

Armenia: Paramaz and his comrades in Beyazit Square

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A photograph from Beyazit Square. Once you have seen this photo, you will never forget it. Gallows lined up behind each other, bodies in white shirts swinging from the rope with white placards hung about their necks. What the black and white photograph doesn't show are the lush green trees in the background, and the revolutionaries who met death with sang-froid, sacrificing their lives for the cause they believed in. The date was June 15 1915.



[Original](#)

The history of 1915 has a lot to teach those who study history: of pain, hunger, exile, and massacres, especially in these lands. April 24 1915 has gone down as the start of the expulsion and destruction of the Armenian people, one of the ancient peoples of Anatolia. From this date onwards, a period that will go down in memory as an eternal shame began. A few weeks after this date on the day this photograph was taken, 20 revolutionary Armenians were hanged by the neck until dead in Beyazit Square by the Ottoman State. Their struggle for the freedom of their people and socialism, and the resistance they showed on this path are extremely inspirational. Let us remember this event, which has gone down in history as the Trial of the 20, and the courageous people, especially the Armenian socialist Paramaz (Matteos Sarkissian) who fought for their cause to the last breath, who defended peace and brotherhood.

The road to June 15

Following the crushing defeat and the significant territorial losses of the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) aimed to turn the Ottoman Empire into a homogenous Muslim/Turkish entity. Accordingly, all non-Turkish identities in Anatolia would be disregarded and the populations assimilated, and those who failed to do so would be destroyed. Alongside this ideological attack, the non-Muslim population living in Anatolia was to be "cleansed" in various ways. Under the leadership of the CUP pashas, the Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Yazidis, and Syriacs (in short, the non-Muslims) were declared enemies and these ancient peoples of Anatolia were expelled and exterminated. In the following years all the wealth and property of the Rums (Greeks living in the Ottoman Empire) was also forcibly confiscated, and they were uprooted from the lands they had lived in for many years and shipped off to Greece. The year 1915 is a milestone for the suffering of peoples in these lands, and the date of April 24 serves as a signal flare for this

great massacre.

On April 24 1915, following the decision to carry out this ethnic cleansing, approximately 240 Armenian intellectuals were arrested. As the days went by this number rose to 2000, and sentences of death and exile were issued at a rapid pace. Using the “Temporary Law of Deportation” passed in May, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were massacred in the short period of four months. Some of them were killed personally by soldiers, some died from the hardships on the forced marches, some from hunger, thirst, and illness, some in attacks, and some faced the gallows. That is to say, that from 24 April onwards the plans for genocide based on Ottoman state’s policies of Turkification in Anatolia was put into practice, and the soon after almost two thirds of the 1.5 million-strong Armenian population living in Anatolia were wiped out from these lands.

In June 1914 120 members of the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, a legal party represented in the Chamber of Deputies, were taken into custody over a report of an assassination plot against the leaders of the CUP, Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Djemal Pasha. After almost a year of this investigation, a trial by court-martial began. While 71 of them were released, the others were sentenced to exile or prison. After 17 days, the 22 detainees were charged with “carrying out armed activities with the aim of establishing a free and independent Armenia, plotting against the indivisible integrity of the state by provoking foreign powers against the Ottoman Empire, holding public and secret meetings to divide the Ottoman peoples into separate states, and making propaganda for these aims,” and sentenced to death. Of the 22, Stepan Sapah-Gulian and Hagop Turabian (Varazdat) escaped, and their sentences could not be carried out. The 20 who were court-martialed were subject to torture and terrible conditions in prison, isolated from each other in chains until the day of their execution. During the 17-day trial, Paramaz and his comrades, who did not submit under heavy torture, fought to the end against the injustice done to them and did not compromise on their stance.

The final words of the 20

Paramaz and his 19 comrades were murdered on the morning of June 15. Although there is no detailed information about all of them, it is clear that the 20 hanged revolutionaries worked with passion and determination for their beliefs, did not compromise their ideals under any circumstances, and took a determined and unyielding stance. Even though they fought selflessly against the Ottoman rulers, they were still very humble. They never gave up on their responsibility, on continuing to learn, or on recruiting new people to their chosen path. Contrary to the accusations against them, they struggled for peace and brotherhood between the peoples of this land. Paramaz’s response to the judge during an earlier trial in Van clearly shows their attitude towards the brotherhood and unity of peoples: “What we want is equality, we are not simply nationalists, what we want is for Armenians, Turks, Kurds, Alevis, Laz, Yazidis, Arabs, and Copts to live together fraternally and on equal terms. As a revolutionary I believe that we will achieve this goal. But the Ottoman state’s attitude is one of Turkism. You are returning to the state that you arrived in this land hundreds of years ago, to one of Turkism...”

The only Armenian witness of June 15 was the priest Kalust Boghosian. In his memoirs, Boghosian describes these 20 people who stared death in the face without a care in the world. He says that their intellectually and spiritually resilient stance gave him the strength to endure, as he saw them walk with pride. Their desire was that others would carry on this spirit of resistance, and they met their deaths with confidence as they knew that they would be succeeded by people fighting for the same revolutionary ideals. For this reason, despite all their pain, they carried on without complaint or regret. In fact, the message delivered to his mother by Yervant the worker from the scaffold was very striking. Priest Boghosian says that while he was carrying out his religious duties, Yervant the worker gave him a handkerchief and said: “Reverend, give this dry handkerchief to my mother and

tell her that her son has never once wet it with tears.”

On the night of June 15, twenty gallows were set up in Beyazit Square. At around 3 o'clock in the morning, Paramaz and his comrades walked to the gallows dressed in their white shirts. Some walked quickly and others calmly, but all were confident of themselves and their ideas. After the death warrants were read out, Paramaz addressed his comrades: “Comrades, we will go valiantly to our deaths with our heads held high, as is befitting.” As he was being hanged, Doctor Benne called out “You hang us twenty, but twenty thousand more will come after us!” The executioners tried to silence the revolutionaries as they did not want them to address the crowd, but they could not stop Paramaz from saying “You can only destroy our bodies, but never our ideas”, nor could they stop the 20-year-old worker Yervant from resisting the noose being tightened around his neck and singing “Death is the same everywhere, but how happy is the martyr who dies for the liberation of his people”. Together in their last breaths, they called out “Long live socialism!”. Priest Boghosian writes that the last wish of Aram Achekbashian, one of the twenty, was to be buried together with his comrades. As per the request, the twenty revolutionary Armenians were put onto horse-drawn carts and buried in a mass grave in Edirnekapı Cemetery.

After their deaths, the photographs and the writings about their struggle still remained. Although many years have passed, there have always been those who preserve the stories of the cruelty and heroism in history. As a matter of fact, history has marked the names of their executioners with an indelible stain, and has remembered the names of the twenty who paid the ultimate price for their resistance. There is no veil that can hide these facts forever. The struggles of today will go down in history, just as the sacrifices of yesteryear are remembered today.

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