



STALINIST TERROR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Whether by design or coincidence remains unclear, but twenty days after the assassination of Khanjian, a new campaign of repressions was announced. On July 29, 1936, the Central Committee of the Communist Party sent all republican and other major party organizations a "Closed letter describing the terrorist activities of the Trotsky-Zinoviev counter-revolutionary block"; the letter listed the "crimes" of the group and demanded efforts to strengthen the fight against any kind of anti-Soviet elements in order to identify hidden enemies in state and party bodies. The new Armenian government reacted immediately. An "Informational Letter" addressed to the Head of the Department of the Leading Party Organs of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) Georgi Malenkov and the Zakkryaykom Secretary of Sergey Kudryavtsev explained in detail the work done to identify the "enemies" in Armenia, even listing the ones who had been defeated. Yet this letter did not impress its intended audience since it listed only three senior officials—the above mentioned A. Stepanian, Drastamat Ter-Simonian (the Head of the Department for Arts at the Council of People's Commissars) and Aghassi Galoyan (the Secretary of the Party Collegium of the Supervisory Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia).

So the new government of Armenia, guided by the leadership of the Zakkraykom, began to create a fictitious organization to satisfy their superiors. Acting efficiently, they primarily used individuals who had already been arrested, extracting from them testimony about the members and activities of nonexistent groups. Simultaneously, in the middle of 1936, mass arrests began among various social strata, principally targeting government and political figures and intellectuals. This method of identifying "enemies" made it possible to

quickly "reveal" a "Trotskyite-nationalist" group, whose members were N. Stepanian, Sahak Ter-Gabrielian (former chairman of the Council of People's Commissars), Arsen Yesayan and Danoush Shahverdian (Chairmen of the Relief Committee of Armenia, called HOK in Armenian), Aramayis Yerzinkian (former People's Commissar of Agriculture), and Artavazd Yeghiazarian (former People's Commissar of Education), among others. These people were selected for a reason. As committed communists, prominent statesmen and party leaders, they had served as protectors of the national interests of Armenia and the Armenian people. The political goals and means of implementation adopted by Stalin in the Soviet Union and Beria in the Transcaucasus were unacceptable to them. Naturally, they were the first to fall victim to the political terror. In the following months virtually all of the party-state elite of the republic was repressed, in particular, in various years, the secretaries of the Communist Party Gevork Alikhanian (father of the prominent human rights defender Elena Bonner), Haikaz Kostanian, Sarkis Lukashin (Srapionian), the Chairmen of the Council of People's Commissars and Central Executive Committee Moushegh Danielyan, Sarkis Kassian, Sergo Martikian, People's Commissars Stepanian, Vahan Yeremian, Garegin Goumedin (Melik-Dadayan), and many others, almost all of whom were shot.

In this new phase of eliminating their real or imaginary political opponents, the authorities began to consider any connections with the Arme-

nian Diaspora, irrespective of form and content, as a political crime.

In June 1937 the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs Mugdusi in a memo to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia Amatuni writes about Ter-Gabrielian: "In 1931 S. M. Ter-Gabrielian together with Erzinkian, Yesayan, Ter-Simonian, and others established an anti-Soviet, Armenian nationalist-Trotskyite Center. The Center and the core of leadership include 14 people, among them 10 former members of the Communist Party of Armenia". According to Mugdusi, the anti-Soviet activities of the Center were carried out as follows: "anti-Soviet, nationalist work in foreign Armenian colonies; connections with the capitalists and the bourgeois parties of the Ramkavars and Dashnaks; collecting funds through them for Armenia in exchange for adopting policy positions that were identical to those of these parties, the disorientation of Armenians workers abroad, drowning out their fight against a local national bourgeoisie, squashing the struggle against the Dashnaks inside the country, stopping the fight against Ramkavar here and abroad, declaring them to be friends of the Armenian people".

However, the case of Ter-Gabrielian took a completely unexpected turn for its instigators Amatuni, Mugdusi and their "godfather" Beria. Arrested in Moscow and delivered to Armenia in August 1937, during his interrogation Ter-Gabrielian either jumped or was thrown from the window of the second floor of the NKVD. Whether it was suicide or murder, in the light of subsequent events, it is important that the local government decided not to inform Moscow about it. Of course, Stalin soon learned about the incident and on September 8 sent a letter to Malenkov and A. Mikoyan. With his usual skill, Stalin plays on the absurd miscalculation of the Armenian leaders: "It's hard to imagine that Ter-Gabrielian jumped out of the window, it is totally incompatible with his timid and pragmatic mind. Most likely he was thrown out to shut his mouth so that he could not expose the enemies of Soviet power. Oddly enough, the Armenian leadership has not informed the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR or the Communist Party. Apparently, they wanted to hide this glaring fact and naively assumed that it would be possible to hide it". And the most important part – "The Central Committee of the Communist Party and Council of People's Commissars cannot allow patrons of the enemies of the Armenian people to hide from the people the failure of the leadership and in order to hide these failures – to sell the murder of the enemy of the nation as a 'suicide'". Such a clever interpretation of the incident made the enemy of the people not only Ter-Gabrielian, but the existing leaders of the republic, including those who

with such zeal previously carried out the repressions of their party colleagues. The first two names were written by Stalin himself, in a letter announcing the arrest of the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs Mougdousi and Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars Abraham Gouloyan. At a plenary Session of the Communist Party of Armenia that included the participation of Mikoyan, Malenkov and Beria, a discussion of Stalin's letter led to the expulsion from the party of the Central Committee secretaries Amatuni and Akopov, as well as a number of party and government officials; they immediately found themselves in the prison of the NKVD – no one needed them any longer.

In Yerevan, the trials were held along scenarios developed during the Moscow trials – the former leaders of the Soviet Union were accused of collaborating with the secret services of foreign countries, with the only difference being that in the Armenian version intelligence services were replaced with the political parties Dashnaktsutyun and Ramkavar Azatakan active in the Armenian Diaspora. With this very purpose, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs invented the myth that the overseas center of the Dashnak-Ramkavar parties supposedly cooperated with the Trotskyite-nationalist center in Armenia. Now, all that was required was to exert the right testimony from the accused. Under torture, the defendants supplied more and more "information" about the anti-Soviet activities of Armenian Diaspora organizations. On November 13, 1937, at a regular meeting of the Bureau of the Communist Party of Armenia, a resolution was adopted to shut down the Armenian branches of the HOK and the AGBU, which led to the cessation of all contacts with the Armenian Diaspora. By that time, the chairmen of HOK during all previous years, including Grigor Vardanian, Shahverdian, Yesayan, Aram Manoucharian, as well as an AGBU representative in Armenia Haikaz Karagheusian had already been arrested and shot.

Going After the Intellectuals

As is known, the victims of the 1930s repressions were intellectuals as well as political figures. One of the worst blows was dealt to Armenian literature and science: victims included poets and writers Yeghishe Charents, Axel Bakouni, Zabel Yessayan, Vahan Totovents; professors Poghos Makintsiyan, Tigran Djrbashian, Hovhannes Hagopian, Tatevos Avdalbekian. In 1939 as a result of the so-called "professors' case," Karo Melik-Ohandjanian, Hovhannes Navakatikian, Levon Rotinian and Ashot Hovhannessian were sentenced to various jail terms and Papa Kalantarian was shot.