

DOI 10.23859/2587-8344-2017-1-1-6

UDC 94 (560)

Andrey Mikhailov

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor
Research Institute (Military History)
Military Academy of the General Staff
of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation
Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation
dragun66@mail.ru

**A review of the book: Sargis Torossian ‘From Dardanelles to Palestine.
Memoires of an Armenian officer of the Turkish army’**

Abstract. This review evaluates the significance of the memoirs by a Turkish officer of Armenian descent regarding the events of the World War I on its various fronts, as well as the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The uniqueness of S. Torossian's experience sheds light on many issues that cause disputes among historians and politicians of both past and present.

Keywords: World War I, Armenian genocide of 1915, the Ottoman Empire, Young Turk movement, the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915, Armenian legion

In 2014, the Armenian genocide Museum-Institute of National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (Yerevan) published Sarkis Torossian's memoirs (1891–1954) ‘From Dardanelles to Palestine. Memoirs of an Armenian officer in the Turkish army’ [1]. The author was a man of uneasy fate. Being of Armenian descent, he served in the Ottoman Empire army, and as part of it, he participated in some battles of World War I, lost his nearest and dearest during the persecution started by Turks against Armenians; then he fought against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's adherents in the ranks of the Armenian legion and contributed to anti-Turkish actions among Arabs.

The Head of the Armenian genocide Museum-Institute, Doctor of Historical Sciences G.A. Demoyan in a brief preface to the Russian edition called Torossian's memoirs “unprecedented and unique in plot”, talking about his life, which “intertwined heroism and dedication with betrayal and intrigues of ill-wishers as well as love and pain of loss” [1, p. 3].

S. Torossian's memoirs were first published in English in the USA in 1947 [2] with the preface by John Archibald MacCallum (1892–1973), a prominent Australian

politician and an educator who happened to fight against the Turks in Egypt and Germans in France in 1916–17 as a member of the British army.

Describing these published memoirs, MacCallum noted their importance as a historical source of information about World War I and the confrontation of Triple Entente with Turkey. “Subsequent historians of the Great War,” he wrote, “when they come to deal with tragically abortive efforts of the Allies at the Dardanelles, and Allenby’s historic conquest of the Palestine, will find in this book a valuable source of information and the material which will give color to their story” [1, p. 13]. J. MacCallum also noted a very powerful anti-war potential in Torossian’s war memoirs. Per him, everyone who read this book would lay it aside “with the determination to do all in their power to ensure that a better way shall be found to settle our political, racial, and religious disputes, than by resort to arms” [1, p. 13].

It seems interesting to complement these assessments with G.A. Demoyan’s discourse, who pointed out that Torossian’s memoirs allow to see many events of World War I in the Orient from quite an unexpected point of view, and lead to the conclusions which differ significantly from the well-established estimates and characteristics. This feature is determined by the author’s personality; it required several years to change his views: from a zealous service in the Turkish army to irreconcilable struggle against the forces which stood under the banner of Turkish patriotism.

“Parallel stories...,” G.A. Demoyan writes in his book, “unsaid and deliberately concealed under a ban of somebody’s behoof, are unconditionally part of the whole and are worth being read...” [1, p. 5] This statement is not to be denied; we cannot also underestimate the fact that S. Torossian’s assertions were determined by the circumstances of his dramatic and extraordinary personal fate. However, this fact doesn’t diminish the significance of his memoirs as a historical source, but to some extent makes them particularly interesting.

The publication of Torossian’s memoirs in Russian is undoubtedly an important event both for the professional historians studying World War I and for everyone interested in it. The only thing to regret is its small circulation of 500 copies.

Sargis Torossian was born in the town of Everek (in Kayseri area) in a big and quite wealthy Armenian family. Per his memories, from an early age he lived in the continuous state of suspense and fear that the Armenians felt fearing their safety and lives in the Ottoman Empire. “As I recall my boyhood,” S. Torossian goes on to say, “it seemed to me that there was something material about the very atmosphere, the very buildings in which we lived, where we worshipped and where we went to school. It was like living in a beleaguered city, in an armed camp, only there were no arms, since the Christian subjects of Ottoman Turkey were permitted no weapon, not even a sabre. There was always something electric in the air, eternally charged with rumors and ferocious restraint, with grim patience and perpetual fear” [1, p. 18].

Nevertheless, the young Sargis Torossian had an unusually bold dream of becoming an officer of the Turkish army. The legislation of that time seemed to create unsurmountable obstacles on his way. However, while Torossian was educated in Turkish State College in Adrianople (Edirne), he befriended a young arab Moharrir, whose father was brigadier general. Through this influential military man's help, the young S. Torossian secured a position in the Artillery College in Istanbul together with Moharrir.

After graduation in 1914, Torossian was appointed the rank 'second lieutenant' [1, p. 24] and was sent to Germany for three months of intensive training. Before Turkey joined World War I, he was appointed commander to fort Ertogrul on cape Helles (south-west end of Gallipoli Peninsula), which guarded the entrance to the Dardanelles.

The beginning of World War I made the young officer not only anxious, but inspired and dreaming of military feats. "We were young, and the war had the sound of a great adventure and the promise of decorations and honor. We never gave a thought to the battle's din, and the bloody, gory, sordid mess of it" [1, p. 25].

However, young officers' optimism was greatly inspired by the overall mood in the Turkish society of that time. The rise of bellicose patriotism in summer and autumn of 1914 was colorfully and reliably described in his memoirs: "The air of Constantinople was charged with frenzied rumor. Bands were playing everywhere; soldiers marching, bayonets flashing; a smart German officer, great numbers of them suddenly, like an immigration; cavalry; clanking spurs; flag waving; cheering; shouting; <...>" [1, p. 25].

It is easy to see that the scenes described by Torossian were very like the ones revealed in Saint-Petersburg and Moscow of that time, as well as Vienna and Berlin, London and Paris; in cities and towns in all countries that entered or were ready to enter the fierce struggle.

On 3 November 1914, the English and the French fleet under the command of the British vice-admiral Sackwill Carden bombarded the external fortifications of Dardanelles. Though the fort Ertogrul, where Torossian was located, wasn't damaged, the young officer witnessed terrible destruction and death of people in the nearby fort Sed-ul-Bahr, where British shells had fallen in the ammunition store room.

The Soviet military historian Kolenkovsky described the results of bombardments resorting to a German source: "360 shells exploded, as well as 10 000 kg of gunpowder. The explosion in Sed-ul-Bahr destroyed temporarily all six guns, four of which were brought back into the combat condition in a few days; whilst two others remained idle for a long time. <...> The English consider that 80 people were killed and wounded in Sed-ul-Bahr" [3, p. 20].

It all looked much more terrible and tragic for Torossian, who observed the battle with his own eyes. From his point of view, about 500 soldiers and officers perished

in the fort. “They,” the memoirist wrote, “had been literally blown to pieces. Colonel Halil Bey was the only survivor, and when I saw him, he still was half crazed from his experience” [1, p. 31].

It is worth noting that the bombardment of 3 November was aimed at stopping Turkey from taking part in the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary, but its political result was directly opposite [4, p. 92–93]. The young officer of Armenian descent was shocked, and his illusions were dispelled. “This war business,” Torossian remembered, “was turning out to be a nasty bit” [1, p. 31].

On 13 December 1914, S. Torossian happened to observe one more episode of the fight for the Straits, deplorable for the Turks: a British submarine torpedoed the Turkish warship *Mesoudieh*. “I could see the sailors,” the memoirist recalls, “rushing wildly to the life boats, others jumping overboard. It all seemed a little mad, a little incredible. <...> Men dotted the water everywhere; a cutter foundered; life buoys bobbed about; men were swimming. When she sank, there was a great gushing of steam” [1, p. 32].

In February 1915, during a British large-scale operation against the Turkish fortifications on the shores of the Dardanelles, S. Torossian was in the thick of things. On 19 February, during the new firing of Turkish fortifications, fort Ertogrul’s batteries had to fight the English and the French ships. The result of the battle was unfortunate for the Turks [4, p. 161–64]. Per Torossian, the British dreadnought *Queen Elizabeth* for two hours “kept up a constant fire ... until Fort Ertogrul was a mess of shambles” [1, p. 37].

The bombardment renewed on 5–7 March and then on 18 March [4, p. 177, 192]. Whilst commanding the artillery, Torossian repeatedly demonstrated his personal courage and composure, but on 18 March he was wounded by fragments of an accidental shell and was taken to hospital. As we know, the British and the French did not manage to seize the Strait of Dardanelles. Later, reflecting on the reasons of this outcome, S. Torossian claimed that the English and French high command held off on purpose, as a complete rout of Turkey would have led Russia to strengthen its position in the region significantly.

“The vision of imperial Russia holding Constantinople,” Torossian went on to say, “was too much for the little men of the chancelleries; it became a nightmare and so an easy victory was somehow made over into a very shabby second hand defeat” [1, p. 45].

However, plenty of military historians have been of a different opinion, suggesting that Entente’s commandment realized the impossibility of seizing the Dardanelles solely with the fleet without any landing [3, p. 56–57].

The courage demonstrated by S. Torossian during the defense of the Dardanelles drew attention of high Turkish commandment and promoted him to captain. Moreover, the young officer received an audience at the Minister of War Enver Pasha. “Af-

ter staring at me for fully a minute,” Torossian remembered, “His Excellency arose and introduced me as the Armenian hero of the Dardanelles to his German advisers marshall Lehman von Sanders and general Vondergoltz” [1, p. 53]. The almighty minister of war questioned the newly-promoted captain about the advantages and drawbacks in the fortifications of the Dardanelles and offered to choose from two appointments: come back to Ertogrul or take over the command of the field artillery regiment of the eighth division. Torossian chose the latter. However, the regiment was located on the shores of the Dardanelles not far from Sed-ul-Bahr seized by the English landing.

Since June 1915, the Turkish government was deporting and fiercely persecuting the Armenian population of the Empire [5, p. 83]. Despite all Torossian’s merits, his parents were also deported, and after a lot of hardship they perished. However, Torossian did not know of their fate for a long time.

A lot of nearest and dearest people of “the Armenian hero of the Dardanelles” suffered. Besides, as Torossian explained, there was an attempt of assassination aimed at him, organized by Talaat Pasha, one of the most prominent leaders of Young Turks. Nevertheless, he remained in the ranks of the Turkish army; in summer and autumn of 1915 he took part in the battles in Gallipoli peninsula still demonstrating the fortitude but thinking of breaking up with the Turks and even of revenge.

In September 1916, Torossian received an appointment and was made assistant to the commander of the forty-sixth artillery regiment on Macedonian front. In November, he was made responsible for the command of the 51st artillery battalion, which took part in German-Turkish attack on the Romanian front. In these battles, Torossian demonstrated his courage again; he was wounded and deserved the battle orders. His memoirs about that period of his service contained interesting descriptions of the fighting, descriptions of the Turkish army as well as Germans and Bulgarians, its allies.

At the end of 1916, the 51st battalion was ordered to return to Istanbul. Very soon Torossian reunited with ‘his’ 46 artillery regiment and headed to the Mesopotamian front with it. On the way to his new place of service, he repeatedly met some Armenian refugees and witnessed sufferings and calamities that overtook Armenians of the Ottoman Empire.

Torossian himself had to go through many hard times. This is how he described the march to Mosul, for example, at the end of May – early June 1917. “The roads were rough and filled with jagged rocks, and the march was slow and dreary, over a land that alternated between desert and malarial marsh. The sun was merciless, so much so that traveling by day became impossible. We would squirm for shelter in the thick marshes and boil the muddy germ infested scum to drink. Mosquitoes would descend upon us in hordes. Malaria and typhus broke out, and hundreds died.

<...> The last march was day on 9 June 1917, an army of specters with staring eyes and blackened lips made a pretense at marching as they filed into Mosul” [1, p. 104].

The relationship between the Turkish army and the local people was quite complicated and not always peaceful. S. Torossian described the morals of Mesopotamian arabs with great expression and quite vividly: “...their attitude toward strangers,” he said, “varied from tribe to tribe. As a rule, they were hospitable to guests and then, after they had repasted heavily and were asleep, would attack and murder them” [1, p. 105].

At the end of July 1917, S. Torossian had to take part in quite a dangerous undertaking – an expedition for food for the Turkish army to one of the tribes. “Two weeks before our arrival in Mosul,” Torsion wrote in his memoires, “the general commander, Khalil Pasha, having experienced resistance to his food levies on part of larger tribes, had sent fifteen hundred Turkish soldiers to solicit foodstuff or forage if necessary. They never returned, and the severed heads of officers were sent back in sacks as their answer” [1, p. 106].

It is also worth noting that the above-mentioned Khalil Pasha, who commanded the Turkish army on the Mesopotamian front, was Enver Pasha’s uncle and participated in the battles in the Caucasus, where he became known for the cruel massacre on Armenian and Greek population. It was quite understandable that Torossian described this warlord’s bad luck so thoroughly.

The memoirist managed to get some food in the end. To win over the sheik, he resorted to a very brave method – he helped the Arabs to defeat their neighbors Kurds.

In early October 1917, the 46th division, which included Torossian’s artillery battalion, “was ordered to the front” [1, p. 111] because of the English gaining ground on the banks of the Tigris. In the following battles, the author of the memoires demonstrated his talents of a commander again. Among other things, to confuse the British pilots he “ordered the construction of dummy cannons made of stove pipe and had them placed at points of easy visibility to the enemy” [1, p. 112]. This method was partially effective – the air bombardment damaged the Turks significantly; Torossian was wounded again, and this time in his hand. He also had to recover from the attacks of the British infantry (mainly Hindko soldiers).

In early December 1917, the 46th division was ordered to the Palestine front. Originally it was stationed around Tel-up-Half village (in Syria). Torossian found out that there was a large camp for deported Armenians nearby. Having visited it, he met his sister and learnt from her about the death of his parents and their sufferings. His sister’s story, as well the stories of the people of his nationality, who were expelled from their homes and bullied, naturally acerbated Torossian against the Turkish authorities.

On the Palestine front, Torossian’s 46th artillery regiment camped near the town of Nablus on the western banks of the Jordan. Here, he had to face difficulties related to

the local climate and nature again. S. Torossian remembered: “The weather became unbearably hot and hordes of mosquitoes from nearby swamps infested the camps and spread typhus and malaria. Hundreds of officers and soldiers were ill in the hospitals for five or six weeks at a time” [1, p. 131].

In spring and summer 1918, the 46th regiment took part in severe battles on the final stage of Sinai-Palestinian campaign. The Turkish army was exhausted and bloodless, their morale felt low [6, p. 199]. Rumors that the Armenian legion would participate in the new attack on the Turkish forces alongside with the British and the French (and that was true) influenced Torossian immensely [1, p. 134].

However, his life changed greatly after a short while.

In mid-August, the Arab supporters of independence from the Ottoman Empire contacted S. Torossian. Per memoirist’s story, he had lost his dear woman, an adopted daughter of arab Pasha, who was of Armenian descent and died of tuberculosis. His personal tragedy, the horrors of the war and severe persecution of Armenians reinforced his intention to struggle against the Ottoman government.

S. Torossian worked out action plans at several meetings with the Arab sheiks. He undertook to organize that the force of Arab cavalry mobilized to Turkish army would change sides and support the English and the French troops with their first major attack. The opportunity turned up on 20 September 1918. Torossian described emotionally how leading Arab horsemen were sabering the rear of the seventh and eighth Turkish armies, that were retreating under the British pressure.

He admired the Arab warriors: “In all my military career, I had never witnessed such keenness of vision, such alertness, such rash courage and discipline as shown by these desert horsemen” [1, p. 151]. He wrote with much liking about the future king of Iraq Feisal ibn Hussein (1883–1933), who commanded the Arab troops in general Allenby’s expeditionary building.

A renowned British agent and traveler, one of Arab revolt sponsors, Lawrence of Arabia, on the contrary, did not arouse much enthusiasm in Torossian. The memoirist pointed out that he was just a ‘paymaster’ to whom “the sheiks with their men presented for payment their bills properly approved by the Arab leaders” [1, p. 154].

At the beginning of 1919, Torossian with a small platoon of Armenian volunteers was sent to Cilicia, occupied by Armenian legion [7, p. 85]. His aim was to defend the local people and fight many Turkish units that were attacking the refugees coming back home, as well as civilians. However, very soon his situation as well as that of Armenian legion became uneasy and dangerous: England and France gave up their militant action against Turkey, and their troops were gradually withdrawn from Cilicia.

Torossian considered the allies’ unwillingness to continue the war with Turkey as a betrayal. As an example, of such an outcome, he described the events in the city of Marash. “...French forces,” he continued, “were recalled from the vicinity of Marash, leaving the inhabitants easy victims to the Maranders. In less than a week af-

terwards, the Turks entered the city and massacred over twelve thousand Armenians” [1, p. 161]. Torossian had a small platoon and had to act creatively to provide the Armenians with defense. He often used his knowledge of psychology, as well as Turkish officers’ opinions and manners.

At the beginning of 1920, the situation became desperate in the memoirist’s opinion. He considered Mustafa Kemal’s adherents to be enemies and their actions ‘banditry’ [1, p. 163]. “French soldiers were massacred as the Turks grew more confident and stronger,” Torossian wrote, “and thus the betrayers too were betrayed. The country was overrun with rebellion” [1, p. 163]. S. Torossian tried to wage guerilla warfare against the Turks, but then he realized its hopelessness. “Our quest was obviously hopeless and we were overwhelmed by history,” he noted bitterly.” I decided at last to put aside my sword and gun. Cilicia was not the Armenian homeland but a seething cauldron in which intrigues were brewed in the blood of my people” [1, p. 170]. Thus, Torossian resigned from the army.

Summarizing the facts from the Armenians’ history in World War I, he grimly concluded that all the leading European states intended to make use of the Armenian people and their desire for independence to their own benefit.

It is worth emphasizing that many of S. Torossian’s judgements are one-sided though. However, it does not diminish their significance as a historical source.

Unfortunately, the reviewed publication of S. Torossian’s memoirs has certain drawbacks: first, it lacks nominal and geographical indexes; there are also very few short comments to the text. Nevertheless, the published book seems to be an essential contribution to the historiography of the problem.

The review is recommended to those interested in historical sciences.

References

1. Torossian S. *Ot Dardanell do Palestiny. Vospominaniia armianskogo ofitsera turetskoi armii*. [From Dardanelles to Palestine. Memoirs of an Armenian officer in the Turkish army]. Yerevan: The Armenian Genocide Museum-institute, 2014. 176 p. (In Russian)
2. Torossian S. *From Dardanelles to Palestine: A True Story of Five Battle Fronts of Turkey and its Allies and Harem Romance (Personal Memoirs)*. Boston: Merador Pub. Co, 1947. 219 p.
3. Kolenkovskii A. *Dardannel’skaia operatsiia* [The Dardanelles Operation]. Second edition. Moscow: State military publishing house of the people’s Commissariat of Defense of the USSR, 1938. 136 p. (In Russian)
4. Mikhailov V.V. *Gallipoli 1915: mogila russkoi mechty i britanskikh soldat* [The Gallipoli Campaign of 1915: The Grave of Russian Dreams and British Soldiers]. St. Petersburg: Nestor, 2010. 268 p. (In Russian)
5. Mikhailov V.V. *Britaniia i Rossiia v reshenii vnutripoliticheskikh protivorechii v Osmanskoi imperii v gody I mirovoi voiny* [Britain and Russia in the Solution of Internal Political Contradictions in the Ottoman Empire during World War I]. St. Petersburg: Nestor, 2007. 283 p. (In Russian)
6. Mikhailov V.V. *Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Osmanskoi imperii pered nachalom i vo vremia Pervoi mirovoi voiny i meropriiatiia Rossii i Velikobritanii po oslableniiu turetskoi ekonomiki*



[Economic situation in the Ottoman Empire prior to and during World War I and activities of Russia and Great Britain to weaken the Turkish economy]. *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta* [Bulletin of St. Petersburg University]. 2007. Series. 2. Issue. 4, pp. 191–201. (In Russian)

7. Mikhailov V.V. K voprosu o sozdanii i boevykh deistviakh armianskikh dobrovol'cheskikh formirovaniy na turetskikh frontakh Pervoi mirovoi voiny [To the question of creation and tactical activities of Armenian paramilitary troops on Turkish fronts during World War I]. *Novy chasovoi* [New Sentry], 2008, no. 19, pp. 77–85. (In Russian)