THE ARMENIAN LEGION: A FADED DREAM FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION

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By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, 12 February 2025

While recent diplomatic overtures and military cooperation between France and Armenia suggest a renewed partnership, the legacy of the Armenian Legion (initially known as the Légion d'Orient) should serve as a cautionary tale.

The Formation and Purpose of the Armenian Legion

Created in 1916 in the wake of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian Legion was envisioned as a force that would fight alongside the French against the Ottoman Empire. Armenians from across Europe, the United States, and the Middle East joined its ranks, receiving training in Cyprus. Many saw their participation as an opportunity to align with the Allied forces, particularly France, which had promised an independent Armenian state in Cilicia—a region with a historically significant Armenian population.

France's commitment to Armenian independence, however, was ambiguous from the outset. While the French eagerly recruited Armenian fighters, their primary strategic interests lay in securing a foothold in Syria and Lebanon rather than facilitating Armenian self-rule in Cilicia. This strategic calculus soon became evident in the Legion's deployment.

The Legion's Role in Palestine

Instead of deploying the Armenian Legion to Cilicia, the French redirected its forces to Palestine. Six battalions, comprising approximately 4,000 Armenian volunteers, fought under the command of General Edmund Allenby in 1918. The Legion played a key role in the decisive Battle of Arara against Ottoman and German forces, demonstrating bravery and combat effectiveness. However, its deployment to Palestine diverted it from the very region where Armenian aspirations for statehood lay. By the time the Legion was sent to Cilicia in 1919, its strength had been significantly depleted, and the political landscape had shifted against Armenian interests.



Internal Struggles and French Disinterest

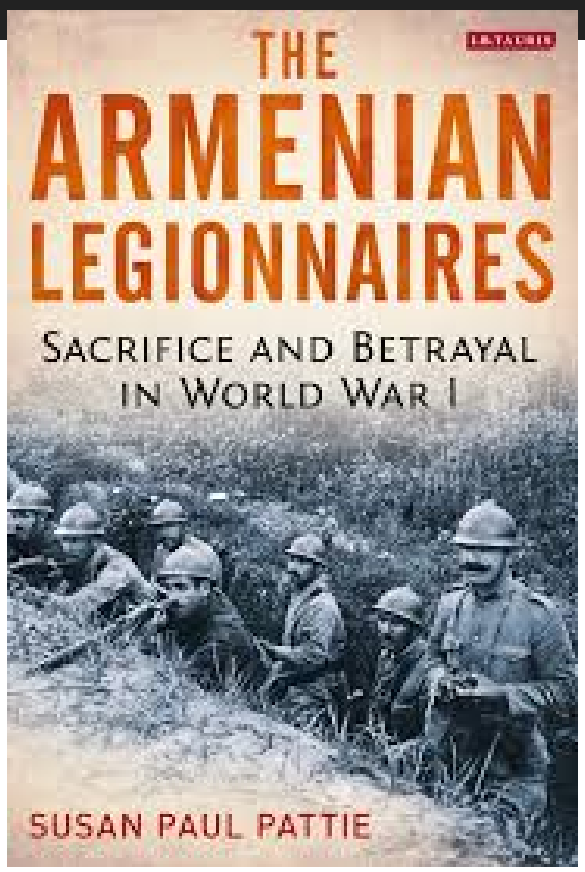
From its inception, the Legion suffered from internal discord. The unit was composed of Armenians, Arabs, Syrians, and Maronites, all serving under French command. While Armenians constituted the majority and had the strongest incentive to fight against the Turks, they were underrepresented in leadership positions, with only four Armenian officers holding command. The Armenian commanders often clashed among themselves, even undermining each other in front of the French. The tensions weakened cohesion, leading to internal conflicts that the French found increasingly problematic.

As Turkish nationalist forces under Mustafa Kemal gained momentum, high-ranking French officials in Cilicia, prioritizing their strategic interests in Syria, began to shift their policies. Bribery and diplomatic maneuvering played a role in French decision-making, leading to the abandonment of Armenian aspirations in Cilicia. Ultimately, Paris decided to disband the Armenian Legion as part of its broader withdrawal from the region, exposing thousands of Armenian civilians to renewed Turkish reprisals.

France's Betrayal and the Disarmament of Armenian Legionnaires

By 1920, France had signed the Ankara Agreement with Kemalist Turkey, formally abandoning its

commitment to Cilicia and agreeing to withdraw its troops. Armenian Legionnaires and local Armenians, who had been encouraged to resettle in Cilicia, were left vulnerable to Turkish retribution. Fearing massacres, Armenian fighters resisted their forced disarmament. In response, France deployed Senegalese and Algerian colonial troops to enforce compliance, leading to violent clashes in cities such as Adana and Marash. Hundreds of Armenians were executed, some publicly hanged, in a tragic conclusion to their hopes for security under French protection.



The dissolution of the Armenian Legion and France's retreat from Cilicia marked the final betrayal of Armenian aspirations in the region. Thousands of Armenians, many of whom had already endured the horrors of genocide, were once again displaced or massacred. The dream of an Armenian state in Cilicia was extinguished, leaving behind a deep sense of disillusionment with France.

Historical Context: France and Armenian Catholics

To fully understand France's role in modern Armenian history, one must also consider its long-standing influence in the Ottoman Empire through Catholic missions. Since the 17th century, France had cultivated ties with Ottoman Armenians, often using religious affiliations to expand its diplomatic and economic influence. A key example of this was the establishment of the Mekhitarist Order, founded by an Armenian monk named Mekhitar of Sebastia. Based on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice, the Mekhitarists sought to spread Catholicism among Ottoman Armenians, at odds with the Armenian Apostolic Church.

French efforts to convert Armenians to Catholicism were met with resistance. In a bid to attract converts, France and the Vatican offered an unusual and ultimately counterproductive incentive: granting consular protection to Ottoman Catholics. This privilege, typically reserved for foreign nationals and not local inhabitants, marked Armenian Catholics, and by extension all Armenians, as

outsiders in their own land, further exacerbating tensions with the Ottoman authorities.

Lessons from the Armenian Legion

The Armenian Legion represents a complex and ultimately tragic chapter in Armenian history. It highlights the perils of relying on foreign powers for security and statehood. While Armenian fighters demonstrated remarkable bravery, their efforts were ultimately undermined by French realpolitik. The abandonment of the Armenian cause in Cilicia remains a painful reminder of the cynical nature of international relations.

As Armenia navigates renewed threats from Azerbaijan and a strained relationship with Russia, and seeks closer ties with Western nations, particularly France, the lessons of the Armenian Legion must serve as a stark warning. No foreign power can be relied upon as the ultimate guarantor of Armenia's security. **That responsibility must rest solely in Armenian hands.**

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Varouj Pogharian was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His grandparents were from Van, Arapkir and Urfa. His family moved to Canada when he was 18. He retired from the Canadian federal government following a career that included assignments in South America. He is currently working on a historical novel, which is set in Asia Minor during the tumultuous period that spanned the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the rise of the Young Turks. His narrative is poised to explore the complexities of this historical backdrop.

Comments



Vartan – 2025-02-19 13:40:26
My grandfather, Boghos Tashjian, and his two brothers, Setrag and Levon, served in the legion. They were from Kheder bek, Mousa Dagh.