

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.SI-1.98>

## THE HEROIC BATTLE OF MUSA DAGH ACCORDING TO THE TESTIMONIES OF THE EYEWITNESS-PARTICIPANTS AND THE COMMANDMENT OF FRANZ WERFEL

**Verzhine Svazlian\***

*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA*

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2918-866X>

As a part of the Armenian nation, the Musa Dagh people, in particular, have felt the necessity of regeneration of the national statehood, its meaning and value, particularly following the fall of the 300-year-old flourishing statehood of Cilicia and during the 600 years of absence of power. The Musa Dagh people, who were forged and had gained sagacity in the heroic battles for survival, have formulated their feat very concisely: “*Freedom is on the tip of the rifle*,” (Svazlian 2015, p. 207) that is to say, freedom can be obtained only by the force of arms, which is followed by “*Freedom is on the tip of the flag*,” (Svazlian 2015, p. 207) that is to say, statehood is the guarantee of freedom.

**Keywords:** *Musa Dagh, heroic battle, eyewitnesses, Franz Werfel, commandment.*

### Introduction

The Amanos Mountain range of the Taurus system stretches in Southern Cilicia, on the south-western foot of which is Musa Dagh (Musa Mountain) with its triangular Damladjek summit (1355 m). Its south-eastern and south-western sides slope abruptly down to the Orontes plain and to the Mediterranean Sea.

The tributary of the Orontes River, the Great Karachay, flows in the east of Musa Dagh, while the vast Orontes plain is spread out in the south. Musa Dagh is situated about 20 km west of historic Antioch. In the past, it was called Svedia,<sup>1</sup> Musa Dagh,<sup>2</sup> Jebel Musa,<sup>3</sup> Musa Ler.<sup>4</sup>

---

\* [vsvaz333@yahoo.com](mailto:vsvaz333@yahoo.com)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Received: 09.05.2025  
Revised: 06.07.2025  
Accepted: 09.07.2025

© The Author(s) 2025

On the northern slopes of Musa Dagh six Armenian villages were spread from east to west, namely, Bitias, Hadji-Habibli, Yoghun-Oluk, Kheder-Bek, Vakef and Kabousié (subsequently new ones were established) at the foot of the mountain on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

In 1375, the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was in decline, as a consequence of the invasions of the Mamluks. Subsequently, the Ottoman Turkic tribes invaded the territory and, in the middle of the XVII century, the Avshar Gozan oghlu tribe ruled there, almost arbitrarily. Written information about that anarchic period is practically missing, since everything was committed to the flames (Galoustian 1934, p. 697).

Subsequently, as a consequence of migrations periodically organized from various localities, the Armenians were replenished and they rallied also around Musa Dagh (Alboyajian 1941, pp. 105-121, Andreassian 1967, pp. 291-351).

The six-thousand-plus inhabitants of this cluster of villages were engaged in cattle-breeding, agriculture, silkworm-breeding and bee-keeping. They had elementary schools and churches. They lived in peace and led a creative life (Goushakjian 1970, p. 448, Gyouzelian 2001). The Musadaghians rebelled against the Hamidian massacres in 1894-1896.

They also showed the same heroic attitude in 1909, when Adana was in flames with its surroundings.

In point of fact, the Adana massacre was the beginning of the Armenian Genocide, when the Young Turks, assuming as a basis the resolutions of the secret meeting of the “Ittihat ve Terakki” party held in Salonica, in 1911, were hastily getting ready to completely exterminate the Armenian people, waiting for a propitious opportunity; this opportunity was provided, when World War I broke out. Turkey entered the war having predatory objectives and with the monstrous plan to realize the total extermination of the Armenian people.

### **The heroic battle of Musa Dagh according to the eyewitness-participants**

In the beginning of World War I, the Musa Dagh people were compelled to submit to the Turkish order of mobilization and to pay the war taxes, but they did not obey the order of deportation and exile, and defended their life and honor with arms.

The participants of the heroic self-defensive battle of Musa Dagh Serob Gyouzelian (b. 1882), Movses Panossian (b. 1885), Poghos Soupkoukian – Ashough (Minstrel – Arm.) Develli (b. 1887), Anna Davtian (b. 1888), Movses Balabanian (b. 1891) and Hovhannes Ipredjian (b. 1896), Iskouhi Koshkarian (b. 1902), Tovmas Habeshian (b. 1903) from Lebanon, Davit Davitian (b. 1905) from

France, Sargis Adamian (b. 1906) and others have related about those historical events.<sup>5</sup>

Former English lecturer at the Yerevan State University, repatriate Assatour Makholian from Musa Dagħ (b. 1911, Bitias v.) has narrated: “...*When World War I began, the Turkish government collected all the Armenian men and took them into the army. Only women, children, and the old people were left. When the deportations started, Rev. Tigran Andreassian lived and worked in Zeytoun. When the Turks deported the Armenians, his family had been among them. Tigran Andreassian had presented himself to the Turkish officer and, because religious leaders (Protestant) were allowed to come out of the caravan of the exiles, he was freed with his family. He returned to his birthplace, Musa Dagħ, and explained to the people what was happening to the Armenians all over Turkey. And he suggested that it should be much better to ascend the mountain than die*” (Svazlian 2011, T. 297, pp. 489-490).

On July 26, 1915, an order for deportation of the Armenian population was received in the neighboring town of Kessab. Feeling that their turn would soon arrive, the Musa Dagħ people organized, on July 29, in the village of Yoghun-Oluk, a general meeting with the representatives of the six villages.

The native land is sacred, and the Musa Dagħ people were ready “*to strike, to be stricken,*” but “*to die on their land*” of ancestors.

Everybody was filled with the feeling of protest and vengeance. Men and women, children and old people left their homes and orchards and ascended the inaccessible summit of Musa Dagħ, carrying with them their cattle and provisions, to heroically withstand the attack, to fight against the innumerable soldiers of the enemy, to fully defend their honor and dignity.

All, without exception and without delay, started, in an orderly manner, to build huts from the forest trees, to dig trenches, to build ramparts with solid walls, leaving small embrasures from the inside to fire at the enemy. In some places, they cut down the thick forest to be able to see the enemy. Even the little boys worked as signal-men. The women organized the food, the girls and the young brides carried water for the fighters from afar. A special military council was created under the command of Yessayi Yaghoubian, whose members were the Reverend Tigran Andreassian, Petros Dmlakian, Khacher Doumanian, Petros Doudaklian and others.

A special attention was given to the defensive positions. The fighters were about 600 in number, who had altogether 132 hunting rifles and a limited quantity of bullets. The defense of the mountain was divided into four regions, namely, Ghezeldja, Gouzdjegħaz, Damladjek and Gaplan-Douzakh, where the self-

defensive detachments were positioned. Musa Dagh had become the stronghold of the front.

On August 7, 200 Turkish soldiers under the leadership of the prefect of Svedia, Khalid, started the attack. According to abovementioned Tovmas Habeshian: *“On the mountain, each family built a hut of wood, as there were no bricks or stones. Young boys erected barricades. They held two meetings: one was administrative and related to the internal life of the mountain, the other – to organize military forces. The battle commenced. The first bullet was fired by Sargis Gabaghian. The battle continued. The enemy met strong resistance and retreated”* (Svazlian 2011, T. 291, p. 485). Thus, the Turks met an obstinate resistance and after an unsuccessful fight, which continued for six hours, they retreated suffering a number of losses.

On August 10, the enemy, reinforced by 5.000 soldiers and cannons, launched the second attack. The battle lasted for twelve hours under a pouring rain, but the Musa Dagh people resisted bravely.

On August 19, the enemy attempted a new attack with 9.000 soldiers under the command of Fakhri pasha. The combat went on for two days. The Turks tried to break through the defensive line, but the courageous Musa Dagh people were able to stop them, maintaining their positions. The Turks retreated once again, leaving 1.000 dead soldiers on the field. Coming down from the mountain heights, the Musa Dagh fighters seized hold of a fair amount of ammunition.

The Turks did not launch a new attack, but thought of encircling the mountain with a view to make the Armenians starve to death. The enemy concentrated 15.000 soldiers at the foot of Musa Dagh and besieged the mountain on its three sides, hoping that the Armenians' provisions and ammunition would soon be consumed and they would surrender, but the will of the Musa Dagh people was inflexible.

The enemy concentrated new forces to chastise the rebellious Armenians. The provisions and armaments of the Musa Dagh people were exhausted. The heavy rain had rendered shot-guns they had, all in all, unfit for use. Being in despair and hoping to receive aid from the sea, they tied white bedsheets together, they wrote on one of them *“The Christians are in danger, save us!”* and on the other they drew the sign of the Red Cross and displayed them on the mountain slope overlooking the sea. At night, they built bonfires around them, so that the ships would notice them from afar.

For a long time, however, no ships were visible on the horizon. Several times the Turks exhorted the Armenians to surrender, but the Musa Dagh people were determined to maintain their positions.

On September 5, the French battleship “Guichen” passing ashore in the Mediterranean Sea noticed them and slowed down its course. The 75-year-old Movses Kerekian, with a small tin box containing a petition hanging round his neck, jumped into the sea. He reached the ship swimming, knelt and crossed himself before the captain of the ship, Louis Dartige du Fournet and handed him the petition in English. The Armenian navy officer Tiran Tekeyan was also on the French ship and acted as a translator.

On September 13, the French battleships “Guichen” and “Jeanne d’Arc” appeared in the depth of the Mediterranean Sea. Soon it was declared that the French government had promised to transfer the Armenians to Port-Saïd.

On September 15, about 4.200 Armenians from Musa Dagħ were transported by small boats to the French battleships anchored at a distance, which then headed for Port-Saïd. The Armenian community of Egypt, under the leadership and care of the President of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, Poghos Noubar, had already ensured the comfort of the Musa Dagħ people at the local tent-camp. The Armenian officer serving in the French Navy, Tiran Tekeyan, also greatly contributed to those life-saving operations.

The memoir-testimony of Movses Panossian (b. 1885, Hadji-Habibli v.), the one hundred and five-year-old participant of the heroic battle of Musa Dagħ, gives a more detailed and circumstantial description: *“I am the last participant of the heroic battle of Musa Dagħ and I am here, alive... On July 13, 1915, the Turkish government issued an order, telling: ‘In seven days all the Armenians must leave.’ The elders of our seven villages met in Yoghun-Oluk and said: ‘I was born here, I will die here. I will not go as a slave to die with tortures under the enemy’s order; I will die here, with a gun in my hand, but I will not become an emigrant.’ And so we did. We ascended the mountains. Everyone took whatever he had with him: mattresses, quilts, pots, pans, animals, and chickens. We took everything to the mountain...”* (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 268).

Thereupon, the participant of the heroic battle, Movses Panossian, referred to the old and scanty arms they had to wage the fight, but, all the same, they had driven the enemy away: *“What I had was a hunting rifle, and the bullets were filled from the end of the barrel. It was difficult to use it. I did not have a regular gun to fight the Turks the way I wanted”* (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 269).

Movses Panossian recalled how a great number of women and even children (the so-called “telephone boys”) distinguished themselves, equal to the male fighters, with their devotedness and heroism: *“...The Turks attacked us four times, but each time got their answer. Our boys of Musa Dagħ fought well: the women and girls helped us; they brought us water to drink in water jugs. Several women,*

*rifle in hand, fought with us. One of them was Nashalian; she was very brave... The children had become messengers: they carried news from one front to the other... All of them were at work” (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 269).*

Thereafter Movses Panossian recollected the feelings and concerns they experienced during the heroic battle and the unflinching faith they had in their victory: *“There was always a white cloud, something like a mist, on our mountains. One could say that God had sent it specially to help us, for we could see the enemy from above, but the enemy could not see us. The Turks tried to come up, but whoever did so, was killed. “Come on, eh Mohammed, come on, eh Mohammed,” we used to say and shoot. The Turks could hardly stand this for two hours and then they fled... It often rained in the mountains; the raindrops pierced our body. Once, when it was raining, we entered under a rock for shelter. Sheikh Panos’ son was with us. He had a book and it always was under his arm. We said: “Open your book. Let’s see what our future will be.” Sheikh Panos’ son opened the book and began his prediction: “A ladder will come down from Heaven and we’ll be rescued.” He said this, but we did not believe him, because we had been fighting for more than forty days, day and night; we were exhausted. Our food and the ammunition were getting less and less...” The Mediterranean Sea was behind us. At night, we lit a fire for the passing ships to see us and come closer. During the day, Reverend Andreassian had drawn a Red Cross on a bed-sheet and displayed it on the mountain slope... A few days passed and finally a ship was seen far out at sea. The Kerekians’ son was a good swimmer; he dived into the sea and swam to the ship. There was a small metal box hung from his neck, containing a letter written in a foreign language. From the ship, they had been watching with field glasses; they had seen him. They helped him to get on board the ship. Movses knelt, crossed his face to make them understand that he was a Christian, for he could not speak French. He gave the captain the written letter; they read it and understood that about five thousand Armenian Christians of Musa Dagħ were waiting for God’s salvation” (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 269).*

Then the survivor Movses Panossian continued: *“The captain had asked where they were, where the enemy was, how long they could withstand: “You resist for eight more days, let me get permission from my government, either we’ll bring you weapons or come and rescue you.” They did not bring us any weapons, but they came with warships and rescued us. As Panos’ son said, they lowered ladders from the ship, and we went up on board the ship. What he said was always in my mind, and I never lost hope, and we were rescued...” (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 269).*

Subsequently Movses Panossian truly recollected the peculiarities of the ensuing historical events: *“When the Turks attacked us again for the last time, the French had already found us. This time Fakhri pasha had come with fifteen thousand Turkish soldiers, but we had already descended to the seashore. His arrival gave no advantage to the Turks”* (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 269).

The Musa Dagh people, who have struggled for freedom, have artistically expressed their feat in the following popular, historical epic poem-song:

*“Our Musadaghians are all heroes,  
They are encouraged looking at each other,  
They never know the meaning of fear,  
Since they have you, Musa Dagh.  
Hey, Musadaghians, dear ones,  
We kept high the Armenians’ honor!*

*We rose, all seven villages, to the mountain top,  
We didn’t bow before the enemy,  
We had many victims in forty days,  
We kept high the Armenians’ honor.  
Hey, Musadaghians, dear ones,  
We kept high the Armenians’ honor!...”*

(Svazlian 1984, T. 403, p. 158).

The one hundred and five-year-old participant of the heroic battle Movses Panossian also remembered details of the life of the Musa Dagh people in Port-Saïd: *“Women, children – all of them were on board the ship. The ship pulled up the anchor and moved. After sailing for several hours, the French captured a German ship. We moved to the German ship, and it took us to Port-Saïd... We landed on Egyptian soil. The yellow sand of the desert burned our feet. We saw tents; they had erected tents for us, with beds, everything... At that time, Poghos Noubar was one of the great men of Egypt. God bless his soul. He helped us and the Armenian orphans of Der-Zor very much. There, our children used to write the Armenian alphabet on sand, learned Armenian, until Sisvan School was opened in a tent, and next to it, was founded a hospital. English captains came there and started training us – one, two, right, two... And we marched. An English officer said to us: ‘Leave the French and come to our side.’ We said: ‘The French rescued us; we’ll be on their side.’ Mleh came there and found us. Then we were enlisted as volunteers for the French army and laid the foundation of the Armenian Legion.*

*Armenian volunteers came from Harpoot, Sebastia, Arabkir, and Houseinik and everywhere in Cilicia. They joined us; we went to the front at Nablous. We fought and won... The English said to our Armenian leaders: 'You're wealthier than our king, as you have such brave valiant soldiers...' (Svazlian 1984, T. 1397, p. 270).*

And indeed, the French and the English commanders-in-chief praised the brave Armenian legionaries. On October 12, 1918, General Allenby sent a telegram to the President of the Armenian National Delegation, Poghos Noubar, saying: "I am proud to have the Armenian regiment under my command. They fought courageously and had a great share in the victory" (Keleshian 1949, p. 582).

### **Franz Werfel's historical novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and his commandment**

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by the talented Austrian writer Franz Werfel is not just an ordinary novel, but an epic poem, the hero of which is the Armenian people. The heroic struggle of the Musa Dagh people, living in Cilicia, against the Turkish oppressors, in 1915, served as a historical base for the author.

The accuracy of the historical events presented in this fictional work and the testimonies given by the participants of the heroic battle of Musa Dagh is obvious. It is the artistic evidence of the sufferings and the heroic struggles of the Musa Dagh people. The book condenses the highest moral values: noble patriotism and uncompromising struggle against violence and barbarism.

In 1964, during my visit to Poland, I toured the Auschwitz concentration camp near Warsaw. Originally established during the Second World War, the camp has since been converted into a museum. The guide told us that the suffering exiles, who read that book, gained spiritual strength, filled with the hope of living.

Franz Werfel previously had detailed meetings with the Mkhitarist Fathers, studied in depth the history, ethnography and culture of the Armenian people, the traditional crafts of the seven villages of the Musa Dagh people: woodworking, bee-keeping, silk-cultivation and silk-thread production, as well as the finely woven embroideries and colorful carpets of the skilled women of the Musa Dagh. Franz Werfel vividly depicted the profound and picturesque popular love quartets, through which he created a typical Armenian environment for the activities of typical characters. All the characters in the novel, especially Johannes Lepsius, are truly unforgettable. Lepsius confronts Turkish Foreign Minister Enver Pasha, expressing his grave concerns: "*Armenians constituted the most educated and active segment of the Ottoman population. For centuries, they made monumental efforts to modernize the country's archaic economy. Who will replace the Armenian doctors, engineers, and lawyers, whose tireless work propelled the*



*nation forward?” – He adds defiantly, – “This is the power of godlessness, and the purpose of exile is annihilation.” Then he continues, “While Turkish neighbors loved and respected Armenians when sending them to the desert of Deir ez-Zor, Turkish soldiers acted as predators, mercilessly raping the Armenian women, as if they were raping their god... The sin of the government against the Armenians has cast a shadow over the government” (Werfel 1964, p. 142).*

According to F. Werfel, *“The extermination of the Armenians was the primary objective of Talaat and Enver’s national policy. However, the Germans could not remain neutral. This issue was fundamentally moral, before it became political. Therefore, it is necessary to take the power from the hands of the rulers of the world, from the politicians, and to establish the ‘Savior’s rule’ on the earth”* (Werfel 1964, p. 158).

The insightful author has come to the right conclusion that evil must be eradicated at its core. He stands for heroic resistance. This monumental work glorifies patriotism against barbarism and war. The author’s main idea is the rejection of all forms of violence and war, directed against tyrants throughout history. Yet, during his era, the world ignored the warnings of the Austrian visionary, leading to a greater evil: fascism.

Franz Werfel’s creative masterpiece maintains an enduring ideological relevance and purpose today. This rejection of violence remains highly pertinent for the Armenian people, who are still ensnared in the “velvet” clutches of violence.

## Conclusion

The heroic battle of Musa Dagh shook the world. It demonstrated to the mankind the immense capabilities of a handful of people, who have heroic traditions and unanimous will power.

In his historical novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, the notable Austrian writer Franz Werfel has artistically depicted in vivid colors the exploit of the Musa Dagh people. However, the world did not pay attention, in due time, to the alarm raised by the great writer, and greater evils, Fascism, other genocidal actions were born, and at present we face international terrorism.

## Notes

1. The ruins of the historic town of Selevkia (Seleucia) are found in these regions. The appellation form of “Svedia” is the echo of that ancient locality. (Andreassian 1967, p. 291, Andreassian 1935).

2. Turkish appellation.
3. Arabic appellation.
4. Armenian appellation. A number of legends about the toponymic name of Musa Dagħ see in: Svazlian 1984, Testimony (henceforth: T.) 45-50, pp. 110-116.
5. The memoir-testimonies of the Musa Dagħ eyewitnesses are included in my books: Cilicia: The Oral Tradition of the Western Armenians (Yerevan, 1994, T. 1397-1403, pp. 268-292) and The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors (Yerevan, 2011, T. 281-297, pp. 478-510).

### References

- Alboyajian, A. (1941). *Patmutyun hay gaghtakanutean* [History of the Armenian emigration] ( Vol. I). Cairo: Sahak-Mesrop. (in Armenian)
- Andreassian, T. (1935). *Zeytuni taragrutyune yev Svedio apstambutyune* [The exile of Zeytun and the rebellion of Svedia]. Aleppo: Armenian Evangelical Association of America. (in Armenian)
- Andreassian, T. (1967). *Svediyi barbare* [The dialect of Svedia]. Yerevan: AS ASSR. (in Armenian)
- Galoustian, G. (1934). *Marash kam Germanik yev heros Zeytun* [Marash or Germanik and heroic Zeytun]. New York: Central Administration of Marash Compatriotic Union, US. (in Armenian)
- Goushakjian, M. (1970). *Antioki ev sherjakayits patmutyun*. Hushamatean Musa Leran. [History of Antioch and its environs. Memorial book of Musa Dagħ]. Beirut: Jebel Musa Compatriotic Union. (in Armenian)
- Gyouzelian, G. (2001). *Musa Leran azgagrutyun* [The ethnography of Musa Dagħ]. Yerevan: Gitutyun. (in Armenian)
- Keleshian, M. (1949). *Sis-Matean* [Sis-Register]. Beirut: Hay Jemaran. (in Armenian)
- Svazlian, V. (1984). *Musa Ler. Hay azgagrutyun ev banahyusutyun* [Musa Dagħ. Armenian ethnography and folklore] (Vol.1). Yerevan: AS ASSR. (in Armenian)
- Svazlian, V. (1994). *Kilikia: Arevmtahayots banavor avandutyune* [Cilicia: The oral tradition of the Western Armenians]. Yerevan: Gitutyun. (in Armenian)
- Svazlian, V. (2011). *The Armenian Genocide: testimonies of the eyewitness survivors*. Yerevan: Gitutyun.
- Svazlian, V. (2015). *The heroic battle of Musa Dagħ: testimonies of the eyewitness survivors*. Yerevan: Gitutyun. (in Armenian & English)
- Werfel, F. (1964). *Musa leran karasun ory* [The forty days of Musa Dagħ]. Yerevan: Hayastan. (in Armenian)

ՄՈՒՍԱ ԼԵՌԱՆ ՀԵՐՈՍԱՄԱՐՏԸ  
ԸՍՏ ԱԿԱՆԱՏԵՍ-ՄԱՍՆԱԿԻՑՆԵՐԻ ՎԿԱՅՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ  
ԵՎ ՖՐԱՆՍ ՎԵՐՖԵԼԻ ՊԱՏԳԱՍԸ

Վերժինե Սվազյան

Մուսալեոցիները, որպես հայ ժողովրդի մի հատված, Կիլիկյան 300-ամյա շենշող պետականության անկումից հետո՝ անիշխանական 600 տարիների ընթացքում, առանձնապես զգացել են ազգային պետականության վերականգնման անհրաժեշտությունը, նրա իմաստն ու արժեքը: Այնինչ, հերոսամարտերում թրծված և իմաստնացած մուսալեոցիներն իրենց սխրանքը բանաձևել են շատ հակիրճ. «Ազադլըխը թվունգէն ձուարն ի» [*«Ազատությունը հրացանի ծայրին է»*] (Սվազյան 2015, էջ 27), այսինքն՝ ազատությունը զենքով են նվաճում: Սրան հետևում է. «Ազադլըխը բայրուխէն ձուարն ի» [*«Ազատությունը դրոշակի ծայրին է»*] (Սվազյան 2015, էջ 27), այսինքն՝ պետականությունն է ազատության երաշխիքը:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** *Մուսա Լեռ, հերոսամարտ, ականատես, Ֆրանց Վերֆել, պատգամ:*