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REVOLUTION AND LIBERATION IN THE PROGRAMS OF
THE DASHNAKTSUTIUNE, 1892 AND 1907 .

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The Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutiune (Armenian Revolutionary Federation or ARF) was founded in Tiflis in 1890 with the avowed purpose of obtaining "political and economic freedom in Ottoman Armenia" through rebellion. Originally, it was to act as a coordinating body between a number of student and radical groups that had adopted roughly the same goals. Soon after its founding, it was discovered by many of its members that the organization was ineffective because coordination was insufficient to further the cause of Western Armenian liberation. Also, attempts to include the Hunchakian Party, founded earlier, had failed. In 1892, during what came to be called the First General Congress of the organization, the Dashnaktsutiune came forth as an party in its own right: it adopted a program which encompassed a worldview and a set of general and specific goals; it developed a strategy and tactics as well as a form of organization. The program of the Dashnaktsutiune, as that of the Hunchakian Party founded in 1887, reflected a radical departure from the dominant Armenian political thought.¹

The program remained essentially the same until 1907 when, pressed by the failure to achieve concrete results after many years of struggle, and under the impact of events in the Caucasus and Russia, the Fourth General Congress of

the Dashnaksutiune made further changes in the party's worldview, strategy, and tactics.²

The purpose of this paper is to place that program in the context of nineteenth century Armenian political thought and to study the relationship between the changes from 1892 to 1907 and social and political developments in the Caucasus and Russia.

Although essentially an Ottoman Armenian issue, the history of the struggle for the liberation of Western Armenia is intricately tied to Armenians in the Caucasus, and to the Russian Empire.

Russian expansion to the Caucasus ~~occurred~~ when modern Western imperialism was becoming the most pervasive force in international relations, and when technologically backward states such as the Ottoman and Persian realms were being integrated into the world market system. What once were issues of local significance acquired implications for major power relations, and decisions taken in Europe affected the lives of peoples in remote areas of the globe.

Modern Armenian political consciousness evolved as a reaction against the suffocating effects of medieval

Ottoman and Persian imperialism in the process of disintegration and as a response to new but problematic opportunities for liberation offered by increasing Western and Russian interests in the area. Thus, when Russia, a more secular and dynamic state, annexed Persian Armenia in 1828, it transformed the region into a lively arena of inter-European conflict, which in turn made the politics of Western powers accessible to Armenians; and it introduced in East Armenian life new patterns, and a faster pace, of change.

Yet, despite a growing divergence between the Armenian communities on opposite sides of the border by the middle of the 19th century, circumstances made it possible to transform the cultural renaissance of the 1840's and 1850's into the common political program of the last quarter of the century. First, both sectors drew on a two thousand year-old common history to assert a distinctive national identity. Textbooks and poetry published in Constantinople and Moscow revived ancient personalities whose grandeur and heroism contrasted sharply with the prevailing servile mentality and status of most of the Armenian population. Secondly, by the 1860's a liberal intelligentsia among East as well as West Armenians won its battle for secularization of institutions and values. Their use of modern Armenian instead of the classical

language was most consequential. Although a different dialect was accepted by East and West Armenians as the norm, it now became possible for them all to understand each other's writings without much effort.

Thirdly, the relative lack of discrimination and oppression in Russian Armenia allowed Armenians to focus their attention on the Ottoman sector, where social and economic conditions had deteriorated considerably and where a clear danger to the physical survival of the Armenian people was seen. This was particularly true during and after the famine that followed the war of 1877-78, when a number of Western Armenian leaders from the provinces visited Tiflis and asked influential compatriots there to actively support the cause of Western Armenians. The presence of colonies of Western Armenian refugees and migrant laborers in the cities of the Caucasus made the plight of Ottoman Armenians even more immediate.

Although the Russian government later decided that another Bulgaria could not be tolerated on its flanks, at the time it did not object to the Russian Armenians' advocacy of West Armenia's liberation, particularly if that meant further tsarist annexations.

The path to a political program for a new Armenian nation was not straight. Circumstances directly related to Armenia's betweenland position-- lack of opportunities and protection normally provided by a national government; lack of communication for the joint exploitation of the land's resources; absence of security of property, particularly in the Ottoman sector-- produced two Armenian bourgeoisies. In the Ottoman Empire evolved a commercial class, beneficiary of the growing trade with the West; in Russia the bourgeoisie became increasingly industrial and financial. Both flourished in the capitals and in major administrative and commercial centers of the two empires, outside the Armenian heartland where the majority of Armenians lived and which had become backwaters of the Ottoman and Russian territories. By mere economic necessity, and lacking a social basis to exert any political power, affluent Armenians linked their fortunes to the regimes in their respective states. Hence, the two bourgeoisies did not seek, and could not have achieved, a common program solely on the basis of their ethnic background, notwithstanding contacts between the liberal intelligentsies supported by each. Their interest in the improvement of the lot of the common man in Armenia proper did not exceed a mild reformism; under no circumstance did they antagonize the governments that had afforded them economic prerogatives.

Politically the best that the new class in the Russian empire could provide was encouragement for further annexation of Ottoman Armenian territory by Russia. This failed primarily because of European opposition to Russian expansion in the region. The East Armenian bourgeoisie, which had earlier strongly supported Russian advances into Ottoman territories as a means of freeing the West Armenians, did not protest in 1885 against the closing of hundreds of parochial Armenian schools in East Armenia ordered by the tsar's government. Furthermore, when Russo-Turkish relations improved in the 1890's and Russia actively opposed the anti-Ottoman activities of Armenian revolutionaries, the latter were denied any assistance by this wealthy class.

Within the Ottoman Armenian bourgeoisie prevailed the idea of liberal reforms which came in successive stages: the Tanzimat, as reforms throughout Ottoman territories; the Armenian Constitution, as an extraterritorial reform for the internal administration of the community; the third, as reforms limited to Armenian provinces, prescribed in Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin. Any advantages that resulted from the first two were limited to the capital and major coastal cities; and in the spirit in which it was adopted, Article 61 remained a mere expression of sympathy.

The West Armenian bourgeoisie lost much of its enthusiasm for systematic reforms in the eastern provinces once Sultan Abdulhamid II revealed his reactionary attitudes toward social change. The Armenian National Assembly in Constantinople limited its activities in this last regard to formal representations to the Porte. Most well-to-do Ottoman Armenians were only too willing to accept the Sultan's occasional paternalistic favors to chosen individuals as a proof that his rule was benevolent and his society harmonious.

In the 1880's it became clear that the reforms advocated by the traditional leadership would not be carried out. By then, the Armenian bourgeoisies, and the once powerful Armenian Church associated with them, had retrenched from their earlier active participation in the process of political awakening. The Ottoman constitutional movement and Armenian liberalism had failed. The failure to effectuate any reforms on the basis of the Treaty of Berlin brought forth among Armenians two forms of opposition to the Ottoman state.

The first came in the form of individual acts of rebellion. Some Armenians largely in the rural areas, no longer willing to endure the oppression, humiliation, and injustice imposed by the system, took up arms and became haytugs.

A few could be classified as "social bandits" at this stage. Yet they constitutes the prototype of the future fedayee or guerrilla fighter who, even then, made it the purpose of his life to defend his village from the accepted forms of looting and oppression, to punish the guilty officials, and to redistribute wealth in the land in his own way.³

Yet, however heroic, such acts in themselves did not constitute a program for social or political change.

The second was the founding of small organizations in urban areas for the purpose of self-defense, with the vague ideal of "saving" liberating Armenia. One such group, "The Defendors of the Fatherland" in Erzerum, disintegrated when Turkish police discovered its existence and jailed its leaders.⁴ Another, the "Armenakans" of Van, failed to become a nationwide organization since it seems to have been largely an informal association until 1894. Also, except for its devotion to self-defense, the principles underlying its activities were drawn still from a liberalism that had already failed, while its strategy continued to rely primarily on liberation through Western, in this case Russian, intervention. More important perhaps, in explaining the failure of the Armenakans, was their urban orientation. For the Armenakans the abstract concept of nation, undifferentiated and unique, suffering

yet idealized in its past, led to a self-centeredness that excluded other segments of the population from participating in its efforts. They made no attempts , for example , to devise a program which would organize the peasantry, the largest and most oppressed class of Armenians,⁵

It is with the founding of the revolutionary parties, the Hunchakians in 1887 and the Dashnaktsutiune in 1890, that the liberation struggle acquired clearly identifiable and defined goals. This is hardly an accident, since these parties were founded by the Eastern Armenian radical intelligentsia that had been previously involved in the Russian revolutionary activities alongside the narodniki. Unlike their Western Armenian compatriots, Russian Armenian students were schooled in the tradition of understanding the world through the abstraction of theories and generalized principles of social and historical development.

While their involvement in the Western Armenian political struggle implied a retreat from the universalist understanding they thought they had while participating in movement of liberation of the Russian peasantry, their perception of the Armenian struggle was predicated upon their consciousness of class differences in theory and in the urban centers such as Tiflis, their sensitivity to the status of the peasantry, and their continued adherence to the belief

that history was subject to scientific inquiry and formulations-- formulations which would not only offer laws of historical development but also make possible its abstraction into guidelines for future action.

Thus, the involvement of Russian Armenians in the Western Armenian struggle, otherwise a symptom of the emergence of a national movement, introduced into that struggle interpretations and perceptions based on a vague sort of socialism. It is one of the most revealing paradoxes of the Armenian liberation movement that, unlike Western Armenians activists, those who were willing to lead a revolutionary struggle in Western Armenia and devote their total energies to it were the individuals who understood the concept of "nation" to be a historical rather than an absolute category and sought to explain their nation-oriented politics through the particularities of the historical condition of the nation rather than an inherent and unique value ascribed to it.

The parties came to articulate the needs of the "people" and devote themselves to their satisfaction. Their revolutionary character was not defined solely by their willingness to resort to an armed struggle - a practice quite well known to Armenians. Zeytun, Sasun, and Karabagh -

nor in their goal to achieve reforms otherwise supported by well-meaning liberals. Rather, that revolutionary character is to be found in their willingness to relate the crisis of the provinces to an oppressive social structure and regressive political-economic system; in their determination to transform the people from subjects of history into agents of change, thus to achieve a radical transformation of society by whatever means necessary, within whatever political framework possible.

The revolutionary movement began when the political parties redefined liberation as that of the people rather than a territory and thus qualitative changes in the future structure of society acquired at least as much importance as formal changes from one to another ruler.

The 1892 program of the Dashnaktsutiune, the more important and durable of the two main organizations, must be understood in this content.

According to the 1892 program of the Dashnaktsutiune, the basic pattern in history has been the exploitation and political domination of political and economic elites over the working majority. Although the specific forms of social

and economic relations have changed over the centuries, class antagonism has remained a constant. The specific forms of the establishment of such an elite in the Ottoman Empire has resulted in the transformation of an ethnic-religious groups, such as the Armenian, into an exploited class. This explanation recognized that some Armenians were among the beneficiaries and exploiters in the system, while non-Armenian elements, including Turks, were among those exploited. Furthermore, change could not come by reliance on the goodwill of the rulers. An armed struggle was necessary for that.

Yet, at the same time, the struggle could not be conducted within the framework of a rigid, catechistic ideology; nor should the masses be misled into believing in the imminent establishment of an Eden on earth through the detailed description of an ideal system. The program stated:

The sad and cruel lessons of history have demonstrated clearly that to achieve victory it is not sufficient for the suffering segment of humanity to understand its own condition, or even to develop the willingness to see it changed; that it is also necessary to obtain real power. But since that power cannot be created overnight, and since that power is the consequence of existing conditions, and changes accordingly, it is obvious that any form of social organization, however ideal, cannot be instituted at once, and that such an institution becomes possible only through the reform of existing conditions.

It is for this reason that we do not come forth

as proponents of this or that utopian ideology; it is our purpose that our program be essential. Our attention is focused on the present condition of our land. Our goal is to subject to an objective critique the causes that have given rise to the present condition; to identify the causes of that condition based on the positive laws of the social sciences; and at the same time to wage a relentless struggle against the factors that have conditioned these causes.

For the founders of the Dashnaksutiune to understand history and to change it one should account for subjective as well as objective factors. The party program asserted, for example, that Armenian peasants were oppressed in the Ottoman empire because they were peasants and because they were Armenian. While their being peasants in a semi-feudal society accounted for certain forms of the oppression and exploitation - including some by Armenian landlords and usurers - their being Armenian and Christian accounted for other forms of oppression, and rationalized exploitation. This more elaborate relationship between political and economic factors indicated a program more flexible than that of the Hunchakians. Liberation for the Armenian people would be sought through graduated reforms in the political and economic spheres simultaneously. These reforms, the "minimum demands" constituted the sole concern of the party. The "maximum demands" ostensibly the establishment of a socialist order was not articulated clearly. Socialism was implied as the ultimate ideal to which the inexorable march of history was leading, and in which all clear thinking revolutionaries

believed by definition. An independent Armenia was at best suggested by the vague notion of "azat Hayastan" or a "free Armenia".

The platform of the Dashnaksutiune called for the establishment of a popular-democratic government based on free elections. This government would guarantee security of life and the right to work; equality of all nationalities and religions before the law; freedom of speech, press, and assembly; distribution of land to the landless; taxation according to ability to pay; abolition of the military exemption fee and replacement of it with equal conscription; ~~establishment of compulsory education~~, and promotion of national intellectual progress; and reinforcement of communal principles as a means to greater production and exports.

The party viewed specific demands as means to achieve the larger goal of a dynamic progressive society.

It believed that "the liberation of the people from its untenable condition in order that they may enter the mainstream of human progress could only be achieved through revolution." ?

The reforms sought by the Dashnaktsutiune were to be achieved through rebellion against the Ottoman state. Such a rebellion would be led by "revolutionary fighters." The guerrilla warfare envisioned would include terroristic activities against traitors and government establishments. The struggle would also be directed against those general conditions which are a burden for non-Armenians, including Kurds and peaceful Turks. Such a policy, according to the program, in addition to its overall significance, might neutralize the will to resist Armenian reforms on the part of non-Armenians, even if not altogether successful in creating a common front against the government.⁸

Essential to the revolution was a campaign against the slavish mentality of the Armenian masses. Propaganda was to be reinforced by living examples of valor and martyrdom in situations of armed resistance to oppression. In addition to their psychological impact, the revolutionaries viewed the acquisition of arms by the Armenian populace as the best means of defense against widespread lawlessness overlooked by the Ottoman government, and occasional pogroms condoned by it.

Yet, the armed struggle aside, the actual strategy of the Dashnaktsutiune was more conventional than anticipated. That strategy was based on the following five premises: 1) the Armenian people would snap out of its lethargy and support the

revolution once they were informed of its goals because Armenians were oppressed; 2) privileged Armenian classes would support the movement since, after all, the movement was a national one aimed at reforms; 3) European powers would support the Armenian movement and intervene on its behalf since Europe had been the cradle of revolutions and had committed itself to the resolution of the Armenian Question at the Conference of Berlin; 4) Russia would not oppose the goals of the movement despite its despotic regime because of its long standing enmity with the Ottoman Empire; and 5) the Ottoman system would collapse without much delay from the revolutionary assault from within and European pressure from without since the system was weak at its foundations.

Subsequent developments, including the massacres of 1894-1896 which caused the collapse of the Hunchakian Party, came to show that these premises were partially or totally false. The Dashnaktsutiune was forced to explain the failure of the movement to achieve minimal success by 1896 and chart a revised strategy. Party leaders argued that a majority of Armenians remained indifferent toward revolutionary practices because the slavish mentality was too engrained; the Armenian bourgeoisie and Church failed to support the movement because they were fearful of losing their own privileged positions; Europe had failed to act because its governments, representing capitalistic interests, were materialistic and lacked any idealism; the tsar opposed the revolutionary movement because it too was despotic and anti-Armenian; and, finally, the Ottoman system did not

succumb since the Sultan, free of external pressures because of conflicting imperialistic interests, had been able to institutionalize a policy of depopulating the Armenian plateau through systematic persecutions and massacres.

The solutions were almost self-evident. The revolution required more preparation and a wider popular basis, to be secured by more propaganda, more heroic examples and tactical successes; the course of European diplomacy could be altered in favor of the Armenian movement if an appeal was made to its more enlightened and progressive public and opinion-makers, the socialists, whose vision they shared.

Moreover, as a tactical measure, the immediate concern was further narrowed to the removal of the person of the Sultan, now the main villain. The Sultan was a **target** around which it would be possible to find support among non-Armenians. This would also expand the support of the for the revolution horizontally rather than vertically. A policy of cooperation with Young Turks, Kurdish tribes, and other ethnic groups within Armenia helped create a larger gap between the idea of independence and the Dashnaksutiune. It also emphasized those aspects of its program which dealt with grievances common to other discontented elements in Ottoman society.

These adjustments turned the Dashnaksutiune into a force more formidable than any of the previous organizations. Yet these too failed to produce any substantial results. In 1904 an offensive by Ottoman armies on Sasun preempted a planned uprising in

selected spots of Western Armenia, an uprising which was to activate all other factors favoring the introduction of reforms.

Equally debilitating for the morale and more consequential for the ideology of the revolution were events on the other side of the border.

Until the turn of the century, Russian Armenians generally filled the role of suppliers and supporters to the struggle in Ottoman Armenia. But the tsarist government's edict ordering the expropriation of Armenian Church properties, the Armeno-Tatar conflict, and the First Russian Revolution brought to the surface the question of political and economic oppression in Russian Armenia and challenged some of the basic tenets of the Dashnaktsutiune.

Generally speaking the Armenian Church had remained aloof from the revolutionary movement, although a few clergymen were involved in clandestine activities. The revolutionary parties, including the Dashnaktsutiune, considered the Church a lethargic and regressive institution. The Church, in turn, would not cooperate with parties that called for a struggle against patriarchal institutions in Armenia and advocated a secular society. In 1903 the Dashnaktsutiune came to the support of the Church arguing that the expropriation decree was aimed at all Armenians and that Armenian properties should remain in Armenian hands, even if that meant clerical hands. Following massive opposition and large scale demonstrations, the revolutionaries had been able to force the rescission of the decree.

The Armeno-Tatar conflict from 1905 to 1907 was another episode which strengthened the national character of the Dashnaktsutiune. Among the many problems it posed was the threat to the position and properties of the Armenian bourgeoisie in the Caucasus. Relations between the political parties and the bourgeoisie had an ambivalent character. Notwithstanding their programmatic antagonism toward all exploiting classes, revolutionaries, especially the Dashnaktsutiune, expected the wealthy at least to provide financial assistance. Their press often criticized the Armenian upper classes for the latter's cowardice and lack of interest in the fate of the common Armenian. The mutual distrust dissipated in the Caucasus between 1905 and 1907. Unable to rely on government forces to protect their interests and properties, merchants, industrialists, and financiers turned to the Dashnaktsutiune, practically the only organized Armenian force in the Caucasus. The Dashnaktsutiune accepted the challenge. Its leaders argued, firstly, that Tatar aggression had been instigated by the reactionary Russian government as part of a larger anti-Armenian policy; hence it was equally necessary to defend Armenian owned property as it was to protect defenseless Armenian peasants.

Secondly, they argued, given employment discrimination against Armenian workers in non-Armenian concerns, the assistance provided to the Armenian bourgeoisie was tantamount to the safe-keeping of employment opportunities for Armenian laborers. 9

Paradoxically, 1905 also marked the beginning of the most intensely socialistic activities in the history of the Dashnaktsutiune. The First Russian Revolution provided an opportunity to a younger generation of Russian Armenian members of the party to practice their socialistic ideals and participate in revolutionary activities which had a better opportunity to succeed than in Ottoman Armenia.

The "left wing" of the party began the publication of newspapers and pamphlets which extolled the virtues of socialism, organized unions among Armenian workers in a number of Caucasian cities, and generally participated in anti-tsarist activities. The new direction was expressed in what came to be known as the "Caucasian platform" adopted in 1905 during a regional meeting held in Tiflis.¹⁰

As an unmistakable sign of its rediscovered sense of economic justice in the socialist sense, the Dashnaktsutiune pressured the Catholicos at Edjmiadsin to convene a general assembly of Russian Armenians to allow for popular participation in the management of Church affairs. Most of the delegates elected to the 1906 meeting were members or sympathizers of the Dashnaktsutiune. The party felt strong enough to propose the distribution of Church owned agricultural lands to the peasants who had tilled them for generations. The party had not yet decided whether non-Armenian peasants would be entitled to the same benefits when the assembly was disbanded by Russian police, probably at the instigation of clergymen.¹¹

While the new generation of Russian Armenian socialists were critical of the party's leadership for its lack of genuine and actual concern toward the socialist ideals of party, Western Armenians in the party were critical of the "Caucasian platform" since it threatened to focus the attention of the party on the Caucasus, away from the life threatening situation in Western Armenia. Although the association with the bourgeoisie had filled the coffers of the party-- and in the process allowed the flow of arms and financial assistance to the struggle in Western Armenia in an unprecedented scale-- the party was threatened with a two-way, even a three-way, split.

The Fourth General Congress of the party held in Vienna in 1907 was called upon to either resolve the differences or divide the party and allow each segment to continue its own struggle. The Congress produced a new program which satisfied most of its adherents without necessarily convincing all of the wisdom of the newly discovered "different but united" formula for the continuing liberation struggle.

The new program was based on the premise that the idea of revolution in Ottoman Armenia applied to Russian Armenia as well since in both sectors the struggle consisted in essence in opposition to political despotism, national oppression, and economic exploitation. The differences in levels of economic and political development required a different emphasis in activities rather than a different struggle in each. The program

furtehr clarified the concept of "people" to include only workers and peasants. The new definition made manifest the class aspect of the revolution but also accounted for the particular composition of exploited Armenian classes on both sides of the border.

The program also included a set of minimum economic and political demands for Russian Armenians as it had done fifteen years before for Ottoman Armenians. As a political framework within which those demands would be realized, the party adopted federalism for both Armenias, thus clearly rejecting for the first time the idea of independence.

The Dashnaktsutiune also revised its general principles to bring them closer to the widely accepted concept of "scientific socialism" without relinquishing its appreciation of the subjective factors in history. Thus throughout its new program the party sought to preserve the class aspect of the revolution in Western Armenia and guarantee, at the same time, a solution to the national problem in the Russian Empire.

The struggle for Armenian liberation was now defined by the idea of a people separated by political boundaries but united through the dedication of both to common revolutionary ideal. The theoretical bond was to be further strengthened by the belief that a democratic Russia, toward which Russian Armenians would

strive, would be more inclined toward accepting reforms in Western Armenia. Also, the cooperation among various national groups in the Russian Empire during the 1905 Revolution strengthened the strategy in Western Armenia of seeking reforms with the cooperation of Young Turks and other dissatisfied elements.

The diversity of factors with which the Dashnaksutiune had to come to terms produced a curious blend of nationalism and socialism which can be seen as a prototype of national liberation movements that evolved in other parts of the world following the First World War. Yet events, often beyond the control of the party or the Armenian people during and after the First World War, overtook formulas and theories, thwarting the national program and preempting the socialist ideal.

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Notes to Libaridian

- 1 Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutian Dsragir (henceforth Dsragir, 1892), Vienna, n.d.
- 2 H.H.Dashnaksutian Dsragir (henceforth Dsragir, 1907), Vienna, 1907.
- 3 "The Changing Self-Image of the Armenian in the Ottoman Empire: Rayahs and Revolutionaries", paper presented by author at Symposium on "The Armenian Image in History and Literature" at UCLA, November 9-10, 1979.
- 4 R.P.Hovhannisian, Arevmtahay azgayin-Azatagrakan sharzhumnere ev Karini "Pashtpan Hayreniats" kazmakerputiune; [National-Liberation Movements in Western Armenia and the Pashtpan Hayreniats Organization of Karini]. Erevna, 1965.
- 5 For the Program of the Armenakan organization, see Artak Darbinian, Hay azatagrakan sharzhman oreren [Of the Days of the Armenian Liberation Movement] Paris, 1947. p.125-128.
- 6 Dsragir, 1892, p.5-6.
- 7 Ibid, p. 16.
- 8 Ibid, p.19.
- 9 M. Hovannisian, Dashnaksutiune ev nra hakarakordnere [The Dashnaksutiune and its Adversaries] Tiflis, 1906/7; p.54-83.
- 10 For the text of the "Caucasian Platform", see Niuter H.H. Dashnaksutian Patmutian hamar [Documents for the History of the Dashnaksutiune], Vol.2, H. Dasnabedian, ed. Beirut, 1973, p.231-236.
- 11 M. Varandian, HH. Dashnaksutian Patmutiun [History of the Dashnaksutiune], vol. 1, Boston, 1934. p.468-472.

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