VAN & THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION: A SPECULATIVE REFLECTION

Posted on May 18, 2026 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, Colombia, 4 May 2026

History hinges on timing. In the Armenian struggle for survival and self-determination during and after the genocide, no factor proved more decisive—and more cruelly mistimed—than the Russian Revolution of 1917. At the very moment when Armenians had reclaimed Van with Imperial Russian support and dared to imagine a future rooted in their ancestral lands, the collapse of the Tsarist army left them stranded. What followed was not just a military defeat, but the erasure of a people's foothold in their historic homeland.

In that loss lies a haunting question: what if the Bolshevik Revolution had come later? The significance of this question to the Armenian struggle cannot be overstated.

A Brief Republic of Hope

In early 1915, Van stood defiantly against the tide of annihilation. After repelling Governor Djevdet *Bey's* siege and welcoming advancing Russian forces, the Armenians of Van experienced a brief and fragile window of autonomy. Aram Manukian, both military commander and civic organizer, demonstrated remarkable resilience in helping restore order to the battered city. With Russian logistical support and Armenian volunteers returning from the Caucasus, the dream of a liberated Armenian enclave—perhaps even a nascent republic—flickered into life.

For a time, it seemed possible. Refugees returned. Roads were repaired. Agriculture resumed. The cathedral of Aghtamar, long a symbol of Armenian spiritual endurance, stood not as a relic but as a living monument. Van, the ancient capital of the Urartian kingdom and a cultural heart of Armenian civilization, pulsed with new energy. The Defense of Van, once a desperate act of survival, began to look like the first chapter of a national revival.

The Collapse of the Russian Front

But history had other plans. Years of battlefield losses, food shortages, and imperial mismanagement had pushed the Russian Empire to the brink of collapse. By the winter of 1917–18, the Tsarist army was disintegrating. Soldiers deserted in columns. Officers no longer obeyed orders. Revolution spread faster than the front could hold.

When Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power, they ordered an immediate withdrawal from the Caucasus and eastern Asia Minor. In January 1918, Van's Armenian defenders watched Russian units abandon their barracks and march north. They left behind rifles and equipment, but little ammunition. Four small Armenian battalions remained to face the Ottoman counteroffensive. They knew what was coming. They had seen it before.

Some Armenians fled north with the retreating Russians. Others joined General Andranik's volunteer regiments fighting in the Caucasus. Many vanished into the mountains, hoping the land would hide them. American missionaries, namely, Dr. Clarence Ussher and his colleagues, who had been

providing medical care and aid to Armenian civilians during the siege, were evacuated under Red Cross protection. They were the last foreigners to leave the city.

The Return of the Sword

The Ottomans moved quickly. Vehip *Pasha*, commanding the Third Army, pushed forward to reclaim the east. Djevdet *Bey*—Enver *Pasha's* brother-in-law, a ruthlessly ambitious sadist with a well-known hatred for the Armenians of Van—returned with Kurdish irregulars, including remnants of the *Hamidiye* cavalry. Kurdish units swept through the countryside ahead of the regular troops, burning villages, seizing livestock, and killing any Armenian caught on the roads.

By April, Ottoman forces had surrounded Van's Armenian quarter. They cut the water channels and blocked all routes for food. Artillery pounded the stone houses until the district was a broken maze of dust and smoke. Inside, Armenian defenders held out with what little ammunition remained. Civilians huddled in cellars and church basements, surviving on thin rations and melted snow.

The siege dragged on through the summer. By August 1918, the defenders were spent. When Ottoman infantry breached the final barricades, the last line collapsed. What followed was systematic: men were taken to the banks of the Murat River and stabbed or shot before being thrown into the current; women and children were driven from hiding places and killed in the alleys; entire neighborhoods were erased. Contemporary reports from missionaries, diplomats, and surviving villagers described the aftermath as a "desert of ruins."

The violence spread outward. In Bitlis, thousands of Armenians were killed as the city fell. Across Diyarbakir province, Kurdish and Ottoman forces destroyed Armenian communities in Silvan, Beşiri, and the plains leading toward Sassun. Some Armenian bands, fleeing north toward Russian-held territory, struck back at Muslim villages along the way. Rage made the road darker.

Yet even in that ruin, there were exceptions. Turkish neighbors hid Armenian women and children. Some smuggled families to the mountains at night. A few paid with their lives when caught.

By the end of August, the Armenian presence that had been rooted in Van for centuries ended in smoke and silence. Survivors later counted more than fifty thousand missing or dead across the province, and well over a hundred villages destroyed. Exact numbers blurred in the chaos, but the magnitude was apparent: it was annihilation.



What If Lenin Had Waited?

Had the Russian Revolution been delayed by even two or three years—if the Russian front had held firm until 1919 or 1920—the Armenian presence in Van could have solidified. The Defense of Van, rather than a doomed but heroic episode, might have marked the beginning of a new Armenian polity in eastern Asia Minor, backed by Russian power and Armenian resolve. It's not far-fetched: with Russian aid, infrastructure could have been rebuilt, agriculture restored, and refugee populations resettled. Van could have become a capital, a symbol of what could have been.

Consider the implications: a well-defended Armenian territory in Asia Minor, existing during the Paris Peace Conference, could have strengthened the case for Wilsonian Armenia. On-the-ground facts might have altered the geopolitical arithmetic. The fledgling First Republic of Armenia might not have been as isolated or vulnerable. The subsequent Turkish nationalist victories could have been slowed or checked.

Instead, history gave the Armenians a cruel twist: the only major power offering tangible help collapsed at the moment of greatest need. Worse still, the Bolsheviks would soon make their own accommodations with Kemalist Turkey, recognizing the new Turkish borders and silencing the

Armenian question in exchange for geopolitical pragmatism.

Van was lost twice: once to violence, and again to historical timing.

The End of a World

Foreign newspapers carried the story. London and Paris condemned the massacres. Lord Bryce's earlier report had already warned the world, calling the campaign against the Armenians "unparalleled in modern history." The Allies promised accountability, but the war's final months drowned those vows. Diplomacy overtook justice.

The last Armenian fighters held the ruins of the cathedral, a symbol of their faith and resilience, for three days. When their position fell, Ottoman soldiers raised the crescent flag, a symbol of Islam, over the governor's mansion—roofless, blackened, open to the sky. This act marked the end of the resistance and the beginning of a new era in Van's history.

Van's second defense had lasted 1,057 days from the first uprising in 1915 to the final collapse in 1918. Its fall was not just a military defeat. It was a profound tragedy, the end of a world for the Armenian people.

A Reflective Postscript

The fate of Van reminds us how precariously history is built—not just on courage, strategy, or alliances, but on forces beyond anyone's control. The Armenian people, who had survived against impossible odds, found their brief foothold undermined not by their enemies alone, but by the collapse of their only major ally.

This episode, real and re-imagined, carries a lesson for today: that justice and survival must not be contingent on the stability or goodwill of others. The Armenian people did not lack for bravery or vision—they lacked the crucial elements of time and support to turn their resistance into permanence.

Speculative history, while it cannot undo trauma, can help us see the narrow passages through which survival or sovereignty might have been achieved. In the case of Van, it allows us to consider alternative scenarios and understand that the difference between endurance and destruction was not always a matter of strength—but of time and circumstance.

Had the Russian Empire survived just a few more years, the mountains around Van would still echo with Armenian voices. The great cathedral of Aghtamar may not be a lonely relic. The map itself may look different, a potential outcome that we can only imagine with a sense of regret.

But the Bolshevik Revolution came. And with it, the silence.

Comments



Varouj Pogharian – 2026-05-23 23:41:31

Vahé: Thank you for your thoughtful comment. You are absolutely correct that by the time the First Republic of Armenia was declared in May 1918, much of Western Armenia, including Van, had already been devastated and largely emptied of its Armenian population through massacres, deportations, famine, and flight. The Treaty of Batumi further underscored how precarious the Armenian position had become. My argument in the essay was less that an Armenian-majority Van still existed in 1918, and more that the collapse of the Russian front eliminated what may have been the last realistic opportunity for a sustained Armenian foothold in the region after the 1915 defense and temporary Russian occupation. Even a partially functioning Armenian-administered enclave, backed by continued Russian military support for a few more years, might have altered later diplomatic and military realities. Your reference to Gallipoli is also very important. The failure of the Gallipoli campaign remains one of the great turning points of the war. Had the Allies succeeded in forcing the Straits and threatening Constantinople, the Ottoman Empire could have faced collapse much earlier. That, in turn, might have relieved pressure on the eastern front and altered the fate of Armenians in Anatolia. The point raised by Albert Apleina is fascinating as well. British policymakers were balancing several competing fears at once, including the possibility that a rapid Ottoman collapse would significantly strengthen Russia's hand in the postwar settlement. Great Power politics often treated smaller nations, including the Armenians, as secondary considerations within a larger geopolitical contest. That is part of what makes this period so tragic and complex. The survival of entire populations often depended not only on courage or resistance, but on the timing and interests of empires.



Vahe H Apelian – 2026-05-22 10:42:33

Varouj, I read your article with interest. Surely, it is a convoluted period of history. All this time, I was left with the impression that Western Armenia, including Van, were very much cleansed of Armenians when Armenia declared independence in May 1918, and a week after founding the Republic of Armenia, the Ottoman Empire and the newly independent First Republic of Armenia, signed the Treaty of Batumi on June 4, 1918. Albert Apleina, M.D., in his novel title The Antiochians, offered another if. What about if the Gallipoli expedition, that took place between February 19, 1915, to January 9, 1916, had succeeded? But, he wrote, "no one can definitely be sure whether or not British diplomacy at that time favored an early occupation of Constantinople. A premature collapse of the Sultan's government could seat a victorious Russia at the peace conference", implying not to weaken Turkey fighting the Russians on the eastern front.



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-05-19 15:34:00

Dear Varouj, What I find most powerful in your essay is that you treat Van not merely as a lost city, but as an interrupted historical possibility. In Van, Armenians were not only struggling to survive; for a brief moment, they were also restoring order, resettling refugees, reviving agriculture, and imagining a political future in their ancestral homeland. For this reason, the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution cannot be understood only as a military withdrawal. The collapse of the Russian front left the Armenians of Van exposed, but it was followed by an even broader diplomatic tragedy as Armenologist Mr. Hovsep Hayreni has also recently reminded us, the arrangements made by Bolshevik Russia with Ottoman and later Kemalist Turkey opened the way for Kars and Ardahan to be left to Turkey. Armenians were abandoned not only on the battlefield, but also at the diplomatic table. Seen in this light, the loss of Van was not an isolated tragedy. When Van, Kars, and Ardahan are thought together, we see the gradual closing of Armenian political possibilities in the historical homeland. Once again, the Armenian people's right to determine their own future was sacrificed to the calculations of great powers. Your essay therefore raises a painful but necessary question: why are courage, organization, and historical justice sometimes not enough? In the case of Van, the answer is bitter. Resistance needs more than bravery if it is to become permanent; it also needs time, support, and a geopolitical order that does not collapse at the decisive moment. Your article made me think that Van was lost twice: first through Ottoman violence, and then through the timing and diplomatic calculations of great powers. That is not only a matter of mourning the past. It is also a warning for the present. The justice and security of small nations cannot safely depend on the stability or goodwill of larger powers.