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Anarchism in Armenia

Ryan Robert Mitchell

2009

Armenia has long been contested and subjugated by two regional and competing powers, Russia and the Ottoman empire. The revolutionary nationalist movement was formed in Armenia in the absence of any liberal parliamentary movement that sought to represent Armenian interests. In fact, after decades of alternate subjugation to Russian or Ottoman power, the majority of Armenians trusted neither the bourgeoisie nor the Armenian Church, who they saw as colluding with their oppressors. It is in this environment that radical nationalist movements were formed in Armenia.

The Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutium or Armenian Revolutionary Federation (most commonly known as either the Dashnaktsutium or Dashnak Party) was founded in Tbilisi in 1890 as both an outgrowth of and response to the sterile scientific socialism of the social democratic Hunchak (Alarm Bell) Party that had been formed three years earlier in Geneva, and was at that point Armenia's sole political party.

Premised on the idea that socialism would be the best way to mobilize the worker population who were horrified by Ottoman oppression and massacres, the Dashnaktsutium was a loose federation that attracted socialist revolutionaries,

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Retrieved on 22nd November 2021 from
onlinelibrary.wiley.com

Published in *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*.

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national liberationists, and social democrats. Lacking any ideological coherence, the party was defined by the objective of liberation rather than ideology. Unlike the earlier Hunchak Party, which defined national liberation as separate from social liberation, the Dashnaks defined liberation in terms of a people rather than territory. It was important, then, for the Dashnak Party to also appeal to Muslim and Turkish people, both of whom they saw as being oppressed by despotic Ottoman rulers.

Early in its founding, the Dashnak Party had a strong anarchist contingent and its best known figure was Alexander Atabekian (1868–ca. 1940?). Atabekian extensively published Russian and Armenian language publications as part of the Armenian expatriate anarchist communities of Geneva, London, and Paris. In 1894, while in Paris working on his medical degree, he began publishing the Armenian language anarchist journal *Hamayankh* (Commune), which detailed the Ottoman massacres and the Armenian resistance against them.

Beyond being a publisher, Atabekian would later serve as Peter Kropotkin's personal physician and was at the latter's side when he died in 1921. Atabekian's own fate is unknown since there is no record of his death or of his activities after 1921. It is likely that he perished in the Soviet purging of political dissidents.

By the turn of the century, anarchist presence within the Dashnak Party had effectively disappeared as the party became fractured and increasingly authoritarian – something Atabekian had earlier expressed concern about in the *Hamayankh* journal. Outside of anarchocommunist activities in 1905 in industrial cities like Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Baku, any major anarchist presence in Armenia effectively ended in this era due to increased tsarist (and later Soviet) repression and the subsequent Ottoman genocide.

In an ironic turn of events, after Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Dashnaktsutiun re-

formed as a right-wing nationalist party supporting authoritarian post-independence regimes. In 2005 the new Dashnak Party was involved in the persecution of members of the anarchist network Autonomous Action, which sought to expose irregularities in the electoral process.

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