

On the Origins of Armenian Red Power

An Original by the Kars Collective

Glorious Armenia—experiencing occupation by empires from all sides—the bloodthirsty Ottomans from the west, the Safavid and Qajar Persians of the south, and from the 19th century, the armies of the despotic Tsar from the north—made our homeland a nexus of the worse kinds of oppressions: colonial, militarist, and later, capitalist. The murderous rampages of the Turks, the abject poverty of the peasants as emerging urban centers neglected the countryside, the constant harassment and humiliation by Kurdish lords and tribesmen; these are the reasons that the Armenian workers and peasants were the first in the south Caucasus and west Asia to recognize the assertive and revolutionary potential of socialist power from a very early stage.

If the Russian Empire was the prison of nations, then the Ottoman Empire was the *death row*, the *gallows*, the *Golgotha* of nations. Even in the face of total annihilation not yet known to history up to that point, Armenian revolutionaries waged an independent struggle for liberation and later syncretized with the Russian workers' and peasants' struggle that led to the formation and consolidation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR. In this way, Armenian socialists were always at the forefront of moving the gears of history forward.

The Armenian Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or *Hayastani Komunistakan Kusakts'ut'yun (HKK)*, founded in 1920, was not the first instance of Armenian red power, and it is precisely here where we will briefly explore the history of Armenian socialist parties that led up to the creation of the HKK (1920). This work will begin with the foundation and activities of Avetis Nazarbekian's Hunchakian Party (1887), then follow through with Stepan Shahumian's League of Armenian Social Democrats (1902) and the revolution in Baku, and touch upon the role of the HKK (1918), before all three merged into the HKK (1920).

The genesis of Armenian revolutionary party activity begins with the weekly periodical *Armenia*, first published on August 1, 1885. It was founded by teacher and writer Mkrtych Portugalian (1848-1921) in Marseille after fleeing the Ottoman Empire due to revolutionary activity. Though not socialist, *Armenia* was the first serious publication that embraced armed struggle for Armenian liberation and was essentially a megaphone for the type of revolutionary aspirations espoused by Armenian *Catholicos* (head bishop) and "Father of Armenian armed liberation," Mkrtych Khrimian (1820-1907). It was from here that the seeds of two very important Armenian parties were sowed: the Armenakan Party (1885), the first Armenian revolutionary party, and the Hunchakian Party (1887), the first Armenian socialist party.

The Armenakan Party was founded by a group of Portugalian's students in Van, 1885. Though neither *Armenia* nor Portugalian himself were officially associated with the party, the Armenakan partisans rallied around the philosophy of the periodical and named themselves after it. The Armenakans were the first to engage in organized armed Armenian struggle in the Ottoman Empire and were important in their own right, however, we will be shifting our focus now to the Hunchakian Party.

Socialist revolutionary activity begins under Avetis Nazarbekian (1866-1939). Born in Tabriz, Iran, but raised in Russia since childhood, Nazarbek, as he would be known, studied at the universities of St. Petersburg and later in Paris. It was here, in 1886, that Nazarbek became a significant contributor to *Armenia* and rallied behind Portugalian, assuming he would come to

lead a revolutionary organization, which was frequently proposed in his newspaper. While Nazarbek waited, however, he began contacting other Armenians in Europe who were as restless to form a political party as he was.

In Paris, he met his future wife and political partner, Mariam “Maro” Vardanian-Nazarbekian (1864-1941), a vivacious Armenian woman from Tiflis (modern Tbilisi) who was expelled from schooling due to revolutionary activity. From Paris, they moved to Geneva, Switzerland to study at a local university and met many other Russian-Armenian political exiles and students, most importantly, Yerevan-born Ruben Khanazat (born as Nshan Karapetian, 1862-1929) and Shushi-born Gabriel Kafian (1860-1930). Three more Armenians from Montpellier, France joined them: Tiflis-born Gevorg Gharajian (1861-1936), Christopher Ohanian, and later Levon Stepanian.

By the summer of 1886, the new Geneva Group sent a letter to Mkrtych Portugalian suggesting he be a temporary treasurer for the emerging revolutionary party, however, Portugalian rejected the offer, instead saying he had already founded an organization, which would be disclosed soon. What was unveiled, to the surprise of the Geneva Group, was the Armenian Patriotic Society of Europe, the goal of which was to educate Ottoman-Armenian students in European schools and be returned to improve the conditions of the homeland. This form of capitulation to liberal institutions by Portugalian was unexpected, whose entire rhetoric was centered around armed struggle.

As a result, the Geneva Group published and distributed a pamphlet titled “*Hayaker K’ameleon*,” literally translating as “The Armenian-Eating Chameleon,” but figuratively meaning “The Opportunistic Persecutor of Armenians.” In it, the students severed their relationship with Mkrtych Portugalian and immediately got to work to establish their own program and newspaper.

A committee of three, known as the Center, was elected to lead this future organization: Avetis Nazarbekian, his fiancée Maro Nazarbekian, and Gevorg Gharajian. Influenced by the “Father of Russian Marxism,” Georgi Plekhanov, and his Emancipation of Labor party, also based in Geneva, the radical students wrote a five-part platform which is summarized below:

I. The vast majority of the masses are exploited by a ruling elite, and full and real freedom for the majority can only be established based on humanitarian and socialistic principles.

II. The immediate objective is the political and national independence of that part of our homeland under occupation by the Ottomans known as western Armenia. Only the road to socialism can rescue the Armenian masses from slavery. Once liberated, the political aims of the new state will be: 1) free elections by universal and direct suffrage where voters have full power to all national administrative questions; 2) extensive provincial autonomy; 3) extensive communal autonomy where all public administrators are elected by the people; 4) every individual has the right to hold office; 5) freedom of press, speech, conscience, assembly, organization, and electoral agitation; 6) the person and home of every individual are to be inviolable; and 7) universal military service. A progressive taxation system and universal compulsory education will also be installed.

III. Revolution is the only means of reaching this objective. The methods of revolution are as follows: 1) Propaganda, to educate the masses on the right time to revolt; 2) Agitation and Terror, to elevate the spirit of the people; 3) Organization around a centralized committee; and 4) Peasant and Worker Activities.

IV. The best time for revolution is when the Ottomans are distracted by war. Non-Armenians, such as Assyrians and Kurds, must be brought within the fold of the revolutionary cause.

V. European co-optation of our struggle must be rejected since they will only use Armenia for their own selfish interests to split the Ottoman Empire. After the independence of Turkish (western) Armenia, the revolution will be extended to Russian (eastern) and Persian Armenia, and the "Three Armenias" will be united. This new country will lead Armenians and others into a socialistic society for all humanity.

Based on this party outline, the seven young Geneva students founded the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party (SDHP) (*Sots'ial Demokrat Hnch'akyan Kusakts'ut'yun*) in August 1887, becoming not only the first Armenian socialist party but ultimately the very first socialist party to operate in the Ottoman Empire and Iran. It would be the most organized Armenian political party in the Ottoman Empire until the mid-1910s. By 1890, it was also known as the Revolutionary Hunchakian Party.

An essential quality must be highlighted regarding their program. It is clear that the SDHP founders were highly influenced by the peasant populism of Narodism, and hence were subject to their same errors. The Nazarbek couple firmly believed that the peasants, not the proletariat, were the most radical segment of society, that they alone could overthrow capitalism in favor of peasant communalism. This is illustrated in Articles II-2 and II-3. Furthermore, Article III is nearly precisely the same methods utilized by the *Narodnaya Volya*, or People's Will, the armed propaganda organization of the Narodniks. So, despite the substantial influence that Karl Marx had on the Nazarbeks (Avetis would begin the first translation of *The Communist Manifesto* into Armenian, which would later be published along with many other Marxist works in their newspaper), the SDHP was socialist, but not thoroughly Marxist socialist, at least in the first decade of its existence. Regardless, the Hunchakian Party was the earliest Armenian manifestation of socialism.

By November, the first editorial of their newspaper, *Hnchak*, "bell" in Armenian, was published. It was named after the periodical by Alexander Herzen, the "Father of Russian socialism," *Kolokol*—"bell" in Russian. Within a few months, *Hnchak* had hundreds of subscribers from two primary groups: the *pandukhts* (Armenian peasant migrant workers) of Constantinople and other major cities, who were attracted to the principles of socialism, and the Armenian intelligentsia, who were anti-socialist but attracted to the widespread call to armed liberation.

Hnchak was initially based in Geneva but later moved its operations to Athens (1892-1894), London (1894-1904), and Paris (1904-1915). They predominately wrote about the social and economic conditions of Turkish Armenia and advocated for armed struggle to secure independence, even for Russian and Persian Armenia. *Hnchak* was not only a strong proponent

of national liberation through socialist means but additionally of internationalist solidarity for the freedom of all oppressed peoples.

Furthermore, the newspaper was also published in Ottoman Turkish to attain cooperation with Muslims, with some success. For example, in 1893, SDHP founder Gabriel Kafian was involved in the distribution of propaganda and instigation of revolt among the Kurds (*Zaza/Dimili*) of Dersim (Tunceli), however, he was ultimately arrested by the Ottoman police.

The first real exercise of Hunchak power occurred on Sunday, July 15, 1890, in the Armenian Quarter of Constantinople, known as *Kum Kapu*, or *Kumkapı* in Turkish. Here, a group of three Hunchaks, led by Harutiun Chankulian (1855-1915), interrupted a speech by Patriarch Khoren Ashugian addressing a church gathering observing *Vardavar* (Transfiguration of our Lord). The Hunchak revolutionaries read out loud on the altar a statement denouncing the church leadership's indifference to the Ottoman oppression of Armenians and their cooperation with Ottoman authorities. The demonstrators forced the hesitant Patriarch to join them in a protest outside the Sultan's residence and court, Yıldız Palace. However, on the way, a group of Ottoman policemen and soldiers used violence to break apart the march, martyring three protesters. Four policemen were killed in self-defense. Though the Kum Kapu demonstration was considered a failure by *Hunchak*, it further rallied Armenians on their side because of their organization of one of the first occasions of resistance against Ottoman soldiers in Constantinople for centuries.

Elsewhere, in parallel time, in Tiflis, 1889, three men, Christopher Mikayelian, Stepan "Rostom" Zorian, and Simon Zavarian, united two local student groups, the liberal nationalist *Severnîe* (Northern) group and the socialistic *luzhniya* (Southern) group, into Young Armenia (*Yeritasard Hayastan*). Being a big-tent political federation consisting broadly of capitalist nationalists, Armenakan sympathizers, rightist socialists, former *Narodnaya Volya*, some anarchists, and Hunchak sympathizers, Young Armenia, with their *Droshak* (Flag) publication, advocated for a decentralized manner of armed struggle. Witnessing the events of Kum Kapu, Young Armenia suggested to the SDHP to join as a single organization. Though reluctant, the Hunchaks, with Ruben Khanazat as their representative, merged with Young Armenia and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) (*Hay Yeghap'okhakan Dashnakts'ut'un*) was founded with Trabizon as their headquarters in 1890.

Avetis Nazarbekian quickly realized however that the Dashnaks, as they would be called, were swiftly capitulating to the capitalist elements of their party, something the Hunchaks had been weary of since the beginning. In less than a year, the Hunchaks declared the federation over, and the ARF continued as their own party. By 1908, the Dashnaks had liberalized during their collaborative effort with the Turkish Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the party later responsible for the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Nonetheless, they still stayed militant, however extremely decentralized in their activities, one of the reasons behind their inability to unite Armenian resistance to the Genocide into a single front. When the ARF established state power through the Republic of Armenia (1918-1920), they had completely surrendered to the bourgeois elements of Armenian society, collaborated with the imperialist powers, and, following the birth of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, were the principal anti-Bolshevik reactionary force in Armenia.

The Dashnaks were not the only group to be shaken by internal contradictions. During the 1896 1st Congress of the Hunchak Party in London, the rightist bloc, represented mainly by

the Armenian intelligentsia, criticized the Hunchak Center (known as the Nazarbekist bloc) for associating with the Russian workers' movement and believed that it was isolating the conservative Armenian bourgeoisie as well as the European powers, which the rightists believed needed to intervene on behalf of the Armenians. This bloc, led by Mihran Damadian, advocated the complete elimination of socialistic principles from the party platform. Two years later, they would officially split as the Reconstituted (or Reformed) Hunchakian Party (RHP) (*Verakazmyal Hnch'akyan Kusakts'ut'yun*). Promoting autonomy within the Ottoman Empire instead of independence, the RHP was a liberal party centered in Egypt that ultimately merged with the remnants of the Armenakan Party in 1921 to found the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party, or *Ramgavar* Party. The Hunchak Center nevertheless remained principled in their socialist beliefs.

This however would not be the end of the inter-Hunchak line struggles. Through the influence of the rise of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (the Hunchaks would officially establish contact with Vladimir Lenin), the Hunchak Center would adopt a more Marxist platform with time and it became clear that a reworking of the party outline was necessary. These differences would be debated during the 4th and 5th Hunchak Congresses, held in London, 1903, and Paris, 1905, respectively. The Hunchak Center, led by Nazarbek but also including other prominent members such as Khanazat, stressed that Armenian liberation from the Ottoman Empire would only result from a pan-Russian Empire revolution. The Nazarbekian faction argued that the Hunchakian Party in the Caucasus should fully integrate with the Caucasian Union of the RSDLP (more on them later), while the Hunchakian Party in the Ottoman Empire should exist as an autonomous part of this greater coalition. The competing faction, led by Nakhijevan-born Stepan Sapah-Gulian (1861-1928), rejected this internationalism and argued that Armenian socialist emancipation should be limited to the Ottoman Empire.

Ultimately, however, by the end of the 5th Hunchak Congress, the party voted in favor of the Sapah-Gulian line. The Nazarbekists rejected the decision, and many of them, including both Avetis and Mariam, joined the RSDLP, favoring the Bolsheviks with time. Most of the Hunchak cells in the Caucasus, including the Hunchak parties of Yerevan and Baku, also integrated with the Bolsheviks.

Throughout the factionalism, however, the Hunchaks did not stop their peasant organizing. The Revolutionary Hunchak Party would come to lead many significant peasant uprisings in the Ottoman Empire, most notably the valiant 1894 Sasun Resistance and the 1895 Zeytun Resistance, both part of the larger 1894-1897 Hamidian massacres, which saw up to 300,000 Armenians martyred by the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish cavalry regiments. Hunchak partisans and leaders were also very active during the 1905-1907 Armenian-Tatar War in the south Caucasus.

In 1913, following the 7th Congress of the Hunchak Party held in Constanța, Romania, the Ottoman authorities arrested nearly 140 Hunchak leaders as they arrived back in Constantinople. After two years of prison time and mock trials, 20 of the most significant leaders were publicly hung in Beyazit Square on June 15, 1915, approximately three months after the start of the Armenian Genocide. Known as the Twenty Hunchak Martyrs, they included Meghri-born freedom fighter Matteos "Paramaz" Sarkisian (1863-1915), a model Hunchak revolutionary who helped build the Persian branch of the Hunchakian Party, was one of the chief

organizers of the attempted assassination of Tsarist Caucasus viceroy and despot Grigory Golitsyn, and led some of the resistance during the Armenian-Tatar War. His final words were:

“You can only hang our bodies, but not our philosophy... You will see tomorrow on the Eastern horizon a Socialist Armenia.”

The height of Hunchak socialist leadership and organization, however, would be fully realized in the winter between 1917-1918, during the Great Imperialist War following the October Revolution. To understand the activities of the Revolutionary Hunchak Party here, we must first explore the story of Armenians and Bolshevism to understand how it converges with the Hunchaks, and this commences the second topic of this piece: the League of Armenian Social Democrats. To start here, of course, we must now rewind the clock to transverse into a parallel series of events.

We begin this second expedition with a reminder to the reader of Tiflis-born Gevorg Gharajian, one of the original founders of the SDHP and an elected member of the Center. Early on, however, Gharajian would leave the Hunchaks, and, if being one of the founders of the first Armenian socialist party was not enough, founded in Tiflis the first explicitly Armenian Marxist organization, the 1898 Marxist Armenian Workers' Group.

Many colorful figures were also some of the original members of this workers' group. They include Dashkesan-born Melik Melikian (1868-1918), Kharberd-born Karekin Kozikian (1878-1915), Trabizon-born Hayk Adamian (1878-1918), Tiflis-born Ashot Khumarian (1875-1938), Lori-born Asatur Kakhoyan (1874-1937), Karabakh-born Bogdan Knunyants (1878-1911), and Tiflis-born Arshak Zurabian (1873-1920). Many, such as Melikian, Khumarian, Kakhoyan, and Knunyants, would later become dedicated Bolsheviks.

The Marxist Armenian Workers' Group, with their *Banvor* (Worker) organ, remained relatively small, but not isolated, and closely coordinated with other Georgian revolutionary workers' groups. They took part in many strikes, particularly in leather and shoe factories, and criticized the Hunchaks at this period for not developing a more pan-worker line (the Nazarbekists, as we saw, eventually did adopt this). By 1901, however, Tsarist repression had forced the pioneering organization to close down and imprisoned many of its members.

The Marxist Armenian struggle would be reinvigorated shortly afterward when a young man named Stepan Shahumian (1878-1918) returned to Transcaucasia. Born in Tiflis but having spent much of his childhood in Lori, he was already a prolific Marxist by the age of 20. He studied in St. Petersburg and later in the chemical department of the Riga Technical University before temporarily returning to Tiflis to work as an editor for the newspaper *Novoye Obozreniye* (New Review). In August 1900, he once again returned to Riga Technical where he was involved in a number of revolutionary student groups, strikes, and agitation circles. In 1901, he was expelled from the institute for revolutionary activity and deported back to Tiflis. It is here where he connected with former members of the Marxist Armenian Workers' Group, such as Melikian, Khumarian, Kakhoyan, Knunyants, and Zurabian, and founded the League of Armenian Social Democrats (*Hay Sots'ial-Demokrat Miut'yun, HSDM*) in 1902, with their *Proletariat* publication. The organization and its newspaper were the first Armenian group with *Iskrist* views.

Proletariat caught the attention of Vladamir Lenin, who instantly asked for the entire edition to be translated for him. The manifesto described the prototypical Social Democratic positions: the theses of scientific socialism, the need for revolutionary action, a united Proletariat

front, and so forth. What intrigued Lenin the most, though, was how the HSDM answered the National Question. It says:

“Taking into consideration that the Russian state is made up of many different nationalities at varying levels of cultural development, and believing that only the extensive development of local self-government can safeguard the interests of these heterogeneous elements, we deem essential the establishment of a federative republic in the future free Russia. As to the Caucasus, in view of the extremely diverse national composition of its population, we shall strive to unite all the local socialist elements and all the workers of the various nationalities; we shall strive to create a united and strong Social-Democratic organisation, for a more successful struggle against the autocracy. In the future Russia we shall recognise the right of all nations to free self-determination, since we regard national freedom as being only one of the aspects of civil liberties in general. Proceeding from this proposition, and taking into account the above-mentioned diverse national composition of the Caucasus and the absence of geographical boundaries between the various nationalities, we do not find it possible to include in our programme the demand for political autonomy for the Caucasian peoples; we demand only autonomy in matters pertaining to cultural life, i. e., freedom of language, schools, education, etc.”

Lenin expressed his thoughts on the 33rd issue of *Iskra* on February 1, 1903:

“... is it possible *from the Armenian Social-Democrats' point of view* to speak of the demand for a *federative* republic? Federation *presupposes* autonomous national political units, whereas the League rejects the demand for national autonomy. To be fully consistent, the League should delete the demand for a *federative* republic from its programme, confining itself to the demand for a democratic republic in general. It is not the business of the proletariat to *preach* federalism and national autonomy; it is not the business of the proletariat to advance such demands, which inevitably amount to a demand for the establishment of an autonomous *class* state. It is the business of the proletariat to rally the greatest possible *masses* of workers of each and every nationality *more closely*, to rally them for struggle *in the broadest possible arena* for a democratic republic and for socialism.”

In general, Lenin congratulated the correctness of the HSDM platform. His only critique, however, was that, despite the correctness of these views, particularly on the National Question, the logic of the League does not follow through. If the HSDM accurately describes the impossibility of drawing national borders in a region as diverse as the Caucasus, and therefore the impracticality of political units based on nationality in the Caucasus, then these views would not be consistent with demands for a federative republic.

Shahumian, and many of the members of the HSDM, came to recognize Lenin's assessment and eventually rejected federalism. The Armenian Social Democrats would be present during the March 1903 1st Congress of the Social Democratic Organizations of the Caucasus, also attended by representatives of the RSDLP and the editorial board of *Brdzola*

(Struggle in Georgian), the organ of the Georgian Social Democrats. Here, recognizing the necessity of uniting a single, central revolutionary organization, the Congress proclaimed the Caucasian Union Committee (*Kavkazskiy Soyuznyy Komitet, KSK*), an “inseparable part of the RSDLP,” tasked with coordinating the activities of local committees on the basis of proletarian internationalism to expand Marxist literature into the regional languages—Georgian, Armenian, and Russian. *Proletariat* and *Brdzola* were merged into a single organ called *Proletariatis Brdzola* (Struggle of the Proletariat), whose editorial board included figures as well-known as Mikhail Tshakaya, Josef Stalin, and of course Stepan Shahumian himself. In this way, the HSDM was dissolved into the greater pan-Russian struggle, and it was at this point that the Nazarbekists joined the RSDLP as well. The KSK, along with the rest of the RSDLP, had its own Bolshevik-Menshevik split, where figures like Zubarian joined Menshevism.

A group of Armenian socialists, displeased with the rejection of federalism, founded the Armenian Social Democratic Labor Organization (*Sots'ial-Demokratakan Banvorakan Hay Kazmakerput'yun, SDBHK*) in October 1903. They rejected the centralized efforts of the RSDLP, as well as the agrarian program accepted by the 2nd Congress, claiming that it was unsuitable for the specific conditions of Transcaucasia. In this way, the SDBHK would be nicknamed the *spets'ifikner* (Specificists). These Armenian National-Federalists never gained too much popularity and were criticized as just “Caucasian Bundism” (The Bund was an organization of federalist Jewish socialists who believed that their party should be the sole representative of Jewish workers within the RSDLP).

In 1906, Shahumian founded *Kayts'* (Spark, named after *Iskra*), the first legal Armenian Bolshevik newspaper, and it is here that the essays challenging the Specificists were published, arguing that no autonomous organization should exist to represent the Armenian working class, that rather federalism is an impediment to proletarian organization. Due to this, the last of the socialist Armenian organizations had either joined the Bolsheviks or disintegrated from Caucasian politics, particularly following the 1905-1907 Armenian-Tatar War.

However, one of the worse periods of revolutionary activity in Transcaucasia occurred during the dictatorship of the third Prime Minister of Russia, Pyotr Stolypin. In what would be called the *Stolypin reaction* between 1906 to the late 1910s, harsh repression in the form of executions, mass arrests, and deportations took hold of the Caucasus and was a major blow to all forms of organizations. The Dashnaks, already withdrawing from eastern Armenia, were nearly completely wiped out. The Hunchaks, at least the ones who did not integrate with the RSDLP, survived with only a few cells remaining. *Kayts'* was shut down and nearly all of the activities of the Bolsheviks were destroyed, with leaders like Shahumian retracting to Baku, where he stayed for several years.

Everything would change with the outbreak of the Imperialist War of 1914 and the October Revolution. It is exactly here where three of the origin points of the Armenian Communist Party (1920) will converge: the Hunchaks, Shahumian's Bolsheviks, and the HKK (1918), the last of which we will get to extremely soon.

During the Great Imperialist War, large swathes of the Ottoman Empire were conquered by the imperialistic Tsarist Russian Empire. History forever transformed when the Bolshevik Revolution broke out and called for the end of the war. Soldiers arrested their pro-Tsarist generals and officers and seized the military hierarchy—establishing Soldiers' Deputies across

the front. In the occupied Dersim province, the soldiers established the 1st Red Guard Army, led by an Armenian named Arshak Jamalian.

Shortly thereafter, a coalition of landlords and Tsarist officials in the Caucasus, backed by British, French, and American envoys, formed the Transcaucasian Commissariat on November 28, 1917, which officially recognized itself as an autonomous part of Tsarist Russia at first but functionally was an independent successor state. Four days later, on December 2, Mikhail Przhevalskiy, General of Infantry of the Caucasian front, recognized the Transcaucasian Commissariat, and, on their behalf, began negotiations for a ceasefire and demarcation with the Ottoman side. This was concluded as the Armistice of Erzincan between General Przhevalskiy and Vehib Paşa, commander of the 3rd Army, on December 18. The next day, the Commissariat declared that they would demobilize the Russian army they had inherited, arm separate national regiments, and “create a special body to lead the fight against the Bolsheviks.”

The Bolsheviks were incredibly alarmed at all that had just occurred. *Bakinskiy Rabochiy* (Baku Worker), the RSDLP(b) organ in Baku, wrote:

“The order of General Przhevalskiy ... not only exposes the front to the local enemy but also creates incredible anarchy within the country. The dissolution of the unified Russian army and the creation of national corps strikes not only the Russian revolution but also puts the existence of the Caucasian peoples at stake.”

In response, on January 5, 1918, the Revolutionary Military Committee was formed in Baku to coordinate the Bolshevik activities on the Caucasian front. The next day, the Council of People's Commissars, or *Sovnarkom*, elected Shahumian as Commissar Extraordinary for the Caucasus, tasked not only with establishing Soviet power in Transcaucasia but also to “exclude Turkey from Transcaucasia as a military-political factor.” The Bolsheviks realized that in order to protect Soviet power in the Caucasus, Soviet power needed to be constructed on the Anatolian front. Five days later, on January 11, in one of the most important documents for the Armenian liberation struggle, the *Sovnarkom* published their “Decree on Turkish Armenia,” which reads, in full, below:

“The Council of People's Commissars declares to the Armenian people that the Russian Government of Workers and Peasants supports the rights of Armenians of the occupied territories of ‘Turkish Armenia’ and proclaims the freedom of self-determination up to full independence. The Council of People's Commissars recognizes that this right can only be exercised in a number of pre-approvals of the safeguards that are absolutely necessary for the people of Armenia to hold a referendum.

The Council of People's Commissars recognizes as a partial guarantee the following conditions:

Article A. Withdrawal of Russian troops from Turkish Armenia and immediate creation of Armenian national police (militias) to protect the personal and material safety of Turkish Armenians.

Article B. Unimpeded return of Armenian refugees, scattered across the different countries to Turkish Armenia.

Article C. Unimpeded return of Armenians to Turkish Armenia, who during the war were forcibly exiled inside Turkey by the Turkish authorities. The Council of People's Commissars Council will insist on this condition during the negotiations with the Turkish delegation.

Article D. The establishment of an Interim Government in Turkish Armenia. Deputies will be elected on the principle of democracy.

Stepan Shaumian, appointed as Commissar Extraordinary for the Caucasus, will provide assistance to Armenians of Turkish Armenia in the implementation of Articles B and C, as well as for the formation of a Mixed Commission to identify the date and ways of Russian troops' withdrawal, according to Article A.

The geographic boundaries of Turkish Armenia will be determined by the people's democratically elected representatives together with Muslims and other residents of neighboring disputed areas and the Commissar Shahumian.”

The 1918 Armenian Communist Party (HKK, 1918), the third and final component of the future 1920 Armenian Communist Party, was founded by Alashkert-born Kurkin Haykuni (1889-1966) and Batum-born Vahan Yeremian (1895-1937), two active Bolsheviks operating from Gyumri and Abkhazia, respectively. They were tasked with implementing the January 11 decree in western Armenia by distributing Bolshevik literature and setting up revolutionary councils.

It was precisely in this context that we can discuss the height of Hunchak power, and ultimately the height of all Armenian socialist power in western Armenia. During this period, the leadership of Nazarbek's Hunchaks, the organization of Shahumian's Bolsheviks, and the vigor of Haykuni's HKK (1918) converged at this point in history. It was here where Arshak Jemalian was tasked with establishing Soviet power before all the Russian troops could be withdrawn within three months' time. This is why Jemalian convened with Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish leadership in Erzincan (Yerznka in Armenian, Erzîngan in Kurdish).

During this meeting, Murad of Sebastia (1874-1918), a long-time Hunchak member present since the Kum Kapu Demonstration, represented the Armenians. In this region, the primary Kurdish tribe is mostly Kurmanji-speaking Zaza of Alevi Qizilbaş descent, a tribe known as the Qoçgirî. The leader of the Qoçgirî, Alişan Bey, and his *kâtip* (clerk), Alişer, represented the Kurds. A man sent by Istanbul, the Mufti of Erzincan, represented the Turks. Here, they announced the creation of the Erzincan Soviet and established the *Şura* (Council) with 25 (Armenian sources say 75) democratically-elected representatives. The Hunchak Murad would give a speech during the festivities of the founding of the new government:

“Turks, Kurds, and Armenians are brothers. It is the imperialists and their local collaborators who set us apart. We forget our sufferings and extend our hand of peace.

Let's establish our own consciousness by uniting all Kurdish, Armenian, and Turkish peasants and workers. We don't need Sultans. The Russians have formed their own government by overthrowing the tyrant Tsar, so let us unite and form our own government. Lenin and his army support us."

In one of the most radical periods of Anatolian history, the Şura established collective farms, land was redistributed to the peasants, homes were built and resources were provided for returning Armenian victims of the Genocide, taxes were collected and used for the common good, and a domestic Erzincan Red Army was established. Several of these Soviets were built across Anatolia with the help of the HKK (1918), such as in Erzurum and Sivas, but none were as large or as organized as in Erzincan, which not only included the province of Erzincan but also extended to all of Dersim as well as the Bayburt province.

Unfortunately, as soon as the Red Guards retreated in March 1918, the Turkish delegation of the Şura invited the Mustafa Kemal-led Ottoman Army and many of the Muslim peasants were asked to put down their arms. However, they would stand firm and declare that "whoever attacks, we will be against them." It took several years for the Ottoman Army to put down the Erzincan Soviet, which had also moved its capital to the village of Yeşilyazı when Erzincan was no longer safe. Even after it was officially dissolved in March 1921, the Qoçgiri tribe continued their rebellion for at least several months afterward, leading a coalition of others. However, when they were also defeated, socialist power in Turkey was concluded.

As the Erzincan Soviet fell, the Baku Bolsheviks, with its leader Stepan Shahumian, established yet another Armenian-led socialist powerhouse. He had been elected as the chairman of the Baku Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (*Baksovetom*) following the February Revolution as a demonstration of dual power against the Baku City Duma. After putting down a major counter-revolution, the *Baksovetom* established the Caucasian Red Army and abolished the Duma on April 20, 1918, seizing control of the entire industrial city, and five days later declared the Baku Council of Peoples' Commissars (*Baksovnarkom*), also known as the Baku Commune, the first Bolshevik body in the south Caucasus. Led by a coalition of Armenian, Azeri, Georgian, and Russian revolutionaries, including figures like Prokofy Dzaparidze and Mashadi Azizbeyov, the commissars led the Baku workers and peasants to nationalize their natural resources, establish Peoples' Courts, and liberate most of eastern Azerbaijan, the Mughan Plain (southern Azerbaijan), and even parts of Dagestan. Their proclamation reads:

"Baku workers without national discrimination—Russian, Armenian, Turkish, Georgian—are prepared to die with weapons in their hands, they must fight their internal and external oppressors, they must protect the freedom of the workers and peasants. ...

The Baku proletariat seeks to build a new government in Transcaucasia, one without beys, without princes, and even without Armenian nationalists, a Workers' and Peasants' Soviet. This government, hand-in-hand with the Russian proletariat and peasantry, will have the opportunity to defend the union between Russia and Transcaucasia, crush all landlord and capitalist regimes, and establish fraternity within the workers and peasantry of Transcaucasia. ...

Peasant brothers and fellow workers:

The enemy is coming to us armed. We call on you to stand up against your bloodthirsty oppressors, the beys, the princes, the merchants, the union to oppose the union of all oppressed nations.

If we scatter the traitors and gather our strength to establish a fraternal union, we will not be frightened by the external enemy.

Towards your weapons, Turkish and Georgian peasant friends. Towards your weapons, Armenian peasants. Do not listen to your former leaders, who betrayed you in the hour of alarm and have lost the whole of the Armenian people with their condemnable policies.

All the dark forces have stood up against the Baku Soviet, against the only liberated corner of Transcaucasia. The flag of the Baku Soviet is the flag of the liberation and fraternity of the workers. Go under that flag.

Down with the leaders of Transcaucasia.

Down with the beys, the khans, the princes, the capitalists.

All land to the peasants, all power to the workers.

Down to the Ottoman yoke, and long live the union with revolutionary Russia.”

Unfortunately, however, a British-backed coup led by a coalition of ARF, Mensheviks, and neo-Narodniks brought the fall of the Baku Commune in late July, 1918, leading to the occupation of the city by British forces. Shahumian, the “Lenin of the Caucasus,” and other Commissars attempted to escape to Astrakhan, but their ship was intercepted by pro-Whites forces and he, along with 25 other Baku Commissars, were martyred in the desert of Turkmenistan, forever shifting the trajectory of the Armenian liberation struggle. By mid-September, the Ottoman menace had occupied most of Transcaucasia and arrived at Baku, establishing in the city the new center of the reactionary Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Many well-known Armenian socialists, including Murad of Sebastia, the Hunchak leader of the Erzincan Soviet, and Melik Melikian, a Bolshevik leader of the Baku Council, were martyred during the Battle of Baku.

After the destruction of the Armenian Bolsheviks in Baku, what remained was Haykuni’s Armenian Communist Party (1918). Following the fall of the various soviets in Anatolia and the creation of the ARF-led Republic of Armenia, the HKK (1918) would reorganize in the summer of 1919, establishing the Revolutionary Military Committee of Armenia (*Hayastani Rrazmaheghap’okhakan Komite*, RHK), tasked with the establishment of Soviet power. The RHK was active in Sarighamish, Kars, Gavar, Yerevan, Ghazakh, Dilijan, but most importantly in Gyumri, especially in the Shirak basin. Finally, in mid-May, 1920, the RHK led an armed revolution against the Western-aligned Dashnak government, seizing power in Gyumri but also large areas of the Kars, Gegharkunik, and Tavush provinces. It was led by Dashkesan-born Sargis Musayelian (1882-1920). Unfortunately, the ARF government was successful in putting down the Bolsheviks and later executed the leaders, martyring Musayelian.

However, it would only be within a few months, in September of that year, that an Armenian peasant revolt that began in Ghazakh (today in Azerbaijan), the “cradle of the Armenian revolution,” and later spread to Dilijan invited in support by the Red Army that Soviet power was finally established in Armenia. In this way, the three components that this piece has

elaborated on: the Hunchaks, the Shahumian Bolsheviks, and the 1918 Armenian Communist Party, were brought together. The Hunchaks, leaders of the Erzincan Soviet, largely integrated with the Caucasian Union of the RSDLP, which was the forerunner of the Baku Bolsheviks. These Baku Bolsheviks, heir to Shahumian's 1902 Social Democrats, would liberate Transcaucasia before Ottoman occupation. The remnants of the Armenians of the Baku Commune would officially merge with the 1918 Armenian Communist Party on June 30, 1920 to form the Armenian Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1920, and on the 2nd of December, they would officially proclaim the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

It would take several years until Soviet power was firmly established in Armenia, and of course, the story of the development of Armenian socialism did not end here. There are still many chapters to explore. However, understanding the origins of the HKK—that it is heir to a long struggle for Armenian liberation, that the patriotic fight of the Hunchaks, the principled activities of Shahumian, and the fearless May uprising of 1920—tells us that it all converges as a single Armenian revolutionary tradition, something we must carry ourselves to the future forward. Only through the lessons of the past and the vision of the future can this tradition be reignited, and the flame of revolution will inspire the workers once more.