

# The Realm of Ideas and the Evolution of Programmatic Objectives

## SOURCE

HRATCH DASNABEDIAN:

History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutiun (1890-1924)

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## 1- Ideological Factors in the Armenian Liberation Movement

Two currents of world thought had a marked influence on Armenian avant-garde circles in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods.

The first, brought home from Western Europe by intellectuals who studied there, was democratic-liberal ideology, the concept of the rights of man, a legacy of the French Revolution of 1789. It was prevalent especially among the Armenians of Constantinople and the intellectuals in the provinces. A result of the mentally created by it was the National Constitution of the Western Armenians, with its democratic structure.

The second, again imported from Europe but essentially filtered through Russian revolutionary thought, was socialist ideology, specifically its Marxist variant. Of course the theories of historical materialism and class struggle did not directly apply to the realities of Western Armenia, given the nature of Turkish persecution, driven by religious and racial hatred. But under the influence of the social-democrats and Narodnaya Volya (the progenitors of the social-revolutionaries), socialism was adopted by an important segment of the Caucasian-Armenian intelligentsia as its ideology.

Furthermore, always present, and heightened as a reaction to the growing persecution under Turkish and Russian despotism, was re-awakened awareness and pride, in general the concept of nationality and national consciousness. As we have already seen, a growing national self-awareness and nationalistic tendencies eventually gave the Armenian liberation movement the aspect of national-liberation, in addition to its initial character as a movement essentially for human liberation.

Any approach that would place the Armenian revolutionary movement solely in one or another of the above ideological currents would be flawed. All those tendencies, attitudes and feelings were present in varying proportions among Armenians of the last quarter of the 19th century, on both sides of the Russo-Turkish border. The Programs of the two main Armenian revolutionary parties, the Hnchak Party and the Dashnaktsutiun, demonstrated this thesis well. All differences were simply a matter of dosage, timing, and evolution.

The official Hnchak ideology was in essence Marxist. According to the "Long-term Objective" of their program, they aspired to establish a socialist order. But where? (and here is another extreme expression of the initial Romanticism of the revolutionary period) - in an independent and free Armenian republic, to be created by the unification of the historically Armenian lands of Ottoman Armenia, the Transcaucasus, and Persian Aذربaidjan. This Proposition, in and of itself ideal yet quite unfeasible in the actual conditions of the times, combined with the understandable contradictions between Marxism and nationalism, created polarizations inside the Hnchak Party and hastened its initial splintering (1896).

The principal founders of the ARF were also Socialists, and Marxist elements are clearly present in the introductory section of the Party's first Program written by Rosdom and entitled "General Theory". Yet the aspiration for national independence is also common to all of them, whether as a result of patriotic feelings or well-grounded ideology. Moreover, the formulated objectives and corresponding claims are much more modest and realistic, objectively based on the actual needs and the potential of Western Armenians. The first Program of the ARF did not include ambitions of building a socialist order or creating an independent Armenian state detached from the Ottoman Empire. The ARF was to formulate such Programmatic propositions in the course of time, coordinating its claims with the consecutive evolutionary stages of the Armenian Question, which its activities transformed into a National Cause.

## 2- The ideological Evolution of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation

In the introductory paragraph of the "General Theory" of the Program published in 1894, the Dashnaksutiun expressed its confidence in the final victory of the socialist order, without actually using the word "socialism". Subsequently, through a brief historical-sociological retrospective, it concludes with the following thesis: "No model of social organization, however ideal it may be, can be realized at once", and "the only way to achieve this ideal society is through the transformation of existing conditions".

The "general Theory" continues in the same realistic spirit: "We do not enter the arena as the followers of one or another utopian "dogma" with it attendant "doctrines"... Our aspiration is for our program to be viable; our attention, on the whole, is concentrated on the present situation of our country". An analysis follows, on the main features of the tyrannical Ottoman regime and the unbearable conditions of life for the Armenians, and stresses the necessity, through revolution, of "shaking off that infamous yoke; destroying the despotic, tyrannical regime; achieving a fraternity of nations, the right to work, and freedom of conscience, speech, and belief", and also, "struggling against the class of economic exploiters". Then, the objective of the Dashnaksutiun is formulated: "To attain political and economic freedom in Turkish Armenia by means of insurrection", after which follow the practical demands and the sections on "Means" and "Organization".

The first Program of the ARF, then, endowed the Party with an essentially democratic worldview enriched by a socialist perspective. Realistically based on the objective conditions of Western Armenians, the Program stressed the historical necessity of changing those conditions through armed struggle. Without using the terms "Independence", "Democracy", and "Socialism", the Program expresses the entire, multifaceted make-up of the Armenian revolutionary movement, including its national-liberation, political, and social-economic aspects.

Despite subsequent partial modifications, clarifications, and amendments, the above-mentioned principles and tendencies, in their fundamental outlines, continued to characterize the ideological world of the Dashnaksutiun. Its realistic approach toward issues also remained unchanged. Never did the ARF fall prey to rigid, infallible dogma: nor did it adopt the phraseology of propaganda dear to the social-democrats and communists. Perhaps it concerned itself little with theoretical matters, yet it transformed the consciousness of the Armenian people and let the national-liberation struggle. And it remained, always, a party of action.

Its internal harmony was shaken for a time between 1904 and 1907, especially after Council of the Dashnaksutiun in 1905 published its "Action Plan for the Caucasus". As a result of the growing severity of Tsarist oppression, the ARF, and especially its Caucasian Regions, deemed it necessary to take part in the expanding revolutionary movement in Russia. Convinced that the cause of Western Armenians was being abandoned or becoming secondary, some fieldworkers and members of the armed forces and Western Armenian intelligentsia for an instant rebelled. Both sides displayed extremist tendencies and intolerance. But in 1907 the Fourth World Congress reconciled the opposing viewpoints and established internal unity. It affirmed the willingness of the ARF to collectively wage a liberation struggle for all Armenians - the Western and Eastern segments - equally; and this time officially, it endowed that liberation struggle with the humanist vision of socialism.

Thus, socialist ideology formed the basis of the section on theory in the new Program adopted by the Fourth World Congress. While Marxism in effect only considers economic factors as the prime movers of history (historical materialism), the socialism of the Dashnaksutiun (similar perhaps to the worldview of the Russian social-revolutionaries) grants equal value to the subjective factors of history - reason, conscience, will. The ARF considers these subjective and objective factors to be mutually dependent. This historical-philosophical assessment of man, added to the essentially democratic conception of human freedoms, completes and enhances the socialism of the Dashnaksutiun.

After 1907 this Dashnaksutiun worldview remained unchanged, despite changes in the national and political conditions and the resulting evolution of the demands stated in the Program. Moreover, for long decades the Dashnaksutiun had little time to dwell on ideological matters. At first it was engaged in a whirlwind of historic events while faithful to its role as the leader of a national liberation struggle; and in the Diaspora, it was engrossed in the exhausting day-t-day task of organizing the communities and pursuing the Armenian Cause while in exile. It was only in the last decades that an ideological re-assertion and reawakening were considered necessary, and the ARF reformulated the section in the Program entitled "General Theory", adapting it to the current conceptions of socialism and democracy, the nationalities question, the right of self-determination, and the legitimacy of national-liberation struggles.

### **3- The Evolution of the National and Political Objectives of the ARF**

A party's Program is never merely the expression of an ideology. With its proposed objectives and demands, a Program forms a totality of the practical concerns as well as the aspirations and goals of that party. Inescapably, that totality is dependent both on current conditions - the national and international situation, in general - and on the social and political thought of the given party. That totality, the Program itself, therefore, is subject to change in accordance with the evolution of these various factors.

Thus, the demands of the ARF Program in the national and political realms have been realistically coordinated with the evolutionary stages of the Armenian Case and international developments.

During the first period, until 1907, when the second Program was adopted, the objectives expressed in the ARF Program, basically, were connected to the actualization of the promised reforms for Ottoman Armenia and intended to achieve, as already stated, political and economic freedom. There was no reference to any form of national sovereignty; nor was there any mention of Transcaucasian Armenians.

The "Plan of Action for the Caucasus" was the genuine expression of the Eastern Armenians' revolutionary outburst against Tsarist oppression. It proposed a federated system for the peoples of the Transcaucasus with a large degree of internal autonomy but not separation from Russia. Two years later, in the new Program adopted by the Fourth World Congress, the ARF advocated the principle of an autonomous Armenia in the framework of a Federated Democratic Republic of Transcaucasias; at the same time, it made the demand for a federated autonomous Turkish Armenia within the Ottoman state. In short, the ARF ceased to consider the concept of "Armenia" restricted to Turkish Armenia alone and considered it the right, and responsibility, of the Armenian people to struggle for the liberation of Russian Armenia, as well. Under the conditions of the times, the proposition of two separate Armenians within the borders of two different states was perhaps the only logical and possible way of creating an "Armenia" on the historically Armenian territories and providing the necessary solution to the problems of Turkish Armenia and Russian Armenia.

During the period of the Ottoman Constitution (1908-1914), when the Dashnaksutiun operated in Turkey as a legal, parliamentary party, the Programmatic objective of an autonomous Armenia was adopted as its political platform and was pursued in the Ottoman Parliament and government circles. In 1914, a variation of this objective, in the form of two autonomous Armenian regions under the control of two European High Commissioners, was about to be realized when the First World War broke out, and Turkey entered the war on the side of Imperial Germany.

Similarly, the ARF's formula for a federated republic in the Transcaucasus was approximately realized in 1917, as a result of the political transformations brought about by the February Revolution in Russia. In April 1918 this Transcaucasian Republic even enjoyed a brief spell of independence, which ended, however, at the end of May 1918. The disintegration of the Transcaucasian Confederation, however, gave the Armenian Question a completely new aspect. Following the example of Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia declared independence. After the October Revolution, when the Russians abandoned the Caucasian front, the Armenians, alone in facing the Turkish armies, had waged a dramatic fight for survival that had taken on the aspect of popular war. National independence was the just recompense for that heroic effort, itself the culmination of long years of revolutionary struggle.

Moreover, the World War had disintegrated the Ottoman and Russian Empires and made the concept of federated republics within them anachronistic and meaningless. The people and government of the Armenian Republic, as well as the Armenians outside of the Republic, expressed their just aspiration to regain the territories of Western Armenia depopulated by Genocide and to create a unified, integral Armenia. On May 28, 1919, on year after the declaration of independence, Prime Minister Alexander Khadisian officially announced, in the Armenian parliament, his government's new political platform: the creation of a united, independent Armenia. In September 1919, the Ninth World Congress of the ARF, held in Yerevan, in turn decided:

a/ To consider null and void all the minimum political demands of the Party's Program regarding Russian Armenia and Turkish Armenia;

b/ To make the declaration of an independent and United Armenia everlasting, and make every effort to implement it, on the basis of a democratic republic.

As a result of the evolution of the Armenian Case and the liberation struggle waged by the ARF, a logical conclusion was reached, the final stage of Programmatic objectives: the need to establish the independence of a unified, integral Armenia.

That demand, the culmination of Dashnaktsutiun's political thought and aspirations, remains in effect always, made permanent by the sacrifices made during the liberation struggle. Since 1919, all the World Congresses of the ARF have adopted that programmatic objective of an integral Armenia repopulated by all Armenians as the most just and final solution of the Armenian Question - in short, a Free, Independent, and United Armenia.