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Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)

By [Toygun Altintas](#)

With branches in the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Iran, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Hay Heghapokhagan Dashnaktsutiun*) was the leading Armenian political party during the First World War. The party leaders and cadres in the Russian and Ottoman Empires adopted different strategies and tactics during the War. The party's influence waned in the region after the Armenian Genocide and the Bolshevik takeover of the First Republic of Armenia.

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Origins

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (hereafter ARF) was founded in 1890 as a unified political party for Armenian socialist, [nationalist](#), and/or revolutionary groups. The party's founders were [Stepan Zorian \(1867-1919\)](#), [Simon Zavarian \(1866-1913\)](#), and [Kristapor Mikaelian \(1859-1905\)](#). The ARF agenda advocated the implementation of a wide range of political and social reforms that would guarantee universal suffrage, administrative decentralization, freedom of speech and assembly as well as the equitable redistribution of land. The methods to achieve such goals would consist of the dissemination of revolutionary ideas and arms among the Armenian populace, the organization of revolutionary committees throughout [Armenia](#), and sustained attacks against "government officials,

informers, traitors, usurers, and every kind of exploiter”.[1] The ARF expanded its network and remained active within oppositional politics in the Ottoman, Russian, and Qajar empires over the next decade.[2]

1908 Revolution: A Turning Point

The 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire was a significant turning point for the ARF. After the reinstatement of the prorogued constitution and parliament, the organization declared its allegiance to the new constitutional order and commitment to engaging in legal and parliamentary politics. During this period, the ARF formed a tenuous partnership with the Committee of Union and Progress, which was the leading political organization in the Empire at the time. The collapse of Hamidian autocracy allowed the ARF to organize extensively throughout the provinces, have several deputies elected to the Ottoman parliament, and expand its influence within Armenian civil and educational institutions.[3] The ARF-CUP alliance fell apart in 1912 during a period of acute instability in imperial and international politics.

With renewed international interest in the implementation of reforms in Ottoman Armenia after the Balkan Wars, the ARF attempted to voice Armenian demands. The CUP's resistance to the implementation of reforms and the involvement of the Great Powers exacerbated the tensions between the ARF and the CUP. By early 1914, the Ottoman government yielded to increasing international pressure and accepted the Powers' proposal to appoint two European Inspectors-General to oversee the implementation of the reforms. The outbreak of the First World War, however, precluded the realization of the project.

The First World War

At the onset of the War, there were differing opinions within the leading cadres of the ARF regarding the allegiance of the party should the Ottomans enter the war. One camp, led primarily by prominent figures in the Eastern Bureau of the party, posited that the ARF would gain a significant advantage by organizing volunteer units in the Russian Empire and following the Russian advance. The other camp, dominated by members of the Western Bureau, thought the Ottoman army would attack its Armenian citizens if volunteer units crossed the border. They proposed strict neutrality unless the safety of Ottoman Armenians was threatened.[4]

During this period, the ARF was approached by the Russian and Ottoman governments. The CUP and ARF met in Erzurum in the fall of 1914 to discuss the possibility of an ARF-led insurrection against the Russian Empire in Transcaucasia. While the ARF delegates were committed to the defence of Ottoman lands following a Russian invasion, they rejected starting an insurrection from within the Russian Empire. The ARF expressed solidarity against a potential Russian invasion and encouraged Armenian conscription.

Disregarding the cautious attitude of the party's Western Bureau, the ARF in the Russian Empire organized four Armenian volunteer battalions to fight against the Ottoman Empire. Each battalion was led by a prominent *fedayi*— [Andranik Ozanian \(1865-1927\)](#), [Arshak Gavafian \(1858-1916\)](#), [Hamazasp Srvandzian \(1873-1921\)](#), and [Drastamat Kanaian \(1884-1956\)](#). The volunteer units served in the Russian army for over two years, although tensions between the Russian command and ARF unit leaders remained constant. This was a result of the volunteer units' [atrocities](#) against local Muslim communities under occupation and the Russian command's disregard for Armenian self-administration in occupied Eastern Anatolia.^[5]

The Armenian Genocide

Sporadic violence against Ottoman Armenians, particularly in the borderlands between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, foreshadowed the official Ottoman entry into the war. On 25 February 1915, the Ottoman General Staff ordered the demobilization of non-Muslim soldiers and officers, and their relocation into labour battalions. Starting on 24 April, hundreds of Armenian intellectuals, artists, and politicians were arrested in Istanbul, and transported to the interior of the country where the majority were murdered. Among the victims were prominent ARF members and allies such as [Khachatur "Aknuni" Malumian \(1863-1915\)](#) and [Krikor Zohrab \(1861-1915\)](#), who was not a member of the ARF but often aligned himself with the party in the Ottoman parliament. The formation of the Armenian labour battalions and the arrest and murder of the community's intellectual and political leadership would constitute the first stage of the [Armenian Genocide](#).

The last weeks of April 1915 marked another significant turning point. Under the leadership of regional ARF representatives and community leaders, the Armenians of Van set up defensive parameters in two quarters of the city against an increasingly hostile governor and his forces. Tensions intensified and [armed clashes](#) between the two sides began on April 19, 1915. ARF leaders, most notably [Aram Manukian \(1879-1919\)](#), organized the Armenian community against Ottoman forces. The defenders held off Ottoman forces until the Russian advance reached Van in mid-May. Aram Manukian was appointed acting governor of Van by the Russian command. ARF administration of Van, however, was brief. The Ottoman army recaptured the city in July, resulting in the exodus of most of the city's Armenians.

Over the course of the next two years, the majority of Ottoman Armenians were expelled, deported, murdered, or kidnapped. The ARF therefore redirected its efforts to Transcaucasia. It was the dominant Armenian political organization in the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic. After [Georgia](#) and [Azerbaijan](#) declared independence in 1918, the First Republic of Armenia was formed under ARF leadership. Nonetheless, the republic was short-lived: it was invaded by the Soviet Union and reconstituted as the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920. The ARF leadership was forced into exile after the Bolshevik takeover.

Section Editors: [Alexandre Toumarkine](#); [Erol Ülker](#); [Pinar Üre](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Nalbandian, Louise: *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley 1963, p. 168; Libaridian, Gerard: *What Was Revolutionary about Armenian Revolutionary Parties in the Ottoman Empire?*, in: (eds.) Suny, Ronald / Göçek, Fatma / Naimark, Norman: *A Question of Genocide. Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, New York 2011.
2. ↑ For the role and participation of Armenian revolutionaries in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution see Berberian, Hourii: *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. The Love For Freedom Has No Fatherland*, Boulder, Colorado 2001. For the Armenian revolutionary movement in Russia see Suny, Ronald: *Looking Toward Ararat. Armenia in Modern History*, Bloomington, Indiana 1993, pp. 63-94. Ter Minassian, Anahide: *Nationalism and Socialism in the Armenian Revolutionary Movement (1887-1912)*, Cambridge 1984.
3. ↑ Türkyılmaz, Yektan: *Devrim İçinde Devrim: Ermeni Örgütleri ve İttihat-Terakki İlişkileri [Revolution within Revolution: Relations between Armenian Organizations and the [Committee of] Union and Progress], 1908-1915*, in: Adanır, Fikret / Özel, Oktay (eds.): *1915. Siyaset, Tehcir, Soykırım [1915. Politics, Deportation, Genocide]*, Istanbul 2015.
4. ↑ Türkyılmaz, Devrim İçinde Devrim [Revolution within Revolution] 2015, pp. 349-351.
5. ↑ Badem, Candan: *Güney Kafkasya'da Rus Politikaları ve Ermeniler 1828-1918 [Russian Policies in the Southern Caucasus and the Armenians, 1828-1918]*, in: Adanır, Fikret / Özel, Oktay (eds.): *1915. Siyaset, Tehcir, Soykırım [1915. Politics, Deportation, Genocide]*, Istanbul 2015, pp. 413-418. Chalabian, Andranik: *General Andranik and the Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, Southfield, Michigan 1988, pp. 218-250.

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