

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.SI-1.46>

LEVON SHAGHOIAN'S ROLE IN SAVING THE VAN-VASPOURAKAN REFUGEES (MARCH-AUGUST 1918)

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The activities of several heroes, who dedicated their lives to the Armenian national liberation struggle in the twentieth century, remain unknown or have not been thoroughly studied for various reasons. Among those individuals who dedicated themselves entirely to the national struggle for survival was Levon "Pasha" Shaghoian. It is noteworthy that in the course of history, there have often been individual leaders who either played a fateful role in the survival and development of their nation or, on the contrary, were the cause of their own people's demise and its subsequent disappearance from the pages of history. Although Levon Shaghoian was not a talkative person, he left us with extensive written records of his writing. Therefore, the notes, memoirs, and articles of his collaborators served as the basis for reflecting on his activities in the Fatherland. The primary sources for this article are archival materials from the National Archives of Armenia, the personal archive of Levon Shaghoian, and the Brief History of the Iraqi-Armenian Diocese. The official central archives of the ARF in Boston, as well as the memoirs of participants in the region's self-defense activities, have also been considered.

Keywords: WW1, Armenian Genocide, Levon Shaghoian, Armenian refugees, Western Armenia, Cilicia, Iraqi-Armenian diocese, Van-Vaspourakan.

Introduction

During WW1, Armenians were subjected to inhumane torture and exile from their homeland of thousands of years. Although the mass killings and deportations were vast and extensive, in some parts of the country the indigenous people were partly exempt from those horrible actions which was only due to their organized self-

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Received: 25.04.2025

Revised: 28.06.2025

Accepted: 30.06.2025



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defense operations. These heroic deeds took place in various parts of Cilicia and Western Armenia, including the operations in Van-Vaspourakan province.

In Van the defense operations started on April 7, 1915, and continued up until May 4, 1915. In this period the Armenians faced thousands of Turkish regular army divisions and various Kurdish mobs. On May 5, 1915, the Armenian volunteer corps together with the Russian army entered Van. Aram Manoukian was appointed governor of Van district. However, freedom lasted very briefly, 70 days only. The Russian army had to retreat, and thousands of Armenians followed them to the Caucasus into Eastern Armenia, encountering all kinds of hardships and sustaining thousands of casualties on the perilous road before reaching their temporary dwellings in Eastern Armenia (Ohanian, p. 31).

In addition to the events which were taking place in the city centers of Van and Aygestan, some other parts of Vaspourakan were also able to stand their ground and did not surrender to the enemy. Of those places PESANDASHT stands out for its heroic battles, and as a result, more than 6000 Armenians were saved from imminent slaughter and looting, owing mainly to the bravery and self-devotion of the commander Levon Shaghoian and his compatriots (A-Do, Yerevan 1917, p. 334).

After a short while, however, the Russian army reoccupied almost all the parts of Western Armenia, which gave a chance to some of the Armenians to come back and start the rebuilding of their destroyed cities and villages, where Levon Shaghoian played a principal role. In Van, a temporary Armenian government was founded on March 27, 1917. A commissariat was formed adherent to the administrative body, which after Yerzenka Truce on December 5, 1917, took charge of all civil and military operations in Van-Vaspourakan.

On January 6, 1918, Van-Vaspourakan was declared a free and independent *Hayrenik*. Consequently, on January 18, the second government of Vaspourakan was formed headed by the most beloved national hero Kosti Hambardzoumian (Ohanian, p. 32).

It is to be noted that the dual Russian revolutions (February and October 1917) and the beginning of the Russian Civil War in 1917 were accompanied by the collapse of the Russian armies in the Caucasian front. The Russian armies abandoned their positions in the occupied Ottoman provinces which left the Armenians facing the enemy's offensive that would also threaten the very existence of the Eastern Armenians in the Caucasus. By April 1918, after the last retreat of Van-Vaspourakan population, all Western Armenian areas which were occupied by the Russians during the war, had been retaken by the Turkish army (Hovannisian, 2011, pp. 274-275).

However, events took a precipitous course, as in the spring of 1918, the entire population of Van and the surrounding cities and villages reluctantly started their final exodus which resulted in the de-Armenization of Van-Vaspourakan once and for all (National Archives, Yerevan). These people were forced to leave their homes of thousands of years and, experiencing all kinds of deprivation, fighting continuously in different parts of Persia, finally set foot on the hospitable soil of Iraq under the tent city of Baquba, which was prepared by the British authorities. They were received with unconditional care by various kinds of Armenian and foreign humanitarian organizations and individual benefactors, which made it possible to partially alleviate their pain and unspeakable sufferings.

The present paper will focus on the activities of these organizations, the selfless contribution of Levon Shaghoian, the president of the Armenian Refugees Committee to rescue the orphans, and take every measure for the survival of the refugees who arrived in Mesopotamia in August 1918.

Arrival of the Armenian refugees in Iraq

The remnants of the refugees of the Armenians and Assyrians who retreated from Van, Salmas and Urmia, after a five-month struggle for existence in Persia, Hamadan and Tazakend (Persia), were scattered under the scorching sun, waiting for the so-called “great ally,” Great Britain, to decide their future. It is worth mentioning that Hamadan became the biggest grave of the refugees after departing from their homeland. During the five-month battles in different parts of Persia, the Armenians’ losses could be considered as trivial, hardly 1200-1300 killed and wounded. Whilst only in Hamadan more than 5000 died, left uncovered and without shroud, even deprived of personal grave, in addition to the treacherous killing of the commander Kosti Hambardzoumian (Vazgen, 1930, p. 161).

Finally, it was decided to move part of the Armenians to Tehran – Sultanabad and Kirmanshah region, form a volunteer regiment of young people, and send them to Sulduz-Tabriz front. The rest of the largest part were to be sent to Mesopotamia, Iraq, where there was “food and security” (Trchnik, 1926, p. 56).

The number of the people who were compelled to leave Van in March 1918 was 26183, as per the statistics prepared by Mesopotamia Refugee Committee dated April 1919 at Baquba Refugee camp. However, more than 10 thousand of refugees were killed, lost and/or died of epidemics during the five-month struggle, fighting through Persia to Iraq. (Ohanian, Yerevan 2019, pp. 35-37).

On arrival to Baquba camp, the refugees, for whom shelter and security were ultimately provided by the British Mandate Authorities, were roughly grouped under three separate groups (Austin, 1920, p.4).

- a) The Armenians, chiefly from the region of Lake Van, who numbered approximately one-third of the camp population.
- b) The Assyrians of the mountains of Kurdistan in the Turkish territory, who formerly inhabited the wild regions watered by the Great Zab and its affluents, and who also numbered approximately one-third of the population.
- c) The Assyrians and Armenians of the Urumiyeh and Salmas Plains, and formerly Persian subjects, who comprised the remaining third.

At this time, the Vaspourakan Military Body, headed by Levon Shaghoian, stayed in Hamadan (Persia) to expedite the refugees return to the Homeland. At the same time, the latter was involved in the formation of the Armenian Military Unit under the leadership of the British Army, which was located in Sakez Aghaj in Persia, waiting for orders to proceed to the mentioned front.

After settling down in Iraq, and determining the physical safety of his people, Shaghoian's only concern was the future and fate of his people living abroad and the desolation of the Western Armenian lands. He tried to do his utmost to find ways to resettle his people on their native lands, or at least near the lands of Armenia, even though those lands were in Kurdistan, at a time in which both the people of Kurdistan and Armenia shared the same fate. He thought that it was better to resettle the Armenian refugees in Kurdistan and bring them closer to the Fatherland. This was the reason why Shaghoian later chose a plot of land in Kurdistan region of Iraq for the emigrant farmers of Van. The plot of land, which came to be known as Havrezk, was barren and not cultivated but it was close to his native Vaspourakan. He was confident that his creative compatriots would turn the arid land into a paradise. And indeed, that is what happened as soon the designated area was fully populated. There was a time when the village of Havrezk had a population of about 2500. Families staying in different settlements came to resettle in that newly created little Armenia.

In the meantime, the desire to return to their Homeland was great among the people who took refuge in Mesopotamia and, with the vision of their lost "*Heaven*" still fresh in their memories, sent endless appeals to the relevant bodies with a request to return to Armenia. After arriving at the Baquba Refugee camp, there were non-stop attempts by all interested parties to return the refugees to their Homeland, especially by the Refugee Committee and its president Levon Shaghoian.

In the initial period, after the start of the general negotiations towards the end of 1919, there was a proposal to return the refugees of Cilicia and Istanbul to their homeland, as the above-mentioned settlements were liberated and were still under

the control of the allies. However, for various reasons, this proposal did not materialize (Shemmassian, 2020, p. 248).

In this regard, it is noteworthy that most of the emigrants who arrived in Mesopotamia had high hopes of settling in Armenia. In July 1919, after receiving the call-message of the chairman of the Armenian Refugee Committee of Mesopotamia, Levon Shaghoian, the Catholicos of all Armenians, appealed to the government of the Republic of Armenia to organize immigration as soon as possible, to save the remnant of our people suffering in the deserts of Mesopotamia (ARF Central Archives, Boston). In this regard, Shaghoian spared no effort in trying to transfer the people to Armenia as soon as possible, as being one of this people, he understood that foreign and unfamiliar environment like Mesopotamia would definitely have a negative impact on the simple and still intact Armenian souls, the majority of whom were farmers stuck to their Homeland with its national traditions.

It was obvious that the national authorities in Armenia could not stay indifferent to the cruel ordeals their compatriots were going through in Mesopotamia and extended their efforts to help them overcome their difficulties. Upon receiving Mr. Levon Shaghoian's appeal, the government of the independent Armenia, opened 5 million rubles loan to help the refugees (Armenian National Archives, Yerevan 2010).

By sending numerous letters and telegrams to the Chairman of the Armenian National Delegation Boghos Nubar Pasha and other national organizations, Shaghoian stated that he successively informed all national bodies in Armenia and abroad about the events of Nahar Omar refugee camp and that he had continuously requested urgent instructions to support the physical existence of the refugees in Mesopotamia. However, despite all the efforts, until the time of writing the present letter (July 7, 1921), nothing materialized (ARF Central Archives, Boston). In this respect, the main concern of Levon Shaghoian and the government of Armenia was to keep the troops who retreated from Vaspourakan and the emigrants together, and to search for the remnants of the exiled Armenians from the Arabian deserts. The dedication and the perseverance of the leadership of the Refugee Committee gave great results. The emigrants kept their unity, fought long and hard battles, solved problems and, consequently, a number of emigrants reached Armenia by sea and land, mainly due to the efforts and perseverance of Levon Shaghoian (Ter Minasian, 1952).

After long and strenuous negotiations between all parties concerned (Nahar Omar Refugee Camp Committee – represented by Levon Shaghoian, AGBU, Near East Relief, British Mandate Authorities), beginning from October 1921, 8000-

9000 Armenian refugees emigrated to Armenia by three ships – “*Dara*” took 3000 refugees who left for Batumi, the second ship – “*Akbar*” anchored at Basra port, sailed for Batumi on December 13, 1921, having 2756 Armenian refugees. From there they reached Armenia by bus. The third ship – “*Shuja*,” was reserved by special arrangement to take the inhabitants of the Orphanage of Nahar Omar, numbering 816 orphans with their caregivers and the stuff, to Jerusalem. To complete the number of the travelers, 1200 refugees were transferred to Armenia even on a keel. Thus, according to the British archives, the total number of the refugees returning to Soviet Armenia was 6956 (Shemmassian, p. 260).

In 1922, after the mass repatriation of the refugees, there still remained a few thousand people at the Nahar Omar Refugee Camp. To help them also return to Armenia, a committee was formed headed by bishop Hovhannes Hewsian, and summoned to India and Far East with a mission to help raise enough subscriptions to cover the travelling charges of the remaining refugees to Armenia. This mission was as successful as the first one (headed by Mardiros Guyumjian), and after a short while the latter came back with enough funds to cover the travelling expenses and the cost of their living in Armenia for three months (Shaghoian, Yerevan -B. Hakobian Leninakan, Sept. 25, 1925).

It is noteworthy that the government of Soviet Armenia was doing all in its power to help the refugees scattered to the four winds. The country was able to receive and accommodate many thousands of refugees from all over the world. But this process or method of repatriation was very slow and impracticable in view of the number of Armenians who wanted to come home (L.Shaghoian Archive, B. Hagopian, Sept. 1925).

In this regard, Levon Shaghoian appealed to the Council of The Indian-Armenian Churches, emphasizing the importance of the mission of Archimandrite Hewsian to India to raise the necessary funds to alleviate the physical and moral sufferings of the refugees who were still in Nahar Omar. Levon Shaghoian further added that to save those people morally and physically, to support their immediate help until the time of repatriation, was urgent for keeping the hungry alive, the school open, medical and medicinal requirements supplied, and the policemen paid, etc. (L. Shaghoian Archive, Yerevan 2022).

In addition to the foregoing efforts, the Chairman of the Armenian Refugee Committee at Nahar Omar, Mr. Levon Shaghoian appealed to the American Consul in Baghdad in 1922. With the help of the Consul, he explained to the American people and the government the catastrophic situation of the refugees, hoping that ways and means would be derived to repatriate those still remaining in the camp to Batumi over sea, or to Yerevan overland through Persia (L. Shaghoian Archive,

Repatriation File). L. Shaghoian believed that this appeal, which was made in the name of Christianity and Humanity to the American benevolent government, would receive a favourable and immediate consideration (L. Shaghoian Archive, Repatriation File, Yerevan letter No. 1731, dated 8. 7.1922, Nahar Omar).

The efforts of L. Shaghoian were fruitful, and the Very Reverend Archimandrite returned from India and Far East countries with a considerable sum of more than 40.000 rupees which covered the return of about 750 Armenians overland by buses through Persia to Armenia.

Conclusion

It is obvious that every effort was made by the Refugee Committee headed by Levon Shaghoian and other national parties to have the approval of all the parties concerned, to secure the necessary funds to finalize and execute the repatriation process of the refugees to their Homeland. In addition to the local Iraqi-Armenian philanthropists, two delegations were sent to India in an effort to secure the necessary funds from the Indian Armenian diaspora and non-Armenian benefactors. Both delegations – headed by Mardiross Kouyumjian and Archimandrite Hovhannes Hewsian respectively, returned to Iraq with fruitful results, which helped the refugees overcome the difficulties they were facing after the demolition of the camp at Nahar Omar.

With the help of all the parties concerned, about 8000 Armenians repatriated to Homeland in the 1920s.

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ԼԵՎՈՆ ՇԱՂՈՅԱՆԻ ԴԵՐԸ ՎԱՆ-ՎԱՍՊՈՒԻՐԱԿԱՆԻ
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ՓՐԿՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԳՈՐԾՈՒՄ (ՄԱՐՏ-ԱՊՐԻԼ 1918 Թ.)

Սեղա Օհանյան

Քսաներորդ դարում հայ ազգային-ազատազրական պայքարին իրենց կյանքը նվիրաբերած մի շարք հերոսների գործունեությունը մնում է անհայտ կամ մանրակրկիտ ուսումնասիրված չեւ տարբեր պատճառներով: Ազգային գոյապայքարին ամբողջությամբ նվիրված անհատների թվում էր Լևոն «Փաշա» Շաղոյանը: Հատկանշական է, որ պատմության ընթացքում հաճախ եղել են անհատ առաջնորդներ, որոնք կամ ճակատազրական դեր են խաղացել իրենց ազգի գոյատևման և զարգացման գործում, կամ, ընդհակառակը, պատճառ են հանդիսացել իրենց սեփական ժողովրդի կործանմանը և հետազոտում պատմության էջերից նրա անհետացմանը: Լևոն Շաղոյանը մեզ թողել է իր գրվածքների ընդարձակ գրավոր արձանագրությունները: Հետևաբար, նրա համագործակիցների նշումները, հուշագրություն-

ները և հոդվածները հիմք հանդիսացան Հայրենիքում նրա գործունեության վերաբերյալ մտորումների համար: Այս հոդվածի հիմնական աղբյուրներն են Հայաստանի ազգային արխիվի արխիվային նյութերը, Լևոն Շաղոյանի անձնական արխիվը և Իրաքահայ թեմի համառոտ պատմությունը: Հաշվի են առնվել նաև ՀՅԴ պաշտոնական կենտրոնական արխիվները Բոստոնում, ինչպես նաև տարածաշրջանի ինքնապաշտպանության գործողություններին մասնակցողների հուշագրությունները:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Առաջին համաշխարհային պատերազմ, Հայոց ցեղասպանություն, Լևոն Շաղոյան, հայ փախստականներ, Արևմտյան Հայաստան, Կիլիկիա, իրաքահայ թէմ, Վան-Վասպուրական