HAMO AND DRO

Posted on December 28, 2015 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

Antranig Dzarougian, 1992
Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**, 28 December 2015

> *This is an excerpt from a chapter of Antranig Dzarougian's "The Greats and the Others" (**Մեծերը եւ Միւսները**, 1992). The chapter's original title is 'Hamo Ohanjanian and Vahan Papazian'.*

In the middle of the Second World War, at the height of German military successes, Hamo Ohanjanian came to the center stage of Armenian life--out of seclusion in the country of the sphinxes, where he was becoming one as well. His long-time friend Avedik Isahakian had written a bitter and an emotional letter to him from Armenia asking how was it that Dro was allowed to join the Germans and invade the Soviet Union, which meant invading Armenia? Ohanjanian responded publicly in an article that took an entire page –-whether he had written it or someone else had done it on his behalf does not matter for he had signed his name -- in the ARF organ "Houssaper" saying that he and his party unequivocally condemn Dro's conduct and actions and that they irreversibly stood with the Allies, meaning with Armenia.

Antranig Dzarougian, 1992
Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**, 28 December 2015

> *This is an excerpt from a chapter of Antranig Dzarougian's "The Greats and the Others" (**Մեծերը եւ Միւսները**, 1992). The chapter's original title is 'Hamo Ohanjanian and Vahan Papazian'.*

In the middle of the Second World War, at the height of German military successes, Hamo Ohanjanian came to the center stage of Armenian life--out of seclusion in the country of the sphinxes, where he was becoming one as well. His long-time friend Avedik Isahakian had written a bitter and an emotional letter to him from Armenia asking how was it that Dro was allowed to join the Germans and invade the Soviet Union, which meant invading Armenia? Ohanjanian responded publicly in an article that took an entire page –-whether he had written it or someone else had done it on his behalf does not matter for he had signed his name -- in the ARF organ "Houssaper" saying that he and his party unequivocally condemn Dro's conduct and actions and that they irreversibly stood with the Allies, meaning with Armenia.

It was simple, clear but nonetheless just an article, a pubic affirmation. Yet one would not have faulted a person who thought it did not appear to reflect the real mindset and the ongoing actions. But it would soon be proven that whatever Hamo Ohanjanian said in his response to Avedik Isahakian was altogether honest and expressed the real conviction of the ARF Bureau.

Late one night in Aleppo a circular arrived for an extraordinary meeting compelling the recipients to attend. Because of the war the Central Committee (Gomideh) had reduced its membership to a minimum (five members) and there was a special provision that a decision by three would be regarded unanimous. Although there was no war in Syria, the country was experiencing a heightened state of alert. German and Italian spies abounded; new groups were coming ashore from the sea and from the air, and there were Armenians among them. British and French agents were ceaselessly apprehending Arab nationalists whose overt sentiments were pro-German.

Under these circumstances it was a total surprise to me when I found Hamo Ohanjanian at Adour's house. It was the first time we had met, although it seemed to me that I had seen him many times before. He was so much the man as in the photographs. His arms were resting on the armchair, he was holding his head high much like in his photographs. He retained the same composure throughout the meeting. Only once did he change his posture when he excused himself to go to the bathroom. He had convened the meeting in the name of the Bureau. He immediately made a point that there would be no minutes recorded--to my relief, as I was the recording secretary.

The British were planning to evacuate Egypt out of concern that they couldn't withstand the assault of Rommel's army, whose front forces were approaching Alexandria. It was thought that after taking Egypt the German forces would succeed in entering Palestine, Syria and Lebanon where the British, after putting a show resistance, would pull to Cyprus to ready themselves for a counter-attack later on.

For over an hour we heard similar military and political analysis after which Ohanjanian turned to the main topic. He revealed the British would have a plane at the disposal of the Bureau, which was centered in Egypt, to evacuate its members and transport their archives as the British retreated. Given that the ties between the Bureau and regional bodies might be disrupted under such circumstances, decisions had to be taken to keep communication lines open. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and read the following words: 1) Comrades (ungerner), 2) Dear Comrades and 3) Precious Comrades.

If the circulars from Bureau read "Comrades", the outlined directives should be followed irrespective of regional considerations because the Bureau would have regarded it in the best interest of the people at large. Should the circular read "Dear Comrades", it would mean that the Bureau was not convinced of the best course of action so it was up to the regional committees to act accordingly. Should the circular read "Precious Comrades" the directives in the circular should be ignored.

After he communicated to us this latest development, he invited us to ask questions. But we remained silent and no one asked any question. We were dumbfounded. The decisions taken appeared so out of place and unexpected. We had lived the past three years of the war in relative calm and relative passivity, far away from the happenings. The bloody battles were news which we watched with interest. In fact, the community was experiencing such an economic upturn that there

appeared a revived interest in literature. The "Nayiri" literary periodical was established for Armenian writers in the Middle East irrespective of their political affiliation. Whatever Ohanjanian conveyed to us sounded pretentious and totally contrary to our party.

It was Herartian who objected by saying: "You seem to forget that our party is based on the principle of decentralization. How could the Bureau dictate to us a course of conduct when our by-laws stipulate that each regional committee act according to the dictates of the region?"

Ohanjaniana replied: "The Bureau has made a note to that affect. Since we are in wartime the by-laws have been suspended."

Dzaroukian: "Decentralization is the core of our party's structure and can only be suspended by an all-party assembly. Would it not have been prudent for some of the members of the Bureau to have departed with the British and taken the archives while the rest of the leadership stayed put? Much as in France's case where there is a Free France under the leadership of De Gaule and an occupied France under Marshal Petain.

Ohanjian's rebuttal was fast and swift: "Young Comrade, an occupied Bureau cannot function under the heel of Hitler."

The meeting ended at dawn. It was decided to invite group leaders for a consultative meeting the same evening. During the meeting we asked Ohanjanian to gauge the feelings of party members. He had nothing to report or to say to them, he said. He would listen rather than tell them anything.

It should be noted that, whether unfounded or not, the overall feeling in the party was pro-German. After the German occupation of Greece and Crete, it was natural to expect the next blow would be against Turkey. It's a mob mentality that gives a feeling of euphoria. Few were prepared to analyze an insignificant event that would tell volumes about German and Turkish relations. Upon Hitler's orders, the remains of Tala'at Pasha, which had been buried in Germany for the previous twenty years, were taken to Istanbul. Surely that did not sound as a hostile act but signaled a growing friendship. It was only after the war that we came to realize relations between Germany and Turkey had been contrary to our understanding. Not only Germany had no intention to attack Turkey, it was Turkey that had been waiting for the opportune time to attack Caucasus.

Ohanjanian said a few words and encouraged attendees to openly express themselves. He heard the same pro-German tune from all. Dasnabedian asked: "Should tomorrow Dro reach Yerevan with the German forces and appeal to us from there, what would be our response?"

"Let me ask that question to you," said Ohanjanian, "what would you do?"

"We? We would applaud and dance from here," said Dasnabedian.

For the very first time Ohanjanian's voice quivered when he snapped almost in fury: "Should he do that, he will no longer be my friend and you will not be an ARFer with your dance."

From left and right the same sentiments could be heard. The German military successes had dazzled our comrades. No one had any doubt that Germany will emerge the winner of the war. I should admit that the members of the leading bodies did not think differently. It was only Ohanjanian who remained steadfast on his belief that final victory belonged to the Allied forces. He then adjourned the meeting.

There was such an emphatic tone in his voice that I remember his closing words almost verbatim. "Comrades, do not be deceived by appearances. The German victory means a return of mankind to the Middle Ages. The wheel of time does not go backward. It would be impossible to envision Hitler ruling the world. Do not believe in transient victories. The racist mentality of Germans cannot stop the wheel of progress. Believe in the final victory of freedom and socialism."

He stirred emotions but could not convince the attendees. The belief that Turkey was next had overwhelmed the comrades.

My last meeting with Ohanjanian was brief. It lasted half-an-hour. He had requested that we present our opinion on paper. I presented a summary of our views and gave it to him after reading it out loud.

“Our committee does not support Bureau’s decision to depart with the British for the following reasons:

A. Where can the British take the Bureau? Probably to London or even to India. Presumably under German occupation, how can we follow directives from the Bureau that surely will not be in favor of the Germans? If we were to follow its directives we would undermine our security here. If we do not follow the directives of the Bureau, the British would have no reason to hold on to the Bureau.

B. We recommend that the Bureau stay in Egypt even though some comrades may be obliged to leave."

Ohanjanian took the paper and looked at it for a long time. It appeared he re-read it. He looked at each of us, one by one, and then said in a low voice: "Alas, it appears that for forty years we have struggled in vain to secure a victory for socialism. It appears I have not known my comrades.'

Soon after the meeting the wheel of fortune suddenly changed in the opposite direction. Not only did the British not leave Egypt, but they started to pursue German and Italian forces from one end of Northern Africa to the other. At the same time, after the heroic Battle of Stalingrad, the Soviet forces resorted to counter attack. The rest is history.

From all these I retain the unadulterated picture of Hamo Ohanjanian and his unwavering belief. Of all the political personalities I have met no one else has stood without blemish as he has. To enjoy success and to retain a belief in victory is not an impressive achievement. Real courage and greatness lie in retaining one’s beliefs and not being swayed by the currents.