

MISCONCEPTION IN FEBRUARY

Posted on February 22, 2016 by Keghart



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Vahe H. Apelian, Loveland OH, 20 February 2016

Several years ago in February, I attended in Burbank, California a banquet organized by the local chapter of the Knights of Vartan. The event was to honor noted Armenian educators in the Greater Los Angeles area.

In his opening remarks the master of ceremonies stated that Armenians know how to make a moral victory out of defeat citing the feast of St. Vartanants which Armenians have celebrated in February for over 1,500 years. This popular misconception is often mentioned mockingly as evidence that self-deceiving Armenians continue to celebrate defeat disguised as a moral victory.

The misconception is rooted in the protracted war Armenians fought in the 5th century to retain their Christianity. Instead of the outcome of the war, that struggle has been symbolically focused on the fallen commander-in-chief Vartan Mamigonian and the battle he lost against the Persians has come to symbolize the feast of St. Vartanants.

The Armenians have named the encounter of the two armies Battle of Avarayr, after the plain where it was waged. It was the first and major military confrontation of that protracted thirty plus years war.

"Though beaten, however, the Armenian army was far from destroyed," wrote Dr. Antranig Chalabian in an article he wrote in the Military History Magazine. Chalabian explained: "Vahan Mamikonian, son of the great Vardan's brother Hmayak, took charge and led the Armenians in a guerrilla war that flared around strongholds and along impregnable heights for the next 33 years. During that time, the Sassanids underwent three changes of rulers, and also had to deal with external conflicts with Rome and a new wave of eastern barbarians known as the Ephthalites, or White Huns." After King Peroz was killed by the White Huns (484), his brother and successor, Balash, reassessed the long, inconclusive conflict with Armenia and sued for peace. Vahan sent messengers to the Persian camp, with proposals for liberties in Armenia, the main one being: "Religious worship in accordance with Christian doctrines and rites to be declared free in Armenia, and fire altars to be removed," wrote Chalabian.

The long military conflict was resolved with Balash accepting the terms Vahan Mamigonian dictated. In 484 the two parties signed a treaty in the village of Nvarsag conceding to the Armenians the objectives of the war. The treaty came to be known after the village where it was signed. Historians claim that it is the first treaty of its kind.

The conclusion of the protracted war was celebrated in the Cathedral of Dvin. Catholicos Hovhan I Mandakuni (478-490) officiated the ceremony with the dynastic lords in attendance.

It is up to historians and ecclesiastical fathers to shed light as to why the Armenian Church opted to canonize only the participants of the Battle of Avarayr and raise to sainthood its commander-in-chief, its fiery priest Ghevont Yerets and the fallen combatants of the battle but not also Vahan

Mamigonian and his combatants who continued the war to its successful conclusion. The Feast of Vartanants is commemorated in February on the Thursday preceding Great Lent to celebrate having achieved the objectives of the war. It is both a religious and patriotic feast. The Battle of Avarayr was surely the major military confrontation of the long protracted war. In commemorating Armenian valor at Avarayr, we celebrate victory--just as any military victory is celebrated for having successfully achieved the objectives of the war.



Yeghishé Vartabed, a 5th century chronicler, documented the successful 5th century revolt of the Armenians against the rule and religion of the Sassanid Persians. The priest-historian broke down the 1,036 Armenian dead in the Battle of Avarayr as follows:

House of Mamigonyan, Brave Vartan and 133 warriors (Մամիկոնեան Տոհմեն՝ Քաջն Վարդան եւ 133 մարտիկներ).

House of Balounyats, Valiant Ardag and 57 warriors (Պալունեանց Տոհմեն՝ Արի Արտակը եւ 57 մարտիկներ).

House of Khorkhorounyats, Skillful-in-Arms Khoren and 19 warriors (Խորխորունեաց Տոհմեն՝ Կորովի Խորենը եւ 19 մարտիկներ).

House of Kntounyats, Admirable Dajad and 19 warriors (Գնդունեաց Տոհմեն՝ Չարմանալի Տաճատը եւ 19 մարտիկներ).

House of Timaksyan, Wise Hmayag and 22 warriors (Դիմաքսեան Տոհմեն՝ Իմաստուն Հմայեակը եւ 22 մարտիկներ).

House of Katchperounyats, Builder Nerses and 7 warriors (Քաջբերունեաց Տոհմեն՝ Հրաշակերտ Ներսեսը եւ 7 մարտիկներ).

House of Knounyats, Manoug Vahan and 3 warriors, (Գնունեաց Տոհմեն՝ Մանուկ Վահանը եւ 3 մարտիկներ).

House of Enzaynots, Just Arsen and 7 warriors, (Ընծայլոց Տոհմեն Արդար Արսենը եւ 7 մարտիկներ).

House of Srouantsdians, Enlightened Karekin and 2 of his family members, (Սրուանձտեանց Տոհմեն՝ Յառաջադեմ Տարեգինը իր 2 հարազատներով).

Nine major lords along with combatants from Artzrounyats (Արծրունեաց) and other dynastic houses were martyred at the Battle of Avarayr.

As to why we celebrate the war in February, I quote Dr. Antanig Chalabian: "The Vardanian War, as it came to be called in Vardan's honor, began on May 26, 451, but the Armenian church celebrates the event in February. In the past, spring was considered the season for warfare. Armenia's ecclesiastical

fathers had decided to commemorate the event in February, before spring, in order to inspire the youth and prepare their minds for battle, in defense of church and fatherland."

