honor” became the clarion call on every lip, even of those who in true Christian spirit had believed in forgiveness and forbearance all their lives. On his return, Dr. Ussher, an uncompromising, splendid Christian missionary, stopped at the headquarters of Ashkhadank and addressed the anxious crowd there in his somewhat broken Armenian, “I believe it is now up to you to defend your lives, because all hope is ended. Unfortunately, I can do no more... Certainly, oh certainly, you must defend yourselves. I wish you success.”



The Central Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Van received the following letter from Shirin Hagopian, its agent for Arjag and Kharagonis:

“There is no way to restrain the enemy. They demand the surrender of young men from Kharagonis. There are continuing arrests in these regions, and we feel massacres to be imminent. Armed and mounted Kurds have congregated here from all directions; from the Russo-Turkish battlefield, artillery pieces and militiamen have been withdrawn and brought here. I have reliable news that massacres will start on the 19th of April.

“Yesterday, April 18th, our messenger and my close friend, Nuro, the Kurd, informed me that Zia Bey, the district governor of Pergri, had summoned all the elders of the region, giving them strict orders not to give asylum to any Armenian, or protect

them in any way, even when the latter embrace the religion of Islam during the massacres; those who disobey will be subjected to the same fate as their Armenian proteges.

“I have, so far, succeeded in avoiding arrest. I have no doubt that I will be killed, but I will die with my people. Do not view this as a cry of hopelessness. We are determined to defend ourselves against forces ten times stronger. We sorely lack weapons; if possible, help us.

“I have just been informed that the massacres are to begin in a matter of hours. Turkish regulars, militia and the Kurds are arresting people, and beating others; women are being attacked without restraint. My companions and I have pledged to defend the people to the last cartridge.”

“Farewell, Shirin”

April 17, 1915

Arjag

Practically all of the regions inhabited by Armenians in the province of Vasbouragan shared in the tragic fate of Arjag and Haiotz-Tzor. The curtain was to be raised on this bloody drama on the 19th of April. This fact has been established by documents and information received at the headquarters of the Revolutionary Federation. It was supported by the events that took place both during and after the struggle to prove, that all had been planned and perpetrated by the government through its faithful and crafty agents, one of whom was Jevdet Bey, the governor general of Vasbouragan.

The entire governmental machinery was geared to the task of exterminating the Armenian element. The old city was isolated from Aikesdan; traffic among villages was stopped through the establishment of guard houses and mobile units. Kurdish chieftains and their tribes were alerted to be ready for massacres of a given signal. Fighting fronts were being robbed of their strength to reinforce the sinister undertaking. Revolutionary leaders had either been arrested or killed; those at large were being

relentlessly pursued. Under the guise of conscription, men were arrested or forced to be fugitives. The grim specter of wholesale massacres hovered over isolated and defenseless Vasbouragan.

Now the mask of deceit and hypocrisy was finally torn off, revealing the culpability of the government in every detail and every phase of this attempt at genocide of the Armenian people. Some friendly Kurds whispered to their Armenian neighbors, “Be aware, save yourselves any way you can; Jevdet has been brought back from the Persian front to massacre you and your leaders.” Kurds met with similar treatment by the Turks, later.

Peno, a Kurdish gendarme and a native of Gomer village in Shadakh, was arrested on suspicion at the village of Sivdag, but was released through the intercession of Azad, an agent of the Revolutionary Federation. On the eve of the incidents at Shadakh he wrote, “Friend Azad, I owe you one debt of gratitude which I will never forget and wish to warn you to be very careful these days. Tomorrow the Kaimakam (governor) of Shadakh is going to start enlisting Armenians. He knows you are going to avoid enlisting, so he will start massacring Armenians. Lezgin, chieftain of Grav clan in Nordouz, with his thirty men, is now waiting for orders at Haiotz-Tzor. Jevdet Bey has ordered him to wait in readiness for the start of trouble at Shadakh, when he can arrive and avenge his father’s death. The clans of Yezdinan and Alan have already arrived here for the purpose. The gendarmy of Khoumar have been called back. The armed forces of the clans of Khalilans and Khavshdians, from Nordouz and Pervar, have been instructed to report for action here. The Kurds of the neighboring villages, as well as the militiamen, have been issued weapons. Hoping to have discharged my obligation to you, I beg that only God, you and myself know of this letter.”

“Peno of Gomer”

Representatives of the Armenian political parties held a meeting on the 18th of April, to survey the situation. In view of the extraordinary tensions and a situation that was worsening by the hour, there was unanimous agreement that the government had

decided to annihilate the entire Armenian population of Van. All agreed to pool all resources for self-defense, to be placed at the disposal of a committee to be known as the Armenian Defense Command. With unanimous approval, Gregory of Bulgaria, Gaidzag Arakel, and Armenag Yegarian were selected. The first two were members of the Federation while the third was a member of the Armenian Democratic Party. They were well qualified, being experienced in guerilla warfare, and loved and respected for their coolness, cunning, and bravery. Two auxiliary offices were also created at this time to assist the defense committee, intelligence, and the control and distribution of weaponry. Hmayag Manoogian, Onnig Mukitarian and Armenag Poghahaian headed the intelligence service all being at the same time secretaries to the Defense Command. Assisting these men were Vartan Babigian, Arpiar Safrasdian, Hrant Kaligien and Garabed Ajem Khachoyan. The committee for the control and distribution of weaponry was composed of David Papazian, V. Der Boghossian, Garabed Baylerian, and Gabriel Semerjian.

After the loss of Vramian and Ishkhan, Aram was the only person endowed with the gift of leadership; he assumed the moral responsibility of inspiring courage, endurance and hope, and coordinating and supervising the activities of the various bodies.

The Defense Command embarked on its tasks by instructing the resistance leaders through the following bulletin:

“To area leaders, position leaders, and fighting men; to all fighting for survival;

“It has been impossible to yield further to the unjustifiable demands of our enemy. It has become amply evident that Turks want to carry out, at all costs, their plan for the extermination of Armenians. We are now forced to enter the arena of bloody battle. In spite of all our desire for peace and attempts to maintain it, we must defend our people to the last drop of our blood. In order that we may hope to succeed, we recommend our fighting men carry out the following instructions:

(1) Our basic plan is defensive except when it becomes necessary to secure more strategic positions or to terrorize the enemy when offensive action is allowed.

(2) Area leaders are responsible to area leaders, and fighting forces are answerable to their leaders.

(3) Armed men at any defense position may not leave their post at will. If allowed temporary or permanent leave, his arms and ammunition shall be left with the leader, without exception.

(4) It is imperative to be sparing of ammunition in the event of attack. Fire only when you can see the enemy and are certain your bullet will find its mark.

(5) Each group must fire directly on the enemy attacking its position. Do not waste your ammunition when a nearby post is being attacked.

(6) No group is allowed to change its defense point without the permission of the area leader. No area leader can move to another area without the permission of the Defense Command.

(7) Sleep without undressing or removing your cartridge belts.

(8) Guards must be on duty always. It is necessary to study and scout enemy positions, and movements of enemy forces shall be reported to the Defense Command.

(9) Drunkenness is absolutely forbidden.

(10) Anyone in the fighting forces, be he area leader, leader, or private, who is found derelict in his duties, particularly deserters, shall be punished.

(11) Punishment shall be based on the gravity of the offense. Forms of punishment consist of rebuke, disarmament, imprisonment, beatings, and the severest military penalty.

“Leaders shall read and explain these instructions to their men and see that they are carried out.

“And now let us hark to the call of our sacred duty, let us act...”

“The Defense Command”

April 18, 1915

Van-Aikesdan



While the party leaders and public bodies in cordial cooperation were straining all their efforts to reinforce all aspects of armed resistance, the general public, spontaneously, formed a supply organization to provide food and clothing for the men. With one or two exceptions, these men were mostly merchants and not affiliated with political and revolutionary parties. They lived through the massacres of 1895 and had been exposed to the Revolutionary teachings of Portugalian. Outstanding among them were Kevork Soojian, Simon Shiroyan, Sahag Shegoyan and Hmayag Tarpinian. The Supply Committee had its headquarters close to the square of Norashen. They gathered considerable quantities of grain, flour, sugar, kerosene and miscellaneous other victuals and cattle. No sooner was the Defense Command created than this Supply Agency put its services and stores at its disposal.

Another such spontaneous development was the creation of the Armenian Red Cross with its separate units of stretcher bearers, nurses, orderlies, surgeons and physicians. They improvised several hospitals in the comparatively secure sections of Aikesdan. Druggists and other in possession of medical supplies donated them to the Red Cross. People donated large quantities of beds, bedding, and linen. Red Cross workers were distinguished by the red cross emblem on their hats and arms. Dr. Sanfani, M.D. (Khosrof Chitjian) was the inspiring spirit of the Red Cross, assisted by Dr. Khachig and Armenag Voovoonian, the druggist.

Dr. Garabed Torkomian, surgeon, with many years of experience at the American hospital, was in charge of surgery. Dr. Ussher of the American hospital was very sympathise to the efforts of the Red Cross; he promised to assist them in any way he could and, indeed, placed the facilities of the hospital and the drug store at their service. The majority of the Red Cross workers were inexperienced school boys, but who learned fast. After futile attempts to obtain arms and join the fighting forces, these youngsters had come to the Red Cross as the next best way to serve the common cause. Women, mostly teachers, volunteered as nurses. Among them were some young girls who ran away from home to participate in the struggle for survival.



Gradually, the Turks completed the encirclement of the city. They brought in large forces, placed them along the perimeter, facing our own defense positions. The southern flank was covered by the largest of Turkish barracks, Haji-Bekir, with its contingent of five-hundred regulars and several pieces of artillery on a commanding position. From here the Turks could bombard our positions to separate the villages of Shooshantz and Goorobash from Aikesdan, and the German Missionary compounds, and could easily sweep across the plains that laid between the city and Mt. Varak. In this plain, the Turks dug extensively paralleling our fox holes there. Through our field glasses we could see the two cannons at the barracks as well as the numerous patrols that covered the field. It was evident it would be extremely difficult to keep communications open with Shooshatz and the mountains, which as a last resort, could serve as an escape route from the death trap for some.

Equally threatening was their position at Toprak-Kale on the north flank. Here they had placed their heavy artillery, while lower down on the banks of Hanguisner stood their large barracks swarming with very large numbers of militiamen and Hamidies (Kurdish detachments). The barracks of Hamud Agha fronting our main defenses, was heavily fortified; nearby two storied buildings were seized and fortified. The orchards along the highway to Sikhga were similarly replete with Turkish and Kurdish forces; but the southern Armenian quarters prevented direct contact of Turkish forces at Hamud Agha, Ourpat Creek, and Haji-Bekir. Jevdet's purpose in wanting to place soldiers at the German Missionary compounds was to overcome this gap. On the southeasterly perimeter, Turks succeeded in occupying the church and school building at Arark without any resistance from Armenians. Backed by Turkish quarters, this important strategic position included the police headquarters. On the north, and facing Armenian homes and the defense position of Sahag Bey, Turks occupied and reinforced the Turkish homes of Hamzo, Mucho, Jalal-Mirza, and others, including the orchards. Further away Turks seized the very substantial building of the British consulate with its dominating position over Armenian quarters. Turks also had complete possession of the square of Khach-Poghan and the avenue of the same name, including all the area

extending west to the old city. On the north, Turks also controlled the Armenian wards of St. Jacob as far as Agrpy and thence to Toprak-Kale. In this area, Turks had barricaded themselves in the school and related building of the Dominican Fathers. The northwesterly perimeter was densely populated by Turks in Shan Poghan as far as the hills of Sev-Kra. Thus, through a preconceived strategy, the Armenian population of Aikesdan was being hemmed in on all sides, rendering escape impossible.

It is not possible to make an accurate estimate of Turkish strength. It is known, however, that not less than one thousand militiamen had been stationed at Van; that Jevdet had brought fifteen-hundred regular and five-hundred Kurdish soldiers from the front; that two battalions of militia had arrived from Moosh and Khnus. It was certain that during the last week, large numbers of armed forces were pouring in, though Jevdet was trying to keep their movements secret. During the last three days, multitudes of Hamidie forces entered the city; they were to be joined, without doubt, by the Turkish population. It is safe to estimate the strength of Turkish forces at six thousand bayonets on the eve of the fighting. This number was to increase to ten thousand later on. They enjoyed an inexhaustible supply of ammunition and of food, freedom of movement, and of deployment.



The following is quoted from my diary;

“The night of April 18th. The enemy’s plans for our total extermination have awakened the necessity for united action among us. There has been no confusion, no cross purpose activities in our efforts which are hourly gathering momentum. This consciousness pervades all individuals, families, parties and organizations. We have collectively decided and vowed to sell our lives and the lives of our people dearly, very dearly, before we fall victim to the death dealing scythe of the Turk.

“It was reported this (Sunday) afternoon that Jevdet was visiting the barracks of Hamud Agha. Aram and Gregory of Bulgaria, in company of a dozen men, rushed to

the vicinity, ready for any eventuality; the visitor proved to be only a high ranking military officer.

“April 19th. It was quiet last night. Villagers from Sukhga and Shooshantz took refuge in Aikesdan. The orphans, pupils and the teachers of Varak Monastery also came in. Some of the monks and servants preferred to stay and were later butchered by the Turks.

“Last night, several armed men from Avantz village arrived to ask for help and seek information as to the general situation. They had been fired on by Turks when passing near the village of Sikhga. They managed to slip away without returning the fire.

“Our men are feverishly busy around the American and German mission compounds, lest Jevdet surprise us by deploying soldiers there. That would create a very dangerous situation.

“Last night (Sunday) defense leaders of the Federation party convened at the Shdigian house where Aram and Gregory of Bulgaria addressed them. In eloquent and inspiring terms, Aram asked them to follow the heroic example of Ishkhan and Vramian, to remain true to the traditions of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to the end, and to knowingly sacrifice themselves in order to save the people. Gregory confined his speech to defense matters and stressed the very critical nature of the situation. That discipline was of paramount importance.

“April 19th at 12:00 o'clock noon. Armenian inhabitants living in the immediate neighborhood of Turkish wards, have taken refuge in the American and Germans missions. The overflow have been placed in homes. Evacuated entirely are the wards of Glor Dar, and the parish of St. Jacob; the sectors of Arark, Hanguisner and Khach-Paghan have been partially evacuated.

“Communications with adjoining areas have been cut. So thorough is the siege that it has proved impossible to contact the old city, Avantz, Shah-Baghi, Timar, Haiotz-Tzor, Shadakh, etc. An attempt will be made by Siroun of Pergarib and a dozen of his men to slip through the cordon and reach Timar.

“An hour ago, the Defense Command was informed that Turks were transporting mule loads of arms and ammunition, guarded by soldiers. Defense leaders are asking for permission to seize this war material but Aram refused permission stating, “We are not going to fire the first shot, so long as the government has not resorted to force.”

“News has been received that in the name of Jevdet Bey, a Turkish officer has demanded the surrender of our defenders at the Hotel defenses, covering Armenian wards in the section of Khach Poghan. If they fail, all will be hanged. The Defense Command instructed them to refuse and retaliate in kind, if necessary.

“Evening of April 19th. We waited all day with deep anxiety. We could not understand why Jevdet did not carry out his threats against our defenses at Hotel.

“Today a number of outstanding personalities visited Aram privately. All concurred as to the extreme gravity of the situation. There was but one thing to do, fight and die with honor. Some foreign dignitaries were among the visitors.

“Aram, usually of a nervous, imperious temperament, has become very calm. He is busy issuing orders. Gregory of Bulgaria is occupied with military matters, selecting and establishing new defense points, and supervising the distribution of arms and cartridges. He is assisted in this task by Teos Deghdrigian, and Nishan and Gregory Sharanbeyian.

“There is a great scarcity of arms. Members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, lacking their own, were issued arms. The democratic Party had barely enough weapons for its members, without any reserves. The Hunchag Party possessed no arms at all. It was, therefore, decided to make arms available to all eligible persons without regard to party membership and reserve a small amount for emergencies.

“Our defense positions are now likely to be the paths of onslaught. Some defenders are well armed, others have only antiquated weapons; some are experienced, others are novices. The strategic importance of each position is reflected in the number of fighters and arms allocated to it. Mobile units are in readiness to give immediate assistance wherever needed.

“The area commanders, position leaders and their assistants have been appointed. They are old hands at revolutionary guerilla fighting. Each group is supplemented with one supervisor, supply agents, scouts and messengers. Each group includes a number of unarmed men for guard duty who will replace fighters killed in action.

“Our fighting force, according to the latest count, number eight-hundred. Half of them are armed with miscellaneous types and makes of arms, the other half, with Mauser pistols. We have approximately fifty positions with as many leaders, and five area commanders.

“This morning of April 19th, the Central Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation dispatched its last letter, in code, to comrades in Moosh, Garin, and Constantinople, with the following content:

‘They have unexpectedly arrested Vramian and sent him to destinations unknown. Ishkhan and his three comrades have been killed on their way to Shadakh by the treachery of Jevdet. He was on his way there to help quiet the situation as a representative of the government and ourselves.

‘We are living in suspense, facing maximum danger. We have used up all possible means of extricating ourselves. Further concessions are impossible with all people exposed to massacres. We are surrounded on all sides by Turkish troops and artillery. It is possible that massacres have already started outside. Momentarily, we are waiting for the first rifle shot by the Turks. We will defend ourselves, with whatever we have altogether, with singleness of purpose and complete harmony.’

“Farewell”

“Midnight, April 19th. The night has been quiet. Party leaders and intellectuals are visiting defense positions. The former impart necessary instructions, the latter inspire the fighter, and create a cheerful and radiant atmosphere.

“In the plains, our trenches are partially completed.

“Siroun of Pergarib and his eight comrades have reached Timar, unnoticed by the enemy.

“A dense and dark cloud of anxiety hovers over us. What will tomorrow bring?”

THE HEROIC STRUGGLE OF VAN

April 20th to May 16th, 1915

Chapter VI

The Beginning

At 6:00 A.M., April 20th, scattered shots were heard from the direction of Urpat creek, signaling the commencement of hostilities. The following written report by the area commander was delivered to the Defense Command by their courier:

“Peasant women of Sikhga village who had taken refuge at Shooshantz village attempted to slip through the Turkish cordon to reach our dugouts. Exactly at six o’clock, when it was almost daylight, we heard terrified voices crying for help. They were caught and abducted by Turkish guards along Urpat Creek. Two of the women attempted to escape and were shot by the Turkish guards. Our men rushed to intervene, but unfortunately, without necessary precautions, they were killed at once by a volley of Turkish bullets. These were Yeghia Nakhshoonian and Hagop Turzian. We were forced to accept the fight in the open field. The Turks retreated leaving one killed. The women were freed. The fight has spread to the rest of defenses along the line.

“In a matter of minutes the fighting at Ourpat Creek spread to all of Aikesdan. There was panic in the streets; most were praying, frozen in fear, some were stamping their feet in uncontrolled despair; yet others were crying hurrahs as young men made their way through swarms of people to man their positions and face the enemy.

“On the heels of the first fusillade at Ourpat Creek the barracks of Haji-Bekir belched thunderous fire with their artillery; cannons placed at Toprak Kale and the barracks of Hamud Agha followed suit. From every direction and at every ten paces of the periphery of Aikesdan the crescendo of rifle fire could be heard.

“The somewhat somber, vacillating attitude often sensed in the corridors of the Defense Command building now vanished. Everyone was engaged in feverish activity, determined and hopeful. This spirit of hopeful optimism and feverish activity overflowed the headquarters of the Defense Command to inspire all fighters and infuse the public.

“There was constant traffic of messengers to obtain and transmit instruction to the various positions. The rifle shot had served as a signal for the Turks to take the initiative by attacking on all fronts. Everywhere they met with stubborn resistance.

“On the same day a proclamation was issued and circulated among the Turkish population, which read;

“To our Turkish compatriots;

“The blood thirsty Albanian governor who has exposed the country to all the miseries of war and, through his senseless tactics, has caused the loss of ten thousand of our soldiers at the front is now trying to cover up his blunders behind the red curtain of Armenian blood.

“He has withdrawn soldiers from the fighting front with the expressed purpose of exterminating a guiltless and innocent people. Bear in mind his own confession that he owns but one horse here and, therefore, can well afford to shed the blood of both of our people, delivering you to the enemy who has crossed our borders, while he escapes on his horse. You know that this governor fells the whole tree in order to sever a branch. You two are a branch of this tree and can well understand that we will perish together. Therefore, refuse to be a party to this unjust war which safeguards neither your safety nor your rights, nor those of your posterity. Otherwise, an awesome chasm will be created between our two peoples.

“Besides jeopardizing your own lives, you will, in the very future, render yourselves responsible for today’s happenings and suffer tragic consequences. If you desire to save our country and to be happy, then get busy at once. Tell Jevdet that, while governments are transient, people are permanent; tell him it is not good to create conflict between us. He is only a guest here so demand that he remove himself. Demand that he put an end to the present state of siege and stop the incidents taking place in outside districts and villages. If you fail to do this, consequences are bound to be extremely tragic for both our people.

“Armenian Populations of VAN”

Our defense positions at the Sahag Bey and at Tovmazian houses were the first targets of Turkish bombardment. Turkish soldiers were in ambush some twenty paces away, directly opposite our defenses. An hour later a vicious cannonade was let loose from the heights of Toprak Kale and the barracks of Haji - Bekir. In addition to shelling our defense positions, the Turks dropped shells on unprotected buildings, in the streets, and in open squares. The attack was aimed at knocking out our defenses at Sahag Bey and Tovmazian, thus breaking the spirit of resistance and divide Aikesdan into two parts.

The messenger from Sahag Bey seemed very nervous. Immediately Aram took him to one side to question him, whereupon he consulted the Defense Command and joined them in an investigation. The group consisted of Aram, Gaidzag Arakel, Panos Terlemezian, Teos Deghdrigian, Hrant Hiussian, Vagharshag Berberbashian, Barkev Banirien and Onnig Mukhitarian.

It proved impossible to proceed through the streets, where bullets whined incessantly, and shells burst at the top of poplar trees, scattering shrapnel into the streets. Teos chose to lead us by way of the orchards; we followed silently. It did not prove any safer this way. Bullets hailed upon us from the former British Consulate, now a Turkish fortress. By taking shelter behind trees, watching and waiting, and crawling long distances on our bellies, we managed to approach the court of Sahag Bey's house. There we found half a dozen unarmed young men waiting to substitute for anyone that might be killed. One of these men had been killed by a piece of shrapnel and another wounded lightly just before our arrival.

We had ascended to the top story but the stairs had been demolished. We had to help each other up. It was hard to see or to breathe in this place, thick with dust, and smoke with the irritating and inebriating smell of gunpowder. And there was the smell of blood... Near the stairway lay a giant of a man. No one knew him by name, but all knew he had disregarded the leaders order to take cover and kept on firing at the enemy until a shell struck him down. Later he was identified as a peasant from the region of Aghpag.

Aram's presence revived their spirit; like carefree children they began to sing and dance about him. In only a few hours fighting, they already had lost one-third of the force. Only eight men were left to carry on. I could not help wondering and worrying as to what was in store; how long before darkness would bring surcease or how many would be left to face the enemy hordes tomorrow?

The top story was fast becoming untenable; it was necessary to get down to the first floor. Two shells shook the building causing one corner of the roof to cave in; another shell hit just above the opening through which the men had been firing. Panos Terlemezian, a crack shot and talented painter, examined the position of the artillery through the hole and fired a couple shots to silence it. Soon another officer manned the gun with increased ferocity. In the terrible melee two more of the defenders were killed and two others wounded.

Aram and the rest of us were unhurt; he promised to send reinforcements within the hour, praised their bravery, and kissed them as we left to visit the defenses at Tovmazian.

It proved impossible, although only about sixty yards away. Vagharshag and Hrant volunteered to crawl but had to retreat due to vigorous volleys. Aram ordered trenches to be dug between the two defense positions for communication. While thus preoccupied we could hear the voice of martial songs coming from Sahag Bey, from the few remaining intrepid defenders.

Forced to return to the headquarters for necessary arrangements we were met by a large crowd, cheering and singing, accompanied by the student's band.

“Everywhere death means the end,
Man must die but once,
Blessed be he who sacrifices
For the freedom of his land.”

The animating spirit of the crowd was a teacher of Armenian language and history in the central high school, a man bent under the weight of years, an ardent follower of the revolutionary tenets of Mugurdich Portugalian and a colleague of such

leaders as Avedissian, Bedo and Mardig, Ohannes Guloghlian. He addressed the crowds, saying:

“The day of destiny is upon us, my countrymen; the hour to die with honor is here and now.

“Only twenty years ago the same enemy attempted to destroy your parents but failed, thanks to their heroic resistance.

“Once again this ungrateful foe shall meet with your resistance and be itself annihilated in the devilish web of treachery of its own making.

“Remember 1896; recall the noble sacrifices of your fathers, follow the example of your matchless leaders, the late Vramian and Ishkhan. Swear never to betray your ideals; swear, if you must die, to die the most glorious of deaths.

“Forward, then, to man the ramparts. Forward to freedom. Forward to eternal life.”

Hearts overflowed with emotions. Most eyes were wet. A giant chorus of hurrahs went up and as the band struck the national anthem, all joined in singing...

“Our fatherland shall be freed
By the sacred blood of her valiant sons.”

The fighting became more intense in the late afternoon. The artillery fire from Haji-Bekir had a devastating effect upon our trenches in the plain. Our defenders were forced to abandon them and fight in the open. Digging foxholes, fighting and retreating, they managed to get behind the protection of some fence walls after several hours. They lost two men, and several defenders from nearby positions were killed by shells.

Severe fighting was going on at Khach Poghan area. The house of Garmirmoroukian was one of our strongest positions. Under protection of intense shell and rifle fire, a large Turkish force rushed out from Lalo, the Turk’s house across the street. Unable to hold out against the overwhelming force, defenders set fire to the building and retreated to Zervandian’s house close by. In the meantime the homes of the well-to-do Armenians were pillaged and burned along Khach Poghan. Also in the St. Hagop ward, Armenian property, as well as the church, received the same treatment.

Luckily, the inhabitants had already taken refuge in the American and German mission compounds and the interior sections of Aikesdan.

The fires burned throughout the night of the first day of fighting. Tongues of fire piercing through dense clouds of smoke cast an eerie light, over the city. This coupled with the veritable inferno during the day, helped to depress the people to the point of panic, inspiring doubts of the outcome. True, both sides had suffered considerable losses, but the Turks had not succeeded in subduing a single one of our defenses.

Later in the evening of April 20th, Turks stopped their attack abruptly. Silence reigned for half an hour while conflagration continued its destructive work on abandoned homes from Khach Poghan to St. Hagop wards. In the temporary calm one could hear the distant thunder of cannon fire, a sure sign that our brethren in the walled old city, at the foot of the Castle Rock, were standing up to the Turks. Some surmised that the Turks had given up the idea of overrunning Aikesdan and were pouring their fury upon a handful of Armenians in the old city. The Defense Command and Aram agreed; the silence was ominous. Urgent instructions were conveyed to all positions to be on the alert through the night, to forestall any surprise attacks. Fresh and experienced defenders were dispatched to our most important stronghold, Sahag Bey.

The assumption that the silence was sinister proved correct. It was terminated by a concerted and furious attack against our positions. The full fury and the deafening tumult accompanying the attack defies description. People closed their eyes and plugged their ears to avoid its effects; some thought this to be a mirage, a mental aberration, instead of the deadly fact that it was.

“This is an attempt to strike terror among us,” commented Gregory of Bulgaria.

“Are you sure Sahag Bey’s defenses can hold out?” asked Aram.

“Nothing to worry about; Panos Jamochian is there,” said Gregory.

“Shall we go?” queried Aram.

“Whereto, to Sahag Bey, of course,” said Aram.

“Let us wait here for the situation to clear up; I do not believe there is imminent danger,” noted Gregory.

Between the constant barking of the cannons and the cracking of rifle shots, one could hear the national anthem reverberating from our defenses.

Soon a messenger arrived from Sahag Bey; Aram and Gregory were anxious for the news. He reported all was well there, no casualties; damaged barricades have been repaired and Panos and the comrades send their salutations. “Any casualties?” asked Aram. “None at all” was the reply. “The Turks are trying to frighten us, but are not having any luck. We have been ordered to shower them with brickbats to save ammunition. It seems to work just as well.” We all laughed at the last comment and a joyful optimism filled us all. (From my diary of April 21.)”

The joyful optimism was not shared by the non-combatant populace. The unexpected frenzy of the attacks led them to believe that, indeed, Jevdet was going to destroy Aikesdan within twenty-four hours. Some tried to take refuge at foreign missionary compounds; others fell victim to flying bullets in their pellmell rush for safety. The most undaunted were of the opinion that the Turks would follow with frontal attacks, breaking through our defenses and starting wholesale massacres.

“Dardanelles,” our most important defense point in the plains, was subjected to vigorous fire and violent attack, at night. An eyewitness in describing the encounter said, “One could read and write from the light, so intense was the fire and so dense the bullets.” Ales Barsamian, Harootiun Lordo, Mihran Khranian, Krikor Pazigian and others among the best revolutionary fighters were manning the defenses.

At midnight, the Turks attempted to break through our Sahag Bey and Tovmazian defenses and met with violent resistance. They withdrew after suffering many losses.

Similar attacks were made against two of our defenses at Khach Poghan, and both failed.

Shahbenderian defenses at Hanguisner were caught in unyielding Turkish crossfire. They were forced to desert it and to withdraw to a second line of defense. Noticing this the men in nearby defenses rushed the Turks and drove them out with murderous volley of their Mauser pistols and hand grenades. Throughout the night, Turks incessantly maintained a devastating fire against our positions. This was the

baptism of fire for our combatants. Soon, all trepidation yielded to cool confidence, courage, and cunning stratagems. This transformation was accelerated by the constant contact among combatants, their leaders, and the Defense Command. The men sang patriotic and triumphal songs as they repelled the enemy; every defense point became a chorus to prove to the Turks that their attempts at intimidation were as futile as they were insane. The student band, moving from one to another (especially the most endangered posts) was an important factor in cheering and raising the spirit of defendants.

Many of our strongholds had been damaged or demolished by Turkish shells. It was imperative to reconstruct and reinforce them at once. This task was assigned to Hovsep Kouyoumjian and his men. During the first infernal night, he succeeded in having the trenches cleared and extended, and repairing the ramparts or building new ones.

The following proclamation was issued by the Defense Command on April 21st to explain the meaning of the last night's violent fusillade and to establish confidence and calm:

“Fellow Countrymen;

“The sole purpose behind the numerous shells and hundreds of thousands of bullets wasted by the enemy last night was to intimidate our people. We have not lost a single fighter nor surrendered a single defense. We have not deigned to return their fire. There is no cause for alarm.”

Chapter VII

The Second And Third Days Of The Struggle April 21st and 22nd, 1915

On April 21st, the Turks continued their assault with unabated fury, and artillery shells continued their devastation. Mostly due to carelessness, half a dozen men, women and children were killed in the streets. One of our fighters, Khachig of Nazli, was killed at his post by enemy fire. He was a veteran guerilla fighter.

Stubborn fighting was concentrated particularly in Hanguisner, Khach Poghan and Arark wards. The night of April 20th, furious hand to hand fighting took place at the Shahbenderian defenses. Turks succeeded in entering and occupying the post. The same night Armenian fighters from other posts drove the Turks out.

On April 21st, Turks repeated their violent attack against the same post. Again, Armenian defenders were forced to yield. A group of combatants rushed the building armed with hand grenades and their Mauser pistols. They were unable to dislodge the enemy. This temporary success cost the Turks the lives of more than ten soldiers, and two gunners. Our sacrifices were two defenders, natives of Vozm.

The military police and gendarmery who had barricaded themselves in the British consular building kept up a continuous and fierce fusillade. The commanding position enabled them to stop movements in the orchards, the streets, and even the trenches, completely disrupting communication between our defenses in the area.

The Turks wanted to take full advantage of this strategic position. On April 21st, they smuggled many more soldiers and ammunition in, by diverting attention with concerted attacks against our positions every two hours.

While the Turks were busy reinforcing this post, the Armenians were perfecting their plans for its destruction. Gregory of Bulgaria, Kevork Jidechian, and Nishan Jamakordzian contrived to dig a hole in the basement wall and soaked the underside of the first floor with kerosene. A homemade pump was used to force the inflammable liquid into all parts of the wooden understructure. In the meantime, nearby defenses were alerted to keep the Turks busy until the fire had a good start. Then they

were to mow down all who attempted to escape. More Turkish reinforcements were busily climbing the walls to reach the building. They suffered heavy casualties in the crossfire of our defenses. Several dozen Turks lost their lives in the burning building. Nishan of Kordzot, leader of the Yavrouyan-Maksabedian post, was so carried away that he rushed into the street alone, chasing after the fleeing enemy.

The Armenians thus fully avenged the burning by the Turks of their defenses at Garmirmorookian on the 20th. The burning of the British consular building relieved the several defenses in the area of the serious and constant Turkish menace. It instilled cheerful confidence among the population.

The Defense Command decorated eight men for outstanding valor during the two days of fighting which had just passed. Crosses of Honor and tricolor ribbons were awarded with a note stating, “The Defense Command of Armenian Self-Defense respectfully bestows upon you the enclosed Cross of Honor in recognition of your valor and services in our struggle for freedom.”

“Defense Command”

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Following were the recipients of decorations; Ales Barsamian, Commander of the Arark area, leader of “Dardanelles” defenses, Melkeset Eiynatian, Commander of the defense area Hanguisner to Khach-Poghan, Missak Armenag Tokhmakhian, Dikran Yaghjian, Panes Jamgochian, as commanders and leaders of the Sahag Bey and nearby posts, Nazaret Boumoutian, leader of the Shahbenderian defenses, and Nishan of Kordzot.

As the fighting progressed, many more were decorated with the Cross of Honor.

The relentless fighting of these several days impressed the Defense Command with the paramount importance of the control and regulation of all factors connected with the defense effort. Separate groups were entrusted with the task of procurement and distribution of food items, and rebuilding of barricades destroyed by enemy shells,

maintenance of discipline among the non-combatant population and relocation and care of incoming peasants.

There was a pressing need for construction workers. The Turks were able to destroy our strongest defense after a few hours of bombardment. To avert the eventual tragedy, it was imperative that new defenses be erected and the older ones repaired. Some of our vital defenses were reduced to rubble, several times a day. It was also necessary to dig an extensive system of trenches along the eastern periphery as well as through the orchards to secure contact between the various defense positions, comparatively safe from Turkish shot and shell. Several groups of construction squads were immediately set up under the supervision of the Defense Command and headed by Shavarsh Hovivian and Azad Khorenian; the task of supplying the necessary tools was entrusted to Gregory Banerian.

Volunteers from all kinds of trades presented themselves, but most were masons and well diggers. The former were to reconstruct damaged ramparts and the latter to dig underground passages for the purpose of destroying Turkish barracks. Merchants, tradesmen, and shopkeepers, unable to bear arms, swelled the ranks which, towards the final phases of the struggle, amounted to about eight hundred men, most of them peasants.

Equally important as the armed forces in the defense scheme, these men, armed with pick axes and spades, performed their duties with unsurpassed heroism. Despising death that dogged them at every step, they made it possible to yield not one inch of ground to the enemy. They suffered heavy losses.

It was not uncommon for our defenses like Sahag Bey or the Tovmazian, Hotel, or Arark to be wrecked six or seven times a day. Just as often, these men succeeded in repairing and reinforcing them.

On April 21st, the Defense Command asked people to report to the headquarters so arms could be issued to those desiring to participate in fighting but lacking weapons. An enormous crowd of men all ages surrounded the headquarters the same day. After a cursory selection, a few were issued arms and the remainder were detailed for sentry duty.

In order to expedite matters in an explicit manner, the Defense Command issued the following orders;

“Comrades;

“All your requests and requisitions must be in writing and must be concise.

“Try to verify all reports and hasten them to the headquarters. All such reports must be signed by the leader. Word of mouth messages will be ignored. Leaders are to be held accountable for unfounded rumors.

“Return shovels and picks. Never waste ammunition aimlessly. Each bullet must find its mark. Whoever disregards these rules will be severely reprimanded and/or otherwise punished.

“Return all empty shells.

“You are forbidden to use wine or whiskey excessively.

“Never revile the religion of the enemy.

“Sgt. The Defense Command”

On April 22nd, the fight continued with the unabated fury of the previous two days. In the precinct of Arark, Armenians occupied Turkish strong points through surprise attacks. Turks fled leaving behind a considerable quantity of ammunition. At Hanguisner, Turks rushed our defenses and the savage encounter lasted more than one hour. The enemy had several casualties and was forced to retreat. Smaller clashes, took place at our defenses at Chachal Mirza, Piroumian, Haji-Bekir and Sassoun. At the Haji-Bekir barracks Turks subjected our defenses across the street, to serve rifle fire as cover for two of their arsonists who were approaching our positions. They were discovered and dispatched in good time. As if to add grim humor to the struggle, a clever Turkish brigand in the Toprak Kale Area set his sheepskin hat on top of a rock inviting us to waste our bullets. A twelve year old Armenian orphan from the German orphanage crept up the hill, under the barrage of Turkish rifle fire, and snatched the hat, returning safely to our lines.

Squatting in the middle of Armenian defenses on the northeastern sector was the mammoth barracks of Hamud Ahga. With its commanding position it was a great

menace to our defenses and Jevdet had placed here his most trusted and capable sharpshooting brigands. These sharpshooters would enlarge our peep holes, barely two inches in diameter, into gaping window sizes, rendering them useless as barricades. Worst of all was its tie with the armory at Toprak Kale, where two mountain pieces had been emplaced. It appeared to be a matter of days before this Turkish force, supported by artillery, would overcome our defenses with a daring assault.

The Defense Command was very much concerned about this situation. It was out of question to try and capture the barracks. It had neither the men nor the necessary ammunition. Yet about sixty of our best defenders were standing guard, in the neighboring house, sleepless and inactive, not being able to harm the foe appreciably. As a symbol of Turkish despotism and bestiality, this barrack evoked deep seated hatred and revulsion in the hearts of the Armenian population of Aikesdan. Its destruction would not only relieve our front of the constant threat, it would also instill courage and confidence among the people.

From the very start of hostilities, Gregory of Bulgaria had realized the imperative necessity of destroying the Hamud Agha barracks. This modest and taciturn revolutionary had, for many days and nights, tortured his brain and taxed his ingenuity and cunning for a means to accomplish this purpose. As soon as he came up with a feasible plan he revealed it to Aram and the rest of the Defense Command. The plan was approved.

With the help of experienced well diggers, he started tunneling from the Armenian position, some five-hundred paces away; Melkesst Einyatioan, the area commander, was informed of the plan and received necessary instructions. After two days and two nights of incessant work, the diggers had completed their job and crawled out. Gregory placed needed amounts of dynamite under the four corners of the foundation, set the caps, and lit the fuses. He crawled out softly, whistling a tune. The fuses were cut to detonate the charge in half an hour. Our fighters were instructed to open fire on fleeing Turks as soon as the explosion took place. After half hour had passed, there was no explosion; anxiety and fear of failure gripped everyone except Gregory who kept on smoking his pipe unperturbed.

Then from the Turkish barracks cries of derision went up; “Hey, you Armenians, your bomb proved to be a dud.” Armenian fighters replied with less confidence than vigor, “You will hear from us tomorrow.” Gregory was searching for an answer; maybe the dynamite had deteriorated or maybe it was buried too deep. Anyway, he instructed the men to be on the alert all night and left them still ruminating on the causes of the apparent failure.

As the night came on, rifle fire and battle activities came to a stop. There was an ominous lull. At midnight, Hell let loose. The skies in the northeasterly direction brightened with tongues of crimson flame, topped with black clouds of smoke rolling hither and yon in the otherwise pitch black night. Above all the tumult and confusion, one could hear the chorus of cries, “Hamud Agha barracks are burning.”

The cause of the apparent failure was now evident. The charges had been buried too deep in the soft soil. Their explosion had only slightly shaken the building, but had succeeded in setting fire to bales of straw that were stored in the basement. Unaware of this, the Turks suddenly found themselves engulfed in raging flames. They attempted to put out the fire, but failing, they ran out to face the bullets from Armenian defenses. Some of the more fearless brigands preferred to stay and fight and were consumed by the fire. Some three dozen Turks lost their life while fleeing through Shahbenderian’s orchards. One Armenian defender, Dooman Dikran, chased after the foe and was killed.

Inebriated by the success, many Armenian combatants started on an offensive of their own by pursuing the enemy. Area commander Melkesset Einyan and his leader Hovhannes Zaparian chased the enemy through open fields at Hanguisner to the heights of Toprak Kale. Here they met with stubborn resistance by overwhelmingly larger Turkish forces. A curt order by the Defense Command was necessary before they yielded and returned to their post.

The following morning Armenians set fire to the three-storied buildings of Hamud Agha complex after plundering its contents. Most of the loot was handed to the Supply Agency; the rest was distributed among the various defense posts. Some of these articles, unmistakably, were Armenian property looted during the massacres of 1896.

An old lady implored to be given a token of something that Hamud had despoiled her of, so that her curse on him may have been fulfilled. The sight of the conflagration that night inspired the Armenians to joyful demonstration everywhere, even at the American and German missions. A large crowd gathered at the headquarters of the Defense Command in excited jubilation. The following morning the band struck the tunes of the exhilarating song “Our Fatherland” and both marched to witness the smoldering ruins of the hated barracks.

The Defense Command issued the following commemorative circular;

“Fellow Armenians:

“During the past four days of fighting, our inhuman foe has thrown at us thousands of shells and hundreds of thousands of bullets; their fanatical forces have attacked us in frenzied fury on all fronts without letup, but have failed miserably in the face of our indomitable will to survive and our desire to sacrifice all for the sake of freedom. From Aiej Oghlou to Khach Poghan, from Arark to Hamoud Agha at all of our defense posts, our valiant fighters are proudly and victoriously facing the enemy. The overwhelming superiority of the enemy forces does not make us cower; neither are we fearful of the certainty of our death, because we revel in death that is glorious and is divine. Let the rest of the civilized world know, after this World War, that the ancient and noble Armenian race, in the depths of Anatolia, prized honor and freedom above everything else and sold its life very dearly indeed...

“Fellow Armenians, we will carry this fight that has been forced upon us, to the very last drop of our blood or until the bestial enemy is vanquished. Keep up your courage, fellow Armenians, the eventual victory will be ours; let the heroism of our combatants pervade your hearts; support them in every way you can. Every one of you, young or old, maiden or mother, has a duty to perform to help your brethren behind the barricades and to participate in the many labors so essential for the success of our struggle and winning new victories. We are not in this fight only for our self-preservation, we are also fighting so that truth and justice may prevail.

“Onward then! With redoubled enthusiasm and courage, let us prepare for the coming day, the glorious day of our Renaissance and Liberty.”

“Defense Command”

April 23,

Van-Aikesdan

Chapter VIII

April 23rd To April 25th

Following the destruction of the Hamud Ahga barracks on the 23rd of April, the Turks again subjected our positions to violent artillery and rifle fire. However, the baptism by fire experienced by the Armenian population, during the past several days, had steeled them with courage and any inclination to panic had disappeared. Our fighters were standing up to the enemy with unexcelled prowess and calculated contempt. Late in the afternoon Turkish assaults came to a stop. They had not been able to advance one inch, and our losses were small, considering the violence of Turkish efforts; five or six fortification workers lost their life and several children and women fell victim to stray bullets and shells in the streets.

To compensate for the violent shelling of our Sahag Bey and Tovmazian posts, our fire brigade set fire to several Turkish strong points in the vicinity. Teacher Dikran was the genius of this brigade; his plans were clever enough to catch the Turks by surprise and always were crowned with success. With necessary variations dictated by circumstances, his plan was to approach the building unnoticed, dig a hole in the wall and spray the underside of the wood floors with kerosene so the inflammable liquid would be set on fire by bullets or a grenade. The spray pump was a homemade affair, designed and manufactured by Dikran himself. Where the terrain did not afford safety, they would tunnel into the building and accomplish their work unmolested.

This strategem of destroying Turkish strongholds by fire proved of immense value in our scheme of defense. It struck terror among Turkish soldiers, caused considerable loss of their fighting strength, and forced them to retreat to other, less strategic positions leaving behind quantities of arms, ammunition and food items, all desperately needed by us. As the fighting progressed, more brigades were organized by the Defense Command. Teacher Dikran, Kevork Jidechian (chairman of the municipal council), Nishan Jamakordzian and several crack well diggers were entrusted with the execution of the plans. Besides its disastrous effect upon the enemy, these

conflagrations lifted morale, especially among the non-combatants. At night they created a holiday spirit of joviality; people sang and danced while the band trumpeted tunes of victory.

From the daily communiques issued by the Defense Command, it appeared that Turks had suffered extensive losses during the fighting of April 23rd to 25th. Twelve were killed at the Tovmazian defense and one gunner; six were killed at the Chavoosh Bashi defense and two at the Tutunjian and Shan Tagh defenses. Also, unknown numbers of Turks were killed in encounters at Haji Bekir barracks, Vizviz, Khach-Poghan, Ayij-Oghlou and Shahbenderian defenses. (Shahbenderian post was reoccupied by us after the demolition of Hamud Agha barracks).

On the 25th of April, Armenians succeeded in setting fire to Turkish (Harazyn) strongholds across from our Sahag Bey defense; Turks fled leaving several dead. Three Turkish strong points were set on fire in the Arark sector killing four Turks. We suffered no casualties in the merciless bombardment of our Arark and Shahbenderian defenses on the 25th of April.

During the six days of fighting, April 20th to April 26th, our Tovmazian defense had been completely isolated. Unable to contact the Defense Command or any of the other defense posts due to the superior advantage of the Turkish posts, they carried on a most desperate fight. This handful of inexperienced young men had nothing but their own courage, cunning and endurance, along with fast disappearing stock of ammunition, to fall back on. "It all seemed like a dream," said one of them after they were relieved. We thought all of Aikesdan was in ruins like our barricades. It seemed so strange to see that buildings were still standing, men still fighting, children playing and women and old men still praying to God. The enemy peppered us with tens of thousands of bullets during the six days of fighting and showered us with an average of a hundred shells a day. I cannot explain how we were able to resist or how we kept on fighting. There were nine of us, all without experience in the arts of war. For some, it was the first time to shoulder a rifle. A few had little training at Varak, but that was not the real tragedy as we soon got used to it. The lack of ammunition was the real tragedy. While the enemy was lavishly wasting its ammunition, we were sparing ours to the

extreme. At the start we each had one-hundred fifty rounds of ammunition, and forty or fifty rounds were left. During the last days we had lost all cover. The second story of our building was demolished the first day, as were the two outside walls. We used the privy as a barricade but the infidels shelled it to rubble. There was nothing left of the massive Tovmazian home on the last day, only heaps of rubble here and there. There was one small section of a wall left standing which served us well. For some time, the enemy did not detect us and we were able to pick off their gunners one by one from behind the wall. The last day our last barricade was also reduced to ashes. We lacked both men and tools to try and reconstruct our barricades. At night the fusillade was continued by the Turks, who were stationed in the orchard. No escape was possible and we experienced no particular fear of death; we longed for hand to hand fighting, but they denied us the opportunity.

Miserly about our ammunition, we were very improvident about our food supply. Tovmazian's home was well furnished with provisions which were to be buried soon under the rubble and we never thought of the length of time we might be severed from the rest of you. Two chickens were our source of food if we could discover where they laid their eggs.

Aram Shaljian was our leader; a goldsmith by trade, he was a brave fighter with steel nerves. The real spirit of the gang was Vagharshag Shirvanian, a tradesman, yet a real daredevil who caused us many an anxious moment. He was at the most endangered sites, exposing himself to attract enemy fire. He sang, danced and teased the Turks. At one time a shell fell at his feet; fortunately it did not explode. He picked up the shell and tossed it towards an enemy gunner yelling, "Hey, brother gunner, try this again, it did not do any good the first time."

It became a game with us to tease and enrage the enemy so the ammunition would be wasted. Thus, when they momentarily stopped shooting, we would throw brick bats and wrapped excreta at them, accompanied by concerted and nervous laughter. The few teenage students, barely eighteen years old, proved themselves worthy fighters. As superb as everyone was, none could equal Aram Tovmazian, the

owner of the building, in courage, calmness, ingenuity, and devotion. He was a teacher and became a renowned humorist under the pen name of Ler-Gamsar.

During these six days, none of us had a chance to sleep. In fact, sleep did not appear to be a physical necessity anymore. The Defense Command allowed us two days leave. Our weapons were given to others who came to relieve us. In this group were a few experienced men along with several students. They came up through a trench that was started at our Sahag Bey defense, thus establishing communication between the two posts.

Later on the Tovmazian defense was wrecked and reconstructed many times. This beautiful family home was transformed into a ugly, yet efficient, sort of fortress.

Chapter IX

April 26th To April 28th

During this period, the destruction by fire of Turkish strongholds and our successful resistance to their attacks continued. The house of Topal Molla, one of the Turk's strongest posts right across from our Tutunjian defense point was set on fire and totally destroyed during the night of April 26th. While Armenian trenchers were tunneling in the approaches of Molla's house, they suddenly came face to face with a group of Turkish diggers. They had set out to destroy our position by the same method. A hand grenade immediately dispatched all of the Turkish gang, and the building was set on fire. Taken by surprise, they deserted the post in panic. Armenian combatants occupied the post, gathered the arms and ammunition left behind and quietly returned to their post.

The same night our forces attempted to set fire to the police headquarters at Arark. Being strategically placed among our defenses, it had been a constant source of threat and annoyance. The specialist, teacher Dikran, was placed in charge. There was a heavy downpour. Dikran succeeded in setting fire to the adjoining shops. Its early detection by the Turks and the heavy rains extinguished the flames. This proved a great disappointment to Dikran and his squad, who so far had not tasted failure. The area command of Arark deemed it essential to destroy this den of brigands.

There was a light drizzle the night of the 28th of April. A furious fusillade was being kept up on our defenses who were tensely waiting for the outcome. "Fire away, you beasts, as this is going to be the last night for you," cheerfully exclaimed Dikran. "What is on your mind, Petoed?" (Dikran's pet name). "You going to try again?" "Sure enough, so help me God and I am on my way," said he. He made ready his combustible material and cautiously approached the scorched walls of the store building where his first attempt had miscarried. Suddenly, dogs started to bark, betraying his presence. The Turks immediately concentrated a murderous fire in that direction. Twenty minutes had already passed since he left for his mission. Was he killed or was he waiting for the

opportune moment? All were tense and taciturn. Leaping tongues of flame from the stores changed their anxiety into jubilation; yes, the flames were spreading rapidly. No failure this time. “Long live, brave Dikran,” they yelled, and ringed the headquarters with their pistol fire. Turkish forces stationed at the Arark church and the school building opened a terrific fire. The police headquarters was now in the crossfire of our position and Turkish positions in the church and school. It was a foregone conclusion that teacher Dikran was killed; but, lo and behold, he stumbled in, wet, exhausted, but happy and triumphant. Everyone embraced him like a lost brother. A smoldering heap of ashes marked the location where the extensive complex of the Turkish police headquarters had been.

The Defense Command decorated teacher Dikran with the Cross of Honor and the communiques referred to him as the “intrepid incendiary.”

Armenians succeeded in destroying, by fire and explosives, an important Turkish stronghold at Ahmed of Bojaks house. On the 28th of April, the Turks there retreated fighting, and left several dead and wounded. Relative security of communication was thus established in the ward of Shan Tagh. On the same day, the Turks were evicted from their strongholds at Khuls and Sarajians. These victories cost us the lives of one incendiary and one combatant.

Vigorous fighting was also going on in the direction of our defenses at Pos Tagh, Shmavonians, Khach-Poghan, Hotel, and Nalbandians, where Turks suffered heavy losses. Our losses consisted of two trenchers killed, one wounded (a rich goldsmith), one eleven year old girl killed in front of the Persian Embassy at Khach-Poghan, and the killing of an old woman with a white flag who was carrying Mr. Spordoni’s letter to Jevdet Bey.

Turkish losses were heavy, particularly at the encounters going on in the Hanguisner district. Turks kept up the shelling of our Tovmazian and Sahag Bey posts all during the 27th and 28th of April. Two Turkish gunners, one officer, and several militiamen were killed.

April 29th marked the end of the tenth day of the resistance. The Defense Command issued the following proclamation addressed to Armenian defense forces:

“The struggle we have been waging for the past ten days against an ignoble enemy shall go down in the long history of our fighting for freedom as one of its most splendid and noble pages; a struggle in which everybody participated. An enemy who is at once despicable and barbaric, treacherous and blood thirsty, is determined to put an end to our individual and collective existence. There was no alternative left us but to resist, to fight for our lives and our honor, for our faith and our property, for the honor of our mothers and sisters and to fight to preserve the Armenian race.

“We are waging war against a barbaric and murderous government of six hundred years duration. Our fight is against Jevdets who are criminals, thirsty for Armenian blood, who would deny us the rudimentary rights of humanity and civilization, who proclaimed “Jihad” (Holy War) against external enemies and used it as a tool to murder Christian Armenians indiscriminately; be they women or children, infants or old people, young men or cripples.

“Fellow Armenians of Vasbouragan, for ten days we have been resisting the enemy through our individual and collective efforts and resources. Not only is this unparalleled in our own annals of heroism, it will also be admired by the civilized world after the present cataclysm. The entire world will marvel at realizing how a handful of valiant men fought, relentlessly and enthusiastically, for highest justice.

“May the God of retribution instill us with the spirit of gallantry.

“We have fought for ten days. Let us get ready for continued struggles and fresh victories.”

“Defense Command”

April 29, 1915

Chapter X

Community And Creative Endeavors

The scarcity of ammunition was seriously worrying both the Defense Command and the combatants themselves. For this reason the first order issued by the Command was “Use your ammunition sparingly.” Everyone fully realized its critical need and therefore cherished it as treasure. At times this niggardliness in the use of ammunition meant jeopardizing lives. Turks derided us for this on all fronts. It had become customary for our defenders to use brick bats, etc., wherever possible.

It was realized, however, that this restriction was, at best, only a half-measure. The end of the fight was nowhere in sight. It was only a matter of time when our ammunition would be depleted through constant attacks against our positions. The inventive genius of the Armenians of Van was called upon to remedy the situation. During the first week of the struggle, large shops were established to produce first black powder and then smokeless powder. The most competent artisans contributed their skills for the purpose. Among these were goldsmiths, engravers, gilders, and mechanics as well as teachers and intellectuals. Most noteworthy were the contributions of Professor Michael Minassian and his associates, Vartan Babigian and Haroutiun Gakavian, who perfected the technique of producing smokeless powder. Necessary chemicals were either produced in the laboratory or procured, where available, from drugstores. Fifty people were engaged in the production of gun powder, supervised by master goldsmiths.

Every evening the empty cartridges were collected and delivered to the Defense headquarters; from here they were dispatched to the powder shop for refill and the following morning they were returned ready for use, and distributed to the various posts. The shop had several departments such as powder production, casting of bullets, loading and capping, etc. The work had to go on night and day as long as lead, nickel and chemicals were obtainable. Vosdanig, Arshag, Avedis and Karekin Shahbaghlian proved themselves very competent in this work.

The daily capacity of the shop was approximately two thousand rounds per day, nowhere near enough for the eighty defense positions. Without exception, every Armenian family in Aikesdan participated, in whatever useful manner they could, in the furtherance of these efforts; they donated any and all articles containing lead or nickel, not sparing their favorite Samovars. The efforts on the part of the children showed marvelous courage and dexterity. Unmindful of danger, they would dash out to pick up spent bullets wherever they could be found and bring them to the headquarters.

Powder production was hampered by the meager supply of potassium nitrate. People were asked to collect the white crystalline material about their barn yards, dung heaps, and cellars. Also, attempts were made to mine it in Varak mountain where a deposit was supposed to exist.

Several accidents occurred. On the 30th of April, eight pounds of powder exploded through carelessness. Luckily no one was harmed. This was considered a real calamity and was bewailed by all. Several rifle barrels also burst due to faulty powder or its measurement.

A separate weapons repair shop was set up to repair, make needed parts, and clean rifles and pistols. But the most interesting invention was the homemade cannon, designed and constructed by Gregory of Bulgaria. He had been devoting all his spare time to its building and perfection. Many were his failures, but the quaint little cannon was finished and dubbed Gregory's cannon. It was a small caliber and used long shells weighing about two pounds. This "odd" artillery piece, which was put into action during the last week of the fighting, was nevertheless a symbol of the ingenuity, untiring sacrifice and uncompromising determination of the people of Van.

It was first tested in front of our Der Khachadoorian defenses and found to have fairly good range, the shell exploding and making the noise of a real cannon. That day was a festive day for the people. Next it was placed to bombard Turkish barracks at Toprak Kale. It landed several shells causing great consternation there, as they thought the Russian army had already arrived.

A shop was set up to produce shoes for the combatants. These were light shoes, more like slippers. About forty pairs were produced daily and distributed among the

combatants, upon written requisition from the leaders. The shoe factory was under the supervision of the Supply Committee which supplied them with leather and other necessary items.

Since the Defense Command was fully occupied with responsibilities of its own, a separate police force was organized on the 1st of May to maintain order among the populace, now increased by the influx of many thousands of peasant families. In order to acquaint the people with the duties of the new organization and to reinforce its authority, the Defense Command issued the following instructions:

“To the police department of the national defense”

“Gentlemen:

“Under prevailing conditions it is imperative to maintain complete harmony. To insure this harmony it is necessary to forestall offenses and to remove causes for dereliction.

“It is evident that in our present congested situation any negligence of hygienic rules must be regarded as grave misdemeanor as it can jeopardize the lives of the people. Those guilty of this and similar misdemeanors will be tried by the police court and punished.

“To minimize losses caused by enemy shelling, people shall not be allowed to congregate in the streets.

“Those who spread false rumors, whether good or bad, will be arrested and punished.

“Police court will have jurisdiction to try and pass sentence in cases involving a misdemeanor. The more serious crimes shall be referred to the Defense Command.

“Necessary measures will be instituted to insure harmony among families having to live in the same house and guard the safety of vacant buildings.

“Profiteers in food and clothing will be punished and their activities reported to the proper agency.

“This is a general outline of your duties and responsibilities. You shall be alert, at all times, to prevent any untoward acts from taking place.”

May 1, 1916

The police headquarters was located at Guloghlian's house in the Norashen ward. Gregory Jonian was appointed chief of police, having served in the same capacity as a member of Turkish police force. The force was comprised of fifty men, corporals and sergeants included. Most of them were young students. All carried a red band on their arm and were furnished with a short club. The community respected them and gladly carried out their orders and recommendations. Aside from trivial offenses, no major crimes were committed during the entire duration of the struggle. Regulated by the Defense Command, it had close relations with other administrative bodies such as the court, the Supply Agency, and the Mayor.

At the same time, a court was instituted to adjudicate all litigation, past or present. Shivanian's house became the new courthouse. Judicial functions were shouldered by Hovhannes Mugurdichian-Guloghlian (teacher), Hrant Kaligian (attorney), Ruben Shadvorian (former member of Turkish civil court), and Arsen Hatzakordzian (an itinerant teacher) as the court clerk.

The new Administrative Council had the responsibilities of safeguarding the public health, establishing and enforcing fair prices, care of the needy families, etc. Bedros Mozian was appointed Mayor, with Khachig Zenopian and Ghevont Khanjian as his assistants. They also had their own organization and, like all others, were subject to the authority of the Defense Command.

The Armenian Women's Union of Vasbouragan formed soon after the establishment of the constitutional regime in Turkey and by the efforts of Aram and Mihran Terlemezian, contributed their whole-hearted cooperation. They started a sewing shop where the maidens of Vasbouragan made shirts and underwear, and knitted stockings for their fighting brothers. Most of the material they procured from their own homes; what they lacked they got from others. The Supply Agency also assisted them to the point that they were able to supply the military and hospital needs in that line. Some of them collected food items for the defenders, others visited the fighting fronts

to keep up morale, and many joined the “Sisters of Mercy” to help in hospitals, day and night.

One Sevo (Swarthy), a seventeen year old girl, an orphan and a beggar, never participated in the womanly tasks. A fiery amazon with flying black busses, totally indifferent to danger, she would rush from one post to another carrying messages, or, with a pistol slung from her shoulder, she would spy on the enemy, or substitute for a wounded fighter until replaced.

Prominent among the Women’s Union were Salome Jerpashkhian, Anna Terlemezian and Misses Zarouhie Shaljian, Ripsime Nalbandian, Araxie Safrasdian, and others.

Chapter XI

Fighting In The Surrounding Districts

The night of April 23rd, the whole population of the nearby village of Shah-Baghi took refuge in Aikesdan. Three days previous to this date the Turkish authorities in the village attempted to carry out Jevdet's plan by demanding the surrender of arms and the enlistment of all able bodied men into the army. The police were chasing and firing after an Armenian youth when other peasants intervened, and a fight broke out lasting a whole day. Six of the policemen were killed, two surrendered and were disarmed and freed. Armenians did not suffer any significant losses. In spite of the initial success, they realized their position was untenable, and it was decided that mass exodus into Aikesdan should take place. The following night, they moved out under the armed protection of some twenty-five defenders to the nearby village of Averag. The fact that Aikesdan itself was under siege was known to them and the risk of their being massacred in the attempt was very real, yet there was no alternative. The villagers of Averag joined them; all managed to arrive safely, passing between the villages of Sikhga and Shoushantz at night. They were housed among families sharing their hospitality as well as their anxiety and tribulations, and labors. Men possessing arms were allocated to defense positions by arrangement of the Defense Command.

Two days later, the 25th of April, a crowd of over ten thousand peasants from the villages of Arjag, Kharagonis, Mantan and the vicinity poured into the streets and orchards of Aikesdan. The leader of this modern day Anabasis was Shirin Hagopian.

The preconceived and well-prepared plans which Jevdet had ordered carried out on April 20th, included this area also. In the following letter Shirin described the tragic development of events:

“My Kurdish messenger and my personal friend Nooro revealed the fact that the government was preparing to massacre all Armenians. The ruler of Pergery, Zia Bey, had summoned Kurdish leaders and admonished them that if any asylum was

offered to Armenians, the guilty person's property would be burned to the ground and he and his family would meet with severest punishment.

"The following plan has been adopted; Jevdet Bey will take care of Van; Zia Bay of Pergery. Amar Bey (grandson of Gob Mahmad), and Fabro with his mounted forces, will take care of Pergeri and Upper Timar; Sharef Bey, Turkish ruler of Sarai, aided by Arif Bey with the military forces under his command and Kurdish clans of Tagoor will attend to Arjag and Lower Timar regions; Lagi, the son of Shakir will attend to Haiotz-Tzor; and the son of Hussein Pasha and the Kurdish clans under him will take care of Arjesh and Aljavaz areas. All have strict orders to carry out the massacres in one day. Later the regions of Nordooz, Shatakh and Gavesh would be taken care of in the same manner.

"They have already massacred one hundred fifty Armenian soldiers who were faithfully serving in the Ottoman army. Dr. Karageoxian was among these. By order of the governor of Sarai, several soldiers, or one or more prominent Armenians, were made to disappear daily and among these was Dr. Arisdagos, a dentist from Moosh.

"Having already heard of the arrest of Vramian and the assassination of Ishkhan, I avoided the trap of Turkish gendarmes who tried to induce me to accompany them to Arjag.

"A force of five hundred cavalry and about one thousand infantry, assisted by Kurdish forces, killed everybody they met in the streets of Arjag, the 19th of April. Armenians there resorted to self-defense. On the 20th a ferocious fight was in full swing. Sahag of Manta was killed.

"Priests Mardiros and Sahag of the village of Kharegonis, eyewitnesses to five days of fighting and retreat, have described the events as follows:

"We and the villagers, unaware of the events, were planning the spring plowing and sowing of our fields. Mr. Shirin, the federalist agent who was generally absent, being occupied with government relations and community work, suddenly came on the 18th of April, 1915. Forthwith he summoned the men and organized a force of seventy armed men. Also he wrote letters and sent runners to all sections informing them of the imminent possibility of massacres and warning them to be ready. Mr. Shirin ordered

men, women, and girls of the villages of Mantan and Arjag to come to Kharagois the same night. Now we had more than two thousand five hundred people in the village, (1,300 natives, 700 from Arjag, and 150 from Mantan, besides the 400 refugees from the Azaren and Boghaz Kessen villages who had been with us since last fall). The available number of armed men from Arjag and Mantan increased the number of combatants to eighty. Mr. Shirin assumed the command, organised the squads, indicated each group's defense position, exhorted and encouraged them to honorably discharge their patriotic duty by putting up a stubborn and daring defense.

“A number of armed Kurds arrived in the village that evening with intent to kill and plunder. They were repulsed and left several dead behind. The following day, April 20th, we were surrounded, at day break, by 500 mounted and 1,000 foot soldiers supported by a horde of Kurdish brigands. These were led by the governor of Sarai, Sharaf Bey of Khanasor, Arif of Shav, together with regular army lieutenants and second lieutenants. They also had one field cannon which they put to immediate use by shelling the village with explosives.

“The village was attacked from three directions and the savage fighting lasted until late in the evening. At noon, some of the most intrepid of our men made a sortie against the foe. Our unforgettable hero, Sahag of Mantan lost his life, but his brother, Toros, immediately filled the gap. The morale of our men was superb, they inflicted numerous casualties and forced the enemy back. Mr. Shinn's brother, Ruben, with two companions, rushed to the aid of the hard pressed squads, carrying fresh instruction and words of encouragement from the leader. That night we counted sixty-seven enemy corpses on the battlefield. No enemy was now in sight but we knew we were tightly surrounded. Each fighting man now had a reserve of from thirty to eighty cartridges.

“Under the circumstances, it was thought best to move the population to Gizilja village in the mountains, on the way to Persia. Shirin dispatched a group of eight armed and ten unarmed men from the village of Mantan to Persia to inform the Armenian Revolutionary Committee of the massacres and to ask for help. Samson and his men were to serve as vanguard with other groups were to protect the flanks and the rear. Mr. Shirin and ten of his mounted comrades went out to scout the environs with the idea of

attracting the enemy's attention to assure safe passage of the villagers. As there was no enemy in sight, Shirin ordered strategic positions occupied.

"The following morning the sun's rays found a deserted village. Only the very sick or the very old men and women were left behind, numbering two hundred. Mr. Shinn's sick wife, with her four children, were left in the village. The village was again surrounded by the Turks early in the morning. When Mr. Shirin heard of the fate of his wife and children it was too late to do anything about it.

"The retreating villagers arrived at the village of Gizilja and camped at the foot of the mountain. Immediately food supplies were put under control, a rationing system was introduced supervised by responsible men from each village. Mr. Shirin sent couriers to the Upper and Lower Timar to resist if they are able to, otherwise to take refuge in the islands of Lam and Gdoutz in Lake Van. Strategic points in the mountains were occupied the same day. Under cover of darkness Ruben and several of his mounted comrades attempted without success to enter the village and rescue Shirin's family. Later it was learned that the Turks had identified and butchered them.

"On the 22nd of April, four hundred enemy cavalry tried to skirt our positions by climbing the mountain. They were forced to withdraw leaving seven corpses. The following day they tried it again, approaching from the direction of Yalduzaghaj village, while thousands of infantrymen, aided by cannons, advanced from Napat village. Under cover of a savage barrage, they started to climb the mountain. The fight lasted until nightfall; the enemy was held at bay by the cool courage of our men. About one hundred men from the villages of Guzulja, Napat, Mukhguner, Ardavez, Kababig, Setibeg, Aghajveran and others participated in the struggle. Muno of Napat, a brave fighter, was killed.

"During the night the mass of villagers and their protectors arrived at the village of Averag. Before daybreak, ten thousand people from thirty-two vilages poured into Averag. Mr. Shirin was busy finding fresh fighters and settling the population. The enemy followed on our heels: they surrounded and attacked us on all sides and their two cannons peppered shells on the unarmed and unprotected peasants. The odds were overwhelming; our men fought valiantly, but the populace became panic struck and

attempted to flee the village thinking the enemy had already pierced our defense. It was necessary to use force to bring them back. Of the four hundred that sought to flee, more than half were killed. The situation rapidly became desperate. Unable to stop for very long the violent attacks of the enemy's superior forces, we had to retreat back to the village of Gizilja. Manning the mountain positions were the three brothers of Mr. Shirin, Aram, Manasse, Gregory and others. Never for a moment did Mr. Shirin lose his calmness or equilibrium. Missak of Ardavez and Ruben of Godj and their men held the western front; Mihran of Gusnentsz and his three comrades defended the northern approaches; Samson of Gizilja, with three other fighters, manned the eastern front while Shirin, his brothers Hrant and Ruben with Mardiros of Godj were defending the southern front. The last group succeeded in momentarily interrupting the cannonade by killing the gunner. Besides, they rushed to the aid of hard pressed comrades, and by their daring held up the morale of the rest, even though the barns in the village were all burning and hiding everything under a veil of dense smoke.

“In the afternoon, Ruben, Shirin’s brother, was mortally wounded in the chest. Then Hrant, Shirin’s other brother, was hit by a shrapnel. The same shell also wounded Shirin’s nephew, Hamazasb. But Mr. Shirin fought on and prevented the enemy from entering the village. As soon as night fell Shirin sent scouts ahead, along with fighters to act as vanguards. The oxen were divided among the nine thousand villagers and he conducted them safely into Aikesdan by passing over the mountains of Shah Baghi and between the village of Sikhga and the large pond of the same name.”



Word was received at the Defense Command on April 23rd that large forces of Turkish regulars and Kurdish clans were attacking Darman village for the purpose of pillaging and massacring the inhabitants. Darman is some 10 miles north easterly of Aikesdan. It was decided to go to their rescue. Armenag Yegarian, a member of the Defense Command, together with several experienced fighters had instructions to

organize the defense and increase the food and ammunition supply by raiding enemy posts.

As elsewhere, the fighting in the region of Darman started on the 20th of April. The fear of pending massacres had driven the inhabitants of Vosgipag, Farouz, and Bakhezig into the village of Darman on the 20th. Armed men from Sevan, Zarantz, and Lim joined them the same day. The number of men possessing nondescript weapons was eighty; from Faruz, 15 men, from Bakhezig, 10; from Darman, 25; from Sevan, 20, and from Vosgipag, 7 men.

The following day, April 21st, Turks and Kurdish mobs, aided by field artillery, attacked the village. The fighting lasted all day; they attacked in waves but were repulsed with heavy losses.

Turks, simultaneously, attacked the nearby village of Goghbantz but failed to overcome the resistance. The defenders had to evacuate the village because their store of ammunition had been exhausted. The following day the bloodthirsty mob entered the defenseless village, where they murdered twelve men and women who had not managed to leave.

In another nearby village, Tzorovantz, Armenian peasants, relying on the promise of their Moslem neighbors, decided to stay but were massacred by the Turks from Zervandantz on the 23rd. Only seven men managed to escape. Twenty-seven were killed and young women and girls were abducted.

The fate of the village of Lim was no better. Here, also, Armenians depended on the promised protection of their Moslem neighbors. Thirty-five, including the priest, were massacred on April 25th. Some of the young men had previously escaped to Darman Village.

At Sevan village, the peasants were led by the subterfuge and treachery of aldermen Salih and Khalid, into the deep ravine near the village where one hundred-twenty men were butchered.

Similar massacres took place at Ermantz village where forty-four Assyrians were butchered; at Khno, seventy of them were killed. Sixty of them attempting to flee from their villages Akhjachai and Rashan into Persia were slaughtered on the way, with

only three survivors. Their religious head, Shamasha Mushegh, was among those massacred.

Turkish attacks on Darman village, started on the 21st April, were continuing with increasing vigor. The situation was becoming increasingly desperate; when on the 26th of April, the Turks attacked again, their ammunition had been used up. Armenag Yegarian and his group arrived in time. They attacked the enemy unexpectedly, killing a number of them, and driving them away from the village. The group stayed there several days, organized the defenses, and left for Aikesdan.



Hardly had the ten thousand refugees from Shahbaghi, Averag, Aijag and Kharagonis been sheltered when another stream started to come in from the region of Haiotz-Tzor, on the 26th of April. Early that morning, reports of intensive fire were heard from the direction of Guru-Bash, a village about four miles southeasterly of Aikesdan. On their way to Aikesdan a number of armed peasants from Haiotz-Tzor encountered the militiamen from Haji Bekir barracks, and, to cover their retreat to Mount Varak, resorted to vigorous rifle. Three lay dead and six were wounded; six of the Turks were killed.

Regarding the struggles and massacres in this extended area, the Defense Command received the following concise report;

Nor Giugh; the twenty gendarmes led by Siahhamdi and corporal Ali tried treacherously to massacre the Armenians of the village. The forty armed peasants put up resistance. A hundred and fifty other gendarmes stationed at Asdvandzashen village arrived as reinforcement. The battle lasted all day. One combatant was killed, the rest managed to take refuge in Varak mountain.

Hindustan; some one thousand survivors from Krel, Gasr, Pagakgiadeuk, Behantz, Agrag and Hurtug villages, in the region of Khoshab, had taken refuge in the mountains of Hindustan. On the 20th of April, ten armed villagers went to join them. Shlel-Uzabelli from Khoshab led his armed forces; Islam Bag and Khalil Ibrahim from

Zernag, at the head of three hundred mounted fighters, attempted to seize the mountain. The resisting force consisted of twenty defenders from Hindustan, seven from Hurtug, and twenty from Krel. Though severely unmatched, the defenders kept the enemy at bay until night fall. Five men from Hurtug were killed. As soon as darkness fell, they descended to the village and escorted the population to Mount Varak. Here they found the badly mutilated bodies of the three bishops and their four servants, whom they buried.

Hurtug (Khoshb area); the women and children stayed in their homes. Kurds tortured them severely to have them disclose the location of arms caches. They branded Arme's body in several places. They abducted the priest's wife and six other women and girls and five male children.

Pagakgiaduke; April 19th. The notorious Kurdish brigands, Smgo and Avto, entered the village with their hordes. Alderman Sarkis was ordered to have the men congregate in front of his house. When this was done they proceeded to murder Sarkis, his wife Shoghig and their seven children, and eighteen other villagers. Three women and ten boys were abducted.

Doni, Havshasorig (Assyrians); the night of April 20th, having been informed of the massacres, the people of Aregh, Kheck, and Aradentz took refuge at Varak Mountain and entered Aikesdan later.

Angeshdantz; Lezgi, son of Shakir, and the notorious bandit Jango of Kalabalasan village, leading two hundred mounted Kurds, attacked the village on the 20th of April. The resistance consisted of twenty men only. In a few hours of violent fighting, attacking forces lost thirty-seven men. Aided by fresh reinforcements, the enemy succeeded in entering the village. They killed sixty males and subjected the women to indescribable tortures. These were beaten up, stripped naked, violated, and finally butchered. Only a handful of young men managed to escape to Varak.

The village adjoining Angeshdantz met with a similar fate. Only two men possessed arms, and they fought as only heroes can. They were martyred. The Kurdish mob invaded the village. Seventy of the men were put to the sword. Women and children were made victims of all the bestialities of a frenzied, savage mob.

Khosb; the bandit gang of Lezgi and Shakir murdered fifty people here, including the priest.

Bjengerd; Kurdish neighbors murdered the twelve Armenian inhabitants.

Geghzi; Major Ahmed Bey led the five hundred mounted and foot soldiers of Sadoullah Agha of Kharnoort, and Jihangir Agha of Bjengerd, and entered the village on the 19th of April. Under the guise of conscription for the labor corps, eighty young men were brought out while the rest of the villagers were ordered to stay in their homes. The new conscripts were all massacred. Some ten people of the village resorted to resistance. Towards nightfall their situation became hopeless; they set fire to their homes. Three of the men and fourteen women preferred death in their flaming homes to the indignities of the enemy. Only a handful survived by escaping to Varak mountain.

Asdvadzashen; April 19th, the Turkish governor of the region conscripted sixty young men and put them in the barracks. Later, they were taken out, led past the grist mills, and massacred. Four of the women folks made a desperate attempt to intercede and were shot dead. Two women were abducted. The rest of the women were gathered in the houses of Darmo and Margig, where they were subjected to indescribable tortures. They slashed pregnant women and picked out the unborn babes with the end of their swords...

Anggh; Turkish authorities here promised safety so long as they stayed in the village. This guarantee of security attracted large numbers of villagers from the nearby villages of Kem, Guzuldash, Turkashen and Khosb. On the 21st of April, Khalid Bey arrived with numerous reinforcements. A general massacre was immediately started. Three hundred forty peasants, of which one hundred thirty were native of Anggh, were killed.

Ishkhani-Gom; the Armenian Revolutionary Federation had an organizational committee here. Survivors from the massacres at Kem, Atanan, Kizil Dash, and White Monastery villages arrived the morning of the 19th and 20th of April. In addition, the entire population of Kharagantz, Mashdag, Muelk, and St. Vartan villages congregated here. Among these were the fifteen armed men from Anggh who did not put any faith in Turkish promises.

On April 20th, at noon, Khalid Bey of Gavash, commanding one thousand foot and mounted men, and assisted by field artillery, surrounded the village and started bombarding it. About one hundred armed peasants led by Rev. Jacob Moudoian (Protestant clergyman), prevented the attacking forces from entering the village. The stubborn fight lasted for seven hours. Their supply of ammunition practically exhausted by nightfall, they gathered together the thirty-five hundred villagers and led them to St. Vartan mountain. A group of five hundred with escort managed to arrive at Shoushantz by way of Berdag mountains and thence to Aikesdan. A group of women and children passing through Ardamed appealed to Turkish authorities for mercy and protection, but were severely beaten and outraged; others were killed.

Rev. Moudoian and forty of his men arriving at Aikesdan received a fresh supply of ammunition and left immediately for the region of Haiotz-Tzor where they were able to save over two thousand five hundred women and children stranded in the mountains. Several days later more than one thousand of these arrived in Aikesdan.

Kerdz; April 20th and 21st; there was an influx of peasants from Bltentz and Atanan villages and a portion of the people from Gizildash. This village was not molested until the 3rd of May due to the existence of a small resistance force under the guidance of Dikran of the same village. Hussein Agha of Bukhvan, at the head of five hundred militia and police force, attacked the village on the 4th, but were unable to penetrate its defenses. Some twenty women and children lost their lives during the clashes. Under cover of darkness, the entire population was escorted, over the Ardos mountains, into Pesandasht. Over fifteen thousand peasants had already been concentrated here under the protection of Levon Shaghoian, a very capable Federalist leader. Only a small portion of the villagers from Kerdz crossed over into Aikesdan by way of Varak.

Turkashen: Armenian families here sought asylum at the properties of the famed Nassir Agha. Many others from nearby villages did the same. But Nassir Agha picked out thirty-two young men and had them shot; their loved ones who rushed to mourn their death were also shot.

Ardamed; a mixed group of some sixty armed and unarmed men, fearing massacres, had already left the village for Varak two days before. After the massacre of the village of Anggh, the Turko-Kurdish mob arrived at Ardamed to massacre forty-five natives of the village and eighty peasants from Ishkhani Gom. Only women and children were left in the village, who were allowed to remain under intolerable conditions. After ten days, and by orders from Jevdet, this starving and wretched group was driven into Aikesdan.

Berdag; the peasants from Dzv Sddan, Gentanantz, Sevagrag, and Vochkharantz villages converged on Berday after hearing of the assassination of Ishkhan and the arrest of Vramian on the 20th of April. The same day, Gaspar of Mashdag and his twenty armed men arrived there. The following day, the entire population was safely led to Shoushantz. The unarmed population proceeded to Aikesdan while the armed men stayed in Shoushantz and in the mountain of Varak.

Gouroubash; following the example of the peasants of Berdag, these villagers with the exception of a few armed men, also moved to Shoushantz and then into Aikesdan.

Lamzgerd and Sighga; the peasantiy here moved into Aikesdan on the eve of hostilities.

Shoushantz; the unarmed villagers were moved into Aikesdan.

Lezg; a few of the armed and unarmed people from Lezg left for Aikesdan. The Turks sent one officer with twenty men into the village. They arrested seventy young men as hostages and had them imprisoned in the village of Avantz.



Since the beginning of the siege, it had proved impossible for the people of Van to get accurate information about events taking place in Shatakh and its environs. Several attempts at sending couriers from Haiotz-Tzor and from Aikesdan had failed. On the night of April 27th, two old men from Shadakh arrived in Aikesdan via Haiotz-Tzor. They had passed through Pesandasht and had news from Levon Shaghoian: they

also had visited Kerdz and talked to Dikran. They handed letters to Aram and the Central Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. It was learned that during the last two weeks, the valiant folks of Shadakh, with singleness of purpose and indomitable will, had been successful in repulsing all enemy attacks. The inimitable leaders, Samuel Mesrobian and Dikran Baghdassarian, were in the forefront. Not a single defense had been relinquished in spite of repeated assaults of the overwhelming enemy forces. During the fighting, the Turks had suffered crushing losses, as against accidental losses suffered by Armenians. Hovsep Choloyan was greatly missed by the people of Shadakh, and especially by his comrades now conducting the struggle. With the intent of depriving Shadakh of its favorite son and capable leader, the Turks had him insidiously arrested prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and had him shot to death at its outset.

Yet the situation was otherwise tragic. Refugees had thronged in, and these hardy people who had to eke out a livelihood from the granite mountains, now stared starvation in the face. Also, as had happened often elsewhere, some peasants had Austrian made rifles; once the ammunition was consumed they became useless. Yet, in spite of these adverse conditions, in spite of the overwhelming superiority of the enemy in manpower and weaponry, in their stirring note addressed to Aram, Samuel and Dikran pledged to carry on their unequal and hopeless struggle. They were determined to bring it to a successful conclusion or to give the last drop of their blood in the attempt.

The heartening reports brought by these messengers regarding the situation at Shadakh, Pesendasht and Kerdz created great rejoicing among the people of Aikesdan. After three days rest, the messengers returned, taking with them token assistance in arms and ammunition, a detailed report by Aram on existing conditions, copies of proclamations, communiques, etc., issued by the Defense Command, and recommendations to be on the defensive and never to abandon the people. Above all, they were exhorted never to doubt eventual victory. It was learned they had returned safely, visiting Dikran at Kerdz and Levon at Pesendasht.

Chapter XII

The Spector Of Famine

The unexpected influx of more than fifteen thousand refugees from Arjag and Haiotz-Tzor into Aikesdan was a disastrous blow to our efforts of self-defense. Predominantly, Armenian, the comparatively well-to-do population of these two regions was expected to engage the enemy for as long as they could. Instead, they fled to Aikesdan at the very start of hostilities, releasing several thousand Turkish and Kurdish forces, to increase the already very large enemy forces in attacking Aikesdan. Utterly despondent, these refugees introduced the spirit of defeatism which could not fail to have a debilitating effect on the rest of the inhabitants. The insidious venom of hopelessness, vacillation and doubt reached into the ranks of our defenders.

From the beginning, this multitudinous throng was forced into begging. They counted upon the generosity of the people and knocked on their doors for food. The people of Aikesdan had barely enough for their own families and the fighting forces. Ever since the fall of 1914, grocery stores had been depleted and closed. To import food was impossible. It had been the custom, during normal years, to garner sufficient foodstuffs to tide them over the winter and into the next harvest season. Conscription of manpower, commandeering of food stores by the government, and the cessation of production and commerce, had seriously reduced available supplies, causing widespread depression. Seventy-five percent of the people were penniless.

Sensing the danger, the Armenian population of mixed wards had already moved into the Armenian interior of Aikesdan before the commencement of fighting, creating a shelter problem. Now in a few days the beleaguered city was to accommodate the tremendous wave of over fifteen thousand refugees... The danger of epidemics became imminent; the warming rays of the sun could spark this type of disaster any time.

The dreaded, ghastly specter of famine was beginning to show its ugly face, and the people of Aikesdan, its leaders and defenders, had to brace themselves against

the invidious threat, this fifth column of the enemy. Refugee shelters were set up at the Sandukhtian girls' school and at the kindergarten of the Benevolent Society. The peasants from Arjag, mostly invalids, women, children, or oldsters were allocated to moderately well-to-do families. Their arms were confiscated and distributed among the more stout hearted. Two days later, the 27th of April, by arrangement of the Defense Command, part of the young men were sent to help Shirin of Kharagonis at Shoushantz and Varak. Some of them were to serve as reserves at defense posts and the rest were inducted into the labor brigades for which the need was very pressing.

The Supply Committee was instructed to catalogue all available materials and distribute them with meticulous care. Even the rations for the fighting men had to be reduced to minimum daily requirements.

A Relief Committee was set up to look after the needs of the refugees and the penurious natives of Aikesdan. Intellectuals and teachers offered their wholehearted assistance. People were urgently advised to be very frugal, to donate or to sell, at set prices, any foodstuff in excess of their requirements, especially grain. New bakeries were started up in different parts of Aikesdan. The lack of flour mills presented a problem. The existing mills, situated outside the city limits, had been taken over by the Turks. So, obsolete mills were repaired and new ones were built. To impress the people with the urgency of the situation, the Defense Command issued instructions to the fighting forces, on the 26th, stating;

“Hereafter, it will be necessary for each group to appoint an honest and conscientious member as supply agent, whose duty it shall be to provide on a daily basis from the Supply Agency, the minimum quantity of flour needed. Inspectors will supervise the equitable distribution. Severe punishment is in store for delinquents. Inform the Supply Agency of your agent's name immediately.

“Loitering or the presence of unauthorized persons in and around defense positions is prohibited.”

Similar instructions were issued to the people of Aikesdan by the Relief Committee. Their help was requested in building up food stores, either by outright gift or by purchase at set prices.

Chapter XIII

The Second Ten Days

During the fighting in the second ten day period, from April 29th through May 8th, the attacks were intensified. All our defenses were called into action on all fronts. Repeated attacks took place at all hours of the day or night. Well armed Turkish forces and Kurdish hordes arrived from various regions to reinforce the enemy. Besides increasing their numerical superiority, the Turks received additional pieces of artillery and ammunition from Bitlis. The past ten days of skirmishes had given them valuable experience in the type of guerrilla fighting peculiar to the terrain. They knew Armenians lacked both food and ammunition and that any outside assistance was out of the question. They realized, above all, that this was a fight to the death for Armenians.

Our defenses at Sahag Bey were once more their first target. Four cannons shelled the buildings all day long. Before noon the upper floor was reduced to a heap of rubble, and the position became untenable. The defenders had either to retreat or engage the enemy in hand to hand fighting. They chose the latter. Some hundred Turks had already started towards our position and advanced with wild fanatical outcries (salavat). Ten of the defenders rushed out from the ruins and hurled their hand grenades. The enemy reeled back and more than ten of them were killed in the street. No amount of promises, or encouragement by the officers was able to stop them from taking refuge in their second line of defense. Cannons started to pound again, but our defenders again came out victorious in this first crucial test. They kept sniping at the enemy until nightfall when the labor corps arrived to build this historic defense for the fifth time.

The enemy kept up the shelling. As darkness fell, the labor force started to repair the damage and dig trenches around the blockhouse. Sensing what was going on, the Turks kept the position under steady fire all night. One laborer was killed and two others wounded, but the “devil’s” work, as the Turks called it, continued until the morning of April 30th, when the Turks saw the ramparts standing there stronger than ever.

Practically all the defenses of Aikesdan were subjected to artillery shelling during the 29th. Particularly severe was the fire directed against our defenses at Posward and Lavant Oghlou. Turks attempted an offensive attack here, were repulsed, and lost five or six soldiers.

One of our resistance squads in the Shoushantz area attacked and captured the nearby Tzorovantz village after a sharp skirmish. In their hurried retreat, the Turks left behind considerable stores of food and ammunition as well as grain stored in dry wells, but we were unable to transfer these to Shoushantz or Aikesdan.

The following day, April 30th, the tempo of attacks was further intensified. At dawn, our Sahag Bey and Tovmazian posts were peppered with rhythmic shelling and were ringed with cannon and rifle fire. After three hours of this vicious attack, our defenses were reduced to ruins and were rendered untenable. In groups of ten, and very cautiously, the Turks attacked both of the defenses at the same time. They advanced, wave after wave, under cover of shell and rifle fire. Secreting themselves behind heaps of adobe, the defenders awaited their approach. They came through the streets and orchards yelling the “salavat” to increase the bestial courage and savagery. When about twenty yards away, and on a signal from the leader, our combatants greeted them with hand grenades and salvos from their pistols. The Turkish commanding officer was shot and two militiamen attempting to retrieve his corpse were also killed, as were five other advancing Kurds. The thundering note of “Our Fatherland” played at a safe distance, could be heard above the din of fighting. Once more the Turks were defeated and retreated shamefully.

The situation at the Tovmazian defense was particularly desperate. Absolutely nothing was left standing; yet the defenders had to keep the enemy away until nightfall when the labor battalions arrived to reconstruct the ramparts.

The same day, our positions in the Arark region were also severely bombarded. Some three hundred soldiers from the Haji-Bekir barracks, assisted by artillery and machine guns, attacked the Armenian trenches. Ales Barsamian and his intrepid group stood up to the overwhelming enemy force. Suffering very heavy casualties, the Turks withdrew. The enemy’s attack against our “Dardanelles” post was likewise repulsed.

Simultaneously, some two hundred cavalry attacked our positions at Shoushantz and Varak. They gave up the attempt and retreated back to the barracks of Haji-Bekir after losing several men.

On May 1st, Turkish attacks became indiscriminate. More than four hundred shells, mostly of the explosive type, were fired at our defenses, into the streets and orchards, and into the American and German missionary compounds; one explosive shell burst inside the American missionary church. More than a dozen unfortunate people were killed in the streets. At night they maintained a veritable hailstorm of rifle fire, with the intent of breaking the morale and creating panic among the Armenian population. Both the populace and the resistance forces were by now inured to these threats and answered the enemy with only occasional fire, with brick bats, and the singing of "Our Fatherland." As savage as the fighting of the last three days had been, they seemed to be only an exploratory and softening up operation for the attack that started on May 2nd. They seemed to be inordinately daring and resolute, now aiming to break the spirit of resistance once and for all. Nearly all of our defenses came under simultaneous and continued attack. The situation became pregnant with peril. It was critical.

Early in the morning on this day, our defense positions at Nalbandian and "Hotel" along Khack-Poghan were subjected to very severe bombardment. Quickly our barricades on the second floor were blown to bits; the position became untenable. But at this point and in plain sight of the enemy the labor battalion was pressed into service. They threw themselves into the thick of the battle, disdaining danger and death, to put up fresh barricades for their fighting brethren. Many lost their lives, while others rushed to take their place, and the work went on. In the afternoon the Turks figured it was time to take them by assault. They entered the streets with their usual horrid cries of religious frenzy, "salavat," covered by cannon and rifle fire. Our men waited in readiness; only Dayi, the leader was busy picking off the enemy gunners. Suddenly, many hand grenades exploded and the Mauser pistols mowed down many of the enemy. Instead of the usual pellmell retreat the enemy took refuge in the shop buildings to the right of our defense, further aggravating the situation. Dayi, in vain, tried to snuff out the enemy

which had already set fire to the carpenter shop of Nazareth. In turn, it set fire to our “Hotel” defense. For a moment our combatants panicked; in the meantime fresh Turkish forces began to advance on our “Hotel.” The hour of final reckoning seemed to be at hand; trapped between burning buildings on the one hand, and the enemy’s fire on the other, there appeared to be no hope for the men behind the pulverized defenses. At this crucial moment, however, combatants from Nalbandian defenses came to the rescue. They attacked the enemy in a wide encircling movement making lavish use of their grenades and ammunition. Eight of the militiamen lost their lives; the rest fled in disorder. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Dayi extinguished the fire by means of dust and water. Somewhat later, Turks repeated their salvos. Having regained their composure, the Armenian fighters stood their ground valiantly.

Concurrent with their attacks on the Khach-Poghan sector, the Turks encircled the western perimeter of our defenses. Khach-Poghan, Sahag Bey and the Arark sector were subjected to violent shelling and were reduced to heaps of rubble in short order. Our defenses at Sarkis of Dhers and nearby buildings in the Arark sector were totally demolished.

Having entrenched themselves in the orchards of Glor Dar and the Armenian church and school building at Arark, Turks bombarded our positions ceaselessly with the aid of four artillery pieces. The post of Sarkis of Dher became utterly untenable, when the walls and roof caved in. It seemed impossible to continue resistance. What about their vow not to yield one inch of ground to the enemy? How was the area leader, Nishan Nalbandian, the eminent philosopher-revolutionary, to extricate them from the critical situation? There was but one tried and tested answer; to endure, to keep the enemy from capturing their post until their faithful ally, darkness, came to their rescue. They crawled on their bellies from one mound of brickbat to another, picking off enemy soldiers and stopping their advance. The rest of the defense posts had not fared much better. Hundreds of construction laborers were needed to repair the extensive damage. Thanks to the bravery and endurance of the Armenian peasants, they were rebuilt and ready to meet the enemy attacks that were sure to come the following morning.

On May 2nd, our defenders in the Arark sector burned down the remainder of the police headquarters to retaliate, and to assist the labor corps.

Taza-Karez sector in the northeastern region of Aikesdan extended as far as the German mission compounds and, following the course of Ourpat Creek, ended at Hussian gardens. As in the case of the “Dardanelles” post at Arark, the defenders not only manned the many posts, Haji Malkhas, Kreshjian, Simon Tatoyan, Tanner Khero, Hatz Hamrogh, Dali Batman, Khiak Barsegh, etc., but fought the enemy in the orchards by digging trenches and using the clay wall fences as barricades. Two-hundred fifty defenders were assigned to this sector.

Along this extensive front, Turks had fortified themselves opposite of, and parallel to our positions. Artillery emplacements at Haji-Bekir on the south, and Toprak-Kale barracks on the north, offered a clear command of all of our defense posts. Further, Turks had fortified the heights of Zum Zum Mahgara (hand carved cavern of antiquity) and seized the village of Sikhga, placing them within striking distance of our defenses at Shoushantz and Taza-Karez.

The three cannons at Toprak-Kale and the two at Haji-Bekir shelled our positions for four hours. Our post at Tanner Khero and Hatz Hamrogh were thus demolished. The remainder were damaged in various degrees. The defenders preferred to do battle in the orchards using the earthen fences as barricades. Turkish shells destroyed these barricades one after the other. Trench fighting was the last resort. One part kept the foe occupied, while the other made vigorous use of shovels.

At noon the Turks deemed the situation ripe for mass attack. Two hundred mounted soldiers advanced from the direction of Sikhga, while another three hundred mixed force of Turkish regulars, Kurds and militia from Turkish positions attempted to pierce the Armenian defenses. This first wave of attack failed and the enemy recoiled, having lost ten men. Armenians had two defenders killed and one wounded. An hour later the enemy regrouped its forces and attacked with bigger forces and greater tenacity. They succeeded in approaching within twenty paces of our men. We met them with hand grenades and volleys of bullets from our Mauser pistols. The enemy lost twenty soldiers in this second wave of attack and again withdrew. A third wave of attack, led

by a courageous colonel of the army, followed an hour later. Our combatants were already exhausted, their ammunition spent; they were in a quandary. Informed of the situation, the Defense Command sent its chief, Armenag Yegarian, and the veteran revolutionary, Gaidzag Arakel, to render assistance. Turkish forces were closing in on our posts and few of their cavalry had penetrated into the orchards. At the crux of this encounter, the Turkish colonel was killed and Armenian defenders were ready for hand to hand fighting when Yegarian and Arakel with their men arrived. The bloody and desperate struggle lasted another half hour. We lost one combatant and another was wounded. Turks lost over forty men and were forced, for the third time, into inglorious retreat. They relinquished the fortified posts they had been holding for the last twelve days. An orphan in the Catholic orphanage, a mere youth named Kiragos Kiragosian, distinguished himself by uncommon bravery. At the hottest point of the battle, he advanced and killed two Turkish soldiers by a hand grenade, grabbed their arms and safely returned. For this act of heroism, he was decorated by the Cross of Honor by the Defense Command.

That night the foe maintained a constant fire at our positions in order to prevent the labor force from carrying out its work of repair and reconstruction. Nevertheless, Armenians succeeded in this task; they also dug extensive trench work for safer communication between the various posts.

On the same day, May 2nd, our defense positions in the Hanguisner area were also attacked. The vigorous shelling of our barricades at Shahbenderian, Shaghoyan, Janoyan, Piroumian and Shiroyan was unusually effective due to the close range of the cannon fire from Toprak Kale. Following the shelling the Turks cautiously advanced through the dale of Sofou Dayna for a surprise attack. The resistance force held their fire. At the proper instant, they opened a concerted fire on the foe, causing the loss of between ten and twelve men and forcing them to retreat in panic.

Armenian defense positions at the village of Shoushantz were attacked three times on the same day; the dull thunder of cannonade in the west was a sure sign that our people in the old city around the Castle Rock were also being attacked. On this day,

the Turks brought all the military might at their command to bear against the Armenians but to no avail. The latter proved themselves indomitable.

In this connection the Defense Command issued the following fly sheet;

“To all Defense Groups of Aikesdan;

“Our Comrades in Arms;

“Disappointed in the results of the past thirteen days of mad assaults, the enemy decided to attack us on all fronts and with all they had. Today’s battles prove two things; the enemy’s impotence, and our brilliant victories. Leaving more than forty dead, the foe ran away in panic everywhere, pursued by our bullets.

“This is the last desperate effort of the enemy. It is up to you to resist at all cost. We are confident you do not lack in valor.

“Comrades be courageous. Hold your positions with utmost vigilance.

“Always aim at a target during fighting and be saving of your ammunition.”

“Defense Command”

Van, May 2nd, 1915



During the duration of the defense struggle in Aikesdan, Turkish offensives on the third and fourth of May were unique in their fury and intensity.

Turks shelled our defenses from the southeastern corner of the Armenian cemetery at Arark. The guns were silenced for a while when we killed the gunners; throughout the night our positions were raked by vicious rifle fire. Already familiar with Turkish stratagem, our combatants saved their ammunition. We suffered one wounded.

Our positions at Sahag Bey and Tovmazian received over one hundred explosive shells. Our defenders held the enemy back with hand grenades. One grenadier, a carpenter by trade, was killed due to inexperience. The defense at Taza Karez and the Hussian’s orchard withstood the shelling well. Thirty militiamen from Lavant Oghly barricades attempted to invade our Eghigian post but were driven back and lost three men.

Turks again attempted to set fire to our “Hotel” defense at Khach-Poghan but gave it up and fled leaving one dead.

The night of May 3rd, all of Aikesdan was subjected to rifle fire with infernal fury. To those watching from Shoushantz, it appeared that Aikesdan was in flames.

The following day, May 4th, was to be marked as the day of the most stubborn fighting throughout the resistance. At 3:00 P.M. Turks shelled our defense at Amirkhanian's in the Hanguisner sector, demolishing most of the building. Then the enemy attacked. Our combatants left their ruined defenses, came into the street and, shielding themselves behind a wall, battled the enemy for hours. With a dozen casualties, the Turks fled along the river bed. An hour later the attack was directed at our Shahbenderian defense in the same area. After the customary shelling to soften us up, two army officers led the Kurdish mob into the orchard. Barricades being of little use now, the combatants, to avoid capture, came out into the street. With the help of God, and liberal use of ammunition and grenades, they killed some twenty of the invaders forcing them to retreat. We lost two defenders from Vozm. No sooner had the orchard been cleared than Turks began to bombard the position once more. It became apparent they were covering for the retrieval of the bodies.

Turks had emplaced one cannon on the premises of the Dominican Fathers, to shell our defenses at Pos Tagh, Vizviz, Baidar Khachig and Mno.

After a temporary quiet, fighting broke out at the Hanguisner area at Molaji Marker's defense post. Here, too, with the barricades demolished, the defenders had to fight the enemy any way possible. The attackers left about ten killed, and then retreated.

To forestall Turkish attacks at Hussian's orchard the defenders took the initiative by attacking Kurdish mobs entrenched there. This proved costly. We suffered three wounded, not serious, while the Kurds lost four. Soon after Turkish forces attacked our Der Khachadoorian post. It was a hand to hand fight. There were losses on both sides. Darkness forced the Turks to withdraw to their fortified posts.

Every one of our defenses in the Arark sector were heavily shelled. The fighting was especially heavy at the “Dardanelles” trenches, but Ales and his valiant

comrades pinned the enemy down at their posts. Sahag Bey and Tovmazian defenses were again destroyed and again repaired.

The Information Service issued its communique as follows:

“We met with glorious successes yesterday. The enemy carried out its most vehement attack against our northeasterly defenses, penetrating into the orchards. The struggle lasted all day. Heavy casualties forced the enemy to withdraw. According to our reconnaissance reports, enemy losses were fifty to sixty dead; the number of the wounded could not be verified.

“At Shahbenderian’s defenses, a heroic drama was unfolded yesterday. A young man named Aram Boumazian ascended the stairs three times, and from that vantage point killed an enemy each trip. In spite of all the entreaties by his comrades to the contrary, Aram insisted on going up once more for yet another kill. Turkish gunners had spotted him. A shell shattered his thigh and arm and he fell back mortally wounded. His last request was that his comrades take good care of his mother and sister from the proceeds of selling his Mauser pistol.

“One of the cannons, atop Toprak Kale, which had been shelling our positions with explosives, suddenly burst late in the afternoon. It was noticed both from Aikesdan and Shoushantz. The explosion killed four of the gunners. Soldiers from the barracks below rushed to carry away the bodies, one of which was placed in a stretcher, indicating his high rank.

“We have been informed by our branch in the Arark area that yesterday, the enemy again shelled our positions from emplacements in the Armenian church grounds. The damage was slight. Our sharpshooters silenced the cannons.

“It was noticed that the Turks were carrying away someone in women's garb, yesterday.

“Last night at 3:00 o’clock the enemy continued its senseless fusillade at our defenses. They were seldom answered.

“We have a report from Dardanelles which states, ‘The militiaman from Karashar-Dar entered the lowlands around, and east of, Ourpat Creek, one by one. They waited in ambush this morning. The enemy advanced closer to the road during the day.

At three A.M., we were subjected to heavy firing coming from the canal of the flour mill, south of Haji-Bekir barracks. We had no casualties and the foe did not attempt to invade our position.

“The Chantigian defenses at Hanguisner report: ‘Yesterday we killed two of the attacking enemy and their night attacks were met successfully. One of our men is wounded. Yesterday, from the armory on the hill, the enemy sent sixty shells at our posts. Then Kurdish hordes penetrated the orchards at Der Khachadoorian’s and Zervandantz defenses. We stood our ground and killed six Kurds. They managed to remove the corpses under cover of heavy fusillade. Our morale is excellent.’

“Password for the night is flower.”

“Information Service



The tempo of savage fighting subsided after the 4th of May. Sporadic assaults took place at several of our positions, and Armenian defenders made several attempts at attacking the enemy. Everything was quiet on the fifth, except that during the night, they continued an infernal fusillade and random shelling all over Aikesdan. The Information Service figured that the Turks burned over ten thousand cartridges per hour. May 5th was quiet again. At 3:00 P.M. our defenses at “Dardanelles” and Deve-Boyoun in the southeastern frontier, were subjected to severe rifle fire. The Turks did not attempt to attack. Later the same afternoon, from their emplacements at Glor-Dar, the Turks shelled our defenses in the Arark area. One Turkish gunner was killed.

Armenian defenders had made preparations to set fire to Turkish Adaloukh and Hamza strongholds across the street from our Sahag Bey post. Combatants were instructed to attack the fleeing Turks after the conflagration started. Master well diggers completed the tunneling, while three intrepid young men, Vagharshag Shirvanian, Hovhannes Aiyazian, and Berberian, equipped with incendiary grenades, started fires. The project was carried out without a hitch and flames started to devour Turkish strongholds. Many of the fleeing enemy were killed and stores of arms, ammunition,

and foodstuffs were seized by our men. Next to be destroyed was the Turkish Hamza stronghold. In their zeal for quick victory, the daring young men bypassed the safe but slow subterranean passage for frontal attack. Turkish bullets were flying in all directions and one struck down Hovhannes Aiyazian. The other two rushed towards Turkish positions using hand grenades. Unfortunately, the grenades did not carry the day this time. The initial tendency to panic had subsided. The enemy, entrenched behind their barricades, was pouring volleys of bullets at the daredevils. Having used up their supply of grenades, the two young men fell back on their Mauser pistols and fought the enemy for over one hour. Berberian was hit in the leg, so Vagharshag shouldered his wounded comrade and returned to Sahag Bey. Due to his wound, Berberian died in a few days and both he and Aiyazian were buried with full military honors.

Only light skirmishes took place during May 6th. The usual fusillade during the night proved harmless.

According to reports from Shoushantz and other observation posts, Turks were busy transporting troops along Haji-Bekir, Gouroubash and Haiotz-Tzor line. A similar transfer of troops, two to three hundred strong, was being made along the Toprak-Kale, Shah Baghi, and Khosh Giaduk direction.

Men at the “Dardanelles” defense ascertained that barely twenty to twenty-five guards were left in the Turkish trenches. They also reported that some sixty to seventy cavalry and foot soldiers had left the barracks and were going to the city carrying something, on the 6th of May. On the following day “Dardanelles” reported the passage of some one hundred unarmed Kurds followed by twenty mounted men heading for the city and carrying loads.

Another post reported the passage from the Semiramis ward of multitudes of burden carrying women and children.

Mysterious movements were observed on Lake Van. One sail boat left for Gavesh on the 6th while another was arriving from Tadwan. On the 7th of May, three sail boats left for Arjesh.

These movements aroused deep suspicion among the resistance leaders. Being positively isolated from the rest of the world and encircled by the unrelenting enemy

fire, it was impossible for them to arrive at exact conclusions. Some conjectured that having met with major reverses, Turks were retreating. Others, while recognizing this possibility, suspected a fresh Turkish ruse. Both conjectures proved to be correct. It was learned that on May 7th Turkish forces had surprised and overwhelmed the defenders at Shoushantz, and that the Turks had been badly mauled at Diliman at about the same time.

Chapter XIV

Fighting At Shoushantz And Varak

On the eve of hostilities, a considerable number of villagers, about five thousand, from Haiotz-Tzor, Khoshab, and other suburbs of Aikesdans, preferred the comparative security of Shoushantz and mount Varak to crowding into Aikesdan. Mostly old men, women, and children, they lacked both a means of defense and leadership. This was a broken, hopeless crowd which, in the last few days, had seen their ancestral homes burned to ashes, and their loved ones bestially murdered. Now they had no place to rest their heads, not a crumb of bread to sustain them, and no hope for survival.

Aram was the first to comprehend the scope of this tragedy and its fateful consequences unless quick steps were taken to organize this demoralized mob. During the second week of hostilities, the Defense Command took steps to protect them against Turkish atrocities. Besides, this was a first line of defense for Aikesdan and could well prove the last resort for the embattled Aikesdan.

Shirin was a born leader and organizer with extensive experience in revolutionary and guerrilla fighting; he was both loved and respected by the people and he understood them well. He had just arrived from Arjag and after two days rest in Aikesdan, he was sent out to assume the responsibility. Available were several peasant leaders with their armed groups of ten, who were to watch over the area including Darman and Sikhga villages and Varak Mountains. It was also their duty to organize surprise attacks on Turkish villages with the purpose of providing bread and other foodstuffs. To organize the procurement and distribution of food, the Defense Command provided a commission of four men. Besides, Aikesdan set aside a small portion of its ammunition for Varak and Shoushantz. It also shared with them its meager supply of bread, sugar, soap, clothing and necessities. The Red Cross assisted by sending a group of pharmacists and orderlies, and a quantity of drugs.

Shirin succeeded in organizing this crowd in a short time. He appointed leaders for each group of able bodied men, and set them in defense posts along the front covering the villages of Sikhga, Darman, Gogbhantz, Shoushant, Varak, etc. New barricades were erected and extensive trenches were dug by men lacking arms. He established regular contact with Aikesdan, and, above all, kept the enemy busy by causing big and small skirmishes. He was thus able to occupy Sikhga, Tzorovantz and Zervandantz villages expelling Turks from the area. He was being constantly attacked by the enemy forces at Haji Bekir barracks or from barracks at Hanguiser, which were always repulsed. For ten days, he was able to maintain all of the defense positions in Shashantz and Varak against Turkish attacks. Another important contribution of his forces was keeping regular contact with Aikesdan, furnishing information on the course of events at the old city, and reporting the movement of Turkish forces both on land and on the lake.

The Turks recaptured the village of Sikhga on the 1st of May by vigorous counter attack. After a week's resistance, the small Armenian force fled to Aikesdan. This resulted in exposing the northern flank of our Shoushantz defenses. The leader of the group was disarmed and degraded. Several attempts to regain the village failed. The Turks had themselves well entrenched at Sikhga and were attacking our defenses daily. The contact with Aikesdan became more difficult. From May the 1st, Turks increased their pressure on our defenses which were now literally within their crossfire.

May the 8th proved a fateful date for Aikesdan in general and for Shoushantz in particular. Early that morning, about one thousand infantry and cavalry force, assisted by two field artillery, advanced against Shoushantz from the north and from the south in a pincer movement. Two hundred soldiers from the Haji-Bekir barracks had already entrenched themselves in the hillocks opposite Shoushantz, profiting from the darkness and the drizzle of the past night. The resistance forces were taken by surprise. After a futile attempt to stop the attackers, the men in the northern post, facing Sikhga, fled to the mountain. In less than half an hour the two Turkish prongs made contact and the combined forces rushed the village. The cannon fire had already demolished most of the village; what was left, was wrecked and burned after being plundered by the

victorious enemy. The bewildered and panic stricken peasantry, armed and unarmed alike, fled up the mountain and lost several dozen persons in the attempt. The church building was destroyed, and Turkish soldiers, with swords unsheathed, overran the streets demanding Shirin's surrender. But Shirin and his men kept on fighting to gain time for his retreating people. Two of his comrades were killed, but Gasha, the veteran preacher (Assyrian by race), was at his side fighting like a tiger. For three hours this handful of heroes fought an enemy force of crushing superiority. In the meantime, the panic stricken mob, having reached the upper reaches of the mountain, took stock of the situation. The armed men, seeing that Shirin was still fighting, were ashamed of their cowardice and hastened back to assist him. This time the Turks were surprised. Forced to evacuate the village, they came out to face the forces descending upon them from the mountain. Shirin took immediate advantage of the enemy's confusion; always fighting he went back to join a group of defenders to initiate a counterattack. The hopeless situation became impossible when the two hundred soldiers from Haji Bekir barracks returned to reinforce the detachment at Shoushantz, after having captured our defenses at Varak monastery.

The resistance at Varak crumbled after three hours of struggle against overwhelming forces. Some of the people there fled to the distant parts of the mountain; the rest slipped through the cordon, suffering some losses, and taking refuge at far away positions.

There was nothing else Shirin could do now. No leader could have done any more. With ammunition gone, that night he led the people into Aikesdan. He went to Aram to confess his "guilt," his defeat. Extremely agitated he told Aram he wished he was not there because he felt guilty, guilty because he should have been killed...

The enemy had completed its work of devastation at Varak and Shoushantz by noon May 8th. They also burned down the monastery of Gamervor, close by.

The loss of this important flank was a real calamity for the Armenians who were powerless to remedy the situation. Aikesdan could not risk one combatant or one cartridge. Rumors had it that fresh reinforcements had arrived and that the Turks were ready for the final blow. The Defense Command made one futile attempt to regain the

village of Sikhga, and to divert part of the enemy forces advancing on Shoushantz. Aikesdan had to resign itself to this tragic defeat, to complete isolation, and to the task of feeding an additional crowd of five thousand famished villagers.

In spite of great difficulties, Shirin succeeded in bringing into Aikesdan some three thousand armed and unarmed people. The remaining two thousand took refuge in the mountain reaches for a few days and, after some skirmishes with the enemy, managed to enter Aikesdan, bringing with them the grim specter of famine and defeatism.

The fall of Varak and Shoushantz was a crippling blow for the people particularly for those not in the defense forces. For the first time, the chill of defeat became contagious and would have reached epidemic proportions if the Defense Command not taken immediate and necessary measures, if the struggle not entered into a new phase and particularly, if new and unexpected events not taken place.



The new influx of refugees imposed a very serious problem. All organized bodies such as the Defense Committee, the Supply Commission, the Relief Agency, the Women's organizations and the municipality, etc., concentrated their efforts on saving the population from the menace of famine. The Defense Command exhorted the combatants to be frugal, to supply their own bread and not to feed stragglers. Later on, more restrictive orders were to be issued. For those of the defenders lacking their own food sources, a quota for food, sugar, bread, etc., was established. By permission of the Defense Command, the Supply Commission commandeered all provisions in excess of one month's supply from families who had it. The result was very disappointing. It was thought that the average family would have several month's supply from families who had it. The result was very disappointing. It was thought that the average family would have several month's supplies on hand; it turned out most of them had enough for only a few days. All meat animals were registered and no one was allowed to butcher them without the permission of the Supply Commission.

During the deliberations about the matter in the Defense Command, it was proposed to organize raiding parties for the purpose of procuring needed grain and other foodstuffs. The plan had great appeal and certain possibilities, except that not a single fighter or a single cartridge could be spared for the venture.

Even before the advent of refugees from Shoushantz and Varak, we became conscious of a curious phenomenon beginning May 9th. Every day since then, the Turks drove refugees into our positions. In groups of tens or hundreds, emaciated old men, women, and children were escorted to our positions by the Turkish militia. Soon, orchards, streets, and courts were teeming with many thousands of these miserable wretches whose life Jevdet had spared so they could enter Aikesdan and break the resistance through famine.

No more horrible spectacle can be imagined than the sight of these refugee skeletons dressed in tattered garb. They had just lost their homes, their everything; they had just seen their father, brother, or son murdered; their sisters and mothers ravished. Some, unable to comprehend such inhumanity, had lost their minds; others had been numbed by the experience; forlorn and sullen, they showed no interest in life and lacked self-respect. Still others told of their experiences in an impersonal manner, as if telling of ancient happenings...

Unable to subdue and massacre Aikesdan by the superior manpower and firepower at his command, Jevdet resorted to a “fifth column” treachery. He knew, as hard pressed as they were, the magnanimous Armenians never would refuse entrance to their God forsaken kinfolk. He was confident the tens of thousands of refugees would be instrumental in precipitating victory through his three sinister allies working from within; famine, epidemic and demoralization.

Armenians in Aikesdan were fully aware of Jevdet's designs. They prepared to meet, head on, the new and more insidious enemies. They were imbued with the spirit of their old adage, “Dying together, for a great cause, is like a wedding feast.”

The overflow of the new arrivals were sheltered in Norashen, Sandukhdian, and Benevolent Society's school buildings, as well as the courtyard of Norashen church.

The Red Cross and Women's Society redoubled their efforts against the previous fighting, the spread of contagious diseases, and in trying to provide clothing. Without exception, all families contributed their maximum in food, clothing, blankets, etc., for this purpose.

The committee responsible for military supplies distributed the arms brought in by the refugees from Varak and Shoushantz to the various defense positions. The able bodied men, sound in spirit, were allocated by the Defense Command to assist in the defense work. The rest of the able bodied men were catalogued to participate in the labor force. It may be said that within four days, May 8th to May 11, epidemics and despondency were brought under control. And yet Aikesdan had to endure a lot more, as the Turkish forces and famine were a constant menace.

Chapter XV

Letters And Documents

During the period from April 29th to May 19th, important correspondence took place between Jevdet Bey, the governor of Van, Mr. Spordoni, the Italian vice consul at Van, and Bishop Yeznig Nergararian, vicar of the Armenian Prelacy of the same city. Several of the letters are published here, accompanied by explanatory notes, to serve as valuable documents and shed their own light on the self-defense of Van and the criminal intentions of the Turkish government.

Governor Jevdet initiated correspondence by his first letter to Mr. Spordoni, dated April 23rd, 1915, the day after the destruction of the Hamud Agha barracks. It reads:

“Dear Mr. Spordoni;

“The troublemakers, who appealed to you for three or four days grace so that they could complete their plans, have accomplished their purpose. The guard at Hamud Agha was murdered Monday night, telephone lines were cut, and the telegraph office at Khach-Poghan was attacked by singing young men, wearing insignia on their arms. My detachments, always on guard, naturally returned the fire. For a whole hour, and at the risk of sacrificing my men, I forbade them to reciprocate the intensive fire. However, when I discovered that the disturbance was general, that the police force I had sent to the Armenian Prelacy were fired on, I gave the order... Now there is fighting everywhere. Those who betrayed the Empire in the hour of its involvement in such an important war will certainly receive due punishment. Armed villagers, especially brought into the old city, burned municipal buildings and set fire to the market last night. I have taken severe measures so that none of the criminals may escape. The same fate will be meted out to those accursed ones who dared to dynamite the Hamud Agha barracks. Thank God, the exploding charge did no other damage than to start a fire. They showed their jubilation at this by singing and playing music. Let there be no doubt, those that conspire against our existence shall be crushed.

“I regret it very much that some stray bullets have struck your building. I am convinced it is the work of those damned Armenians who, in their devilish ways, try to exonerate themselves before world opinion.

“You are aware we have no guards in your vicinity except at the British consulate building, and those poor, hemmed in guards always respected your flag. One or two of the guards were martyred by the rebels who also set fire to the building, as if this would do them any good.

“These traitors jeopardize their existence by distressing the government, hope to benefit by it, and I am sure, they are all satisfied. They took up arms, and as you see, the fight is going on with great intensity.

“There is but one way to put an end to these tragic disturbances; it is for them to deliver up all weapons and declare absolute obedience.

“These criminals took up arms hoping Russians would be arriving soon; let them know that Russians never again will overstep our frontiers. I am sorry that the people will, perforce, suffer.

“Due to lack of time, I cannot write at length. I desire an interview with you, but am fearful that Armenians will make an attempt on your life and blame it on my soldiers; therefore, better not to try it. I beg of you to have your flag flying at all times. In times of actual fighting, place flags in all windows. We have already identified your premises to our forces with proper instructions but, as you will appreciate, in the heat of fighting, it is necessary to have flags, conspicuously displayed. The attack is going to be extremely violent and decisive.

“Please take Mr. Agardine and his officials under your protection at the Consulate.

“The rioters burned down the building of the Public Debt, the bank, and the Regie. They even advanced as far as the government house by using bombs, but were forced to retreat on their bellies. We made an unsuccessful attempt to save the valuables at the bank as they set fire to the Public Debt building. Mr. Agardine does not have to worry, however, as the safe was empty.

“The traitors who attacked the government building at Shatakh, and killed officials, and the Moslem public, were largely annihilated by our fresh forces arriving on the scene. Those who took refuge in the church and other places, have been surrounded. I am momentarily expecting news of them being duly punished.

“From Bash Kale and Sarai our detachments are arriving. The insurgent’s attempt to block their arrival was overcome.

“My respects and salutations to the ladies, my dear.”³

(Sgd) Governor Jevdet

April 23, 1915

Mr. Spordoni, Italian vice consul at Van, answered Jevdet’s letter the following day, April the 24th, thus:

“Your Excellency:

“I have the honor to acknowledge receipt of your letter of yesterday. I regret very much Your Excellency’s belief that I acted as intermediary for the Committee to gain time. May I assure you the only intent of my appeal was to serve the government and the people in putting an end to current incidents. During my conversation with Your Excellency, I had the honor of pointing out the possibility of regrettable events, such as the one mentioned in Herr Spori’s letter about the tactless behavior of the militia, who failed to comply with orders issued by Your Excellency.

“I am firmly convinced that your noble and humanitarian feeling, of which I have been aware for the past twelve years, you will be able to find grounds for agreement, which will prevent bloodshed. I entertain great confidence in your capabilities and experience. I am sure you will be able to come up with proposals that will meet with ready acceptance by Armenians.

“Regarding your demand that Armenians surrender their arms and themselves completely, I venture to state, in the present state of events, these proposals will not bear fruit.

“Armenians have resorted to arms because they believe the government, under the guise of conscription, intends to exterminate them totally and indiscriminately.

Without waiting for or hoping for any assistance from Russians, they have firmly resolved to defend the lives of their families.

“I share your grief for the destruction of the British consulate building, as well as for the death of the gendarmes there, but according to information gathered by me, the gendarmes there opened fire first, without being attacked.

“I would like to inform Your Excellency of the fact that a shell struck the Russian consulate and exploded there. The dragomen and gendarmery stationed there had to leave. Five bullets struck my consulate; fortunately, only material damage was done.

“I am very pleased to learn that Your Excellency is going to issue necessary orders not to direct shell or rifle fire in the direction of my consulate.

“Conforming to your directives, I have placed the Italian flag at all conspicuous locations. I have the honor of informing you that I have offered shelter to my subjects, my officials, their families, and my proteges. However, as Your Excellency knows, my premises are not spacious enough to accommodate all, so I was forced to rent the two adjoining buildings. I will hoist the Italian flag on those two building, also.

“I will convey to Mr. Agardine the contents of your letter concerning him. He will write to Your Excellency himself. Due to the very crowded conditions, it is very difficult for me to offer shelter for him and the families which have taken refuge with him, I join him in entreating you to allow him to hoist the flag for protection.

“Mr. Lemin is at my house. Hussein Bey has already informed you that he is here with his family. It was necessary for me to do that after his home was shelled and burned. I beg of Your Excellency to protect the Rue family as well as Mrs. Sanfort (wife of the former French consul). The American mission informed me of the contents of your letter.

“According to reliable information, no armed persons are present either at the American or German missionary compounds; only women, children and sick men. I have been assured that not a single cartridge has been fired from either of these locations; therefore, I ask you to take necessary measures to protect them.

“Unable to find any other means, I had to impose upon the good offices of Dr. Ussher to have one of the convalescent Turkish soldiers serve as courier for this letter. The courier has voluntarily undertaken to come to the city for this purpose; I wish to assure Your Excellency that this was not done to make room for wounded Armenians. In order to prove the veracity of my statements, I beg to have this, as well as the other couriers, returned to the hospital for further treatment.

“In order to expedite the convalescence of these men and to obviate any misunderstanding, I beg of you to make it possible for me to get in touch with them.” ⁴

The Italian Vice-Consul at Van
J.Spordom

Van, April 24th, 1915

Herr Spori, the German missionary in charge of the German orphanage, wrote the following letter to governor Jevdet concerning the commencement of the struggle;

“His Excellency, Jevdet Bey

“Governor of the Province of Van

“My very dear friend:

“The reason for the interview of last Sunday was the expectation that existing crucial problems between the government and the Armenian people could be settled on mutually acceptable grounds. Unfortunately, our hopes were not realized, and the solution of the problems took a terrible turn. In the morning of April 20th, several women who had been pursued at Gouroubsh, attempted to seek refuge in the city by way of Shoushantz. They were forced to cross one of the cordons. One of the young women, a former orphan at our orphanage, was furiously attacked here. Since the declaration of the war, her husband has been in the army. She managed to escape by dropping her load and abandoning the donkey. Your soldiers opened fire, and soldiers from other lines joined in. We saw all this because it was taking place close to our mission. This grieves us very much. Last night we were subject to violent fire from above, and found ourselves face to face with great danger. Fortunately, nothing

happened. Yesterday bullets penetrated our compounds. One of our teachers barely escaped with his life.”

(Sgd) Spori

Two days later, April 26th, Jevdet answered Signoir Spordoni in the following short letter.

“Italian Consul:

“Signoir Spordoni:

“I was astonished at the contents of your letter. I did not mean to infer that you tried to gain time for the rebels. What I meant was that the insurgents, taking advantage of our friendship, posed as being the persecuted and declared their submission in order to gain three days; this is what I stated. However, thank God, they did not succeed in their plans. I have now ordered all roads, mountain trails and passed closed; the insurgents who have been opposing us have been mostly overcome and punished. I hope in the near future to put an end to the disturbances here also.

“Our gunners have received orders to fire on armed groups only and they are doing just that. Mr. and Mrs. Sanford are at their house, safe and comfortable. The government is conscious of its duties. Your statement that they have been attacked is regrettable. Until and unless they surrender arms and declare absolute submission, I am compelled to continue the task of chastisement.

“The government cannot negotiate terms or make treaties with rioters. You appreciate this fact, of course. It is not permissible to hoist flags on any buildings other than the consulate. Let your neighbors know this.”

“Affectionately Jevdet”

April 26th, 1915

There was a lull in correspondence for a short while. It was resumed by Jevdet more eagerly after the 13th of April. Following is the third letter addressed to Signoir Spordoni by Jevdet:

“Mr. Spordoni;

“I have received your congratulatory letter on the occasion of the anniversary of Sultan’s accession to the throne. I thank you for it.

“Our squadrons advancing from Bitlis by way of Gargar are punishing those opposing their passage, while those of the villagers who pledge submission, are being protected.

“Similarly, our squadrons advancing from Timar have arrived at Aliur village after exterminating the rebels at Diramer. Aliur and some nearby villages vowed obedience and were taken under our protection. They must deliver all their weapons and the young men must join the army in order to prevent untoward events.

“The people of Avantz have shown complete obedience and are enjoying all sorts of favors and accommodations by the government.

“The stupid rebels who were digging trenches in order to obstruct the advance of our forces have been punished. The rebels at Darvan and Goghbantz villages will be duly punished today. The majority of the rioters in the old city, most of whom are known to be villagers imported from surrounding villages, have been overwhelmed. In a day or two, we will liquidate those entrenched in several houses and at the Prelacy, and the church. In spite of our repeated warning, these traitors publicly announced they were trying to help the Russian forces, which they expected to be arriving soon; naturally they shall all be properly punished today.

The allegation that one of our shells has hit the American missionary church is nothing more than a falsehood fabricated by them to assist the Armenian cause in any way possible. We have no doubts, unfortunately.

“The rebels attempting to penetrate the Moslem quarters were fired upon at Arark and Sahag Bey house. A general attack against these rebels is unavoidable. They are assisting the enemy and refusing to pledge submission. During the general assault we will attack, conquer and punish them wherever they may have fortified themselves, Including inside the American and German mission compounds. By help of the Almighty, we will settle this question.

“A large quantity of arms and bombs have been discovered at Diarbekir. The people, proving their fidelity, have pointed out revolutionaries. These sinister criminals were apprehended and put in prison, and peace was reestablished.

“But the natives of Van are working wholeheartedly for the benefit of the Russians and their revolutionary leaders. Consequently, they shall be severely punished.

“The sight of mutilated bodies, caused by our shells in the old city, naturally grieves us all. However, the government, conscious that they are plotting against its existence and the people, shall continue to fight until the rebels surrender and vow complete submission.

“I have just been informed that the building across from Nalbandian's house was set on fire immediately after the Turkish flag was hoisted. It is my guess that occupants of the building desired to show their submission by this means and were burned out as soon as the rebels became aware of it. If the situation is as bad as I think it is, all hopes for peace have vanished.⁵

“I had mentioned that Mr. Algardi should visit me if he could; you have mentioned nothing about this. His house is in the danger zone and surrounded by mutineers. Do me the favor of informing him to leave. If he cannot cross over, he should stay with you.”

“Governor Jevdet”

April 30th, 1915

Signoir Spordoni's answer follows:

“Your Excellency;

“I have the honor of acknowledging the receipt of your last letter; I deemed it helpful to communicate its contents to several parties.

“It is to be understood that the peaceful communities are afforded government protection and benevolence. Unfortunately, the news we have received reveals atrocities perpetrated on the unarmed population of our villages. This news has completely destroyed people's confidence and compelled them to conclude that the government is planning general massacres; they are driven to self-defense.

“Regarding the American missionary church being hit by a shell, I felt it my duty to personally investigate the matter, and found the report to be true. Your Excellency may rest assured that they are maintaining absolute neutrality.

“J. Spordoni
Italian Vice-Consul at Van”

May 3, 1915

“P.S. Please inform me of the whereabouts of Miss MacLaren so that I may inform her colleagues. Also, please issue necessary orders that no shells or bullets are to be fired in the direction of the American missionary compound.”

³ Mr. Agardine was an Austrian national and director of the “Regie Co-Interessee des Tabacs de l'Empire Ottoman.”

The courier was a fifteen year old Armenian lad who was left behind in the Turkish quarters. Turkish police escorted him as far as the last stronghold at Khach Poghan. Here they furnished him with a white flag and sent him ahead.

This letter of Jevdet's contained most welcome information for the Armenians in Aikesdan who, since April 17th, had been insulated from the old city and the world outside. Thus, they learned that their brethren in the old city, far from being crushed or surrendering, were carrying on an aggressive and valiant fight.

Many unsuccessful attempts had been made to communicate with the old city. Finally on the 17th of May, messengers succeeded in arriving in Aikesdan. They stayed in Aikesdan a few days and returned with messages from Aram and the Defense Command. However, the siege was so tight they were forced to hide in the hills of Shah Baghi and Lesk until May 16th, the day of deliverance.

⁴ Some two thousand people had taken refuge at the Armenian mission. These were women, children and old people who enjoyed the tender care of the mission staff, Dr. and Mrs. Ussher and Mr. and Mrs. Yarrow. While maintaining absolute neutrality

in all matters of a political nature, it can be stated that their sympathies as well as those of Herr Spori and Signoir Spordoni were decidedly in favor of Armenians. Their neutrality however, was not strictly honored by Jevdet. Two children were killed, and one old women messenger was shot; the American flag was shorn by shell and Dr. Ussher's family barely escaped death. Signoir Spordoni, Herr Spori and others sent special reports to Caucasus, by Armenian couriers, emphasizing the dangerous situation of Armenians at Van. The messenger was a Turkish soldier, who like many others, was being cared for free of charge.

⁵ The story of hoisting the Turkish flag, burning of the house, and submission, is a vile lie concocted by Jevdet.

Neither the people nor the Armenian Revolutionary Federation made any official or non-official appeals to the Russian government or the commanding officers before or during the struggle in Van. Several attempts were made to communicate with the Armenian volunteer Corps in Caucasus with the purpose of obtaining arms and ammunition. Only one messenger succeeded in getting as far as Persia. Not one cartridge was obtained until the advent of the volunteers.

There had been no resistance at Diramer, mentioned in Jevdet's letter, and not one shot fired. The unarmed peasants and hundreds of men in the labor corps were murdered by Jevdet's order.

It is true Avantz was spared: everything except the boats were confiscated. They were saved after the panicky retreat of the Turks. One hundred twenty five of these sailors transported most of the Turkish army to Tadvan, across Lake Van in their boats. As reward for this service, they were butchered.

The paragraph referring to the people at the old city is pure fabrication. They never were subdued; they never declared they were waiting for the coming of the Russians; and there was never an outsider among them.

Chapter XVI

The Last Phase - The Triumph May 9th To May 18th

After their occupation of Shoushantz and Varak, the Turks concentrated their forces for attacks against Aikesdan and the old city, intending to crush the resistance with one massive blow. During May 9th and 10th they carried on the usual deployment of forces, and terrorized with cannonade and furious fusillade. In the afternoon of April 9th, the Turks attempted a pincer movement, in tight formation, against our defenses at Taza-Karez and Ourpat Creek. The purpose was to force the Armenians into the inner quarters of Aikesdan and thus reduce the size of the circle. The defenders valiantly stood their ground, yielding not one inch of ground. Simultaneously, the Turks bombarded our positions at Sahag Bey, Tovmazian, Sunatjian, and Toutlouzian. The Turks lost one officer, one gunner, and one private, attempting in vain to recover the officer's body. Turks suffered casualties in their attacks on our Tavmazian, Zervantzian, an Murdian defenses and lost over a dozen at Taza-Karez and Ourpat Creek.

On May 9th, the Intelligence Service at Arark reported that our positions were shelled from the direction of Glor Dar, without damage. In the fighting that followed, the foe suffered important losses at our Glor Dar, Peotigian and Solakhian barricades. It was also reported that an hour before, the enemy drove women and children from Haiotz-Tzor and Ardamed to our positions by way of Arark. The next day, the Turks bombarded, with their two field pieces, all our positions in the Arark area, particularly our post at Sarkis of Dher's house. Several dozen shells made shambles of the house; the defenders were deprived of any protection but continued to fight on. This obstinacy infuriated the Turks who decided to rush and capture them alive. They were greeted with a hail of murderous bullets from behind heaps of rubble. The Turks had to give up the attempt, with loud curses and imprecations, not caring even to recover their dead. As soon as darkness set in, the work of rebuilding the stronghold was started; by morning it was once more ready to face the shells of the enemy. At the Bneian and

“Dardanelles” defenses, in the same area, brief skirmishes took place where several Turks were killed.

Turkish attacks on Aikesdan were renewed on May 11th with unprecedented intensity. They threw all their might and means into the battle. Having emplaced four pieces of artillery atop Toprak Kale, the Turks shelled all our positions at Taza Karez and Hanguisner from early morning, without let up. No adobe fortifications could endure the infernal shelling. At noon, one after the other, our defense positions at Der Khachadoorian, Shiroyan, Chantigian, Shegoyan and Tanner Khero were reduced to dust. Encouraged by the success, the enemy forces attacked our Chantigian post. The situation was extremely critical. Our defeat here could well seal the fate of the rest of Aikesdan. Under cover of furious shell and rifle fire, Turkish regulars, with bayonets gleaming in the morning sun, made quick and daring advances toward our post. For a moment, all hope seemed to vanish; the incursion of the enemy into the heart of Aikesdan seemed inevitable. Instinctively, the intrepid defenders dashed out to meet the enemy face to face, in hand-to-hand combat. There was no time or room for the use of rifles. They had to depend upon their Mauser pistols and hand grenades. Some of the peasant fighters from Vozm had only stones or the butts of their rifles to fight with. It was a bloody encounter and both sides lost heavily and neither side would yield.

Gregory of Bulgaria, Gaidzag, lightening Arakel, arrived on the scene in the nick of time bringing reinforcements and ammunition. The fate of the battle changed. The attacking forces were caught in the crossfire of the Armenian defenders. Fresh Turkish reinforcements, first hesitated, and then refused to enter the blood bath as other Armenian defenses nearby were now concentrating their fire on the attackers. The two hundred attacking forces were compelled to withdraw; they lost twenty-five dead and numerous wounded. Our losses were also heavy; two fighters from Vozm and three others were killed, besides four wounded. Victory was won.

Concurrently, Turks attacked our Murodian and neighboring posts. After the customary bombardment, a mixed force of some one hundred fifty Turkish regular and Kurdish irregulars approached the attacked Murodian post. At twenty yards, our fighters opened fire, but the enemy kept on coming. The situation became desperate. Here, too,

the defenders threw themselves into hand-to-hand fighting using their pistols and grenades generously. After an hour of this, the Turks gave up and fled, leaving behind more than ten dead. Our losses were one combatant and two members of the labor force.

All of the Armenian posts were violently shelled on the 11th day of May. Two of these received more than eight shells. Here the enemy made a half-hearted attempt at attacking, but became disheartened and fled by the solid resistance of Armenians. The defenses at Sahag Bey, Tovmazian and Sunetjian were shelled at random, causing the death of two, and wounding one defender. Turkish attacks at our Aghanigian post were more violent. During one day, over two hundred fifty cannon shells were aimed at the two posts. The posts were demolished and reconstructed until darkness brought relief. In this desperate encounter Sahag of Mantan distinguished himself as the bravest of the brave. An unerring marksman, he had brought down three gendarmes and, as darkness fell, he advanced into the enemy lines, picking up three rifles with their cartridge belts and returning safely, in spite of the enemy's fire. Emulating Sahag's valor, a youth from Der Khachadoorian's post, scorning Turkish fire, rushed to grab the rifle and the ammunition belt from a dead soldier and returned safely. They were in critical need of these items.

Though the defense post at Mno's and Vizviz were also bombarded, the enemy made no attempt to attack. At night our defenders invaded the enemy stronghold, killing one soldier, and forcing the Turks to flee. They returned with weapons after one hour.

The engagements of May 11th were continued through the night. From their north and westerly strongholds at Shan Tagh, Turks opened vigorous fusillade on our posts. At 9:00 P.M. that night the Armenians were successful in breaking through the walls of the Turkish stronghold and capturing several rifles and equipment. The same night a Turkish soldier in women's garb was killed.

The fighting on May 11th was costly to both sides. Turks lost more than one hundred. Armenian losses were also serious. Never before had the Armenian defense positions been so severely damaged. Hundreds of laborers renewed and rebuilt them again and again, so that, on this day, Armenians came out victorious, not yielding one inch of ground to the enemy.

The unprecedented intensity and violence of the attacks on May 11th were interpreted by the Defense Command and Aram as either indicative of serious Turkish reverses at the battle front, or as a way of expending the fury of their vengeance upon the Armenians in Aikesdan, or as the execution of Jevdet's plans as revealed in his last letter to break resistance once and for all. Fresh reinforcements had already arrived and supported this view.

In contrast, the following day, May 12th, was quiet. The Turks seemed to be immobilized. Yet, in this stillness, one could hear the thunder of shell being showered against the Armenians in the old city.



Numerous peasant women from Lower Shamiram and from the Armenian quarters of Arark freely congregated at the square bringing unbelievable reports. A woman from the village of Aliur said she had been held by the Turks for the past fifteen days. "Whoever could manage it escaped; the rest of the male population was mercilessly slaughtered. Turkish militiamen gathered women and children and brought them to the city. Some of us disappeared, and probably were killed. Young and attractive women were distributed among them. Old women and children were sent in groups to Armenian quarters in the old city and Aikesdan, saying "Let them perish sooner and altogether." I saved in the house of a Turk, tending his garden, milking his cow, carrying water, etc. This morning, while working in the garden, I noticed a great deal of commotion among the Turks. The master's son came home, sad and crest fallen; soon his father began beating his head with his hands and repeating, "Moscoff, the infidel is coming." Women and children started to lament and tear at their hair. I hid myself in the bushes for fear of being killed. Soon the scene repeated itself in the neighboring houses. They were all panic stricken, and starting to make dough for bread and packing their belongings. It looked to me as though the Turks were running away; I could plainly hear them say that the Russians were approaching from Bayazid, Sarai and Bash-Kale, that Turkish forces had been crushed, that Armenian volunteers (in the Russian army)

headed by Antranig and Dro were massacring Kurds and Turks, and that they would soon be in Van. After hearing this, I took courage and ran away. On my way, I noticed Kurdish caravans coming from the direction of Khoshad; I was scared to death but, thank God, they did not recognize me.”

The reports of the other women were similar. The reports brought by the Assyrian refugees from the villages of Ermantz and Doniye corroborated what we had been told. Calmly, they told of the panic among the Kurds during the last four or five days. Almost every day Kurdish caravans of pack animals, and their women and children, travelled to Van by way of Khoshab. They had overheard Kurds saying, “Russians are coming, to aid Aram Pasha, and are preceded by Armenian volunteers.”

Similarly, refugees from Arjag, mostly women, said they had seen hordes of armed and unarmed Kurds fleeing headlong as though being pursued, and had heard the distant thunder of cannons.

This piecemeal information was supplemented by reports arriving from our defense points in Aikesdan. Quiet reigned on all fronts; our challenges had failed to evoke any reaction. They concurred in the opinion that Turkish strongholds had been partially evacuated. The “Dardanelles” post reported that Kurdish caravans were descending unhindered from the hills of Gouru Bash and, after a short stop at Haji-Bekir barracks, proceeded to Lower Shamiram.

Scanning the horizon by binoculars from the roofs of tall buildings, one could see a vast dark mass moving in the direction of Ardamed.

The sum total of these pieces of information justified the conclusion that there was real panic among the Turks. To obtain conclusive proof, the Defense Command issued the following directive to all defense leaders:

“We have learned from various sources that a state of panic exists among the Turks, and that they are deserting their strongholds. Stand alert at your posts but send out scouting parties of one or two men to verify the facts and make sure this is not another of the enemy’s traps.”

“Defense Command”

May 12th, 1915

The exploration carried out by a number of Armenian posts that night revealed the fact that, though reduced in strength, none of the Turkish strongholds had been evacuated. The scouting parties met with intense fire so that we were unable to capture any of the posts. The attempt by the Nalbandian defenses was of particular interest. They reported;

“Yesterday we were ordered to reconnoiter enemy positions. In order to avoid loss of life, we devised a trick. Some kerosene was placed in a tin can and tied to a dog’s tail by means of a rope. After igniting the oil, we chased the dog down Khach-Poghan. We made a big noise by firing our pistols and hunting rifles, yelling hurrahs and onward... The enemy, caught by surprise, responded furiously. In less than one quarter of an hour, they wasted over five hundred bullets. It was evident that the Turkish forces had been reduced, since barely a dozen shots were fired from Turkish posts confronting ours; most of the firing was from far away.”

The night of May 13, Turks attempted a counterattack against our “Hotel” post at Khach-Poghan. By coincidence, the defenders of “Hotel” were also planning a sortie and the two groups met. After a short and sharp skirmish the Turks fled; the Armenians did not suffer any losses.



The Armenian community and the intrepid defenders did not forego the celebration of Labor Day on May 1st (Julian calendar) in spite of the ever present danger of death and destruction. They sang folk and revolutionary songs in the squares and orchards, accompanied by the orchestra. It was our misfortune to have to commemorate this Labor Day upon the ruins of our homes, threatened by Turkish shells and bullets, and forced to bear arms against the most despicable of tyrannies. Many eloquent and impassioned speeches were made on this occasion

On the 13th and 14th of May, our positions, particularly those in the Arark sector, were massively bombarded, as was the American mission where several women

and children were killed. We lost Gasha, the Assyrian, who had fought at the side of Shirin and had been fighting at our defenses with unexcelled daring and devotion. He was interred with full military honors at Norashen cemetery.

Chapter XVII

The Resistance Front

The extremely virulent attacks of May 11th made it necessary to take an inventory of manpower and war material. On May 13th, and under the supervision of Aram, the task was carried out in great detail.

This was possible by the lull in fighting that day. The findings were presented to the Defense Command. It revealed the dismaying facts that the over seventy thousand Armenians in Aikesdan, besieged and hungry as they were, had to depend for protection on one thousand fifty-three combatants. The entire arsenal consisted of one thousand fifty-four firearms of which five-hundred forty-nine were pistols and 113,923 rounds of ammunition including the 39,089 for pistols. How long could they hold out against the enemy with a dozen artillery pieces, over ten thousand soldiers, unlimited military and food supplies, and impregnated with the frenzy of a “Holy War”?

Following is the list of Armenian defense positions as compiled on May 13th:

Area No. I comprised the Arark regions; the area leader was Nishan Nalbandian; assistants, were Ales Barsamian and Garabed Saroukhanian.

Post No. 1; the backyard of the church of Arark; leader, Dickran Ohanian; 8 combatants, 5 rifles and 3 Mauser pistols.

Post No. 2; the winery of Musho; leader, Dickran Chutjian; 6 combatants, 3 rifles and 3 pistols.

Post No. 3; Devey Boyun; leader, Mihran Khranian; 9 combatants, 9 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 4; “Dardanelles;” leader, Mihran Khranian, 15 combatants, 11 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 4a; “Dardanelles;” leader, Gregor Pazigian; 17 combatants, 10 rifles and 6 pistols.

Post No. 5; “Tirk;” leader, Artin Lordo; 18 combatants, 15 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 6; Mantagouni's Woods (forest); leader, Joch Agha Solakhian; 7 combatants, 5 rifles, 3 pistols.

Post No. 7; Bneian's house; leader, Dickran Bneian; 5 combatants, 3 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 8; Missakian's house; leader, Aram Sabonjian, 5 combatants, 3 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 9; Fergulian's house; leader, Armenag Arghetdzian; 25 combatants, 10 rifles, 15 pistols.

Post No. 10; Tirk (Nakhry Poghan); leader, Mugurdich Salakhian; 9 combatants, 8 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 11; Markar of Dher's house; leader, Nishan Der Melikian; 15 combatants, 8 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 12; Nerso of Dher's house; leader, Dickran Nersoian; 11 combatants, 5 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 13; Salo's safe; leader, Leon Jamgochian; 11 combatants, 8 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 14; Badour's bakery; leader, David Jraghatzbanian; 13 combatants, 8 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 15; Mugurdich's house; leader, A. Hussian; 8 combatants, 4 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 16; Kevork Peotigian's house; leader, Nazareth Sabonjian; 7 combatants, 4 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 17; Vartan Shirini's house; leader, Yeghia Boyajian; 4 combatants, 2 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 18; Charchi Baghdo's house; leader, Thadeus Bjigian; 12 combatants, 4 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 19; H. Kalantarian's house; leader, Galousd Merjanian; 5 combatants, 4 rifles, 2 pistols.

In Area No. I, there were altogether 20 posts, 19 leaders, 209 combatants, 127 rifles, 109 pistols, 26,029 cartridges.

Area No. II; bounded by Ourpat Creek, Avoyi Dm, and Taza Karez. Area leader, Raphael Der Khachadoorian.

Post No. 1; Der Khachadoorian's house; leader, Avedis Gandalian; 28 combatants, 16 rifles, 14 pistols.

Post No. 2; Solakhian's house; leader, Hagop Gandalian; 17 combatants, 13 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 3; House of Haji Malkhas; leader, Abraham Khojayan; 19 combatants, 9 rifles, 6 pistols.

Post No. 4; Kreshjian's house; leader, Kiavor; 17 combatants, 6 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 5; Houssian's orchard; leader, Hagop Bazigian; 21 combatants, 11 rifles, 14 pistols.

Post No. 6; Simon Tato's house; leader, Avedis Terchoonian; 22 combatants, 7 rifles, 15 pistols.

Post No. 7; House and orchard of Kher; leader. Bahhazar Melkonian, 37 combatants, 19 rifles, 20 pistols.

Post No. 8; Houssian's orchard (2); leader, Gabriel of Gangvar; 20 combatants, 13 rifles, 6 pistols.

Post No. 9; Houssian's orchard (3); leader, Armenag Kazazian; 11 combatants, 10 rifles, 6 pistols.

Post No. 10; Parsegh's house; leader, Dickran of Bltentz; 17 combatants, 14 rifles, 9 pistols.

Post No. 11; Houssian's orchard (4); leader, Nazareth Boumoutian; 13 combatants, 10 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 12; House of Deli Batman; leader. Toros Gharibian; 11 combatants, 4 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 13; House of Deli Batman (2); leader, Toros Gharibian; 6 combatants, 5 rifles, 1 pistol.

Post No. 14; Hatz Hamrogh's house; leader. Hovhannes of Ardamed; 13 combatants, 6 rifles, 8 pistols.

In Area No. II there were 14 defense positions, 13 leaders, 352 combatants, 143 rifles, 128 Mauser pistols, and 28,536 rounds of ammunition.

Area No. III; Shan Tagh-Hanguisner; area leader, Hovhannes Manougian.

Post No. 1; Mukhsi Haroutian's house; leader, Avedis Margosian; 13 combatants, 3 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 2; Boumoutian's house; leader, Aram Shaljain; 18 combatants, 7 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 3; Garsian's house; leader, Caspar Mugurdichian; 8 combatants, 3 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 4; Kadehjian's house; leader, Bedros Rupenian; 14 combatants, 4 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 5; Murodian's house; leader, Mugurdich Manoogian; 7 combatants, 3 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 6; Shmavonian's house; leader, Ghevont Hussianj 9 combatants, 3 rifles, 3 pistols.

Post No. 7; Manassean's house; leader, Mugurdich Pehrizian; 12 combatants, 6 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 8; Sanoyan's house; leader, Senekerim Sanoyan; 7 combatants, 7 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 9; Denderchoyan's house; leader, Yeghishe Vartanian; 11 combatants, 4 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 10; Touroyan's house; leader, Hovhannes Manougian; 15 combatants, 3 rifles, 9 pistols.

In Area No. III there were 10 defense positions with 10 leaders, 114 combatants, 40 rifles, 55 Mauser pistols, and 10,012 rounds of ammunition.

Area No. IV; East of Khach-Poghan as far as the barracks of Hamud Agha. Area commander, Melkeset Eynatian; assistant, Missak.

Post No. 1; Amirkhanian's house; leader Hovsep from Vozm; 20 combatants, 11 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 2; Torkomian's house; leader, Mugurdich Pehrizian; 15 combatants, 6 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 3; Berberian's house; leader, Ghevont Aboubelekian; 24 combatants, 5 rifles, 13 pistols.

Post No. 4; Khrimian's house; leader, Hovhannes Zeperian; 25 combatants, 13 rifles, 20 pistols.

Post No. 5; Vezvezian's house; leader, Hampartzoum from Vozm; 22 combatants, 12 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 6; Zervandian's house; leader, Kerim Chavoush; 26 combatants, 9 rifles, 20 pistols.

Post No. 7; Simon Terlemezian's house; leader, David Chavoush; 37 combatants, 4 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 8; Simon Terlemezian's house (2); leader, Vahan Gailian; 13 combatants, 5 rifles, 9 pistols.

Post No. 9; Yeghigian's house; leader, Nerses Mardirosian; 19 combatants, 8 rifles, 9 pistols.

Post No. 10; Shaghoyan's house; leader, Garabed Barigian; 11 combatants, 7 rifles, 4 pistols.

Post No. 11; Janoyan's house; leader, Yeghishe Nalbandian; 7 combatants, 2 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 12; Manachou's house; leader, Sahag Pokhararian; 4 combatants, 2 rifles, 2 pistols.

In Area No. IV there were altogether 12 positions with 12 leaders, 215 combatants, 89 rifles, 119 Mauser pistols, and 25,117 rounds of ammunition.

Area No. V; South of Khach-Poghan as far as Arark sector, Tutunjian's post. Area leader, Panos Jamgochian; assistant, Nishan Jamgochian.

Post No. 1; Khosdigian-Aboyan's house; leader, Manoug Barsamian, 14 combatants, 9 rifles, 2 pistols.

Post No. 2; Sahag Bey's house; leader, Ruben Israelian; 29 combatants, 17 rifles, 13 pistols.

Post No. 3; Sunetjian's house; leader, Joch Agha Alemkalemian; 33 combatants, 17 rifles, 13 pistols.

Post No. 4; Tovmazian's house; leader, Nishan Aghanigian; 28 combatants, 16 rifles, 12 pistols.

Post No. 5; Sahag Bey's house (2); leader, Yeprem Jerpashkhan; 16 combatants; 4 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 6; Piroumian's house; leader, Kassab Arshag; 17 combatants, 5 rifles, 10 pistols.

Post No. 7; Maksabedian-Yaghjian's house; leader, Aram Shaljian; 11 combatants, 4 rifles, 8 pistols.

Post No. 8; Sarajian's house; leader, Gamsar Bailian; 15 combatants, 4 rifles, 10 pistols.

Post No. 9; Noramirian's house; leader, Dickran Yaghjian; 11 combatants, 4 rifles, 14 pistols.

Post No. 10; Kaligian's house; leader, Armenag Sahatjian; 8 combatants, 2 rifles, 5 pistols.

Post No. 11; Simsarian's house; leader, Armenag Sarkisian; 10 combatants, 5 rifles, 6 pistols.

Post No. 12; Yavrouyan's house; leader, Hovhannes Ghazarian; 15 combatants, 6 rifles, 11 pistols.

Post No. 13; "Hotel" at Khach-Poghan; leader, Hovhannes Ashjian; 13 combatants, 8 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 14; Nalbandian's house; leader, Mardiros Gotoyan-Dayi; 12 combatants, 7 rifles, 7 pistols.

Post No. 15; Casino-Asgueran; leader, Gnel Gasbarian; 15 combatants, 7 rifles, 6 pistols.

Post No. 16; Chachal (Bald) Mugurdiche's house; leader, Vahan Hatzakordzian; 10 combatants, 5 rifles, 7 pistols.

In Area No. V there were altogether 16 defense positions with 16 leaders, 263 combatants, 106 rifles, 138 Mauser pistols and 24,229 rounds of ammunition.

This made a grand total of 5 area defenses with 9 area leaders, 73 defense positions with 71 leaders, 1,053 combatants, 505 rifles, 549 Mauser pistols with 74,824 rifle cartridges and 39,069 Mauser bullets. These figures varied considerably during the period of the conflict; the number of defense posts were increased while the reserves in ammunition dwindled.

It can be safely stated that fully one quarter of the available weapons were furnished by refugee peasants. They also contributed over 200 combatants to the defense force. Of the 800 construction and trenching laborers, 500 were villagers.

We have not included in the above figures those men serving as bodyguards to Aram, or serving with the Defense Command and other agencies. Among them, they had 40 rifles with 6,000 rounds of ammunition, and were always participating in the combats; neither is the reserve of 30,000 cartridges at the Armenian Revolutionary Federation's arsenal included.

Chapter XVIII

The Finale

May 16th was going to be the last day of this supreme struggle, the end of the Turk's fanatical fury, the day of victory.

Starting early in the morning all our positions were bombarded with unusual fury. Twelve cannons spewed shells in all directions. The American missionary complex alone was struck by twenty-six shells. They caused consternation among the people, killing more than thirty women and children and unarmed men. The defenders, already injured, did not get disturbed. Some of them asked permission to attack enemy posts but were refused.

While at a conference at the Central Committee meeting, Aram received word at 5:00 P.M. from the area leader at Hanguisner, suggesting the only way to cut down the enemy was to counterattack. They said they were sure the Turks were making ready to flee that day.

Aram was undecided and preferred to investigate personally, accompanied by Gregory of Bulgaria. While on the way, a second messenger reported that Melkeset Einyan and his men had already initiated a counterattack at Hanguisner. A third messenger brought the news that Ales and his comrades were prepared to capture the barracks at Haji-Bekir. Panos Jamgochian, a member of the Committee, hastened to his post at Sahag Bey to prepare for attack.

Other messengers brought news of serious clashes between the Turkish garrison and the counterattackers at Hanguisner. Indeed, one could hear the sound of terrific rifle fire coming from that direction. Aram and Gregory hurried to the rescue. They had barely reached the Big Kenderchy (one of the many springs) when they heard the first mighty cry of deliverance. **THE FOE HAS FLED!**

Far from being the tumultuous roar of a mob, it was a victorious cry over a bestial tyranny; it dramatized the end of an apparently impossible undertaking; it symbolized the glorious culmination of the valor of the people, their stamina and their

solidarity. Indeed, it was a divine, triumphal symphony, which no musical genius has, as yet, succeeded in creating.

The barracks of Toprak Kale that had been spewing explosive shells of destruction up to a quarter of an hour ago was now blazing. It was like a luminous crimson wreath over the heads of the brave Hanguisners and the victorious Armenians of Aikesdan. After a pitched battle of a half hour's duration, Melkeset, Missak and Zaparian, from Hanguisner, forced the enemy to flee leaving behind the barracks with the cannons. The barracks were put to the torch immediately. This small group then pursued the foe up the slopes to Zum Zum cave; here was another small Turkish barracks. From this vantage point, all of Aikesdan, its streets and defenses could be seen as if on a map. Here, too, the enemy put up a determined resistance. The intrepid group, further inebriated with the heady wine of success, attacked the garrison, sparing neither ammunition nor lives; after half an hour of bloody hand-to-hand fighting, the garrison was subdued. The Turks seemed prostrate now, having lost two cannons and two garrisons at Hanguisner. The second barracks was set to the torch.

The barracks of Haji-Bekir, situated directly south and across the plain from Toprak Kale, continued to scatter shells aimlessly over Aikesdan. It was built on the side of a high hill. Ales Barsamian and a dozen of his men planned to destroy this den of tyranny with a little loss to themselves as possible. Secretly they proceeded half way and waited for the nightfall; they surrounded the building and after a brief contact, forced the enemy to flee, leaving behind about a dozen dead. Two artillery pieces, large quantities of shells, rifles, and stores, were captured and the empty barracks set on fire.

In the old city the defenders had noticed the burning of Toprak Kale barracks and were waiting for the Haji-Bekir barracks to go up in smoke also. Now they were ready to climb the Castle Rock to hoist the Armenian flag of victory and freedom at its summit.

A third group in the Arark sector attacked and captured numerous Turkish positions. Many Turkish guards surrendered.

Some of our best fighters, intellectuals and men without arms, had been concentrated along the defenses at Khach-Poghan. The Turks had deserted three or four

of their strongholds, one after the other. Nothing was left except the still warm corpse of a soldier. Cautiously, the Armenians advanced as far as Jidechian's house where the arch criminal, Jevdet Bey, had been staying. Across the street stood the police headquarters. They would either wait for the cover of darkness or make an immediate frontal attack.

Firing and yelling, they crashed the police headquarters but found it deserted. Once inside they were subjected to violent fusillade from Turkish homes adjoining the station. Treachery of this type was always expected and caused no panic. A quick search of the building uncovered a few old policemen with loaded weapons but frozen with fear; the food was still warm on the chief's table and the samovar was still gurgling. Hats and coats were strewn here and there. The telephone was ringing...

Outside in the streets, both sides continued to fire away. The Turks began to retreat; the sound of their volleys could be heard coming from the historic battlements around the Castle Rock.

Someone shouted, "Did Jevdet escape?" "Oh, he escaped about an hour ago; why did you tarry?" It was the voice of the Armenian servant to Jevdet. He opened the door for the defenders who entered in grim silence, vengeance gnawing at their hearts for having missed the opportunity of avenging the death of Vramian and Ishkhan. They discovered a note written by Jevdet to Signoir Spordoni, containing the usual lies and threats, even at this last moment. He wrote:

"Dear Signoir Spordoni;

"I am compelled, through military exigencies, to leave town. It really is an ungrateful task to preside over a city in turmoil. We avoided nocturnal attacks in order to spare the children. The Russians took advantage of the situation. May God bring misfortune to the traitorous Komitajis (The Armenian Revolutionary Federation). From now on, there is going to be constant fighting, as the enemy is on our land. Greetings to Herr Algardin and all friends. Respects to the ladies."

"Governor Jevdet"

May 16th, 1915

Chapter XIX

The Days Of Sacred Folly

For the first time in many centuries, the Armenians of Van breathed the life-giving air of freedom on the 16th of May, 1915. It is impossible to even faintly depict the grandeur of the flaming night. It would require the brush of a genius to put on canvas the crimson hue of the clouds caused by the burning of Turkish military and administrative buildings, the dense smoke curling up from a dozen or more lairs of their unparalleled tyranny. It would require a composer of inordinate talent to express, in musical notes, the feelings embodied in the endless exclamations, the bursts of cheer of the sixty thousand people. The overpowering feeling of elation and vengeance were mixed with feelings of commiseration, the feeling of hatred with that of love, the inclination to savagery tempered by a spirit of nobility, and the signs of bestiality and expressions of angelic compassion and goodness. If only a moving picture camera had been there to preserve the scenes of the milling multitude now embracing, now kneeling in prayer, in thanksgiving for their “resurrection” ...

Before dawn, all Turkish strongholds were occupied, all Turkish homes searched, and important buildings were set on fire. By daybreak, the two prongs had already penetrated into the Turkish quarters of Shamirrm and Haigavank. The main line had reached the door of Tabriz in the battlements to the old city. The Armenians within the old city, who had in turn, occupied and burned Turkish positions, hurried to welcome and embrace the multitude of combatants and people from Aikesdan. Their joy overflowed all bounds...

For a whole month this scant force of twenty-five to thirty men had resisted the enemy, forcing him to shameful retreat. Haig Gossoyan had been their leader, assisted by Haro, a real fighter, and Sarkis Shahinian. a merchant by trade, but a real dynamo by nature, Mihrtad Mirzakhanian, a meek and amiable person, but daring and uncompromising in combat, Armenag Mirzakhanian, David Sarkisian, Mihran

Torumanian and others. And Bishop Daniel was a real leader and man of arms in spite of his frock.

A group of them ascended to the top of the Castle Rock, took down the red flag, with the white crescent and star, the emblem of blood, bestiality and tyranny, and hoisted in its place the Armenian tricolor which, previous to the past five centuries, had joyfully fluttered in the azure blue of the skies of Vasbouragan for nearly twenty centuries.

At the foot of the rock stood the most despicable institution of Turkish tyranny, the prison. During the past ten years alone, thousands of Armenians had been incarcerated here, condemned to a living death. Many were leaders and intellectuals who tasted the tortures of this prison. The number was greatly increased during the time preceding the conflict. Unaware of the fact that although all Mohammedan criminals had been set free in preparation for the retreat, the Turks had brought the fettered Armenian prisoners out and murdered them in cold blood, they found the prison empty and they poured out their rancor by pillaging, burning and otherwise destroying everything Turkish.



The following three days. May 16th to 18th, burning and looting continued. No authority could have curbed the uncontrollable vengefulness that had seized the Armenians of Van. Furthermore, there would have been no reason to attempt to stop this urge for retribution because everyone realized the futility of trying to bridge over the chasm created by centuries of Turkish brutality. As elemental and compulsive as the feeling was, it also served a very useful purpose; it provided the necessary food for forty thousand famished refugees whose ancestral homes had been robbed of the last piece of bread. It was mandatory to destroy all Turkish fortifications, barracks, police stations, and government buildings so that in the event the Turks returned, they would have no bases. It was necessary to despoil and destroy all Turkish quarters so they could not nurture any hopes of returning. As spoils of war, they belonged to the victor; otherwise

the Russian army entering Van would have expropriated them for its own use. In addition, the enemy had left behind large quantities of arms and ammunition which were catalogued and stored. A large number of prisoners were taken, mostly unarmed men, women, old men, and even deserted children. None of these were killed.

So for three days, the Armenians reveled in their victory. Once again, they were the lords of their ancient land; in the afternoon of May 18th the Armenian volunteer corps, led by Khecho, arrived in Van.

The last proclamation by the Defense Command best portrays the sacred frenzy of the people.

“Fellow Armenians:

“We have now completed one month of glorious fighting, a fight to the death for the resurrection of the race. This month will be proclaimed as the first Spring of our liberation.

“One month ago today, when the vile enemy declared war against civilization and justice, it also declared war against us. We took up arms with confidence, certain that we would win because we were fighting against darkness, ignorance and oppression. We took up arms because the enemy, with its shells and shrapnel, wished to strike the coup de grace to our existence; to humiliate and bend the brow of our youth in the dust; to dry up the very fountainheads of our renaissance. We resisted the enemy’s fanatical and impetuous attacks and its arrogant tactics. During the entire duration of this historic struggle, the foe never witnessed the defeat of our combatants, or the desertion of any of our fortifications.

“We fought the enemy with honor to complete victory and we join our people in its celebration.

“In view of the dauntless resistance put up by us on all fronts the enemy became aware that the divine blood of fight and freedom continue to course through our veins. The resurgence of that sacred blood has caused the enemy to turn timid and recourse to shameful and precipitous retreat, who only yesterday felt itself all powerful and was arrogant, abusive and contemptuous.

“The frenzy of victory has been gripping us for the last three days. We view with admiration and rapture the fires devouring enemy barracks and the lairs of the worst criminals.

“We are inspired to divine madness at the sight of the fleeing foe, who, for so many hundreds of years, massacred, plundered, and crucified us, and we rightfully feel vindictive.

“In our souls, the God of justice and of revenge reigns; above our heads echo the pleas for retribution from millions of slaughtered men, outraged virgins, and immolated infants.

“For the first time in a thousand years, the Armenian flag is again waving today over the old citadel; it is the first time that tyranny with all its power, wealth, and families is fleeing headlong to escape our bullets.

“Now that the glorious struggle is at an end, and victory has been attained, we enter on the era of our final and complete liberation, confident that bright and joyous times are in store for a race that never abandoned hope and never stopped dreaming.

“Through our prowess in battle, we laid the foundation of splendid independence, the dream of our people; for this dream we have sacrificed millions of lives over the past thirty years.

“Above the mountain tops of fortunate Vasbouragan, the dawn of liberty is already breaking.

“Today, therefore, we are not only celebrating the end of fighting, the glory of victory, but also initiating the liberation of all Armenians from all yokes of tyranny and its beastly claws.

“Long Live Armenian Freedom!

“Glory to the fallen!

“Long live the embattled youth of Vasbouragan!

“Long live the Armenian army...!

“Defense Command
For the self-defense of Vasbouragan”

May 19, 1915

Chapter XX

Arrival Of Armenian Volunteer Corps Of The Russian Army

The afternoon sun was glowing like a ball of fire over the blue waters of Lake Van on May 18th when the first cavalry detachment of Armenian volunteers entered Van commanded by Khecho, a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. He was accompanied by Russian Colonel Ozali. The long line of the Cavalry was leisurely approaching Aikesdan by way of the white hills of Shah Baghi. At the other end of the plain, at the foot of the Rock Agerpi, the entire population of Aikesdan had gathered to bid them welcome and embrace them in brotherly love. Over one thousand of the combatants, in military formation, armed with rifles and pistols, formed the front line. There stood the quaint cannon made by Gregory of Bulgaria thundering a triumphal welcome. Aram, head of the reception committee, reminded everyone of the prophet, Moses, who had led his people through the Red Sea. With him were the staff of the Defense Command and Haig Gossoyan with a dozen of his brave ones from the old city. The student body of the Normal school and the band that had cheered the people and trumpeted our victories throughout the siege, had taken position around the “cannon.” At the proper moment, Gregory, the unpretentious hero, fired three bursts of welcome which reverberated through the surrounding mountains. The band played “Our Fatherland” with unparalleled emotion. Perhaps never before had Nalbandian’s grand dream been so truly, so magnificently, realized, as on this day of the 18th of May at Van.

“Our Fatherland, for centuries Subdued and fettered,
By the sacred blood of her valiant sons Shall again be free.”

“Hurrah! Hurrah!” burst forth from ten thousand throats as the volunteers approached. The overjoyed volunteers, in their turn, saluted heroic Van. Solemn and impressive scenes of embraces, felicitations, and prayers, followed. Their path was strewn with multicolor flowers — the gorgeous, profusely fragrant May flowers of Van, which bloom under no other skies.

The triumphal procession moved toward the Armenian section of Aikesdan. With the flowers and green branches along the road of welcome were also the scorched remains of Turkish barracks and the rest of the strongholds of their tyranny.

Dro, the valiant leader of the equally valiant volunteer legions, arrived late that night. In the early dawn, next morning, others came from various directions. The Russian Commander General Nikolaeff, arrived the same night.

The main body of the Russian army came in on the 19th of May. They were greeted with joyous demonstrations. Cannons at the top of the Castle Rock, abandoned by the Turks, fired salvos of salute and welcome. In the large square of Khach-Poghan Armenian maidens made garlands while old grandmothers prayed in silence.

In the following historic telegram, General Nikolaeff reported to the Russian Headquarters:

“Thanks to the armed Armenian population and the leadership of Aram, a Russian subject, Van was defended for one month; only three days ago Armenians prevailed, forcing the Turks to retreat. The city is burned. Some sections inhabited by Armenians and the Russian consulate, are intact. As we approached the city, salvos of welcome were fired from the six cannons captured from the Turks. Armenians presented me with the keys to the citadel. The people of Van, led by its defenders, the bishops, and the clergy, organized impressive demonstrations; surrounding us, they shouted “Hurrahs” and showered us with flowers.”



The Russian army entered Van three days after the Turks had been driven out from Aikesdan and from the old city — three days after the people of Van had succeeded in becoming masters of their destiny. Instead of its bloodthirsty, age-old foe, the Russians found a creative, industrious and friendly people, hungry for freedom; they were received with open arms.

Irrespective of their wishes, the Russians were obligated to entrust the first government of Van to Armenians. The staff of the Russian army corps replied, by telegram, to General Nikolaeff's communication:

“Telegram No. 5452
From Corps Staff
To General Nikolaeff:

“In accordance with your appointment, I confirm Aram in the office of the provisional governor of Van, entrusting to him the government of the region around Van. His administrative staff is to be selected from Armenians exclusively and be supported by Armenian home guards. Have sent telegrams to Army Commandant and to our consul at Tabris regarding the appointment of temporary envoy.”

“General Oganovski”

“Telegram No. 1709
From Corps Staff
To General Nikolaeff:

“The Commandant has confirmed Aram's appointment on condition he be subject to the military authorities, the chief of garrison, to be appointed later. Aram is to be instrumental in carrying out all orders of the military command.”

“General Oganovski”

In his communique No. 24, Major General Nikolaeff informed the army at Bayazid, “The general command of the armies of Caucasus has confirmed Aram's appointment as provisional governor, subject to the authority of the chief of garrison. All military arrangements are to be effected by Aram.”

“Major General Nikolaeff”

On May 21, 1915, as governor of Vasbouragan, Aram issued the following appeal;

“Fellow Citizens,

“The advance of the victorious Russian army initiates a new era in the political and social life of our dispossessed people, both in the city and the province. It marks the end of centuries of thralldom and political persecution. We are today celebrating the fruition of the creative and constructive spirit of the Armenian people.

“In appreciation of the valor of the people of Vasbouragan in thwarting Turkish attempts at our genocide and, in approval of our cultural aspirations, the Commander of the Russian forces, through the decree No. 16, issued on May 20th, 1915, has graciously appointed me as governor of Van and its environs.

“Police, judicial, agricultural, refugee, and municipal authorities have already been set up.

“It is mandatory for all to apply to the proper departments of the new government for all your needs, so as to enable us to establish normal conditions within our jurisdiction.

“Faced with these tremendous responsibilities, we need the full cooperation of our people. Rally, with enthusiasm, toward your government, and help all you can in establishing normalcy. This is the way to merit the approval of the heroes who sacrificed their lives, during the last quarter of a century. This is the means to prove the cultural mission of the Armenian people in this distant corner of Asia Minor.

“It was the through recognition of these aspirations by the Russian general that prompted him to place this great confidence in the Armenian people and in myself.

“Citizens, it is up to us to justify our claims and to realize our hopes in order that we may deserve the continued and increased confidence of the conquering Russian army and its general.”

“Governor of Van”

“Aram”

May 21st, 1915

Chapter XXI

The Provisional Government

Through his exceptional organizing talent and inexhaustible energy, Aram was able to establish order from chaos within a few days. It was democratic and popular in the fullest concept of these terms. He obtained the full cooperation of all, whether residents of Van, peasants, or Armenians from Caucasus, in creative tasks and in strengthening the government so that it was adequate, in all respects, not only for Van but also for greater Armenia. In spite of its brief duration, the phenomenal speed and success with which the provisional government of seventy days tackled the tasks of organization and reconstruction is without precedent in our history.

During the very first few days the following administrative bodies were organized:

1. Provincial government, as the main executive body for Vasbouragan with Aram as governor, Siragan Dickranian, lieutenant governor, Baruir Levonian, assistant; Ardag Tarpinian, chief council, Garabed Ajemian, finance; Dickran Terlemezian, treasurer; Onnig Mukhitarian, secretary.

2. Economics Committee

3. Civil Administration

4. Directorate of Education

5. Agricultural Agency

6. Board of Health

7. Board of Trade

8. Judiciary and Courts

9. Police Department

10. Provincial Council, with Aram again as presiding official. Chairmen of the other branches formed the supreme body, and had jurisdiction over property disputes, in matters pertaining to public safety and education, taxation, guarding of the frontiers, territorial disputes, etc.

In quick succession regions, near and far, were organized to enable the mass of refugees, who had poured in Aikesdan during the siege, to repatriate. In all, fourteen regional governments were set up: Shadakh, Gavesh, Arjesh, Aljavaz, Haiotz-Tzor, Bergen, Ardamed, Shah Baghi, Aliur and Janig in Timar, Arjag, Khosh Ab, Mogs and Nordooz. Each had its separate administrative, judicial, economic and police authorities. The regional council helped harmonize and integrate the efforts of the regional authorities. The police force consisted of 360 men with 40 sergeants. Some of the police were mounted.

The news of the establishment of the free Republic of Van reached from Caucasus into the far corners of Russia. All considered this as the morning star of hope for the age old dream of total emancipation. Munificent donations began to pour in. Other detachments of volunteers were coming in and the newborn government gathered strength. Within the first two weeks such popular leaders as Vardan, Keri, Hamazasb, Sebouh and others arrived in Van. Later, Antranig entered Aikesdan with due honors. Three days later the great and aged General Nazarbegian, who had at Dilijan, pulverized the armies of our common enemy, was in Van. He visited Aram; with tears in his eyes, he said in broken Armenian, “After seeing you, your land and your people, I am proud to be Armenian.”

Besides the eminent military leaders, the elite of Armenian intellectuals in Caucasus flocked into Van. Unheralded, came Rosdom, the titan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, with his colleagues and comrades like Hamo Ohanjanian, Simon Vratzian, Nigoghos Aghbalian, Sarkis Araradian and others who were to be the greatest architects of the future in independent Armenia. Here was our greatest contemporary poet, Hovhannes Toumanian, who was now to sing of Akhtamar in a new spirit and of the revolt of the Armenian people with new emphasis.

The most impressive phenomenon, however, was displayed by the people of Van. Revitalized, they nursed great visions and applied themselves with boundless energy. The historic foe was vanquished putting an end to centuries of thralldom. Van had erased the geographic-political frontiers and had joined hands with her brothers in Caucasus. With unmatched dedication she was striving to lay the firm foundations for

freedom and a pattern of society based on culture, civilization, and creative endeavor. In spite of the tragically short time - only seventy days - the planning and accomplishments of the provisional government, with its unlimited potentialities, will constitute one of the most magnificent pages of our history.

Chapter XXII

The Exodus

On July 21st, 1915, the Russian command ordered the evacuation of Vasbouragan. The appeals by the people, the government, and the volunteer Armenian forces to desist fell on deaf ears.

For no conceivable strategic reasons, the Russian army started its withdrawal on a vast front, along Manazgerd-Akhlat-Aljavaz-Arjesh and Sorp-Gavesh-Van, destroying all military stores.

Within three days, the 200,000 Armenians had to file through Bergery to avoid being trapped by the enemy forces. Aram and the people of Van tried everything possible to avert this new tragedy being inflicted upon us by the perfidy of Russian politics. All efforts failed. The valiant people of Vasbouragan were forced to trek the torturous path of mass exodus.

They dragged themselves over one hundred fifty miles of arid and torrid lands. In the mountain passes at Bergery, tens of thousands were killed by Kurds. Deserted, exhausted, ravaged with hunger and thirst, they arrived at Igdir, Echmiadzin, and Erevan to endure further famine and epidemic diseases.

A black curtain descended upon the history of Vasbouragan. There could be no doubt but that this most ignoble treachery had been conceived and executed by Russian diplomacy. It was a policy of “Armenia without the Armenians” first promulgated by the cynical Lobanov. Irrefutable proof of this policy is the fact that while one wing of the Russian army was “retreating,” another wing of the same army was entering Van only two days later.

Neither the historic perfidy of the Russians nor the horrors of migration could dampen the irresistible desire among the people of Vasbouragan to return to their native land, to repossess and to reconstruct it. Innumerable difficulties and tribulations notwithstanding, and in spite of direct and indirect obstacles created by the Russian military authorities, and in the face of the dissolution of the Armenian volunteer forces and the

total response of Russian soldiery to Lenin's call to "Come Home," the people of Vasbouragan attempted, time and again, and in groups of many thousands, to return to their homes. At the sight of the ruined treasures and the fallow fields, they shed a tear, knelt and said a prayer, and immediately started to rebuild their homes, and recultivate their orchards and fields. They built new schools, established a new economy, new institutions, and a new defense force. In the spring of 1918 these people had their own government with its own currency...

And yet in spite of further and more sinister misfortunes that have befallen the Armenian race and its fatherland, and in the face of all the bitter tribulations meted out by a cruel fate, and though scattered in Erevan, Mesopotemia, Syria, Europe and the Americas, the Armenians of Vasbouragan treasure the living memory of the heroic struggle. The vision of their beautiful and historic homeland dominates their life. Armenians will gladly sacrifice their lives again for a chance to repossess and reconstruct a free fatherland.

Epilogue

The publication of this book coincides with the fifteenth anniversary of the heroic defense of Van and the fifteenth anniversary of our genocide at the hands of the Turk. Vashbouragan, unpopulated and desolate, is usurped by our executioners. Her true sons of many millenniums and rightful owners, talented, honest, industrious, have been scattered to the four corners of the earth. The rest of Western Armenia fared even worse. The erstwhile independent Republic of Armenia has been crushed by the combined forces of Russia and Turkey and only a small portion of former free Armenia, now known as Soviet Armenia, is growing under the forcefully imposed yoke of the Bolshevik regime.

Deserted by all of the civilized powers, either by design or under the force of circumstances, and exposed to the full and unparalleled viciousness of the enemy who proclaimed “Holy War” against Christianity, Vashbouragan distinguished herself as the only province where the population took up arms, resisted and defeated the enemies of humanity and Christianity. Erzeroum, Daron, Kharpert, Dickranagerd and all the cities along the shores of the Black Sea suffered the full measure of Turkish atrocities and were exterminated. The resistance at Van saved 200,000 of the population besides inflicting telling blows on the enemy.

The resistance at Van was the culmination of many years of revolutionary efforts to bring up a generation that was virile and uncompromising where basic human rights were concerned, among a people that had been steeped in fatalism and preferred unquestioning submission as a means of survival. Six centuries of uninterrupted persecution with unimaginable cruelty had made serfs out of the once proud Armenians and buried their souls under a thick blanket of trepidation and hopelessness. The Turks were past masters at persecution and enjoy the role even to this day.

The success of the armed resistance at Van was the supreme, uncontestable proof of the necessity, the wisdom, and the potential of our revolutionary efforts. In Vashbouragan these efforts found a more fertile soil.

For the first time, all the Armenian population of Van-Vasbouragan joined forces with singleness of purpose and a universal spirit of solidarity. All classes of people, of all ages and both sexes made themselves available for the defense work. It was collective, organized and creative. Differences, whether personal, partisan or denominational were buried, selfishness and profiteering disappeared. Survival and freedom were the exclusive preoccupation of all. No sacrifice was too great, no challenges were declined... A splendid pattern of national policy was established for present and future generations to follow.

The spirit of heroism was not confined to the elite alone. Many, like Vramian, knowingly let themselves be arrested and murdered if only the people could be spared; or like Ishkhan, and his three companions, knowingly sacrificed themselves so that peace could be reestablished; or like Shirin, knowingly sacrificed their own patriarchal family on the alter of love for the whole people. Legions were imbued with the same spirit and steeled with equal dedication in Van, in the old city, Shadakh, Pesandashd, Haiotz-Tzor and Timar. What of the thousand plus combatants who for thirty days, and every minute of the day, faced death? What of the labor corps who never flinched nor failed to repair the ramparts or dig trenches, exposed to murderous enemy fire? What of the teenagers who dashed out to recover unexploded shells, or defuse shells not yet exploded, so that we could have powder? What of the intrepid incendiaries who set fire to Turkish barracks and strongholds? Or the large number of high school boys so eager to join the defenders or attend the wounded; the women and girls who were busy supplying bandages, making clothes, socks and baking bread; ready to comfort the refugee or tie the wounds of their fighting brothers? No less heroic were the many craftsmen, teachers, and intellectuals who supplied bread, clothing, shoes, repaired weapons, manufactured gun powder, filled cartridges, made stretchers, and much more.

If it is true that heroism is valor combined with sacrifice, if it means accepting death to support a common ideal or to promote the common weal, if daring, endurance and ingenuity are of heroic substance, then we can say without fear of exaggeration that all the people of Van behaved like heroes during those thirty days of struggle.

**THE EPIC STORY OF
THE SELF DEFENSE OF ARMENIANS
IN THE HISTORIC CITY OF VAN**

Part II

Chapter I

Mobilization

On August the 3rd 1914, soon after the declaration of the First World War, mobilization was started in all parts of the country, by Imperial decree.

In Van, Kiazim Bey was appointed head of the newly instituted military tribunal and immediately declared martial law in all sections of the province of Van. The ten point declaration by the military staff at Van, the new taxes to be levied, as approved by the parliament and the senate were signed by Said Pasha, the Prime Minister, Enver Pasha, the War Minister, and Talaat Pasha, Minister of the Interior.

The military procurement committee started to work without delay. Large quantities of sugar, kerosene, soap, rice, grain, oil, canvas, leather and all sorts of manufactured goods were confiscated under the guise of military procurement.

To begin with, each county was required to contribute 200 tins of cooked meat (large tin cans, capacity 1,275 cubic inches), 600 pounds of butter fat, minimum of 10 sheep, along with wheat, barley, hay, fodder.

The wards in the old city each were to contribute 50 pairs of stockings, 50 pairs of gloves, 50 sets of undershirts and drawers, 50 vests, 5 felt covers, 3 carpets, 7 bedsheets and 1 bedspread; all pieces were either hand knitted or hand sewn. Also, those having cows were to contribute two day's milk for hospital use. Large containers were placed at convenient points to receive the milk.

On August the 4th, the legal plunder of the market was started. Soldiers with fixed bayonets guarded the passages and the exits. Procurement agents loaded the contents of stores and shops into carts to be carried away. The owner was given a "receipt" which conveniently failed to show either the type, quantity or value of goods taken. Strict orders were posted, "those who try to transfer or to hide their goods shall be court martialed and officials found lax in the performance of their duty shall be discharged."

On August 4th, the Military Command decreed the conscription of all of the

male population between the ages of twenty and forty-five, regard to the status of their military training. The latter aspect of the decree caused great anxiety among the Armenians, in as much as all above twenty years of age lacked training, were totally unprepared for immediate induction into the fighting forces, and had paid legal exemption taxes. Yet in spite of this, all hastened to enlist. Twenty to twenty-five year olds enlisted in the regular army, the rest in the nearly formed “mobile” and “stationary” units.

Within the city the Armenian youth, led by Aram, formed a procession in front of the military headquarters during the second week of conscription, offering them for the defense of the common country. In the villages, peasants left their pressing summer work and hastened to enlist.

Normal life came to a standstill everywhere.

Thousands of tradesmen, carpenters, masons, tailors, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, tinsmiths, gold and silversmiths went to work for the army. Local government, taking advantage of the free labor, used them for other than military purposes. They built mosques, the municipal building, the military hospital, a school for Turkish girls and a club house for the ruling Ittihad party.

A large number of tailors worked for months, under Turkish supervision, to make uniforms and garments from confiscated materials. Armenian physicians donated their services unreservedly. Yet the Armenians in Van had to bear the brunt of the mobilization and military procurement with their attendant evils.

It was different with the Kurds. They did not have to be conscripted. Instead, they were issued more arms by the government. The notorious Hamidie Corps, created by Sultan Hamid II to oppress Armenians, was allowed to stay home, free of military duty and control.

Tahsin Bey, the Governor of Van, had succeeded in gaining the esteem of the various elements of the population before mobilization started. With all his shortcomings, both Moslems and Christians respected him for trying to be impartial and in attempting to end the brigandage and deprivation wrought by the Kurds. Even during the mobilization, he tried not to discriminate and refrained from being engulfed in the

all encompassing task of war preparedness. Everyone felt the war was only days away. War news was being distorted to favor the Germans and the Turkish press was openly hostile towards the Entente Powers.

The two German battleships, Goeben and Bresslau, passed through Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmora on August 3rd, which were presumably purchased by the Turkish government for forty million marks. On August the 8th, all “capitulations” to European powers were abrogated.

Mr. Hoeff, appointed by European powers to supervise the carrying out of reforms in the Armenian provinces, arrived in Van on August 17th and was received very coolly by the officialdom. On the 27th of the same month, he was recalled to Constantinople by order of Talaat Pasha, Minister of the Interior. On the 27th, the 11th army corps left Van for Tautagh at the Russian border. Soon came Naji Bey and other Ittihad leaders who organized brigands and proceeded to the Persian front. Some of the leaders went into Persia as war propagandists.

The preoccupation of the civilized powers with the conduct of war had removed all restraints. The Ittihad party, along with the government, thought the time had come to settle their internal problems, once and for all and to recast the Empire into one homogeneous people and one common religion.

We were fortunate to have among us, during these anxious times, Mr. Vramian, Deputy to the Ottoman Parliament from Van, who arrived on September 29th. Being also a very respected leader among Armenians he rendered valuable service as intermediary between them and the government. The situation, so far and in spite of the many hardships, was still bearable. Military commanders and civil officials expressed their appreciation of the Armenians’ willingness to serve and to sacrifice for the country. The following telegram was received from the army headquarters on the 7th of September: “Please express our appreciation to the Armenian people and to all others who seem to be competing in their readiness to sacrifice.”

Towards the end of August, rumors began to circulate about the replacement of Tahsin Bey by the governor of Bash Kale, Jevdet Bey, with very depressing effects.

The parting speech of Tahsin Bey is still fresh in my memory. He said, “I am

leaving you with deep regret. I have desired and worked for the reconstruction of this province, for good-neighborly relations between the races and for their progress. My thoughts will always be with you. My successor, who is here, Jevdet Bey, though young, I am sure, will continue my efforts to complete the plans I was unable to finish. Goodbye my countrymen.”

Premonitions of a turn for the worse, of dark days ahead, had already gripped Armenians who knew Jevdet as a youth in Van. He had amused himself by committing atrocious acts at Vosdan, Pergri, Abagha, Nordouz and later at Bash Kale. He reveled in the monstrous pleasure of torturing people to death by branding them with hot irons, by horseshoeing, by the crushing of the testes and whatever other means his demonical mind would devise. What a contrast between his well-groomed exterior, his fine European garb and refined manners, and his Tartar-Albanian soul harboring the most horrid sins.

Chapter II

Declaration Of War And The Holy War

Exactly ninety days after mobilization had been decreed, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Russia were severed, due to naval incident in the Black Sea. On October 31, 1914, Turkey declared war.

In the hope of realizing their Pan Touranian and Pan Islamic dreams of grandeur, the Ittihad party and its leaders had gathered together poorly trained, ignorant, multi-racial and nondescript force. This war foisted upon the country was not popular even among the Turks who sensed the impending doom.

With the view of overcoming the apathy of the Moslem population of the country, as well as to solicit the support of other Moslem countries, the government appealed to the fanaticism and ignorance of the people and declared "Holy War". This war of religions which could, in theory, include Turkey's own allies, Germans, Austrians and Bulgarians, was meant, primarily, to serve internal ends. The declaration could not fail to create suspicion and animosity among the Moslem and Christian elements of the empire. Through fanatical harangues at mosques and incitful speeches, the ignorant among the Turks and the Kurds were conditioned to pounce upon the Christians and Armenians in particular. The combined declaration of the two types of war evidenced itself by an abrupt change in the attitude of the government towards Armenians.

The Russian army breached the frontier and occupied Bayazid and Alashgerd. News of similar defeats having been suffered at Khoy, near the Persian front, caused Kiazim Bey to move to Sarai and Bash Kale with his newly organized forces.

Abdoul Kadir Bey, the organizer of Kurdish Hamidie detachments, received orders to be ready for action. Kurdish leaders in Nordooz, Shadakh, Gavash, Garjigan, Khizan, Moks and Sparger received similar orders and received additional arms and ammunition from the government.

All Turkish and Kurdish prisoners, criminals, brigands, were released and

inducted in the army.

To sum up, all the Turkish and Kurdish male population between the ages of sixteen and seventy were armed and allowed to remain home.



The economic exhaustion due to confiscations in the name of military procurement became steadily insufferable. Villagers, who already had contributed their share, were compelled to fill the quota again and again, and forced to carry these on their backs to the destination. Confiscation and compulsion became the rule, and the Armenian peasant sank into economic ruin and starvation.

This same policy of forcible despoliation was practiced in the old city. Every single store was forced to donate as many as five times. The market became practically deserted. Armenian wards in the city were compelled to contribute four times their quota of victuals, stockings, gloves, underwear, clothing, bedding, etc. The injustices in the practice of the conscription also weighed heavily upon us. In insisting on the induction of men in the twenty-five to forty-five age bracket, the government was not thinking of strengthening its fighting forces; rather it was planning to deprive the people of protection against its insidious plans.

Large scale desertions among the Turks and Kurds was evidence of the unpopularity of this war. Declaring it to be “Holy” did not, by and large, add a great deal of zest. Kurds deserted the front lines in droves at Bergri, Bayazid and Sarai, causing collapse of the fighting front.

These symptoms of a very grave situation did not seem to worry Jevdet. He was preoccupied with the Armenians. The direct results of this was the increase in desertions and the widening of the chasm between the two races.

Rumors, later confirmed, told of unarmed Armenian soldiers being sent to distant and undisclosed points, where they were massacred.

The Armenian Prelay, as official representative of the people, Vramian, as members of the Ottoman parliament, leaders of Political parties, each in his own

capacity, spared no effort to intercede with the government in the attempt to avoid disaster.

Chapter III

Bloody Incidents And Explosions

Menacing events succeeded each other at an accelerated pace toward the beginning of December 1914. The Russian avant guard and the Armenian volunteer brigades had captured Sarai, Bash Kale, causing panic in the government at Van. On December 7th, the official archives were transferred to Bitlis. Prominent families and high officials set sail, in bitter winter, for Tadvan, and from there, to Bitlis.

For the first time, we were witnessing the terror caused by the approach of Russian forces and consequent total demoralization everywhere.

About this time, Jevdet Bey, escorted by several hundred militiamen, went to Bash Kale - Aghpag front, after having arranged the free distribution of arms and ammunition to all Turks willing and able to use them.

This atmosphere of agonizing suspense lasted until April, 1915.

A few days later, Naji Bey, representative of the Ittihad party, left Van to join Jevdet. Russian's arrival was expected hourly. Their scouting parties and forward detachments were at Malahassan village which is only a few hours walking time from Arjag. Turks were fleeing pell mell. For rear guard, strong detachments were positioned at Aikesdan, the old city, and at various strategic points in the province.

However, the successful counter offensive at the Caucasian front by Enver Pasha forced the retreat of the Russian army on a wide front, extending from the Black Sea to Salmasd and Urmia in Persia.

The acting governor, Sherif Bey, issued the following proclamation on December 13th:

“By the efforts of our lion governor, the enemy has been thrown back. Let everyone go about his business as usual. The situation is quiet.” He was exhorting the Turks to overcome panic.

The combined forces of Jevdet and Khalil Bey crossed into Persia, occupied Salmasd, Urmia, Savouj-Boulak and were advancing in the direction of Tebriz.

Massacres, pillages and beastliness were the inseparable companions to Turkish forces. December, 1914 marks the beginning of the unprecedented tragedy of Armenians in Turkey.

The retreat of the Russian army signaled the second phase in the relations between the government and its Armenian subjects. During this period, pretenses were dispensed with and alibis cast away. Massacres and persecutions became a daily occurrence.

For an extended account of events this period, the reader is referred to Chapters IV and V of part one of this volume.

Chapter IV

The Alarm

Official welcome was extended, at Haji Bekir barracks, to Jevdet and to the 150 mounted escort. In spite of the fact that his return was considered a sinister omen, Armenian dignitaries, including Bishop Yeznig, representative Vramian, Aram, etc., hastened to bid him welcome.

With his customary cynicism and hypocrisy he expressed regrets for incidents which had taken place during his absence. "After all," he would say, "we are in a state of a war. Such things happen, but believe me, I am torn with sorrow for the unfortunate victims. On the the other hand, I find no words to adequately describe the tragedy and the ruin perpetrated by the Russians."

Days of anxious negotiations and consultations followed. Armenian leaders were trying, in every way possible, to avert the impending catastrophe. Vramian tried in vain to convince Talaat Pasha and Jevdet Bey of the dangerous folly, and indeed, the insanity of the policy being applied against Armenians.

Posters appeared on the 13th of April, demanding all Armenians subject to military service to report within three days. People were not enthused anymore, least of all the younger men. This attitude rendered the task of our leaders very difficult in negotiating with Jevdet. A meeting was called. The young men were not convinced by the arguments presented by the political sagacity of their leaders; they yielded, nevertheless, because of the absolute confidence, love and devotion cherished by all of the rank and file. A census was taken of available men and it was decided to present them in a number of smaller groups.

The government at Shadakh ordered the arrest of Hovsep Choloyan, leader of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation there, on April 11th. Relations were strained. Two days later, nine persons in Armashad and two in Jnug were attacked, resulting in armed clashes on the 13th. It was hoped that, as in the case of Timar and Atanantz, the conflict could be mediated. But Jevdet had other plans.

Jevdet suggested to Vramian to dispatch a mixed commission, including chief of police, Vefik Bey, Polad Bey and Ishkhan to quiet the region. The same evening, April 16th, Ishkhan and his three escorts left to join up with Vefik Bey and his group.

This sudden decision was wholly unexpected and the people reacted strongly. Said one of the men, “No matter what the circumstance may be, it is a grave mistake to send Ishkhan away to Shadakh. For all, he was a symbol of courage and devotion, their hope, their assurance of success in the conflict that was bound to burst upon them any time.”

There was unusual activity at the cavalry barracks in the city. As late as midnight, Burhaneddin Bey was busy making arrangements. Mounted gendarmes and irregulars were seen hurrying in all directions. The lights in the offices were on all night. These facts were noticed by the Armenian members of the guards assigned to the protection of the market. Some Armenian merchants were warned by friendly police not to go to market. Vramian was advised of these by special messenger.

Jevdet was the first to be apprised of the success of his perfidious plan. Early in the morning, before there was any possibility of the news reaching the people, Jevdet dispatched messengers asking Vramian and Aram to visit him without delay.

Bishops Yeznig, Daniel, Vramian and Aram were getting ready to drive to the city when our messenger arrived. Bishop insisted that Vramian go alone, if at all.

(In Part I, Chapter V, under the heading of “The Ignoble Conspiracy” the circumstances surrounding Vramian’s arrest are given in detail.)

I am of the conviction that had Vramian known of the dastardly murder of Ishkhan and his men, he would not have refrained from going to Jevdet to castigate him for his inhuman treachery and for being the monster that he was.

Far from disheartening the people, as Jevdet had hoped, the murder of Ishkhan and the arrest of Vramian served as a warning, a toxin to steel ourselves spiritually and physically to face the Armageddon with courage and honor.

Traffic between Aikesdan and the walled city came to a stop at noon, April 17th, and the young men were ready in their defense positions waiting for Jevdet’s next

move.

Chapter V

Aikesdan And The Citadel City

The heroic defense in Van started on the morning of April 20th, on two distinct and separate fronts. Aikesdan and the citadel, or walled city, were separated by extensive wards of exclusively Turkish population. The conflict in Shadakh, which erupted on the 14th, was in progress when Jevdet precipitated the clash in Aikesdan.

The old city is the legendary city of Van built at the foot of the massive rock. Extensive inscriptions in cuneiform on its southeasterly face tell of the exploits of Assyrian and Urartuan kings. The crowded homes skirt narrow streets hemmed in by massive battlements, and is about one and one-half miles from the lake. Aikesdan, meaning garden or orchard city, lies east of the old city. Its wide streets are lined with poplar and willow trees and beautiful orchards and gardens surround the homes. Its central and easterly areas are inhabited by Armenians, and the remainder by Turks.

Strategically, its wider streets, clay fences and multitude of trees offered advantages. The defense perimeter looked like a distorted triangle against which Turks had established their strongholds supported by the barracks of Toprak-Kale and Hamud Agha on the northeastern flank. The other line was through orchards and open fields, anchored at Haji-Bekir barracks and the Turkish wards of Shabania.

The more extended defense line at Aikesdan required a large number of combatants, adequate weaponry and ammunition. A great deal of work had to be done to insure safe communication between the defense posts and the defense command. The very rugged landscape on the east, starting with Mt. Varak offered the possibility, as a last resort (not contemplated) to break through the Turkish lines and escape into Persia. Jevdet, at the start, lacked the minimum seven thousand men to encircle and crush them.

In the city, Armenians occupied the eastern and the Turks the western section. Our defense area resembled a rectangle, flanked on the north by the castle rock. From its elevated position, the Turks had the advantage of bombarding any one of our defenses at close range and render traffic in the streets impossible through rifle fire. The

market was located in the south section along with all government establishments and offices. The remaining three fronts, Turkish barracks, mosques and fortified houses, adjoined this southern section. For the enemy it was possible to encircle us with a small force. The situation required larger defense capability in men and weapons. To break through Turkish lines was unthinkable. It was a matter of either do or die.

The population in the city, previous to the conflict, numbered 3,750. Of this number, 2,500 were Armenians and 1,250 were Turks. Here were located the Armenian Prelacy, the school for boys and girls, the Kindergarten, Hairigian Library and seven churches with a rich collection of valuable manuscripts and religious paraphernalia. The American mission maintained one church, one school and one kindergarten.

Merchant houses, stores and shops were concentrated in the market in the old city along with the following:

1. Government palace
2. Police headquarters
3. Courthouse
4. Central Prison
5. Municipality Building
6. Agricultural Administration
7. "Regie"
8. Public Debt
9. Sanitation
10. Ottoman Bank
11. Post and Telegraph
12. The Azizie barracks
13. Headquarters of the Army Corps of Van
14. Armory
15. Cavalry barracks
16. Gendarmery Headquarters
17. Military Procurement
18. Sultanie School

19. Normal School

There were also 15 large and small mosques. Among these the most imposing were Topji-Bashi, Kaya-Chelebi, Khosrofié and Ulu mosques, ammunition depots, and artillery pieces on the western slopes of the rock.

Chapter VI

Preparation Of The Groundwork

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the city assumed the responsibility for the defense at the very beginning. In view of the fact that Van Vasbouragan had become one of the theatres of the war, teaming with armed Kurds, Hamidie groups and other disorderly militiamen and brigands, this organization busied itself from October, 1914, by drawing up the defense plans and the preliminary tasks connected with same. The early declaration of “Holy War” added much fuel to the fire.

The seven members of the Defense Council included: David Sarkissian, store keeper, Levon Kaljian, merchant, Haig Gossoyan, teacher, Mihran Toromanian, soap maker, Mihrtad Mirzakhanian, land owner farmer, Sarkis Shahenian, merchant and Harootiun Nergaraian, coppersmith.

In consultation with higher authorities, this council was able to complete essential tasks, such as, (a) registration of arms, preparation of arms caches and procurement of firearms, (b) registration of men fit for and capable of combat duty, appointment of defense leaders, reconditioning of arms, (c) creation of first aid and hospital facilities, and procurement of drugs, (d) and a provisioning committee, to be activated as soon as demand required.

The entire arsenal of the defensive forces consisted of 90 Mauser pistols with 13,500 rounds of ammunition, 101 rifles with 20,200 cartridges, 120 small hand revolvers with 10,800 bullets. This figure was increased by 7,000 bullets later on. The munitions shop refilled 12,000 cartridges during the struggle. Also available were six large, six medium and four small bombs. About 300 pounds of powder was salvaged from Turkish shells during the conflict.

According to our defense plans, it was imperative to destroy, at the outset of hostilities, the following buildings which could otherwise render our defense positions untenable: the building of post and telegraph, the “Regie” building, the Bank, Municipal and Sanitary establishments, City Police station, the Armory and warehouse for military

procurement and the Court House. In the case of the last two buildings, it was planned to try and capture them first, failing that, they were to be burned.

The defense area was subdivided into four sections:

Section 1. - Leader, David Sarkissian; assisted by Levon Kaljian.

Section 2. - Leader, Harootiun Nergararian; assistant Sarkis Shahanian.

Section 3. - Leader, Mihran Toromanian; assistant Markar Sarkissian.

Section 4. - Leader, Mihrtad Mirzakanian; assistant Mihran Negararian.

The Defense Command was located at the Prelacy building. All orders were to be issued and arrangements made by this body. Defense leaders had to apply to it for any of their needs. The Defense Command was headed by Haig Gossoyan, teacher.

Chapter VII

The First Interview Of The Armenian Prelate With Jevdet Bey

The treacherous murder of Ishkhan and his companions had created an atmosphere of terror and hopelessness. In order to counteract this demoralizing wave, the Defense Command resolved, during its session at noon, on April 17th to arm the defending forces and have them occupy their posts on around-the-clock alert, without exposing themselves. In this connection it was deemed necessary to get in touch with Aikesdan and get their views and recommendation. Bishop Yeznig was requested to go to the governor to verify the death of Ishkhan and find out what his intentions were. The prelate gladly volunteered and left alone.

He returned very late, causing us anxious moments and was extremely agitated.

He said he found the governor in a very nervous mood, busy with peremptory commands and arrangements. After saluting him, I immediately asked if it was true that Ishkhan had been killed? He was the man Your Excellency sent to Shadakh in company with Vefic Bey to establish order.

“I planned it that way myself. They were to be arrested, if they resisted arrest, my orders were to kill them and that is what happened at Hirj village,” replied Jevdet, adding, “Do you think I could allow a few young men to play with the fate of the whole country? Besides, he was not aiming to establish peace but wanted to further incite trouble and to massacre the Kurds. He said as much to me yesterday while visiting me with Vramian.” “I have not been to Shadakh for a long time and would like this opportunity to go there and hunt for bears,” Ishkhan told me. “I have learned Armenians often refer to Kurds as bears,” finished Jevdet, in a very angry tone.

“Your Excellency,” I replied, “Ishkhan was sent on this mission by your order. Why deceive him and have him treacherously killed. You are the governor of this province and such base acts do not behoove a governor. Contrary to your own father’s efforts to promote peace and progress in this land, your own aim seems to be to wreck it. Please remember your late father, Tahir Pasha, and the Many good deeds he did here

as governor. As his son, please abstain from doing things that would blemish his cherished memory. Let bygones be bygones. I have come to seek ways to improve the situation. I am more than willing to do my share and entreat you to do likewise. As a token of your good will, please release Vramian”. Jevdet interrupted me at this point with an emphatic, “No, that is impossible and it is useless to talk about that. This very night, he will be on his way to Constantinople. I swear, upon my honor, that no harm will come to him.”

I tried to emphasize the salutary effects the release of Vramiam would have on the disturbed situation in Shadakh and on relieving the tense situation prevailing in the City and Aikesdan.

“That is impossible,” shouted Jevdet. “Think of what you can do for yourselves here. Shadakh is going to be punished. I have already sent telegrams ordering all Kurdish clans in the south to attack and punish Shadakh and leave it in complete ruins.”

Finding it useless to argue with a madman, I took leave. I am very pessimistic. That man is going to sack and massacre Van. Let us deliberate on what can and ought to be done. Bishop Yeznig left greatly agitated.

Towards evening, traffic was forbidden on the road to Haigavank. Later a group of mounted men were seen galloping away followed by a carriage, surrounded by some two hundred cavalry, advancing towards the port of Avantz. This was the way the deputy from Van, the courageous and inimitable leader, Vramiam was led to his death. On the way from Bitils to Diarbekir, the guards accompanying Vramiam killed him on the bridge across Bohdan River and threw his body into the waters below.



Priest Hovhannes was requested to visit Aikesdan on April 18th and deliver to Aram our report relative to the interview between Yeznig and Jevdet. Later that morning, Mr. Jemil Effendi, with three policemen called on the Prelate for private talks. On behalf of the governor, Jemil demanded that the school building at Haigavank and Arark be made available for the billeting of soldiers. Bishop Yeznig replied that

authority to do so resided in the City Council and that under the existing conditions it was not possible to call a meeting. Soon after Jemil Effendi had left the Police commissioner, Mugurdich Kara Sefferian came to demand the keys to the school building. If he was refused, he said, Jevdet threatened to break down the doors. Bishop Yeznig reiterated the fact that he lacked authority but if Jevdet wanted to force his way, that was his business. We learned soon after that Turkish soldiers had forcibly occupied the school building at Haigavank.

Priest Havhannes, our messenger, returned in the afternoon. He said there is feverish activity at Aikesdan. The situation is pregnant with grave danger and the people wish to be ready for any surprise actions by the government. Aram is very depressed. He has instructed that the defenses be manned and to wait in readiness.

A majority of the Armenian inhabitants of Haigavank poured into the city the same day. Some found lodgings with relatives and the rest were housed at the Diramer church and the school building.

Chapter VIII

Second Interview Of The Prelate With Jevdet Bey

In the late forenoon of April 19th, Armenag Sarkissian, the provincial dragoman, visited Bishop Yeznig at the Prelacy. He presented the situation at Aikesdan as hopeless. In view of the extremely dangerous atmosphere, he recommended that the Prelate satisfy all of Jevdet's demands.

At noon Bishop Yeznig went to call on the governor again. He was accorded a very brief interview. The Prelate reported:

It was apparent that Jevdet was occupied with secret consultations. With him were the Commandant of gendarmery, Chief of Police and the notorious brigand, Polad Bey. He made me wait. When asked to enter, I met with a very cold reception. He indicated he could not spend much time with me and when I brought up the subject of the unsettled situation, he interrupted me saying;

“The people must expel the trouble makers from among them, deliver up all arms and furnish the specified number of young men for the labor corps, I cannot tolerate any piecemeal satisfaction of these demands. Military requirements must be met. There can be no compromise. Events happening currently shed a different light on Armenians. Fighting has broken out at Shadakh and I have just learned, Armenians have revolted at Haiotz-Tzor. I have issued orders to deal with these situations most severely. Either the Turks or the Armenians are to survive. Do what you can here. This government is obliged to carry out plans prepared for current circumstances. This land will belong exclusively to either Moslems or Christians,” Jevdet repeated this threat several times to make sure I grasped its ominous meaning. This was their last meeting. We had the premonition the hour was near. Sinister silence reigned over Aikesdan,

We received reports that militiamen and irregulars were, surreptitiously, investigating the length and the breadth of the ancient ramparts. At Tabriz gate, groups of armed Turks were busy preparing barricades and cutting openings in the wall.

Chapter IX

Attack And Counterattack

On the morrow of the tragic death of Ishkhan, all communications with Aikesdan were blocked by the government. During the early dawn of April 20th, the Defense Council was exploring means of contacting Aikesdan. The council was also informed that morning, that Armenian families were moving into the center section from peripheral locations, thus causing alarm. Immediately, unarmed men were sent to reassure them and to stop mass movement which, otherwise, would have undesirable effects. Men were instructed to scrutinize the movement of Turks and to discover the cause of the sudden panic. We found out that all exits were being guarded. Men at the lookout point reported hearing rifle blasts from Aikesdan. We immediately verified the report. The sound came from a great distance, now scattered shots, now a crescendo. It crossed our minds, this might be a clash between Jevdet's forces and other Turks opposing his policies. We soon learned that Burhannedin Bey, Commandant of the gendarmery, had loudly announced at Massman fountain, "Tell the Prelate, Armenians in the city have nothing to fear. Do not be disturbed, the government has taken steps to punish trouble makers in Aikesdan. The Prelate may confirm this by visiting Burhannedin Bey."

The gradually intensifying rifle fire now seemed to be centered in Aikesdan. Occasional cannon fire made it very clear that fighting had already started there. The misleading assurances of Jevdet and Burhannedin had one purpose only, to concentrate the entire fire power of the government on Aikesdan and subdue it first, then turn against the old city.

Our combatants were asked to be at their posts, ready to resist the frenzied Moslem mob when they attacked. For the first few days, while Aikesdan was plunged into general and bloody conflict, the city was quiet. Then, without any provocation, rifles started to crack and murderous shells poured into the Armenian quarters from the top of the castle rock. It all started to happen at 9:00 A.M., April 20th, 1915.

An armed Turkish mob attempted to penetrate Armenian quarters, rushing out from westerly Turkish wards. Our defenders stopped them at the Karagoezian house. Simultaneously from the east a squad of cavalymen followed by militia were advancing for attack. The combatants, assigned to our Panos Marootian defense, had barely occupied their posts when they detected the attackers. Deserting the protection of the barricades, they rushed out to meet the enemy, killing four and causing the enemy to flee.

It is not possible for me to describe the animation, the dash, the enthusiasm of these young men during the initial phases of the resistance. They manned their posts with exemplary courage, built barricades and ramparts, bricked in windows, pierced holes in the walls ready to meet the beastlike foe, who already had secreted one hundred twenty regulars and many Kurds at the Terzibashian, and sixty militiamen at the Jidechian buildings.

Messengers rushed in to either ask for help or announce successes. The Armenian Democratic Party put its members at the disposal of the Defense Command, who hastened to reinforce the posts, where required.

The two storied, sprawling building, housing the Military Procurement was flanked on the east by Police headquarters, on the south, by the Armory and on the west, by the Courthouse. The top floor contained offices, the ground floor, a restaurant with plate glass windows and a tailor shop. It was a very serious threat to our positions. Our aim was to occupy this seemingly impregnable building; failing, we were to set fire to it. Haro, the area leader of Section 2, his leaders, and men dashed out of their barricade at Tzetzian's house to carry out the task. As the group advanced, armed with needed courage and cunning, a Mrs. Aghavny Varbedian, a woman about forty years old and a mother, begged to accompany them as guide. The entrance door was impossible to demolish. She called them, "Come over here, break this door down". In a few minutes the passage was secured. Mrs. Varbedian helped by encouraging the men and participating in the work. Soon they were out of danger of the Turkish bullets. Others came in from the door and broke windows. They had to lay flat on the floor as the windows were barely twenty-four inches above it. Others broke through the ceiling and

the entire building was occupied. This handful of heroes were able to hold off the enemy until nightfall, in spite of the continuous vicious fire directed at them from three sides. Taking advantage of the darkness, they bricked in the windows, made barricades, and were ready for whatever might come the next day. This was a terrible blow for the Turks who tried to set fire to it at night. Mrs. Varbedian's watchful eyes noticed the danger in time. "Water, water," she cried, "they are setting fire to the building, water..hurry." The fire was put out in short order and the men yelled, "Long live lady Aghavni! Bravo! Bravo!."

Leader Armenag Mirzakhanian was wounded in the arm. He handed his rifle to another saying, "Fight on brother." Israel of Sighert was wounded in the lip and the rest of the men carried on the fight as if they were trained and professional soldiers.

Our plans called for the occupation of the Courthouse at the same time. We tried but failed due to clandestine arrangements made by the owner of Jidechian warehouse. This was a large building with stone walls. There were ten stores and shops on the ground floor while the second floor was occupied by the Provincial Court. It was well built and of great strategic importance. The Defense Command had secured the promise of the night watchman, Chooro, to let our men into the building when fighting started. This unsuspecting peasant had revealed it to the owners, who ordered him to lock all doors and deliver the keys to Police Headquarters. Turkish police and gendarmes occupied the building without delay. Poor Chooro was the first innocent victim. Turks shot him and dumped his body in front of our defense. Unaware of the treachery, our men advanced along St. Sahag church, found the doors locked and when they tried to break down the door, Turks opened fire from their ambush. They left in a hurry.

While this was going on, a large number of irregulars were bent on avenging their losses at the first skirmish with our Marootian defense. Artillery, placed atop the rock, pounded the Armenian section for hours, particularly, the Marootian house. Another cannon placed at the cemetery of Haifavank shelled the front walls of it, but its defenders, Levon, Mihran, Avo, Avedis and their comrades stood their ground. By killing the two gunners, they silenced the cannon, but not before one of its shells had

shattered the thigh of our inveterate fighter, Avedis Varbedian. He begged to be allowed to fight on, but soon succumbed to the wound. Sensing the distressed situation, area leader, David Sarkissian, accompanied by two combatants left the Shishgo post to rush to Marootian's aid. He was struck in the face just before reaching there. His assistant, Levon Kaljian, took command and by the arrival of fresh reinforcements, the enemy was thrown back after five hours of fighting of unprecedented ferocity.

The Turks hoped to demoralize and crush the resistance by their tremendous fire power and incessant attacks against all our positions. They possessed all strategic advantages. Even mosques and minarets were turned into fortifications containing death dealing machines and a fanatical force to operate them. They wished to annihilate the handful of Armenians in the old city, to turn its narrow streets into blood baths, and to enjoy free play for their beastly atrocities, which Turkish instinct alone is capable of contriving and only a Turk can revel at the sight.

As the first day of conflict drew to its close, Turkish losses were 60 to 70 dead and 80 or more wounded. We suffered four wounded, one of them Mrs. Varbedian who was struck in the hand.



Fighting did not stop at night. Shells kept on pouring down from above and rifle fire was intensified. Innumerable red flashes criss-crossed in the dark and the din of the explosions was deafening. It seemed the Turks were ready to rush us that night. Therefore, the Defense Command decided to destroy, at all costs, those anchors of Turkish offensive that were in or near the Armenian quarters. The list included the Jidechian building, Police Headquarters, the Military Procurement warehouse, the Armory, the Terzibashian building, which housed the offices of the "Regie", the Post-Telegraph, the Ottoman Bank, and the Public Debt and Sanitation.

This all important task was entrusted to Haro and his group. They started with the Courthouse. The wall was pierced but an intense fire from within stopped them. A violent cross fire ensued. A sixteen year old boy, Aram Gabarogian, taking advantage

of the momentary confusion rushed and set fire to the building. In less than fifteen minutes the whole building was blazing and illuminating the city. Next they succeeded in destroying the Terzibashian complex by fire. Inside were eighty militiamen and forty of the best Kurdish fighters of Avdo. We fired upon them from our Goghadian brothers and Cook Bedross house. The enemy answered with violent rifle fire peppered with insults and blasphemies.

“Hey. You funny Armenians, we are Avdo’s Kurds and Jevdet’s faithful dogs. There will be no escape for you.”

“Hey. LO. LO.,” echoed in Kurdish the leader. “We are the cubs of the lion Ishkhan. We will soon burn your building and roast you in the process.”

Between the deadly crossfire, Goghadian Mardiros and Arem Gabaroogian carefully crawled to the building. We could hear the noise of the axes striking the door which soon gave in and was set on fire. The conflagration hardly had a good start before it was put out by the Turks inside. Yet the decision was irrevocable. The building had to be destroyed.

Sarkis Shahinian, assistant leader, leaped on the roof from the roof of an adjoining building while the enemy was occupied by the fire. Through an opening in the roof, he dropped the bomb he was carrying.

A moment later it exploded with a tremendous roar. Inside the Turks and the Kurds panicked. The flames quickly devoured the structure.

Before dawn, the same night, the Police Headquarters and the warehouse of the Military Procurement were also fed to the fire.

As a result of these successes, the morale of the people, as well as of the combatants, was greatly improved. Turks were surprised at this exhibition of courage, cunning and endurance on the part of the Armenians. A number of Turkish families, fearful of the outcome, had taken refuge in the castle fortifications above, or moved to Shamiram.

Jevdet exclaimed in desperation, the government’s prestige is besmirched and lost.

In his letter of May 2nd, Jevdet Bey stated; “Armenians in the city, you have

done, are doing, a lot of damage. It grieves me to see that you, fighting so bravely, are not imbued with love for the government.”

That night, by order of the Defense Command, Der Boghossian and auxiliary posts in or at Turkish quarters, were deserted and burned. The men who had been fighting all of the preceding day were safely transferred to Unuzes house under cover of darkness.

Chapter X

Deployment Of Forces

Except the Jidechian building, all other defense positions in the original plan were in our hands at the end of the first day's fighting. With small variations, this defense arrangement was maintained from April 25th to the end.

Described below is the structure of our defense arrangement and that of the enemy.

A. Area of Tabriz Gate (east); (1) house of Abro and Vank, (2) the combined positions of Panos Marootian and tailor Hagop, (3) house of Shisgo, (4) houses of Der Boghosian and Gazoyan with auxiliary posts; the post of Laz Ali, adjacent to four Turkish houses the inhabitants of which were taken prisoner by us, or chased away, (5) posts at Shahen Agha and the combined posts of Urum and Havanian.

Area leader, David Sarkissian, who being wounded the first day, was replaced by S. Shahinian, assistant. Levon Kaljian later transferred to Section II and was replaced by Mihran Hovagimian and still later, by Baghdo of Haigavank. Leaders: Avedis Varbedian, Sahag Jangoyan, Avo from Shadakh, Mukhsi Vahan, Michael of Haigavank, Shahen Agha, Mihran Shahinian and Dikran Kondakjian. Number of combatants, 50.

Turkish positions confronting Section I were: the outer Tabriz Gates, the old city wall, trenches in the eastern slopes of the rock, the prison building, and from the 25th on, Marootian's house, the mosque and the house of Teloe. To this must be added the house of Aram Gazoyan, the four houses belonging to Mahmoud and Katerji mosques, the cannon placed at Haigavank and mortars placed in the trenches and behind the ancient walls.

Our defenses at Section I bore the brunt of the fighting from the very beginning. Marootian's house and supporting posts were reduced to dust through constant shelling. Whatever was left was set on fire and relinquished on the 25th of April. As a result, the defenses at Abro became more important. It was connected by underground passage to Shiahgo's defense and in spite of being surrounded by Turks on three sides, it was never

subdued. The defenses at Gazoyan and Der Boghossian were isolated, therefore, were being attacked ceaselessly. Turks made several attempts at burning them. The subterranean passage connecting it with other defense positions enabled them to resist to the end. The post of Shahin Agha lost its importance after our burning of the Katerji mosque.

B. Area of Military Procurement (south); (1) Gaghadian brothers house, (2) cook Bedross's house, (3) Koloze's house, (4) Vartabedian's house, (5) Military Procurement building and Tzetzian's house, (6) Tartar's inn, (7) Mirzakhanian's house, (8) Alexanian's house. Among these the defenses at Goghadian's house and the Procurement building were of crucial importance, particularly, the latter which though reduced to a heap of rubble, kept on fighting from trenches dug beneath the rubble. When the Russian General Nicolaeff inspected these defenses he was amazed and expressed skepticism that defenses like these could be engineered without military education and experience.

Area Leader: Harootian (Haro) Nergaraian; assistant, Sarkis Shahinian, and later Levon Kaljian.

Leaders: Mardiros Goghadian, Armenag Mirzakhanian, Sevo from Mog, Levon Gossoyan, Harootian Ashikian, Moorad from Der Shogh, Dirdad Der Manuelian and Manoog Agha from Gaijigan. Number of combatants, 51.

Turks were entrenched at the Terzibashian building, police headquarters, armory, Armenian shops and stores, Turkish cemetery, government building, municipal building and the mosque across the street, the mosque of Kaya-Chelbi, and the market. Assisting these were artillery placed on top of the rock, at the Turkish cemetery of Yeni-Kapou and at the Shairam ward some 100 to 800 meters away.

C. Area of Yazmali and Khani Dagh(southwest); (1) Boyakhana (paintshops) and adjoining stores, (2) Palabekian winery, (3) Yazmali building, (4) the four barricades on the ground floor of this building, (5) Kharpertzi's house. Turks succeeded in burning down the winery; the others were operative to the last.

Area Leader: Mihran Toromanian, assistant Markar Sarkissian, and later Havahannes Pirgalemian.

Leaders: Monoog Bailian, Zohrab from Bitis, Manoog Totomanian, Gabriel Yeghiazarian and Madiros Saroyan. Number of combatants, 42.

Turks had fortified themselves at the Shoemakers Complex, Khoorshoon or Khosrovie mosque, Azizie barracks, lumber yards and the house of Arif Effendi assisted by shell fire from the rock and one placed at the Shoemaker Complex, a distance of 50 to 300 meters.

D. Area of Ambari Dag (warehouse; west); (1) houses of Der Hagopian and Unuz, (2) Der Hagopian and the “Devils” house, (3) houses of Der Jeremiah and Baghigian, (4) Gakavian’s house, (5) Ateshkiar and Karageozian barricades, later replaced by Sharoyan’s house and contiguous barricades.

Area Leader: Mihran Mirzakanian, assistant Mihran Nergararian.

Leaders: Manoog from Constantinople, Haroot Kishmishian, Ohannes from Shadakh, Minas Nalchajian, Armenag Bazigian, Manoog from Garjigan and Set Aslanian. Number of combatants, 26.

Poised against these were the strongholds in the Turkish quarters; house of Ajam, Ulu mosque, the ruins of Kiamil and the tanneries, assisted by artillery located on the west elevation of the rock above Khorkhor and at Kiamil's ruins, a distance of 150 to 600 meters.

In addition, Turkish garrisons, augmented by Circassian irregulars, were guarding the northern section of the rock which enjoyed a commanding position above the Armenian Quarters. Due to the constant danger from this direction, we had established three observation posts to immediately report any attempt by the Turks to descend for attack, or movements of suspicious nature. Indeed, Turks made several futile attempts to strike us in the back. The observation posts were at Meghroyan’s house, at the Jesuit school and at Saroyan’s house, opposite Takhta-Kalk. Each post consisted of three to five men armed with Mauser pistols and hand revolvers.

Chapter XI

Fresh Assaults, Turkish Prisoners Of War And The Burning Of The Armory

Turkish attacks, April 19 to 22, as vicious and vehement as they were, failed to secure any worthwhile advantages for them. They lacked planning and the effect of concerted and concentrated fire. Beginning on April 23rd, however, this haphazard type of assault was changed into more devastating and well planned attacks.

To pin point our defenses, in the area of action, Turks hoisted large red flags on tall posts, visible by their gunners. It was very risky to remove them, but we destroyed three of them.

It was noticed on April 23rd, that our Marootian defenses were being shelled by the two cannons atop the rock simultaneously with the one held piece at Haigavank demolishing its upper story in short order.

From then on, we were forced to barricade ourselves on the ground floor where shell fire was less effective. Where necessary, we rebuilt the top story at night, to the bewilderment of the enemy.

Our counterattacks during the night of April 20th, which lasted seven hours, had secured the needed anchors for effective resistance. The city was choked with smoke and the flames pierced its thick blanket. Early next morning cannon fire from atop the rock signaled the beginning of a violent and general attack against our Marootian, Der Boghassian, Shahin Agha, Military warehouse, Mirzakhanian, Khani Dag and Unuz positions. At 3:00 P.M., a cannon was brought to the Katerji mosque and started shelling our Shahin Agha defense, a distance of 30-40 meters away. Militiamen and irregulars attempted to sneak behind our defenses to occupy the four Turkish homes. They were discovered. Several of the combatants from Shahin Agha and from barricades at its left flank dashed out and occupied the houses in the face of murderous fire. Four of the enemy were killed. Six women and two youngsters were taken Prisoner, and the rest fled into the mosque. The prisoners were taken to the Prelacy building and were well taken care of. During this encounter Maroot of Der Shogh was hit in the chest

by a bullet. He kept on fighting as the bullet hardly penetrated the skin. The indecisive fighting continued until sunset. Four Armenians were killed in the streets by shell fire from above.

For the night that followed, our objective was the destruction of the Armory. It was a challenge as formidable as it was dangerous. Built of massive stone walls, it was situated across the street from the Military Procurement. Its rear was protected by the ancient battlements and enclosed by stone and a wooden fence. Its two ponderous gates presented the only means of destroying it by fire. The open space between us, about one hundred meters, was a real death trap for anyone attempting to cross it in the face of enemy fire. The job had to be done.

Area leader Haro, his group, and the youth Aram Gabatoogian proceeded as far as the ruins of the police headquarters, which was destroyed by us the previous night. Terrific rifle fire was directed at them. The men took positions and answered as violently. Aram took his tools and proceeded between the bullets. All odds were against him and we lived very anxious moments. A few minutes later, a small flicker of light was noticed. Entrenched inside, the Turks lost their head. Fire. Fire. Help for God's sake were heard coming from the panicked mob. The confusion helped the youth in getting back safely, panting, and bathed in sweat. Haro and his men kept the gates under constant fire to prevent the Turks from putting the fire out. The fire spread gradually and in a few hours the building was in complete ruins helped by the explosion of the war material stored inside.

This was glorious, a glorious victory. Two consecutive nights of brilliant success. In this conflagration, much military gear, ammunition and flags were destroyed.

These were the symbols of our protest against the barbaric policies of the government and a pillory of humiliation for its infamous servant, Jevdet Bey, governor general of Van.

Chapter XII

Public Participation

During the initial three days of the struggle, the entire responsibility for self-defense rested upon the shoulders of the Defense Command and the combatants manning the barricades. These had to fight the enemy, improvise new defenses, repair damaged barricades. There was no time for sleep and hardly any time for a hurried bite to eat. They never complained, never demanded and never disobeyed an order.

The public was bewildered, petrified with fear or tormented by the specter of wholesale massacres. Few of those were capable of cool reasoning, who could subscribe to the only sane policy, "If die we must, then let us die bravely and with honor." On the third day of the struggle, a group of men presented themselves to the Defense Command saying, "We have left our homes, our families in order to assist you, to fight along side of you, to die together if fate so wills."

The spontaneous offer of assistance was more than welcome. It served to subside and subdue a spirit of hopelessness and tendency to panic. The hellish cannonade and the mad assaults in the morning of April 21st had struck terror in the public. They stampeded to the Prelacy building for shelter, thinking Turks had already smashed the resistance and were entering the Armenian quarters. Those at the Prelacy were asked to be calm, were offered tea, and were told there was no cause for alarm. They were also told everyone could pitch in and help instead of idly standing by. All listened intently, but stoically. Here and there, one could detect the trace of a smile.

In the afternoon, four aged men presented themselves to ask the Defense Council for permission to form a procession carrying the Holy Cross, now resting at St. Nishan. We have started to collect contributions for sacrificial offerings and will hold services at night hoping God will have mercy upon us, and pour water on this fire, they said.

The request was extremely oppressive and disheartening. They were told that we had no jurisdiction in religious matters. They parted in disappointment.

Three days of successful resistance were sufficient to eradicate the tendency to servile fear and to cowardice which six centuries of unparalleled persecution had implanted in them. On the fourth day, they were eager to sacrifice their life, ready to assist in any way possible to their everlasting credit and glory, these people never avoided or spared any sacrifice from the fourth day to the end of the fight, thus assuring the victorious outcome of the struggle.

The Defense Command busied itself on the 22nd of April by drawing up the following plans for auxiliary committees:

1. Reconstruction and Repair. Men of experience and ability were detailed for the task of reinforcing, repairing, and rebuilding of defenses, providing communication through underground passages, to building walls to barricade streets, etc. They were to be at their assigned posts day and night. The responsibility was shared by twelve men.

2. Provisions. To supply ingredients and prepare food for combatants and auxiliary groups. They were given a list of foodstuff that included flour, sugar, shortening, meat, etc. for which the people made regular contributions. A committee of twelve was assigned to this task.

3. Medical. There were no qualified medical doctors in the city. In view of this, interested and qualified men had been asked to enroll in the medical-surgical classes at the American mission's hospital in Aikesdan. A small quantity of drugs had been secured. Isajanian's house was converted to an improvised hospital. Women and men attended the wounded.

4. Repair Shop. Isajanian's house, being comparatively safe, also housed the repair shop. Rifles, Mauser pistols, hand revolvers and any other weapons were repaired here. Over the duration, some 12,000 cartridges were refilled and recapped.

5. Relief. To care for the refugees and the poor residents of the city. The committee in charge received about one ton of barley and one and one half tons of wheat. This committee worked in close cooperation with the provisions committee. Families of combatants received their daily share.

6. Tailor Shop. The dry goods found in the Military Procurement building were turned over to a group of tailors for making clothing and undergarments for the fighting

men.

Chapter XIII

Violent Clashes - Strategy Deliberations

April 23rd was noted for the unusual ferocity of the attacks. After the comparative calm of the previous day, the Turks started the attacks early and steadily increased its tempo. All our defenses were being assaulted. Shells were pouring down from above the rock while three other cannons belched deadly missiles from the east, west and south. That day, Turks introduced a large force into the city. The mob plundered the market and set the torch to it.

This type of all out assault taxed the courage and endurance of our combatants to the limit. All were asking for reinforcements, rifles, ammunition. "The fighting is terrible at our post; rush bombs and a few men with rifles or Mauser pistols." This was a typical written request from all positions for that day. All available reserves were distributed but we were far from filling the demand. The situation at Marootian and the Ambar area seemed to be desperate.

At this juncture, Bishop Yeznig was asked to take temporary charge of the Defense Command while Bishop Daniel and Haig Gossoyan hastened to the aid of the defenders at Marootian and Shishgoyan positions. Vartan Der Vartanian, with three companions went to help at the Ambar front.

The situation was critical indeed. The combined shelling from the castle rock and Haigavank had completely demolished the top floors. The defenders were unrecognizable as they were covered with soot and dust. They had to fight in a choking atmosphere of gunsmoke and floating dust. It was decided to move to the first floor which was still tenable. Alert to the change, Turkish arsonists, under strong cover, began to set fire to the doors and other combustible parts of the building. The enemy's vicious fire rendered ineffective all our efforts to put it out. If forced to retreat, we would have seriously weakened our defense potential and would have to sacrifice a number of the combatants. In a last desperate move, we got the fire fighters ready for action, increased our fire, and threw a bomb among the attackers. Its tremendous explosion shook the

building, the Turkish arsonists fled, the fire was put out and we enjoyed a short respite.

The situation at the Ambar defense was even more critical. The Defense Command had been asked permission to withdraw or else send immediate reinforcements. The area leader was asked to spare four men who accompanied H. Gossoyan. However, before their arrival the Karageozian and Ateshkiar posts had already been abandoned and the men were fighting from houses in the rear. Vartan Der Vartanian, who had been sent to aid them, found the two positions cut off by the Turks. Rather than risk the lives of his comrades, he dashed through the hail of bullets to reach the barricades, but was hit in the head and the chest. His death caused the defenders to panic and to withdraw.

The situation was fraught with gravest consequences. Our second line of defense lacked facilities for sustaining resistance. Far worse than this was the fact that now the gates to Ambar were within the Turkish zone and had they been allowed to entrench themselves on the roof of this fortress like building, the fate of our people would have been sealed.

It was, therefore, decided to prepare makeshift defenses around the deserted one. A strong force was stationed across the entrance to prevent the foe from occupying the building. There still remained eight anxious hours of daylight. Were we going to be able to stand the enemy pressure til nightfall? From positions deserted by us, the Turks set fire to the building, which allowed us time to establish ourselves in the new defenses. The fighting continued long after darkness fell. Over one hundred shells were fired at our position that day, with devastating effect. We had lost two of our best defense positions and one of our best fighters. The Turks lost several dozen soldiers. Most corpses were left, where they fell, in front of our barricades.

Certain changes in our defense structure were suggested by the day's fighting:

- (a) redistribution of our forces based on the frequency and intensity of Turkish attacks,
- (b) establishment of a second line of defense, (c) efficient means of repair and reinforcement of defense positions, (d) stricter discipline, better military instructions,
- (e) contact with Aikesdan.

The leaders were asked to convene that night to deliberate on these and allied

subjects. It was a solemn spectacle watching these haggard, taciturn men who had been through the baptism of blood and sweat, march into the Prelacy hall where a single candle cast a dim, spectral light. Bishop Daniel, who, forced by circumstances, had become a comrade in arms, was present, as was Bishop Yeznig, who had assumed responsibility for the relief of the indigent families. Also present was lawyer Jirair Mirzakhanian, who in the past, had been advising us constantly to go slow, to be careful, etc. and now exclaiming, “Bravo, men! Today I discovered in you what I never suspected was there.” It was the forth consecutive day the men had not had any sleep. Their voice was muted and some could hardly speak. All were on edge and ready to dash to their posts as the rifle fire became threatening.

Among other things, it was decided to wall off all 14 streets to prevent intrusion by Turks into Armenian quarters, to reinforce lower floors by duplex walls and the ceilings by heavy timbers, to erect a number of walls at each stronghold to serve as successive barricades, rather than move from one house to another, when the first one proved untenable, and to brick in doors facing Turkish positions to stop enemy attempts at setting fire to them.

Handwritten copies of the following instructions by the Defense Command were distributed to the posts that same night:

“It is already the sixth day of our valiant fight against the enemy who has been frustrated in his attempt to crush us by his artillery and thousands of rifles. The struggle will undoubtedly go on with unforeseeable developments, but, come what may, we have resolved to defend our lives, our honor and our rights. So far it has proved a shameful debacle for Jevdet’s efforts. You are all witnesses to this fact.

“In order to endure and to render the resistance more effective, we exhort all of you to be calm, well disciplined, sparing of your life and your ammunition and to refer to your military regulations and instructions. Those who fail to comply will be held responsible. We have emphasized and repeat it now, be thrifty, economize, save your life, and conserve your weapons and your ammunition. These are the factors which will enable us to keep up our resistance and the longer we resist the greater is the hope for eventual success.

“Be brave, but not rash, be circumspect to protect your life. Use your ammunition sparingly. Let the enemy burn his ammunition freely. Answer them with restraint. Let each bullet find its mark. We need ammunition for days to come. Let us be protective of ourselves and uphold military discipline. Let these be your motto.”

Sunday, April 25, 1915

Defense Command
Armenian Revolutionary Federation

Instructions for Military Discipline:

(1) All defense positions with the combatants are subject to the area leader whose orders are compulsory and final.

(2) It is the duty of the area leaders to direct and supervise defensive action, to allocate combatants to barricades, appoint leaders, insure adequate supply of arms and ammunition. Matters like change of position, counterattack or invasive actions and other important questions shall be referred to the Defense Command for final disposition.

(3) Each post has one leader in command of the combatants. He is responsible to the area leader. It is his duty to carry out orders by the area leader or by the Defense Command.

(4) No combatant may absent himself from his post without the leader's permission and, no leader may absent himself without the area leader's consent.

(5) It is absolutely forbidden to change defense positions without permission from the Defense Command.

(6) No combatant is allowed to carry his arms with him when leaving the post.

(7) No leader or combatant has authority to go to the rescue of another post, neither can help be requested from another post. The Defense Command has exclusive jurisdiction in these matters.

(8) Area leaders and leaders of important defense positions may communicate with the Defense Command in writing.

(9) Unless specifically allowed, no post is to be abandoned, under severest penalty.

(10) No one is allowed to loiter at defense posts.

(11) Always use the same messenger. Put your requests in writing and sign.

The Defense Command

Chapter XIV

Period Of April 24th To April 30th

Presumably exhausted by the previous day's violent and fruitful assaults, the enemy started its attacks on April 24th rather late in the day. Our eastern front, including Shahin Agha's, the Procurement building and the Khani Dag defenses bore the brunt of the attacks. Cannons at Haigavank and at Katerji mosque were again busy shelling the above defenses. In the meanwhile the Turks attempted to surround our Marootian defense by occupying Abro house, and the Gdoutz property, which they had discovered, were not defended.

The report caused great concern at the Defense Command inasmuch as Turks had penetrated the ruins separating Abro's house from the city wall. Bishop Daniel and H. Gossoyan borrowed a few armed men from the Shishgo post and entered the Gdoutz property across the street. During that interval the Turks had succeeded in knocking out a hole in the wall of Abro's house and were ready to crawl in when we opened fire. Mostly militiamen and gypsy brigands, they fled into the ruins. Marootian's defense was alerted to watch the one gate through which they could escape. Increased shell and rifle fire indicated they had received reinforcements, but were caught in our cross fire. Finally they set fire to a pile of scrap wood and escaped through the smoke.

This skirmish lasted three hours. The attackers left behind four killed and several wounded. One of the corpses sprawled at the Tabrz Gate was clutching a rifle in his hands. The eyes of our men fixed on that rifle, but Armenag Sarkissian, a mere youth of sixteen, took the initiative. He crawled along the wall, with a sharp knife in his hand, to the spot where the corpse lay. With a quick volt and lightening fast movement of his arm, he cut the cartridge belt and, grabbing the rifle, ran back. Bullets whizzed about him, but he got back untouched. We all kissed him and told him he could keep the rifle, as we were certain he would use it with courage and honor.

April 25th marked the end of seven days of conflict and very valuable experiences were gained during that period. Our combatants were now trained soldiers,

cool, daring, self-reliant and steeled against panic. Fighting became the norm of everyday living. Whenever attacked, the response was immediate and deadly. During the fleeting moments of leisure, though always watchful, we indulged in jokes, amusements, songs and even dance. A very close comradeship was created. Every defense unit was a family in itself. Young and old offered their best without the least sign of unwillingness or disagreement.

On the 25th and 26th day of April, the enemy attacked us with increased violence. It caused no great anxiety as our stratagem was working well. Some of the posts that were located outside the defense periphery were abandoned because, in the first place, they had already served their purpose and would be costly to maintain. One of these was the Marootian defense, already in ruins, another was Mirzakhanian post which, as important as it was, could not be saved when Turks burned down the entire market ensemble. During the two days, the Turks were busy destroying the market by fire. We withdrew our men from Marootian's house and set it on fire.

A squadron of Turkish soldiers, led by officers, advanced along the Prison street. With the one cannon in their possession, they punctured holes in the wall of the building south of Marootian's house. Soon after, artillery at the top of the rock concentrated its shell on the same target making shambles of the buildings. Nevertheless, our defenders were able to stop the advance. The leader ordered the men to take a bead on the gunners who were shot as they were moving the gun to a new position. The accompanying force had managed to approach within thirty paces of our position. Their officer, with pistol raised, gave the order, "Forward, let no one falter."

The defenders were forced to draw back through an open space, while the Turks were barricaded behind the wall. Fortunately, the cannons could not be put back into service again. We sent reinforcements. The fight continued. Vahan, our intrepid grenadier, was killed. It was decided to burn down all usable buildings and move to new defenses. That night all buildings, including one mosque, was set on fire and the men moved to Shishgo's house and adjacent posts. In spite of all our efforts, the Mirzakhanian building could not be saved. Being located at the market, it was devoured by the flames that consumed the rest of the market. The same night, before Shahin Agha

defense was relinquished, the Katerji mosque was put to the torch. It was being used as a rallying point for frenzied mobs. After that no Moslem crossed its scorched threshold.

During April 26, 27, 28 and 29, fighting continued on a somewhat reduced scale. There was no let up in the use of artillery and some of the defenses were attacked vigorously. We had already completed our plans; the streets were barricaded with thick masonry walls, the enemy had been deprived of strategically important positions. We now could hold them back with a minimum expenditure of ammunition of barricades and underground passages was continued.

The entries in the diary for those four days note that Turks started their attacks late in the forenoon and carried them on somewhat sporadically till 9:00 or 10:00 P.M. Some 250 to 300 shells were fired daily. Every night, for three or four hours, the enemy maintained a vigorous fusillade and we were at a loss to know why.

We established safe communication, through underground passages, with two of our most forward positions. Gazoyan Aram's house, though surrounded by Turks on three sides, and reduced to a mass of rubble, was able to continue the resistance to the end, thanks to these passages.

The situation at Abro's house was just as critical. Three days ago we had been forced to abandon this post. We dug a tunnel from Shishgo's house reaching underneath Abro's house on April 28th. The first floor was pierced and our combatants penetrated into the building. Taken by surprise the Turks fled and the post was in our possession once more. This post proved to be one of our most important defenses. Through its walls were pulverized and the roof caved in, the post kept up its defense effectiveness to the end because of the subterranean passage.

This system of communication was proving so satisfactory that it was decided to tunnel to Marootian's house, a distance of about 125 feet. From there we planned to join it with the subterranean aqueduct leading to Haigavank. This would enable us to emerge at Haigavank and attack the enemy from the rear. The success of this plan would also enable us to communicate with Aikesdan, an objective we had so far failed to attain due to the tightness of the Turkish siege of the city.

The work was started on the 29th of April. Mason Simon and his gang toiled

ceaselessly for ten days making good progress. Two more days and our project would have been completed. Unfortunately, shell fire from the cannon at Tabriz Gate hit the ground directly above our excavation and its explosion uncovered the tunnel. We were forced to abandon the project.

Turks intensified their attacks on the 29th of April. Older type mortar were also brought into play for demolition. Three of these were of large caliber, two were of medium caliber. The heavy iron balls were filled with powder, fitted with a timing fuse and were shot upward in the air. Falling from great heights, and accelerated by gravity, they would penetrate the roofs and floors of building. The explosions caused great damage and loss of life among populace.

To counteract this menace, underground shelters were provided and proved effective. But after two days of use, this added weapon already had lost its terror; indeed, it became an excellent source for replenishing our supply of gunpowder. It was observed that the balls exploded from, 15 to 35 seconds after being fired. The young boys competed with each other in diffusing the explosives as soon as they fell. These ten to fifteen year olds, with sparkling black eyes, would follow the trajectory as soon as the ball left the gun barrel. Among them were, Hovhannes Azkaserian, Mardiros Keoloshian, Papken Isajanian, Vosdanig also known as Urus (Russian) Aslan Aslanian. They also served as messengers. In activities as risky as these, losses were unavoidable. Hovhannes Arkaserian, Mardiros Kelolshian, Yervant Maksoudian, and Hagopig Haidoodian, cheerfully, made the supreme sacrifice, covering themselves with glory.

Through the valiant efforts of these young boys, we obtained sufficient powder not only for our daily requirements, but increased our stock by over three hundred pounds.

Chapter XV

Negotiations With Jevdet Bey

The pressure of Turkish attack was gradually increased from April 30th to May 4th. An average of not less than five hundred shells were fired at us daily. The top stories, along our lines of defense, were completely wrecked and the lower floors badly damaged, putting our defenses into semi-ruined condition. Every night the work of reconstruction was pushed on, relentlessly.

On May 3rd, Turks placed a cannon at Tolo's house only fifty paces from our Der Boghosian and Gazoyan's defenses. For four hours they shelled these posts, firing sixty times. Walls demolished, the fighters kept on firing and held back the enemy. A young Turkish officer was directing the shelling. Now and then he would attempt to start conversation with our men. He seemed well educated, judging from his language.

"Armenians" he would shout, "stop fighting. I want to talk to you on behalf of Jevdet Bey. Tell me your objectives. Let us stop this bloodshed. Let us put an end to hostilities. Now, what is your name?" he asked, addressing himself to one of the combatants, who happened to be Avo, at the Gazoyan defense. "You who fight so fearlessly, rise up, let us talk face to face; I would like to see you and swear upon my honor no harm will come to you."

"Say what you have to say, it is not necessary to expose myself," answered Avo. "You cannot be trusted, bullets are coming from every direction and you expect me to show myself. You are again trying your game of deceit and treachery. Go ahead and talk, we are listening." "What is your name?" asked the officer.

"My name is Avo, from Shadakh. All your Kurdish chieftains know me by name."

"I beg of you get up so I can see you, I swear by Allah, there is not the least danger for you."

"You have destroyed our confidence, you are treacherous, you are inhuman. Did you not murder Ishkhan through base perfidy? Did you not, by deceit, carry away

Vramian? Say your say. I will not show myself.”

“This conflict has gone for enough. What are your demands? Jevdet desires to reestablish peace and order.”

“If you are sincere, why are you talking to me? You know we have our leaders; go talk to the Prelate, to Aram and others. If you genuinely want peace, those are the persons you should talk to.”

“The Prelate, Aram and the others, yes, but you, yourself, what are you fighting for?”

“I am only a peasant; I do not understand terms and conditions. I only know I have taken up arms to defend our honor, not to let our women and children become victims of your bestiality and lust. Our leaders can tell Jevdet what we want.”

“Very well, then tell me what your demands are.”

“Since you insist so much, I will tell you. There can be no peace so long as Jevdet lives. I demand his head. Now, am I making myself plainly understood?”

At this point the diatribe was interrupted.

On May 4th, the magnificent cupola of St. Paul’s church was destroyed by concerted shell fire and while this shelling was going on, two Armenian old women aged about sixty, bearing white flags approached the Shahin Agha defense saying they had brought a letter from Jevdet Bey. The leader immediately brought the letter to the Defense Command. The letter read:

“To Bishop Yeznig, Vicar to the Prelacy of Van:

“The revolt that the Committee (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) started at Shadakh has spread to these parts. The guards at Hamoud Agha Barracks were fired on and some of them were martyred. Now fire has spread to every corner and much blood has been spilt. The inhabitants of all of Haiotz-Tzor, Arjag and the major part of Timar have been properly disciplined. As to the rebels who have taken refuge at Lim Island, I have promised to let them go free if they surrender willingly, and their women and children will not be destroyed.

“The day the disturbances started, I issued orders not to react to rebel fire. Later when I saw those rogues, led by a band, firing as they paraded in the streets, then did I

permit my forces to reply in kind. As you know, we are being kept very busy controlling the rebels. Confident that through your intercession the city could be spared, I telephoned Burhaneddin Bey to post guards at the market, the Tabriz Gate, and at various points in the city. He also had criers loudly announce that the government would protect those who refused to take part in the insurrection. However, the guards were unexpectedly fired upon and several police and pedestrians were killed or wounded by shots coming from Marootian's house. It was plain, then, that there was rebellion here also. We acted accordingly by firing back with shell and shot.

"Fellow inhabitants of the city, you have done, and are doing whatever is in your power to do. It grieves me very much that such valiant fighters are not imbued with feelings of belonging with the Ottomans."

"I understand there are numerous peasants in the city. I am convinced they intend to attack the castle rock. They seem to be sure the Russians are coming. Such plans are plainly foolish.

"Armenian leaders are responsible before God and humanity. Later we will examine this question more thoroughly, of course."

"Heretofore on several occasions I sent emissaries to ask for your surrender. You answered with bullets and vile words. That has stiffened our posture. From now on we will be a lot harder to deal with. We did worry about the children before. Now we shall not overlook any means to bring this situation to an end."

"If you will not heed my advice, I shall be forced to use the new artillery pieces, which arrived today from Gavash, to destroy the city to its foundations."

"The brigands who attempted to seize the pass at Khosh Gadug were all massacred. 385 Armenian corpses had to be buried at Averag village. We have captured the villages, Darman and Goghbantz, where we subdued 123 armed rebels. In Aikesdan we already have occupied and burned to ashes the Arark section. I have ordered that the rebels not be attacked at Shooshantz and Varak for the sake of the women and children. Two brigades are arriving here from Sarai and stationed at Darman village. I am going to demand their surrender and if refused, will attack them by the combined forces from Gurubash and Darman villages."

“Khalil Bey and his army Corps have cleared out the Russians and entered Khoy. This enables us to call back our forces at Godol.”

“Under these conditions there can be no possible escape for you. During recent years we have cherished your people and protected them like the apple of our own eyes. Instead you have repaid us with treachery and shall be punished. But why are the families to be blamed?

If you have no care for your own lives, at least have mercy on the poor innocents.

I therefore propose that;

1. You surrender all weapons.
2. Rely on the government's forgiveness and mercy and submit to it unconditionally.

“If you accept these conditions I am certain, by personal intercession, to obtain Imperial amnesty. Do not continue shedding blood in vain, have mercy upon your families. But if you persist, you will have only yourselves to blame. You shall be destroyed.”

May 4th, 1915 (331)

Governor Jevdet

(See also Jevdet's letter to Signor Spordoni, the Italian Vice Consul, in Part I.)

The letter was carefully scrutinized word for word. The menacing overtones did not impress us. It was apparent the author was in a state of confusion and agitation. He was trying, perhaps for the last time, through his inexhaustible stock of tricks, to set a trap for us. It was decided, therefore, to initiate verbal negotiations for the sole purpose of gaining time and, if possible, to dispatch a messenger to Aikesdan. The two women carried our answer to Jevdet Bey the same evening. It read:

“His Excellency Jevdet Bey, Governor of Van:

We have the honor to acknowledge receipt of your letter. In reply, I wish to

restate the truth that we are not in rebellion against the Ottoman Government. We have always obeyed the laws of the land and will continue to do so. Be kind enough to appoint two responsible persons with whom we can discuss your proposals in detail.”

Bishop Yeznig,
Vicar to the Prelacy of Van

Suddenly at 4:00 P.M., the Turks stopped their fire. Our posts were informed of Jevdet’s letter, instructed to cease fire and stay on guard. In the evening the Defense Command and the combat leaders convened to formulate an answer to Jevdet’s letter. With unanimous consent the following points were agreed upon: Reject all calls for surrender and carry the fight to the last man; Armenians in the city shall not enter into any meaningful negotiations as separate units; demand that Bishop Yeznig be allowed to visit Aikesdan to consult with the leaders there under proper guarantees. Jevdet Bey would be asked to offer two acceptable persons as hostages as he could not be trusted.

Early next morning the two women were back with another letter from Jevdet.
“Yeznig Effendi (Mister):

“I am sending Kalousd Effendi Jidechian accompanied by Ahmed Bey. I have ordered cease fire. Talk with Jidechian Effendi and come with confidence; I assure you there is not one bit of danger for your person as long as you negotiate and arrive at an understanding. If you can persuade the people, well and good. If you fail, again you may return. But in the event of your failure and exactly one hour after your departure, I will order attacks to resumed, I promise you.”

May 7, 1915 (331)

Governor Jevdet

Attached to this was a letter, in Armenian, by Mr. Jidechian which mainly reiterated Jevdet’s statements. The letter concluded they would be waiting to meet His Grace at the Turkish stronghold across from our Der Boghossian, Gazoyan defenses.

Jevdet’s emissaries were informed, through the women messengers, that Bishop Yeznig found it inconvenient to go to the designated place and that he requested

their presence at the Shahin Agha post, where he was at the time.

It was deemed advisable to have Mr. Mirzahkanian, an attorney and expert linguist, accompany the Bishop, and that the interview should take place in the street, where it would be protected by our ramparts.

The emissaries arrived in half an hour. The interview started with a florid speech full of hypocrisy, by Sherif Bey, saying he had made himself available for this very delicate and dangerous responsibility for the sake of establishing peace in the land and sparing the people. If peace could be brought to the old city, he said he was sure the same could be done for Aikesdan and the rest of the province.

We assured the Turkish emissaries we fully shared their desire for peace, but could not see any good reason for singling out the city when the entire province was in flames. Bishop Yeznig spoke, "In my capacity as the prelate of my people, it is my duty to strive for the well-being of the whole province. I am willing to offer myself as sacrifice; allow me to visit Aikesdan in order to consult with the religious and national councils there; let the government assist me in visiting all areas, every village of this province, trying to bring peace, to stop the horrors of bloodshed and fire. How can I wholeheartedly participate in a basic plan, involving all the people of the city to lay down their arms while their relatives, friends and loved ones face death in Aikesdan. Is this possible? Please explain this to the governor and inform him we demand permission to contact the people of Aikesdan, in person. It will be necessary for the governor to provide two prominent Turkish officials as hostages. You have my word of honor, these will not be harmed in the least," concluded Bishop Yeznig.

Time and again Sherif Bey repeated his former statements, always receiving the same answer. The Director of Education, Sherif Bey, suddenly brought up the question of Turkish prisoners, saying, "It is reported that you have put them to death through horrible tortures and incinerated the bodies by pouring kerosene over them." He was assured these incriminations were unfounded, that they were being cared for as well as any Armenian, adding, "If the Bey cared, one of them could be brought here for his questioning."

One of the women prisoners was fetched. In answer to Sherif Bey's questions,

she responded that they were grateful for the care and protection they were receiving: The group left at once to report to the governor, promising to return with the answer as soon as possible.

We were discussing the choice of hostages, in the event Jevdet agreed to it, when envoys returned. The interview was short. Jevdet curtly refused to accede. They returned with our final statement saying that there is no way to assure us of the sincerity of Jevdet Bey's desire for peace. We were convinced it was not his wish to quench this all consuming conflagration. We found further continuation of these negotiations both meaningless and portentous.

The public and the combatants received the following report:

"Jevdet is trying to deceive us. He rejected our demand to contact Aikesdan, as a means of establishing peace. We are ready to continue defending our rights, our honor and our life. We will know definitely tomorrow. Be ready for any eventuality."

The respite of one day and two nights was utilized in mending our defenses, and sending a messenger to Aikesdan.

In the afternoon the women brought Jevdet's last letter addressed to us.

"Yeznig Effendi:

If you and Daniel Effendi cannot succeed in establishing peace in the city, you are not going to have better success in Aikesdan. I have presented my demands to them through Spordoni Effendi. Complying with your request I sent Sherif Bey, Director of Education to discuss the situation with you. You understand there can be no lengthy agreements between the government and its subjects. I offered to intercede if you surrendered, relying on the mercy of the Sultan. I also promised that, failing to surrender, I will have the very last of your combatants destroyed. I will be waiting for your final decision until tomorrow, the deadline is 6:00 A.M."

May 5th, 1915 (331)

Governor Jevdet

The answer to above letter follows:

"Your Excellency, Jevdet Bey:

“I invited a number of well informed people in the city to meet me. We discussed all possibilities and arrived at the conclusion that I will not be able to get any results here in the city because these people have brothers, fathers and family either in Aikesdan or the villages. No amount of persuasion is going to persuade them to lay down their arms. Also, in spite of our long standing record of faithfulness and sincerity, you have in the present instance, labelled us as rebels, rendering the show of mercy by the Sultan very doubtful.

“Your Excellency knows well that I lack power of persuasion both in my official capacity and as a person. If it be your aim to save this country from its present difficult circumstances and spare the lives of innocent women, children and others, then trusting in my honesty, allow me but twelve hours to consult with my people in Aikesdan.

“Great men are wary of the kind of record they leave on the pages of history. You have the power to alleviate the situation. As for myself, I aim willing to sacrifice my life for the sake of improving the lot of this half ruined land; let God be my judge. I am confident that our proposals, if practiced, will reestablish the rule of law and order. On these points I have gone into detailed explanations with Sherif Bey and Jidechian Effendi who can further inform you.

“In closing, I appeal to your magnanimity and assure you of my respects.”

Bishop Yeznig, Vicar to the
Prelacy of Van

Our forces were informed of the termination of negotiations as Jevdet had refused to yield at all. The Imperial amnesty, promised by Jevdet was declined as being a shameful ruse. The fighting will be resumed at 6:00 A.M. according to Jevdet. Be ready and do not spare the enemy.

The night was quiet in the city. We could hear the savage fusillade going on in Aikesdan. We sent out messengers that night.

About 7:00 A.M., May 6th, the attacks resumed, and they continued until May 17th, when the enemy fled from victorious Vasbouragan.

Chapter XVI

Attempts To Communicate With Aikesdan

Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, the old city was sealed off hermetically. Communication with Aikesdan, or with any part of the province, was impossible. We lived in absolute ignorance of the events outside. Had Aikesdan been successful in sending messengers to Caucasus and to Persia? Was there any hope of succor for the beleaguered Armenians? And above all, how were our brethren prepared for continued self-defense at Aikesdan? Ominous thoughts crossed our minds as we observed, through binoculars, the burning of monasteries at Varak and at Garmirvor. We saw Turks digging trenches around the village of Shooshantz.

Altogether four desperate attempts were made to contact Aikesdan.

The first attempt was made on April 24th while we were still in possession of Marootian's house. Starting at this point, Vahan, nicknamed foxy, and Gaspar crawled along the foot of the rock as far as the gypsy quarters. Sentinels were everywhere. For one-half hour they waited in a safe place for a chance to proceed, but were detected by a passing patrol. Forced into headlong retreat, they arrived safely, though pale and panting, having escaped the many bullets fired at them.

A second attempt was made the following night, April 25th. Hagop from Bairak, mule driver by trade, had embraced the Islam religion to save himself during the massacres of 1896. He was given one of the fastest horses, acquired from the police headquarters when it was occupied by us. Two copies of a short message were handed to him, one to be carried on his person, the other to be placed in the saddle bag. He galloped away. Immediately the Turks opened fire. Did he escape? Was he killed....we wondered. Six hours later, in the early dawn he returned to Shishgo's house without his horse. On his way he was again subjected to rifle fire. He reported that he had galloped along Push street, as far as the village of Shah Baghi. "Cautiously, I entered to investigate. No Armenians were left there, only Turks and Kurds. I heard wailing and groaning from one house, but was afraid and decided to return. On the way back, my

horse was killed and I barely got through, as you see.”

His report had all the earmarks of a fabricated tale, but was minutely scrutinized. He could not produce either of the copies of the note entrusted him. He was tried and condemned to death for treason.

A third attempt was made on the 28th of April. The candidate was a fifty year old, an inveterate fighter named Setrag from Arjesh. He too had accepted the Islam faith during the massacres. Later he had moved to the city and engaged in pottery. He was one of the best combatants at the Gakavian post.

Armed with a shepherd's crook and a small revolver, he tread stealthily through the burned ruins of Jidechian building; as he proceeded some dogs, busy devouring the cadavers left in the streets, sensed his presence, and started to bark and attack him. Turks at Kaya-Chelebi mosque were thus alerted, and opened fire in that direction, forcing Setrag to return. Undaunted, he proposed to try again, that same night, choosing another route. This time he managed to sneak through the ward of Masman Fountain, pass through Turkish quarters, cross the trench and the wall, and reach Haigavank. He crossed the square, vaulted a wall to find himself in a field of alfalfa fenced in by mud walls. Turks had set up tents here, and sentries were patrolling outside the walls. A voice barked, "Who are you? Halt." "I am one of you," answered Setrag, in fluent Kurdish, and kept on going. "Halt," cried the Kurd, "I have to be sure." He approached with his finger on the trigger. As the Kurd came close enough to see his face in the dark, Setrag hit him in the eye with his crook, grabbed his rifle and fled while the Kurd was calling for help. "The hail of bullets missed me. I was able to climb over the wall opposite Turkish ramparts. The noise had excited everyone outside scanning the night. They spotted me as I climbed to the top of the wall. "Who are you? What is going on out there?," they asked. "For God's sake do not shoot, I am a Turk, Giavours (Infidels-Christians) attacked us," Setrag replied. "While they rushed to open the door, I darted across, and here I am. Here is the rifle with nine cartridges inside." As Setrag was telling of his odyssey, one could notice a trace of a smile of pride on his face.

We all congratulated him warmly and told him the rifle was his to keep.

The fourth and last attempt was made the night of May 5th. Two men offered

themselves. Harootian, the canvas maker, 35 years old, and Krikor Tashdoyan, of the same age and shoemaker by trade wanted to be given one Mauser pistol each with plenty of ammunition.

Their shoes covered with heavy stockings to dull the noise, they started off from the west side. They disappeared into the darkness without incident. We later learned that they had managed to cross Turkish lines unnoticed, enter the swamps near the slaughter house, cross the fields to Avantz and enter the village Lezk at day break. The village was under military surveillance but one of the villagers took them in. The following night they passed Sighga village and on the third night arrived in Aikesdan by way of Goghbantz village. Unable to return sooner, they left Aikesdan on May 15th, the night preceding Turk's retreat. They were bringing with them an account of the heroic resistance of the people of Aikesdan and news of the approach of the Russian army.

We were already celebrating the victory by the time our messengers were able to reach us.

Chapter XVII

The Resumption Of Conflict

In accordance with Jevdet's threats, we anticipated fighting to be resumed at 6:00 A.M., May 6th, and on a more ferocious scale than ever before.

The people were advised of this and were instructed not to go out into the streets but, as before, live in the safety and comfort of the shelters. They were also instructed not to make a fire during the day, and do all the cooking and baking at night. It had been noticed that mortars aimed their shots at buildings with smoking chimneys.

At 7:00 A.M. the cannons on top of the rock announced that the battle was on again.

In the meantime, valuable information was gleaned from sailors from Avantz who had been held under surveillance at the cavalry barracks. One of them told the following story: "Yesterday there was general talk at the barracks that the city was ready to capitulate; friendly policemen told us, joyfully, that they had already vowed submission, that they would be going in very soon.

"Early in the morning, May 6th, Burhaneddin Bey, commandant of the gendarmy, Polat Bey and Ahmed Bey visited the barracks. A large number of regulars, militia, Kurds and Cherkaz gathered in the courtyard. Each group fell into military formation headed by an officer. A tall table was placed at the center of the yard. We could not make anything of all this, since we watched them, very cautiously, from the window of the basement room where we were being restricted. Suddenly, all stood at attention presenting arms. Burhaneddin Bey climbed on the table and in a loud voice harangued them as follows: "My soldier sons, Jevdet Bey, our Governor, invited the Armenians in the city to surrender. They deceived us, first promising to do so, and now refusing to lay down their arms. By order of the governor, the attacks on the city will be resumed. Those who have risen against the Sultan and the Fatherland shall be punished severely. Every one of these traitors over five years of age shall be destroyed unmercifully. Now it is up to you, my lion cubs, to disdain death and completely destroy

them before the day is over. Do not spare either women or children; all have to be massacred. The artillery on top of the rock will soon be pouring shell and shrapnel over the enemies of Islam; mortars will be kept busy and you, my intrepid ones, I want you to subdue the rebels. Those blackguards have taken enough of our time.”

“Then a mullah (Moselm priest) offered a prayer in low voice which we could not hear. Quickly the barracks and the courtyard were deserted; all left in a frenzy of religious and racial hatred.

“The roar of the cannons, the deafening burst of bullets left no doubt that attacks had been resumed. We thought this was going to be the last day for the city, as we could not find a single ray of hope. Soon we were ordered into the court and, were loaded, like pack animals, with heavy burdens to be carried to the Azizie barracks. We made it with great difficulty as we were very weak. Here we noticed several fresh corpses and wounded men, with new ones being brought in. They pushed us down into an underground room which was dark and damp but we kept on watching through the cracks in the door and the narrow window.

“Soon after mid-day the number of soldiers in the courtyard increased. More corpses were being brought in. One of them was draped in a flag; he must have been an important person. Everyone seemed downhearted and talked in a whisper. The corpse wrapped in the flag was buried in the courtyard, under a tree. Night fell, and we surmised the Turks must have suffered numerous casualties, failing to break the resistance.”

The attacks that started at 7:00 A.M. continued with unparalleled violence until the early mid-afternoon, after which it subsided appreciably. In addition to the cannons atop the rock, one field piece, placed at Haigavank, fired shrapnel type shells; another cannon placed at the mosque of Yeni-Kapoo was kept busy and a mortar anchored at the Kiamil ruins, across from our Unuz defense, was lobbing explosive shells.

At Unuz, our defenders killed the two gunners and silenced the artillery fire. The Turks had knocked out a hole in the wall of Yeni-Kapoo mosque and were bombing us with murderous shrapnel shells. They had to enlarge the hole for better maneuvering of the gun. This brought the two gunners within the line of sight of our sharp shooters who killed them as they were cleaning the barrel. The cannon was immediately wheeled

out of sight. Polad Bey, the perfidious assassin of Ishkhan, was leading the attack, mounted on horseback, against our defenses at the military procurement building. Our avenging bullet found its mark and Polat Bey was dead. 415 shells were fired that day. The enemy suffered numerous casualties, without compensating results. Our losses consisted of one killed in action, Manoog Bailian, and one seriously wounded. A ricocheting shell struck Markar Sarkisian in the head, causing lasting amnesia.

Equal ferocity in attacks was maintained during May 7th and 8th. Often the bombardment was continued into the night; mortars were especially active. Every Armenian home in the city was hit. The minaret at Topji mosque, which we were using as a lookout point, was demolished; the churches of St. Nishan and St. Paul, were badly damaged, as well as the Jesuit-Shooshanian co-educational school, and the west wall of the Prelacy building. The Ottoman coat of arms adorning the wall of the reception hall at the Prelacy was shattered by bombs. From here on to the end, this period may be characterized as the period of destructive action. For one viewing from the top of the rock, the old city would seem to be in ruins and deserted. Everywhere in the streets were pieces of shrapnel, heaps of empty shells, a heavy blanket of smoke, and the acrid odor of putrefying corpses.

Chapter XVIII

New Intrigues By Jevdet Bey

In spite of the additional fire power brought into play by the arrival, from Gavash, of new artillery pieces, Jevdet had again failed to carry out his threat of mass murder of Armenians in the city. In his letter to Signior Spordoni, dated April 30th, 1915, however, he boasted:

“The trouble makers in the city have been crushed. Most of them, we understand, have been brought in from villages. Some last ditch fighters entrenched in the church and the Prelacy building as well as one or two houses, will be subdued in a day or two.”

In desperation, Jevdet Bey resorted to one of his beastly trickeries on May 8th. Over five-hundred derelicts, surviving women and children of the massacred population of Timar, Manned, Aliur, Khaventz and several other villages, hungry and naked, were forcibly gathered together and driven to the gates of the city. Knowing full well that Armenians would never refuse to shelter and feed these unfortunates, he was introducing into the city the ravages of epidemics, the debilitating specter of famine, with panic and eventual surrender following as surely as night follows day.

The Armenian population of the city had increased from its original 2,500 to about 3,500 people by the influx of refugees from massacred Sarai, Aghpag, Aljavaz. A large number of people from Haigavank had also taken refuge in the city. Living conditions were intolerably crowded since only 100 houses were available and these were in constant danger of being wrecked. Every time a house was thus demolished, it also caused the death of some of the residents.

The danger of famine was making itself felt. Primitive hand mills and stone mortars were used for grinding grain. Rations had to be reduced and sicknesses became more prevalent.

We were confronted with a dilemma. To shut the door against our own would be tantamount to delivering them into the bloody fangs and the ravenous lust of the

bestly foe; to admit them would mean to put in certain jeopardy the lives of the 3,500 people, without adding one iota of safety to newcomers. And yet. how could we witness the tortures, the degradations, the murders of our own flesh and blood without instinctively rushing to save them? Indeed, Jevdet had succeeded in inflicting upon us the sort of punishment many times worse than death itself. We saw these emaciated wretches searching for a blade of grass in the streets of the Turkish quarters, where the women, devoid of the milk of human kindness, refused them a scrap of bread from their well stocked larders. We saw bestly militiamen grab women by the hair, who struggled and beseeched God for help, as they were drug inside. After a while their defiled, exhausted bodies were thrown into the street and left to die. Some were fortunate to be shot to death. “We would sooner have had our eyes gouged out than witness these scenes.” We all agreed with the poet writing these words.

Later on we found out that some of the wells in the Turkish quarters were chock full of the bodies of these hapless, innocent women.

To take further advantage of the presence of these God forsaken women, Turks disguised themselves in their tatters and approached to set fire to our defenses. Confident we would never fire on women, they thus succeeded in burning the doors of our Der Boghossian defense on May 11th. While the “women” were busy setting fire, another group of soldiers rushed into the building and barricaded themselves there, under the cover of heavy rifle fire. Michael from Haigavank, sensing the gravity of the situation, sprang at them with his comrades; they killed four of the attackers. Michael himself was mortally wounded. Too weak to wield the rifle he handed it to one of his comrades saying, “Fight on, fight on, my brave comrades.” He lived three days to welcome the day of deliverance for which he so cheerfully laid down his life. A second casualty was Mihran Havagimian, who passed away in the arms of his comrades. But the situation was relieved.

To frustrate Jevdet’s new treachery, the refugees were warned not to approach our defenses, and were given some bread. Thirty-five among them were youngsters, 10-15 years old. Their feminine attire had saved them. They were pressed into our service as watchers and chore boys at the barricades.

Chapter XIX

Turks Panic And Flee

Being completely isolated, we kept on resisting Turkish assaults. The bonfire at night, signaling the successful entry into Aikesdan of our messengers, had not appeared at Shooshantz. Our miserable refugees had brought bits of news. While at Avantz harbor, they had overheard reports that Russians were advancing along the Sarai, Abagha Bash Kale front; the government had sent reinforcements in that direction. But such rumors had been rampant even before the hostilities started, so we dismissed them as belated versions of the same. However, on May 10th, a written report from the leader at Abro's defenses apprised the Defense Command that, "We have noticed hospital equipment being transported to Avantz by way of Haigavank. Armenians from Avantz frequently pass by here, with their donkeys loaded with these items. Shall we attack?"

They were advised to hold their fire, but follow developments closely. I went to investigate. Besides the loaded donkeys, we saw two carriages with numerous bodyguards, going in the same direction. Nothing was conclusive. The defense posts were instructed to stay on the alert at all times.

Turkish attacks were being kept up at the usual pitch of intensity.

The following day, the movements became more noticeable. Caravans of families were on the move; still, nothing was positive. On the 12th day of May, however, there could be no doubt that the Turks were in panic. In the early morning we could see sail boats headed for Gaijigan; the road to Ardamed was covered with carriages, carts, pack animals and people. The same evening we observed hundreds of Turkish families leaving Shamiram and headed for Ardamed village. Still the Turks kept up the pressure on our defenses, though it had become common knowledge that the Turks were fleeing to escape impending danger.

Reliable information was received on the 13th when Havhanhes from Garin, a member of the Turkish police force, managed to come to us. He said,

"During the past three days Turks have been retreating to Baghesh. Prominent

families and hospital equipment went ahead, by ships, to Tadvan. Yesterday Jevdet issued strict orders for the Moslem population to leave for Gavash; force was to be used if necessary. It is true, Russians have captured Abagha and are attacking Pergery. Turkish officialdom from these areas arrived in the city yesterday. Russians have also captured Bash Kale. Jevdet has ordered the fighting forces here to stay on the job. There were seven of us, all Armenian policemen. We were disarmed and ordered to join in the retreat. I realized this would mean the end for us. I proposed that we run away and hide ourselves in the city. Unfortunately the others did not concur. Alone I managed to save myself through darkness.”

When queried about the Armenian prisoners, he said, “I am not fully acquainted with the details but have learned from reliable sources that all Armenians in the prison have been murdered. With my own eyes I saw 35 Armenian members of the battalion tied together and led to the prison on the third or fourth day of the conflict. We later learned they were all murdered. The prison is empty. The Turkish and Kurdish inmates were given their freedom long ago.”

One-hundred and fifty young men, the flower of our intellectuals, had been incarcerated in that den. All had preached freedom and toiled for liberty; all had prized honor above existence. Among them were Ardashes Solakian, Aso, Abraham Proodian, Garabed Danteyan, and others.

At the base of the southern ramparts, close to the prison, their common grave was discovered. It was a narrow trench about thirty yards long, where their mutilated bodies were dumped.

There was no doubt now that Jevdet was running away and all the cannonade and fusillade was a sham to cover the escape. However, the fortunes of war could change again, and suddenly. It might be that Jevdet would make a last effort for the final blow. We had to maintain our vigilance.

Turkish flight assumed massive proportions during May 13th and 14th, and we wondered why Aikesdan was not initiating a counter attack.

Chapter XX

May 4th, The Night Of Vengeance

It is hard to describe the demoralized retreat of the Turks. Large multitudes from Pasha's Fountain to the ward of Shamiram were moving towards Haiotz-Tzor. The artillery pieces at Shamiram continued their random shelling until noon of May 16th. Turkish attacks in the city had greatly diminished and calm reigned at 3:00 P.M. Suddenly the cannons at Haji Bekir barracks started to fire shells in the direction of Boghbdi Dar ward. The Defense Council convened for consultation. Some proposed to probe the situation by counter attacking at selected targets. Fears were expressed that this might be a device to deslodge us from our barricades for easy distinction. A "wait and see" policy was agreed on, particularly because Aikesdan had not taken any offensive action.

The burning of the barracks at Hanguisner was observed at 4:30 P.M. In rather quick succession, flames enveloped the Toprak Kale barracks.

It could be that retreating Turks were destroying their own military establishments. The Haji Bekir barracks were still intact and aggressive. We allowed only reconnoitering steps, to ascertain the status of Turkish strongholds.

The night was strangely quiet. We had gathered at the lookout point, peering into the darkness for any signs of activity at Aikesdan. There were isolated fires here and there; their number gradually increased along lines crisscrossing Aikesdan. Someone exclaimed, "Look, Haji Bekir barracks are burning." And indeed they were. The sky glowed with flaming orange and the old city, miles away, was shrouded by its crimson rays. This was the awaited and hoped for signal. Instructions went forth for the leaders to destroy Turkish defenses in their own areas, not to fire unless fired upon, and to use caution. They tackled the job with alacrity and enthusiasm. Starting with Gazo, Mehmed and Akif Effendi's houses to the strongholds at Amijou line, they proceeded to set the torch to the municipal building, government offices, police headquarters, cavalry barracks, Sultanie school, Azizie armory. All government buildings were

destroyed. Quantities of grain, flour, salt, and other supplies, were removed from government storage.

It was a night of orgy, of saturnalia. And who should deny these people the right to freely vent their hatred of tyranny by destroying its bastions? Was it not small enough retribution for six centuries of slavery under the Turks? Besides, it was a measure of self-protection against future danger.

Chapter XXI

May 17th, The Day Of Victory And The Dawn Of Freedom

There was an air of dizzy revolt everywhere: we were masters of the old city. The golden rays of the morning sun gilded the summits of Ardos, Sipan. Kirkoor and Yarak mountains, heralding the glorious victory to all Vasbouragon. A pall of smoke still covered Aikesdan.

Bishop Daniel and H. Gossoyan, accompanied by a group of aimed men, started up to probe the castle rode. There were no Turks to be seen anywhere, only heaps of empty shells. For thirty days fresh air and sunshine had been denied us; now we avidly enjoyed both.

“Look, your Holiness,” said Gossoyan, “see the remnants of the Turks hastening away. Our sufferings have come to an end.”

“I am benumbed,” retorted the bishop, “I can neither feel nor think for the moment. Let us stop one moment to catch our breath.” From that elevation, we could see large numbers of people, on foot and mounted, in the southern plains, fleeing Aikesdan. On the lake were five sailing westerly to Tadvan.

The feelings that permeate the human soul in situations like this can only be felt but not described...

We announced our victory by one salvo of rifle fire. The castle rock, the symbol, since time immemorial, of the durability of our people, at long last was in our hands again.

Notes of distant song attracted our attention. The Bishop and Gossoyan departed leaving behind the armed men.

The crowd was approaching from the direction of Haigavank. They sang, they danced and ran towards us with cries of joy. “Hello, Shirin, hello, Panos, Kevork. Melkesset,” etc. The next moment we were locked in brotherly embrace. None of the heros could hold back his tears, no words were uttered. After a few moments of this indescribable solemnity, we collected ourselves and up went cries of “Hurrah! Long live

Aikesdan!”

“Hurrah for the valiant defenders of the city!” came the echo.

As we entered the city, we found the entire population gathered to greet us at the gate. We arrived at the Prelacy compound and sat on benches in the flower filled yard. Then Panos Terlemezian (a famous painter) addressed those present as follows:

“We salute the valiant people of the old city; glory to all combatants who fearlessly stood up to the enemy and vanquished him. We are bringing to you the admiration and the embraces of your brothers in arm. Our victories, both here and in Aikesdan were magnificent, forcing the foe to flee in ignominy. We understand that the Russian army, preceded by Armenian volunteers, has captured Pergery. When will they arrive here? We cannot say. They may be delayed and we must not simply wait for them to come. Grave responsibilities lie ahead. More than ever before we must not lay down our arms, but be ready for any eventuality. The crushed enemy is not very far: it is possible that it may decide to return.”

During the celebrations that followed, it was decided to send another group to the top of the rock in honor of the visitors. They travelled across the Turkish quarters where they met several dozen men, women and children. These were escorted to the Defense Command headquarters. Climbing up the western slope, every building was examined. Large quantities of shells, lead, gunpowder and three cannons were found with only a few usable rifles.

The forlorn Turkish flag was replaced with our flag of liberation, the flag of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation’s city chapter.

EPILOGUE

The Armenian Volunteer Corps entered Van on May 20th, 1915 from two directions. Hamazasb and Dro arrived by way of lower Timar, and Keri and Vartan by way of Arjag and upper Timar. Later the Russian army came commanded by General Nicolaeff. All the armed combatants of the city gathered at Avantz to welcome Dro and his volunteers. Dro gave a short speech, his men fired five salvos, and we answered with ten. From the top of the rock the cannons boomed fifty times as we made the triumphal entry into the city.



General Nicolaeff was typically Russian, of middle age, and adorned with a white beard. He was rather lean and very active. His penetrating blue eyes and general deportment betrayed the seasoned military man in him.

He was greeted with enthusiastic ovations by the people. The cannons boomed the twenty-one gun salute. He established his headquarters in Aikesdan.

(See Part I for further details concerning the telegrams exchanged between General Nicolaeff and army headquarters at Caucasus as well as the appointment of Aram as governor of Vasbouragan.)

After visiting and studying points of interest in Aikesdan, in connection with the thirty days long struggle, the general expressed his high regard for the methods used, the inventiveness and the solidarity of the people under such trying conditions.

Later he visited the city, surrounded by an honor guard, and was met at the main gate by Bishop Yeznig, members of religious and political bodies, and others. He was entertained at the main reception hall of the Prelacy. On entering the hall, his attention was arrested by the crumbled coat of arms of the Ottoman empire. The prelate satisfied his curiosity in this and other matters through Mr. Siragan Dikranian, who had mastery of Russian language.

The general was interested in inspecting some of our defenses which we did

on foot. At first he surveyed the position and height of the rock and realized the vulnerability of our defenses in general. Our defense at the procurement building looked no better than a heap of rubble. General Nicolaeff expressed a desire to see the inner workings. With us, he went through its dark and narrow passages examining by the light of a lantern its peculiarities. The walnut planking to reinforce the roof and the walls were of special interest to him. At the conclusion of the tour, the general wanted to meet the military experts who had engineered this fortification. "This reminds me," he said, "of the fortification at Port Arthur, Manchouria." We assured the general we had not experts of any kind, and that everything we had done was suggested by the character of the fighting. The general pondered a minute, shook his head and said, "No, that is not possible. I have noted the hand of the specialist in the interior reinforcements. How many of you have served in or are connected with the Russian army?" We assured him there were no trained soldiers among our ranks.

After a short silence, he turned to his men and said, "It is true that the defense structure we have witnessed here and the successful culmination of the defense seem to be at variance with accepted military planning and logistics. The combatants here have fought alongside their people, against the superior military forces of the enemy. They chose the honorable alternative to death, therefore they have prevailed. They have truly earned the victory being celebrated this beautiful May day on their ancestral lands."

He cast a last lingering glance at the historical castle rock, of Semiramis fame, on top of which the Armenian flag was waving in the azure blue sky.

That evening the general returned to his headquarters at Aikesdan.