The Republic of Armenia: The First Republic

The unfolding genocidal policies of the Young Turks forced about 300,000 Western Armenians to seek refuge in the Caucasus across the Russian frontier. By early 1916, 30,000 refugees had converged at Alexandropol (Gumri) alone, and as more refugees poured into the region the magnitude of the human catastrophe became patently clear to local Russian and Armenian officials. The region lacked the basic necessities to sustain life, reported a local Armenian clergy to Catholicos Gevorg V Surenyants at Echmiadzin.¹ To address the crisis, the Russian government approved a conference of prominent Eastern Armenians to meet in May, on the condition that the delegates limit their deliberations to relief efforts. The conference produced little assistance for the refugees, but it provided an opportunity for leading Armenians to assess the national crisis and the future direction of the nation. Nothing could have been more surprising at this point in Armenian history than the accelerating pace of developments that led to the reemergence of an Armenian state in the region after a millennium since the fall of the Bagratunis in Greater Armenia and more than five centuries since the collapse of the Cilician government.

REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

Despite the recent history of repressive rule in Russian Armenia, particularly since Tsar Alexander III, Armenians maintained a favorable attitude toward Russia regarding the empire’s geopolitical objectives in the Caucasus...
and engagement in Armenian affairs. The tsarist government’s positive responses to the Armenian plight, as demonstrated in the negotiations for the 1914 reforms in Ottoman Armenia and the military support in Van in 1915, reaffirmed the belief held widely among Armenians in the Ottoman empire that Russian geopolitical interests would lead to more direct involvement in the region. The tsarist regime retained its repressive rule over Russian Armenia, but Armenians in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman empire had come to rely on the same tsarist government for diplomatic and, in times of war, for military support against Turkish atrocities. The maliciously abnormal geopolitical conditions created by the Young Turk genocidal policies did not afford Armenian leaders in the Caucasus—even the very few capable ones—the luxury of diplomatic dexterity to cultivate good relations with the neighboring powers. The anti-tsarist political upheavals emanating from St. Petersburg and Moscow and the turbulence and bloodshed in Transcaucasia exacerbated the situation for the Armenians.

The Russian revolutionary movement forced the last Romanov tsar, Nicholas II, to abdicate the throne on March 15, 1917, and installed the Provisional Government led by the more democratically oriented Prince Georgy E. Lvov as prime minister; Pavel Milyukov, foreign minister; Aleksandr Guchkov, war minister; Aleksandr Kerenski, justice minister, and others. Despite their apprehensions regarding the revolutionary movement, and very much like their compatriots in the Ottoman Empire during the Young Turk revolution in 1908, Armenians welcomed the March Revolution with expectations for political democratization and economic modernization. Local peasants’ and workers’ councils (soviets) were established in anticipation of the formation of a representative government with the requisite institutional mechanisms for expansive participatory democracy. The Provisional Government promised democratic reforms but avoided issues of nationality and territory, insisting instead that the All-Russian Constituent Assembly would address such issues after the upcoming elections. In this environment of optimism, in April 1917 Catholicos Gevorg V issued an encyclical urging the Armenian communities to respect the rights of women to political participation in national affairs and their rights to vote for and to be elected into offices. Women’s involvement in various facets of political and economic affairs, Gevorg V averred, was essential for development and progress. He noted that the Armenian Church for centuries had recognized the equality of men and women but that foreign cultural influences had led to a transmutation of Armenian culture, thereby undermining the relationship between the church and the community.

The peoples of the Caucasus, who had often accused the tsarist government of too frequently relying on divide-and-conquer strategies, soon