

TEMPEST-BORN



DRO

SIMON VRATSIAN

INTRODUCTION

From a modest career of a Dashnaktsakan activist, to a hand of justice punishing those who inflicted harm and misery on Armenian people, to a commander of an Armenian volunteer army brigade, to a military dictator, an architect of the military structure of the newly born Republic of Armenia, the defender of its existence and independence, and its last Minister of Military Affairs to the chief negotiator during the sovietization and a member of the transition Revcom struggling to make the transfer of power smooth and painless, to a desperate exile in Soviet Russia and in the Diaspora, Dro's life and career unfolded leaving an indelible mark on the tumultuous history of the Armenian struggle for freedom, and in the hearts of all those who came to know him.

Dro said, "Great work requires many victims," and he himself became a victim of that great fight for the betterment of the plight of the Armenian people many times in his life. The enemy's bullet, nested deep within his lung, accompanied him until his death, always reminding him of the evildoers, the victimizers of his people.

Heroes are born in the flames of the tumultuous fire of history. Heroes are born when the earth shakes, when the sky thunders, when the storm engulfs the earth. Dro's birth, his life, and his death are the signifiers of the metaphor. This is the life story of Drastamat Kanayan, known simply as Dro. Early in his life, he embraced a goal, an ultimate objective which he pursued all his life: everything for the physical survival of the Armenian people. And every step he took in public life, every mission he accomplished had that same concern as a goal.

Dro's active life coincided with a most fateful period in the history of the Armenian people. The Armenian struggle for basic human rights and supplications for reforms to ameliorate the dire living conditions in the Armenian provinces had met with the unyielding politics of the Ottoman Sublime Porte.

Sultan Abdul-Hamid II was doing everything in his power to suppress the Armenian emancipation movement, to neutralize the Armenian element in the Empire, to solve the Armenian Question in his unique way. He aimed to show the European Powers the meaninglessness and infeasibility of Armenian reforms by increasing persecutions, distorting data, and taking advantage of the ambivalence of Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin providing for Armenian reforms. Paradoxically, therefore, the more Armenians rallied around clandestine groups and organizations and took arms in self-defense or persuaded a European power to intervene with the Sublime Porte on their behalf, the more intense the persecutions grew. The massacres and forced migration in 1894-1896 were the culmination of the Sultan's dealing with the Armenian Question. Despite all the persecutions and bloodshed and the failure of the reform plans, the Armenian leaders had lost hope. The revolutionary movement had taken momentum. Arms were smuggled in and were distributed among the masses for self-defense. Groups of fedayee fighters crossed the mountains to extend protection to villages under constant Turkish and Kurdish attacks or to conduct counterattacks in revenge. The Armenian political thought had taken a surge in crystallized goals and objectives for the betterment of Armenian life.

This perspective involved not only the Ottoman Armenians but also the Eastern Armenians enduring constant pressure of Russification expressed in intense political, cultural, religious, and economic discriminations and persecutions. The czarist government's attempt to confiscate Armenian Church properties in 1903 and the government's involvement in instigating the Armeno-Tatar conflicts and massacres (1905-1906) — an evidence of the policy of divide and rule — intended to keep Armenians at bay and under constant inhibition. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation — *Dashnaktsutun* — the major Armenian political party of the time, was engaged in the struggle on both fronts.

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math of the Young Turk revolution (1908) and a short-lived Armeno-Turkish collaboration, the Young Turk government implemented its policy of ottomanization, which entailed renewed tension and intolerance against minorities. With the outbreak of war, the last attempt for Armenian reforms failed, and Turkey entered the war to accomplish its Pan-Turkist objective of "Turkey for the Turks only." Armenians were on the way of the great plan to reach the Turkic peoples of the East and had to be eliminated.

The Turkish genocidal attempt took its toll and nearly one-and-a-half million Armenians were killed. The Armenian provinces were swept clean of their indigenous people. Three hundred thousand wretched refugees crowded the small province of Yerevan. Temporarily cut off from the Russian Empire, the Transcaucasian people, Georgians, Armenians, and Tatar-Turks, declared their independence. Three republics were formed to live a short period of freedom and national sovereignty until the Bolshevik government strengthened its foundations, dealt with internal upheavals and extended to the south to claim the Caucasus. Armenia too was sovietized.

It is not possible to depict in this limited space that most complicated period of 2-3 decades spanning the two centuries. That history is filled with repression, persecutions, and genocide, heroic acts of armed resistance, the desperate defense of the stronghold of Armenian existence in Sardarabad, Bash-Abaran, and Gharakilisa, the birth of the independent republic of Armenia, and finally, the loss of independence and the final diasporization. Dro matured in this hell of conflicting world politics, contrasting ideologies, promises and deceit, optimistic expectations and crushing disillusionment. He made his choice early in life, and faithfully and with great belief followed the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, starting from small jobs that Nigol Duman entrusted to him, climbing the ladder to membership in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Bureau. His political career was shaped in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, but he does not belong to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation alone. His work is too great to fit in

the limits of the history of one party. Dro is an all-Armenian hero; he belongs to the Armenian masses in spite of the dirt that was thrown at him to tarnish his image, in spite of all the deliberate misinterpretations of his "collaborations" with this and that power. One has to learn his life-story to appreciate all his moves, his devotion to one single objective: the survival and well-being of the Armenian people.

After the faltering first years of the independence of Armenia, the political atmosphere there is finally receptive. Armenia, although still weak, needy, and unbalanced in many respects, has opened her arms to embrace the remains of her valiant sons and daughters who lived, struggled and died for her perpetuation. It is an opportune time for this publication, Tamar Der-Ohannesian's accomplished English rendering of the life and work of this Armenian hero, to accompany as a spiritual token the return of Dro's remains to Armenia. The eagle of Bash-Abaran, one of the three gates of Armenian independence, will finally rest in his home.

Dro's life and work, his success and his failures, his yearnings and derivations can be a source of inspiration, a lesson to learn for every Armenian today. Armenia is still caught in the turmoil of world politics. Very little has changed in the foreign interests and conflicts within the region; the role players are all the same. Dro's words still ring fresh: Politics is a market for gains, and one has to be powerful to do business in that market. And what better insight into Dro's life and work than Simon Vratsian's *Tempest-born Dro*? An intimate close friend with Dro, Vratsian knew all the ups and downs of Dro's life, his joys and pains, his enthusiasm and his depression, his convictions and orientations, his determination and steel willpower.

When Dro died in America, his open casket was placed in the hall of the *Hairenik* building, and young *ungers* stood guard. These new devotees of the Armenian Cause had had the privilege of knowing him personally, hearing his encouraging and inspiring words during his frequent visits to America. Today's youth, and especially the English speaking Armenian

youth, has only this booklet, a very scant evidence of Dro's spiritual being, to partake in the life and work of this great Armenian, to draw inspiration from his devotion to the Armenian Cause his unwavering will to hold that cause above everything else in life.

RUBINA PEROOMIAN

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