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THE HEROIC BATTLE OF MOUNT MUSA AND THE VALIANT DEEDS OF THE ARMENIAN WOMEN

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This article, dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Franz Werfel's heroic novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, presents the valiant deeds and heroism of Armenian women during the self-defense of Mount Musa, when Mount Musa of Suetia province became one of the prominent self-defense centers of Armenians. Our analysis of this heroic episode of Armenian history presents the reader with a new genocidal policy adopted and elaborated against the Armenians by the government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. In our study, we have used works published in Armenia and abroad, some of which are primary sources.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, genocidal politics, Suetia region, Mount Musa, heroic battle, heroic Armenian women, cruiser "Guishen".

Introduction

On July 26, 1915, the Armenian population of Kessap received an order to evacuate. Some naive people, believing the government's false promises, thought their departure was temporary. They made up a third of the population, and the rest, more than four thousand people, decided to resist the bloodthirsty enemy. About 800 of them were able to bear arms. And they faced the lack of armory: only one Greek "Kra" rifle, 7 Mausers, 450 antique and hunting rifles were at their disposal. 80-100 bullets were available for each rifle (Pursalean, 2004, p. 13.). In addition, there was enough gunpowder and lead (Plumbum) to produce 30.000 bullets.

The question of choosing a base for self-defense was extremely important. Some proposed to gather all the people in the best-situated village and turn it into a fortress. Finally, at the suggestion of reverend Tigran Andreasyan and Movses Ter-Galustyan, it was decided to settle on the top of Musa Mountain, the height of which was 1800 meters, the area - 70-80 square kilometers ("Medz yegherni herosapatum", 1982, p. 30).

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The Beginning of the operation of self-defense

On July 31, 1915, the operation to climb the mountain began, which lasted three days. For centuries, the Armenian community lived at the foot of Mount Musa with 6 villages, among which were Bitias, Haji-Habibli, Yoghunoluk, Khdrbek, Vagif and Kebusie. The mentioned Armenian villages were administratively part of the Antioch County of the Alexandret District of Aleppo Province, forming a part of Suetia village group (Nahiye).

The ascent of the mountain was accomplished with great difficulty, as during the war the Government had confiscated all means of transport and traction. Crowds of people loaded with sacks came from every village, and the shepherds drove away the cows, goats and sheep. The ascent became increasingly difficult. On August 1, most of the people reached the plateau called Tatar Alan, far below the top of the mountain. Those who came later were accommodated in Gychlchai, Guzchighaz, Tamlachyg, Gaplan, Tuzagh (“Medz yegherni herosapatum”, 1982, p. 31). The movement of the people did not go unnoticed, and the mayor of Suetia demanded more than once from the Armenians to give up their intention, but his appeals remained unanswered.

The heights of Mount Musa had an unfavorable climate. If the sun was scorching below, above it was a lingering ice and thick fog. From a strategic point of view, fog had its advantages and disadvantages. The men immediately set to work making tree shelters.

On August 5, Mudir sent a delegation to Musaler residents with a letter in which he tried to convince the rebels to give up the “adventure” and entrust their fate to the “benevolent” government, but Mudir’s attempt was not successful either.

On August 7, the general meeting of Tatar Alan was held. 15 representatives from each district participated. However, the meeting had just started when they learnt that 200 Turkish soldiers were moving towards the positions of the Armenians. And the first battle began. The enemy had underestimated the military potential of the Armenians, so after a six-hour standoff, the Turks retreated, leaving ten dead and twenty wounded. This victory had a great psychological significance.

The battle, which started at dawn on August 10, lasted 12 hours, the enemy lost 100 soldiers, and the Armenians lost 3. Petros Galustyan and Hakob Garakyozyan were distinguished for their courage. The first killed four gunners with five shots, while the second fought to the last bullet and died of his wounds the next day.

The local governing bodies of the three districts convened a meeting in Tamlachyg to coordinate their activities. A Central Administrative Assembly and a Military Department were established, and 21-year-old Movses Ter-Galustyan was appointed its supervisor. Reverend Tigran Andreasyan was the chairman of the Central Administrative Assembly. The first task of Movses Ter-Galustyan was the organization of combat forces.

At the top of the Musa Mountain, he formed a general administrative body to regulate the daily life of the people. The youth were divided into groups and group leaders were appointed, as well as combat leaders-assistants.

On August 19, on the occasion of the feast of the Mother of God, a solemn liturgy was held near the main barracks, which was attended by almost the entire population. The liturgy had not yet ended when it became known that the enemy was moving towards the mountain with large forces. About 4,000 soldiers with dozens of cannons attacked the Armenians. The Turks concentrated their forces in the direction of Tatar Alan, from where it would be easy to capture other positions. At night, the enemy managed to seize Tatar Alan and appeared barely 200 meters away from the last positions of the Armenians. At dawn, Armenians fought one against ten with the following slogan: "Resist, do not retreat and die" ("Medz yegherni herosapatum", 1982, pp. 57-58).

In the afternoon, the main attack began. A barrage of shells from the occupied Tatar Alan fell on the settlements and barracks, and the people had to flee in panic to the nearby forests. The military operations were mainly around a hill named "Death Hill".

Even the seriously wounded did not leave the positions. The enemy tried to encircle the "Death Hill" like a seven-headed demon. And at that moment something incredible happened. Many of the fighters who had left the positions returned. One of them suggested forming a group of 50 people and attacking the enemy from behind. That was done. The enemy's right flank began to retreat in panic. The defenders of the hill, taking advantage of this, came out of their positions and attacked them, displaying success. And after a short time, the result was evident. The Armenians had 10, the enemy - more than 500 victims. At dawn, the entire Musa Mountain was under the control of the Armenians. The Armenian trophies were several mules, 9 Mausers and 1000 bullets ("M"edz yegherni herosapatum, 1982, p. 73).

In the important battle of August 19-20, Petros Galustyan, Manuk Gelchyan, Martiros Chanszyan, Grigor Ngruryan, Hakob Khechonyan, Sargis Shannagyan, Poghos Gppuryan and many others stood out for their bravery. Armenian women and girls were active alongside the men, among whom Shushanik Gapayan was distinguished (she was by her husband's side in all battles), as well as Manushak Manukyan-Yaghupyan, Varder Zeitlyan, Yeghisabet Sgayan and others (Tadevosyan, 2012, p. 233).

On the morning of August 20, when the enemy had achieved maximum success and penetrated the depths of the Armenian defense, and it seemed that he was close to the final victory, the people of Musaler launched a counterattack. It was completely unexpected for the Turks, and the battle ended with their crushing defeat. T. Andreasyan presented the counterattack that decided the outcome of the two-day battle as follows: "Thus, the fire from the rear and the sides, from different points, created the impression of a perfect siege on the enemy. The hour-long assault, carried out in semi-darkness, completely routed the enemy army and threw it into disarray in the woods. Finally, they ran away, helpless and desperate in the deep darkness" (Tadevosyan, 2012, p. 233).

After the defeat, the Turks changed their strategy. They decided to besiege Mount

Musa and starve the people. Not a single warship was seen during this entire period. It was therefore decided to send men again to Alexandret to search for a warship, and also to build a small sailing vessel to reach Cyprus.

This is how the whole August passed. Not only the food situation worsened day by day, but the autumn cold approached, which would make it impossible to survive at such an altitude.

Examples of courage of Armenian women during Suetia's struggle for existence

For about a month and a half of Suetia's struggle for existence, women were worthy assistants to men. They bravely and patiently endured the heat of the day, the cold of the night, hunger, the steppe climate and the lack of security. Although the women fought with a small force against a well-armed army, they did not despair, nor did they create panic (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 127). On the contrary, the fighters were encouraged and, ignoring the enemy bullets, carried water and food to the front line.

The selflessness and courage of Suetia Armenian women really increased the vigor and courage of men. Movses Ter-Galustyan, the organizer of the first Battle of Mt. Musa, as well as one of the leaders of the heroic battle, cites unparalleled examples of their fearlessness and courage in his article "The Suetia Woman".

Tsagher Ter-Movsisyan was one of the unique, brave and fearless Armenian women who were not afraid of a Turkish bullet. She constantly went around the positions, encouraging the fighters and repeating that Armenian weapons should always be ready to shoot (Der-Galustian, 1916).

Those women were courageous. They had complete contempt for the enemy, convinced that relying on their weapons and impregnable mountains, they would eventually be able to emerge victorious from this bloody life-and-death struggle. When the jug of Varder (Varduhi) Zeitlian, who was carrying water to the positions, was shot by an enemy bullet, instead of throwing the jug out of her hand and looking for shelter, she shouted in the direction of the enemies: "Damn, your bullets can't even break a jug!" Varder, armed with a hunting rifle, took part in the struggle for survival on Musa Mountain.

Senior priest Movses Shrigyan gives the following witness testimony about Varder Zeitlian. The main Armenian positions in Tamlachy were threatened. A group of brave warriors was determined to help. While looking for a short and safe way to reach the place, Varder Zeitlian called her messenger Tovmas, assuring him that she knew the way they wanted. The fighters looked admiringly at the mother, and the group leader said: "Sister, as long as there are Armenian mothers like you, our nation will remain strong" (Der-Galustian, 1916).

The group of brave fighters reached the place on time and caused heavy losses and forced the enemy to retreat.

When the supply of the people sheltering on the mountain was over, a group of women, accompanied by fighters, came out of the enemy's encirclement ring under constant fire and brought millet, wheat and other necessary food from the surrounding villages (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 130).

Shushan Gapayan stood out among the Suetian Armenian women who fought alongside their brothers and husbands, a selfless and noble woman, who knew what dignity was (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 130).

During the last battle, when the Turkish army threatened to exterminate the people, Manushak Manukyan- Yaghupyan showed examples of devotion and courage. She attacked the enemy armed with stones, filled with centuries-old hatred. On this occasion, Yeghisabet Sgayan and her daughter are also worthy of mention (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 130).

Even the mothers from the village were not left out of the struggle for existence of the rebellious mountaineers. Tovmas Hapeshyan gave the following touching testimony: "Priest Ter-Harutyun, the embodiment of justice on the hill of Tamlachyg, was looking at the sky in front of the altar built of rough mountain stones, asking God for help. Before him were a small number of mothers and children, who prayed." (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 130).

The heroic battle of Mount Musa was a unique reality because there was no discrimination between the old and the young, the man and the woman. The danger threatened everyone indiscriminately, and realizing the greatness of that danger, the Armenian women of Suetia fought steadfastly until the end. When the Turks captured many Armenian positions, the women turned to the sea, preferring an honorable death to violence and dishonor. Fortunately, the warlords had foreseen the enemy's invasion, so both the center, and the villages of the people were well protected. They not only repulsed the attacks of the Turks and stopped the panic, but also took advantage of the thick fog to get behind the enemy and start shooting. This time, the enemy, thinking he was besieged, panicked (Zeitlian, 1992, p. 132).

Eventually the Highlanders saw a giant cruiser near the seashore. Immediately the Armenians lit bonfires on the heights and spread out white flags made of sheets. The white sheet for the flag was provided by Mrs. Zaruhi Tonikyan (Miss Nikoghosyan). Her husband was serving in the Turkish army; he could not escape and get free. The "Red Cross" flag was sewn by the women gathered there, on the advice of the reverend Tigran Andreasyan, from the clothes of a girl (Fista) from Yoghanolak and the aprons of school-age girls. It was placed in front of the sea under the supervision of a group of boys. On another sheet, the reverend had written in large letters in English: "We are Christians, help us." It was also raised in front of the sea. One day, 150 women and girls from Tamlachyg went down to the fields with the help of 4 armed boys to fill sacks of millet from the fields near Kapusi and take to the mountain. The enemy started firing, the confused girls fled in different directions. Knowing this, 50 boys went down to the field to find them and followed them up the mountain. However, unfortunately, two of those heroic girls, Sima Abrahamyan (from Khtrbek) and Arshaluys Taslagyan

(from Hajihabiblets), got a nerve disorder, and both of them died (Sherpejian, 2010, pp. 78-80).

Finally, on September 5, in the blue waters of the sea, a gray object was noticed, from which plumes of smoke were rising. The people ran as one man to the “Mountain of Liberty”, on which both flags were already hoisted. The cruiser approached at high speed. It anchored a few kilometers off the coast. A boat was detached from it, which came and stopped in a small bay.

The final denouement. Help from the French side

The fate of the Armenians on Mount Musa was to be decided after eight days. The Armenians informed the commander of the warship that the Turks had accumulated a large amount of weapons and munitions in the church of Kebusie village, and the village was full of Armenian immigrants. The warship had landed a few kilometers to the south and had begun shelling Turkish military depots. “Guishen” was missing for two days after that.

On the morning of September 7, large Turkish forces moved towards the mountain, led by Sheikh Ordo. The battle lasted 10 hours. Eventually the enemy suffered great losses. On September 10, the last and decisive battle of Mount Musa took place. The defenders of the mountain were guarded by the French cruisers “Guishen” and “Desaix”.

Many bodies of enemy soldiers were on the ground. After losing hundreds of fighters, Turks gave way and began to retreat, and finally the retreat turned into an escape. Two Armenians were killed and several were injured. By the end of the battle, both warships had started shelling the Turkish military bases and villages.

The people of Musaler surpassed each other. Yesayi Yaghubyan was distinguished here. The latter was in the most dangerous position. His determination and military skill contributed greatly to the victory. In those days, Armenian heroine women were equal to the men in their courage.

After the bombardment ended, a boat from “Guishen” approached the coast. Armenians were informed of the French government’s decision that it is impossible to send auxiliary troops ashore and continue the resistance. An order was received to transport the Armenians of Mount Musa to a safe place in Cyprus or Egypt. It was ordered to gather the people on the beach without wasting time, from where they would be transported by boats to warships. Leaving a small number of forces in their positions, the people went down to the seashore. That operation lasted two days. Later, the Armenian (Eastern) Legion was created within the French army, the first recruits of which were the warriors of Mount Musa (Gasparyan, 1996, Garamanukyan, 1996). The Legion distinguished itself at the Battle of Arara in 1918 and was highly praised by the British General Allenby, the Allied Commander in Palestine. In 1919-1920, the Armenians of Suetia returned to their villages with the allied troops.

On September 18, 1932, a glorious monument dedicated to the heroic battle of

1915 was opened with great solemnity on Musa Mountain in Tamlachyg, where the remains of 18 Musaler warriors who died during self-defense were buried. In the following 7 years, it became a place of pilgrimage. After the Franco-Turkish agreement of June 23, 1939, Suetia was also annexed to Turkey as part of Alexandret province. Turkish vandals blew up the monument, destroying that stone-made testimony of the unbreakable will of Armenians.

Later, in the 1939-1940s, Musaler residents built a beautiful and well-developed new settlement, Anjar, in the hospitable Lebanese land, which soon became the pride of not only Musaler residents, but also the entire Lebanese Armenian community. However, during the Great Repatriation of 1946-1947, a significant part of Musaler residents immigrated to Armenia, connecting their future with their motherland. Here, near the monument dedicated to the heroic battle at the height of the Musa mountain settlement, not far from Yerevan, every year in September the glorious victory of the 1915 Musa mountain heroic battle is celebrated.

The immortal novel entitled *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* written by the Austrian writer Franz Werfel (Werfel, 1964) is dedicated to the heroic battle of Mount Musa. The novel was published in German in 1933. It has been translated into 36 languages, including Armenian.

In 1938, the Turks burned thousands of copies of the “cursed novel” in Constantinople. In 1961, a second English edition was published with two million copies and quickly sold out. The novel was highly appreciated by the famous writer William Saroyan.

During World War II, Slovenian partisans called Rog Mountain “Slovenian Musa Mountain”.

All the participants of the heroic battle of Mount Musa remember with gratitude the courageous deeds of the Armenian women of Suetia, their will and bravery, mental strength and ability to endure. It is this soul of an Armenian woman that has kept us alive throughout the centuries, and despite years of the absence of statehood, she has continuously transmitted the feelings of devotion and courage from generation to generation.

Conclusion

The heroic self-defense battles of Mount Musa once again speak about the bravery of the Armenian people. Armenian women and girls fought side by side with men during all operation and distinguished themselves with courage in various episodes. The image of courageous Armenian woman has been shaped for centuries, as we have faced many hardships throughout our history. This brilliant page of the history of Armenian people is worth cognition and appreciation, as coming generations should study this example of patriotism. The altruism of Armenian women has always increased the vigor and courage of our men. The mentality of Armenian women has kept us alive throughout the centuries, and despite years of the absence of statehood, they have constantly transmitted the devotion and courage from generation to generation.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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**ՄՈՒՍԱ ԼԵՌԱՆ ՀԵՐՈՍԱՄԱՐՏԸ ԵՎ ՄԱՍՆԱԿԻՑ ՀԱՅՈՒՀԻՆԵՐԻ
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Էդիկ Մինասյան

Հոդվածը, որը նվիրվում է «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» վեպի 90-ամյակին, ներկայացնում է հայ կանանց սխրանքներն ու հերոսությունները Մուսա լեռան ինքնապաշտպանության ժամանակ, երբ հայերի ինքնապաշտպանական նշանավոր կենտրոններից մեկը դարձավ Մուեթիա գավառակի Մուսա լեռը: Մեր՝ հայոց պատմության այս հերոսական դրվագի մասին իրականացրած վերլուծությունը նորովի է ներկայացնում ընթերցողին 1915թ. Օսմանյան Կայսրության կառավարության հայության նկատմամբ վաղուց որդեգրած ու մշակած ցեղասպան քաղաքականությունը: Ոսումնասիրության ժամանակ օգտվել ենք Հայաստանում և արտերկրում հրատարակված աշխատություններից, որոնց մի մասը սկզբնաղբյուրներ են:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Օսմանյան Կայսրություն, ցեղասպան քաղաքականություն, Մուեթայի շրջան, Մուսա լեռ, հերոսամարտ, հերոսուհի հայուհիներ, «Գիշեն» ռազմանավ: