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## REGIONAL MEETING OF THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARY PARTY IN CONSTANTINOPLE IN 1919

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The article offers a historical analysis of the regional meeting of the Constantinople Branch of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), held between June and August 1919. This gathering was particularly significant as it marked the first regional meeting in Constantinople since 1915. The agenda was wide-ranging and thorough. Key reports were presented by the ARF's Responsible Authority, the Central Committee, and various organizational bodies, reviewing their activities over the preceding period. A major portion of the meeting focused on internal organizational matters, including revisions to the party's Statute, structural reforms, and issues related to trade unions, cooperatives, and labor organizations. The discussions also addressed the party's relationships with neighboring countries, other political parties, the Armenian Patriarchate, national institutions, and the Turkish state. Special emphasis was placed on future propaganda strategies, particularly the role of the *Azatomart* newspaper. The meeting concluded with preparations for the upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> ARF General Meeting and the election of a new Central Committee to guide future initiatives.

**Keywords:** *Armenian Revolutionary Party, Constantinople, The Armistice of Mudros, the Patriarchate.*

### Introduction

The genocidal policy conducted by the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire during the first years of World War I has been heavily discussed in both Armenian and world historical-scientific literature. However, new documents keep springing up which come to further prove the fact of the crime committed by the Young Turks.

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Our analysis of a newly revealed historical document aims to introduce the attempts of the ARF Constantinople Branch to counteract the policy conducted by the Young Turks and to save parts of Armenia. The present research aims to conduct a thorough and in-depth analysis of the regional meeting of the ARF Constantinople Branch held in June-August, 1919, and the resolutions made during the meeting. The first part of the meeting was dedicated to the evaluation of the work of the ARF Constantinople Branch during the previous four years, while the second half addressed the upcoming activities of the organization. The participants centered on the future activities of the Armenian Revolutionary Party in Constantinople, as well as the agenda of the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF General Meeting to be held in autumn 1919. The last point of the agenda was to exclusively center on the problem of state-building of the newly independent Republic of Armenia.

The present research aims at:

- introducing the underground activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Party in Constantinople in the years of the Armenian Genocide;
- presenting the evaluations of the given activity;
- revealing the steps suggested by the ARF members of Constantinople to be taken towards the organizers of the Armenian Genocide;
- elaborating on the ideas of the future activity of the ARF in Constantinople after the end of the war;
- getting acquainted with the ideas of the ARF members concerning the future of the Republic of Armenia.

The report is based exclusively on the relevant documents of File D-884 of the ARF Central Archives which have been put in scientific circulation for the first time. These materials acquire far more significance because the File of the documents of the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF General Meeting has not survived. No research has been conducted on the subject matter so far. This is the first attempt to present a scientific account of the underground activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Party in Constantinople in the first years of World War I. The present research attempts to arrive at conclusions through historical investigation and analysis.

### **Evaluation of the ARF Constantinople regional meeting of the organization's activity from 1915 to 1919**

Shortly after the establishment of the Armenian Revolutionary Party in 1890, an organizational body of the party was also set up in Constantinople. During the rule of Abdul Hamid, the party acted secretly not only in Constantinople but in the whole territory of the Ottoman Empire (including Western Armenia and Cilicia). Following the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908, parties were given a

temporary opportunity to act freely in the whole empire. The ARF even had its representatives in the Ottoman Parliament. Just one year after the Revolution of the Young Turks, the relations between the ARF and the Young Turks started to decline seriously. After the Ottoman Empire got involved in WWI, the activity of the ARF was banned altogether. Hence, the Party went underground once again. After the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918, there were more or less favorable conditions for the party to function in Constantinople.

Under these conditions, the ARF Organizational Body *Vishap* informed the members about the intention to convene a new regional meeting on May 7, 1919, and circulated the draft agenda of the meeting. The preamble of the circular states that despite the irreversible human loss during the years of the Armenian Genocide, it is necessary to find comfort in the restoration of the independent state of Armenia and continue the path “colored with the sacred blood of our victims” (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. N14, p.1). As far as the agenda proper is concerned, it was quite broad (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, Document N 14, p. 2). The meeting was held on June 25, 1919. The Central Committee had invited 32 deputies to have a decisive say at the meeting (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D 25, p. 7). The meeting also had participants with a deliberative vote.

The meeting opened with the statement that starting from April 24, 1915, the Armenians in Constantinople and also ARF members had experienced hard times. Moreover, as it became known from private reports, the ARF members were among the ones who had faced direst displacements (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, p.80). Since April 24, 1915, the heads of the responsible bodies were replaced due to harsh political pressures: Chavarche Missakian, Vagharsh (Khosrov Papyan), Mkrtich (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p.13). In his speech Ch. Missakian referred to the period from April 24, 1915, to March 5, 1916, Vagharsh – from March 5, 1916, to October 15, 1916, and Mkrtich from October 15, 1916 to July 1917. Missakian’s report made it clear that two days after the mass arrests on April 24, 1915, a secret meeting of the ARF leaders (not arrested) was initiated by Grigor Merjyan (Merjanof) during which a temporary body was established which contacted with the ARF Central Committee in the Balkans. An attempt was made to establish contact with the ARF members in the Caucasus, as well as with the ARF Bureau. The institution made efforts to restore the district bodies of Constantinople and save what has remained of it (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, pp. 66-68).

It follows that despite the most severe policy conducted by the Young Turks, the local leaders of the ARF who had somehow escaped arrests and had remained in Constantinople after April 24, 1915, took practical measures to organize the

everyday life of the Armenians living in Constantinople. Vagharsh, the representative of the Responsible Body, reports that as far back as the start of April 1915, he witnessed Armenians being persecuted as the secret police forces worked most diligently. However, there was hope that the English would win in Çanakkale<sup>1</sup> and enter Constantinople to prevent the disaster. Despite the forecasts and warnings by ARF figures, the majority refused to believe that the arrests, starting on April 24 not only in Constantinople but also in Bursa and Partizak, would turn into a mass event (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D 25, p. 69).

Vagharsh tried to help his friends from the party in exile. However, soon he was convinced that all of them were going to die a most disgraceful death and that the war was not going to stop. In the meantime, the ARF Central Committee in Constantinople decided to form “revenge groups” and take both defensive and offensive measures. They were to attack railway stations, bridges, tunnels, and telegraphs. Measures were to be taken to get rid of some leading criminals (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 70).

The end of 1915 saw the establishment of a party body that got engaged in the task. Sadly, the plan was endangered because of the naivety of the Bulgarian friends. The Ottoman Empire traced out G. Merjanyan, who had visited Bulgaria and got arrested there (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 71). The same fate awaited Ch. Missakian in 1916 and the task of the “Revenge groups” was left unfinished. As a matter of fact, due to the strong will and moral responsibility of the ARF figures, as well as due to the close observation on the part of foreign ambassadors, Ch. Missakian’s trial did not lead to new arrests. Moreover, he was not charged with fabricated charges and was set free soon afterward (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 72).

Thus, the leading ARF figures of Constantinople who were in freedom, planned to take revenge on the masterminds and perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide still during the years of World War I. True, it was an impossible task under the close inspection of the Ottoman police, but it should be acknowledged that the ARF members of the Constantinople Branch did not reconcile with the reality that was being imposed on them. Moreover, they tried to punish the organizers of the massacre of the Armenians.

Meanwhile, an attempt was made to support the party friends, the ones who were in exile and their families. Mkrtich’s report makes it clear that the ARF members were consistently supporting the refugees and imprisoned Armenians (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, p. 76).

Another responsible body was established in 1918 which included such figures as Hakob Siruni, Aram Safrastyan, Armen Vahe, Dr. Barseghyan, and

others (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 78). The report presented by Aram Safrastyan covered the events from July 1918 to the Armistice and from then to February 1919.

It was possible to contact Avetis Aharonyan (Gharib) after the Armistice.<sup>2</sup> It was with his permission that the party set up a Temporary Body that set out to reorganize the Constantinople Branch. The Temporary Body established relations with the ARF members in Europe and Armenia, initiated the creation of the national consultative assembly for national issues with the participation of other movements, and launched the publication of *Ardaramart* newspaper. A. Safrastyan was appointed the editor of the newspaper (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, p. 77).<sup>3</sup> Aharonyan's visit to Constantinople and his meeting with the local members of the ARF before the Armistice, significantly boosted the organizational work of the party.

Thus, in the final stage of the war, and shortly after it ended, the ARF Constantinople Responsible Body carried out several highly important tasks: the launch of the newspaper, the reorganization of the Body, the establishment of relations with national and foreign institutions, etc. Despite the impact of the Genocide, the organization underwent restructuring and started a more intensive party activity in the districts, especially after the Armistice.

The ARF Constantinople Branch was already an active structure in the summer of 1919. Party groups and committees were restructured both in the districts of Constantinople – Bera, Kum Kapu, Samatiam, Pandrma, Üsküdar, Magrigyugh, Getik Pogha, Bospurus, Gatygyugh, Khasgyugh, Shuka, Chenkeler, Adabazar, Balikesir, as well as out of the city – Afyonkarahisar, Partizak, Kütahya, Konya, Bursa, Izmit and elsewhere. It was also planned to send party representatives to remote regions to comfort and encourage the Armenian people. However, the plan was not possible to realize due to the scarcity of funds (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 81).

The reports by the ARF representatives from different districts demonstrate the reactivation of the organizational life of the party after the Armistice. The report by the ARF representative of Gatygyugh highlights that after the Armistice an attempt was made to punish the perpetrators of the Genocide and the informers. It states, that the departing Germans sold their weapons to Turks. The ARF representatives tried to buy weapons from them, as well (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 82).

Following the Armistice, the union Ayg was reorganized thanks to the efforts of ARF party members in Üsküdar, which in turn helped revitalize women's social life. In a cultural boost to the community, ARF representative Vardan Sargsyan

organized a 120-member choir that went on to perform across Constantinople (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 85–86). Meanwhile, the *Asparez Union* – previously shut down by the Ittihat regime – was reopened, and a local scout organization also began operating in the area (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 87). In Kütahya, the ARF representative reported that due to inadequate self-defense capabilities, efforts were made to maintain cordial relations with the Italian military, which held control over the city (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 89). A library was operating in Bera, serving as a modest cultural center for the community (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 91). In Bursa, there were ongoing efforts to organize emigration to Armenia (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 92), while in Izmit, the local ARF representative noted that the remaining Armenians intended to leave the region, but sought compensation for their losses before doing so (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 92).

As can be seen, after the Armistice of Mudros, the ARF Branch in Constantinople was not only able to restore its activity, but carried out significant work in the educational and cultural life of the Armenians in Constantinople. Concurrently, the members of the Branch made efforts to organize the self-defense of the local Armenians and to punish the Turkish murderers. Ultimately, this idea received a more organized form during the 9<sup>th</sup> General Congress of the ARF and was partially implemented (Tasnapetian, p. 162).

Despite the shortcomings, the regional meeting expressed high appreciation for the work carried out by the bodies during the reported period.

### **Suggestions made at the 1919 ARF Constantinople regional meeting for the upcoming activity**

After evaluating the organization's work over the previous four years, the regional meeting went on to discuss the upcoming plans. As already stated, the members of the organization consistently contemplated the possible punishment of the perpetrators and traitors. For instance, in his report Hakob Siruni suggested punishing all those who betrayed the ARF, for example the member of the ARF Central Committee Barsegh Shahbaz, and others (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, p. 98). The Meeting attached great importance to mutual understanding in the work with the Patriarchate. As discussions revealed, it was planned to change the location of the Patriarchate and the nature of its activity. As far as the Patriarchate and national institutions, as well as the National Constitution, were not able to protect the Armenians, it was suggested that they should reorganize the national institutions with temporary solutions at first, which would be followed by major changes (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 43-44). Hence, it was supposed

that serious changes were to take place in terms of the legal organization of national life. The National Constitution adopted in 1863 did not meet the existing situation.

The restructuring of trade unions, consumer, cooperative, and labor unions, the formation of new ones and the work to be done with them were attached primary significance to. These unions were to be reorganized on the national land (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 94-96). In fact, as a socialist party, the ARF paid great attention to the protection of the interests of the Armenian workers in Constantinople. Special attention was also paid to the interests of the Armenian merchants in the city. The latter had already realized that it was necessary to support a certain party in their relations with the Turkish state, and with this in mind, some of them started to build relations with the ARF (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 22-23). It was also necessary to be in good terms with the other Armenian national parties (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, Document 25, pp. 94-96). The problem of establishing relations with the Turkish state, the Turks and other Muslims was of no less importance for the ARF members. Close cooperation with the Greeks, Assyrians, and Yezidis was of primary significance (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 40-44; pp. 94-95). As far as the relations with the Turks and other Muslims were concerned, it was suggested that they should not ignore the Turkish police and the rag-tag, and should try to be at peace with other Turkish parties (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 33-34). It was expected that problems should be settled with the Turkish state as well (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 94-95). The participants of the meeting also agreed that it was necessary to restart the publication of *Azatamart* for advocacy purposes. At the same time, it was necessary to write down the history of the activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Party in Constantinople and to introduce it to the public (ARF Archives, Part 4, F. 884, D. 25, pp. 41-44; pp. 94-96). All this was important not only to cover the ARF activity and to inform the public about the developments but also to assess the past and attach value to it.

In their belief that the ARF could serve as a strong and effective political force, the participants of the meeting emphasized the vital role the party was to play in national reorganization, immigration, the reconstruction of the homeland, and the overall economic development of the country. A key focus of the meeting was the discussion of the party's internal structure and organizational matters. It was clear that broad, grassroots engagement was needed. The ARF had to build stronger ties with the people, raise awareness about its mission, and create a sense of unity and shared purpose. Promoting immigration to Armenia, organizing literary evenings, lectures, and community discussions, and revitalizing the ARF

student union were all seen as important steps in this direction. A major part of this reorganization involved acknowledging and learning from past mistakes. It was proposed that the party's Statute place greater emphasis on discipline and the need for discretion and confidentiality. The plan also called for establishing ARF meeting points across all districts of Constantinople and holding biweekly general meetings where committee representatives would present reports and engage in discussions. At the same time, the Central Committee would host monthly consultative meetings, bringing together district representatives and invited participants for broader coordination. Committees were expected to submit regular bulletins and proposals to the Central Committee to maintain alignment and transparency. Cultural engagement was also prioritized. Regular literary and artistic events were to be organized, not only to strengthen bonds among members but also to help raise funds. Special attention was given to engaging the intellectual community. Rather than holding street demonstrations, the party would focus on hosting public lectures to broaden its reach and legitimacy.

To connect with wider audiences and spread its message more effectively, the ARF recognized the need to publish and share its vision with the public. Altogether, this ambitious internal work was seen as essential to transforming the ARF into a more dynamic and resilient organization, capable of facing future challenges and turning the Armenian presence in Constantinople into a powerful force.

### **The discussion of the agenda of the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF general meeting**

As already stated, the Constantinople regional meeting was to discuss the agenda of the 9<sup>th</sup> General Meeting of the Armenian Revolutionary Party to be held in autumn in Yerevan in 1919. The Meeting attached great importance to the discussion of political, economic and educational issues of the Republic of Armenia presenting its vision on the future.

The ARF members in Constantinople found it appropriate that the Armenians of the colony should take part in the upcoming election of the Supreme Legislative Body of the Republic of Armenia – The Constitutional Meeting, in proportion to their number. They also considered it important that the Constitutional Meeting should be the reflection of the majority so that the major laws of the country could be adopted *based on wider principles* (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, pp. 44-45). As it follows, the Armenians of Constantinople supported the parliamentary system as a form of government in Armenia, too.

As far as the two Armenian delegations in Paris were concerned, the participants of the meeting agreed that they should unite and be headed by an



official representative of the Republic of Armenia. The participants warmly welcomed the statement of the declaration of the United and Independent Armenia by the RA Government on May 28, 1919. The issue of the RA guardianship was also addressed at the meeting. Because of the neutral stance of the USA during the war, the meeting suggested that the US should take the mandate of the RA (ARF Archives, Part 4, F 884, D. 25, pp. 46-48). As can be seen, the ARF members in Constantinople were not only highly interested in the future of the Republic of Armenia but also tried to support the position of the RA government.

The meeting also brought forward some noteworthy suggestions regarding different aspects of political life in the Republic of Armenia. For example, there was a proposal to introduce trial by jury and ensure the right to a fair and open trial within the justice system (*ibid.*, p. 49).

The participants expressed clear and progressive views on education. They advocated for university autonomy, the establishment of Armenian as the sole state language, free access to secondary education, and compulsory elementary education. They also called for improved social status and benefits for teachers, supported the existence of private colleges, and proposed various other educational reforms – many of which had already begun to be implemented by the Armenian government (*ibid.*, p. 50). In terms of infrastructure and public services, the participants believed that essential systems, such as communication, postal services, the telegraph, and the railway, should fall under the control of the Republic of Armenia (*ibid.*, p. 50). They also endorsed the introduction of a progressive tax system, which they justified on social grounds (*ibid.*, p. 50).

Social issues received significant attention. Labor protection was not overlooked (*ibid.*, p. 57), and immigration policy was seen as a strategic priority. The ARF supporters emphasized the importance of organizing immigration in a structured, state-directed manner (*ibid.*, p. 52). This approach extended to land policy, which was another focal point of the discussions. Land was envisioned as state property, not for sale, and intended to be distributed among families based on their size. Immigrant peasants were also to be granted land (*ibid.*, pp. 53-54). Additionally, natural resources such as mines, water, and forests were declared state-owned (*ibid.*, p. 54), reflecting strong support for state regulation in this area.

While advocating for state control over land and natural resources, the participants were open to foreign investment, provided the government maintained a stake in any such venture (*ibid.*, p. 55). These investments were viewed as essential for the development of domestic infrastructure and industry (*ibid.*, p. 56), highlighting a generally favorable stance toward economic modernization.

Notably, a year after this meeting, the Armenian government adopted the *Law of Independence*,<sup>4</sup> an initiative that saw active participation from the Armenian community in Constantinople.

At the conclusion of the meeting, a new Central Committee for the ARF's Constantinople Branch was elected. The newly appointed members were V. Martikyan, Grigor Merjanyan, Hrach (Karpis-Karapet) Papazyan, Harutyun Gevonyan, and Gurgen Sefiryan. Ch. Missakian and A. Safrastyan were elected deputies to the 9<sup>th</sup> General Meeting of the ARF (ibid, pp. 63-64). The meeting concluded with messages of solidarity and greetings sent to RA Prime Minister Alexander Khatisyan, the RA Delegation in Paris, the Armenian and Western Bureaus of the ARF, and the ARF's central bodies in the diaspora (ibid, pp. 64–65).

### Conclusion

The research leads to the following conclusions:

- During the years of the Armenian Genocide, the ARF Branch in Constantinople made significant efforts to assist Armenians in exile, as well as those residing in the Ottoman capital, in improving their living conditions.
- As early as 1915, members of the ARF Constantinople Branch began planning to bring the organizers and perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide to justice – an initiative that was formally adopted at the ARF General Meeting in 1919.
- Despite the devastating consequences of the Genocide, substantial efforts were undertaken to reactivate the Party and reorganize Armenian life in Constantinople.
- Like other diaspora organizations, the ARF Constantinople Branch was deeply concerned with the future development and consolidation of the newly declared Republic of Armenia and articulated its vision at the ARF's 9<sup>th</sup> General Meeting.

In 1923, the Kemalist forces seized control of Constantinople, marking the start of a new era of terror for the Armenians in the city, particularly for members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

### Notes

1. The Battle of Çanakkale between the troops of the Triple Entente (mostly English) and the Ottoman Empire, also known as the Battle of Dardaneli or

Galipoli, lasted from February 19 to January 9 and ended with the victory of the latter.

2. Avetis Aharonyan was the head of the RA Delegation in Constantinople starting from 1918. The delegation held negotiations with the Ottomans and functioned until the Armistice of Mudros.

3. It should be noted that shortly after the regional meeting, *Chakatamart*, a newspaper published in Constantinople since 1918, effectively came under the influence of the ARF and, through its mission, replaced *Azatamart*.

4. For more information about the law see Stepanyan and Martirosyan's article published in 2021 in the *Collection of the History Museum of Armenia: Materials of the conference dedicated to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence of Armenia* (pp. 288-293) (in Armenian)

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### ՀԱՅ ՀԵՂԱՓՈԽԱԿԱՆ ԿՈՒՍԱԿՑՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՐԶԱՅԻՆ ԺՈՂՈՎՐ ԿՈՍՏԱՆԴՆՈՒՊՈԼԻՍՈՒՄ 1919 ԹՎԱԿԱՆԻՆ

#### Խաչատուր Ստեփանյան

Հոդվածում ներկայացված է Հայ Հեղափոխական Դաշնակցության (ՀԶԴ) Կոստանդնուպոլսի մասնաճյուղի 1919 թվականի հունիս-օգոստոս ամիսներին կայացած տարածաշրջանային ժողովի պատմական վերլուծությունը: Այս ժողովը հատկապես նշանակալից էր, քանի որ այն 1915 թվականից ի վեր Կոստանդնուպոլսում կայացած առաջին տարածաշրջանային ժողովն էր: Հիմնական զեկույցներ

ներկայացրին ՀՅԴ պատասխանատու մարմինը, Կենտրոնական կոմիտեն և տարբեր կազմակերպչական մարմիններ՝ վերանայելով կուսակցության նախորդող ժամանակահատվածի գործունեությունը: Հանդիպման մեծ մասը կենտրոնացած էր ներքին կազմակերպչական հարցերի, հարևան երկրների, թուրքական պետության, այլ քաղաքական կուսակցությունների, ինչպես նաև Պատրիարքության, ազգային հաստատությունների հետ հարաբերությունների վրա: Հատուկ շեշտադրվեցին ապագա քարոզչական ռազմավարությունները և, մասնավորապես՝ «Ազատամարտ» թերթի դերը այդ գործում: Հանդիպումն ավարտվեց ՀՅԴ առաջիկա 9-րդ ընդհանուր ժողովի նախապատրաստական աշխատանքով և նոր Կենտրոնական կոմիտեի ընտրությամբ:

**Բանալի Բառեր՝** *Հայ Հեղափոխական Դաշնակցություն, Կուսանդնուպոլիս, Մուղրոսի զինադադար, պատրիարքություն:*