

**Christopher Gunn,
Doctor of Historical Sciences,
professor of Coastal Carolina University**

**ARMENIAN TERRORISM AFTER 1988: THE ARMENIAN SECRET ARMY,
VREZH & THE WAR ON AZERBAIJAN**

Keywords: *Armenian terrorism, Vrezh movement, war on Azerbaijan, ASALA, conflict, attacks*

Introduction

The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the armed wing of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), first as the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) and later as the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA) led one of the most unique terrorist campaigns to emerge out of the eastern Mediterranean and Europe during the early 1970s. These organizations killed approximately 90 individuals and wounded hundreds more through a combination of assassinations, bombing campaigns and violent assaults that spanned North America, Europe, the Middle East and the south Pacific and targeted ethnic Turks, assets of the Turkish government, and Turkish business interests.

Before fading in the late 1980s, ASALA and the JCAG/ARA were linked to various militant Palestinian factions, as well as other international terrorist organizations, international narcotic trafficking, international extortion rings and even to the USSR, Libya, Syria, Greece and Cyprus [1]. In a geographical and temporal environment where the Armenian organizations had to compete with such groups as the Italian Red Brigades, the German Red Army Faction, the Irish Republican Army, the Basque ETA, and the PLO for media exposure and government attention, the Armenians managed extremely well. In the early 1980s, various U.S. government officials described Armenian terrorists as the most dangerous, savage and mysterious group in existence, and in 1981 these groups accounted for the highest number of documented international terrorist attacks in the world [2].

The groups' most ignominious acts were the murders of Turkish diplomats and their immediate family members, which took 31 lives between 1973 and 1984 [3]. This includes the 1980 assassination of the Turkish administrative attaché to Greece and his 14-year old daughter by Monte Melkonian, a native Californian and an honors graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, who go on to play a major role in the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan [4]. What made the Armenian terrorist campaign unique, however, was neither the diversity or barbarity of its ideologues, nor the sudden and violent

reemergence of the Armenian Question five decades after the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, but that it seemed to have no chance of obtaining the publicly stated goals.

ASALA and the ARF wanted, first, to force the Turkish government to acknowledge that the ethnic conflict in eastern Anatolia in 1915 was an Ottoman-sponsored and directed genocide against the Armenians; second, to pay reparations to the families of these victims; and third, to return the provinces of eastern Anatolia to the Armenians. Contrary to the aims and aspirations of these organizations, however, the Turkish government was not going to revise their country's history to adopt the Armenian version of 1915. By extension, therefore, discussions over reparations were meaningless. Finally, the prospect of violating the territorial sovereignty of the Turkish Republic, particularly along the longest NATO border with the Soviet Union, appeared quixotic at best. Yet, Armenian terrorism thrived for over a decade before allegedly fading away in the second half of the 1980s, despite an upsurge in terrorism at the exact same time [5].

Rather than fade away, however, the priorities of ASALA (at least what remained of the organization) and the ARF changed dramatically after conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijan erupted over the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan, and while much less publicized and researched, Armenian terrorism shifted to the Caucasus. While the role of ASALA & ARF veterans in 2 the various militias that operated during the conflict has been explored elsewhere, this paper will analyze the role of ASALA & the ARF in more traditional terrorist attacks in the region [6].

The ASA and Vrezh

Between 1989 and 1994, Azerbaijan was subjected to a series of terrorist attacks and attempted attacks that killed approximately 70 and wounded hundreds more. While these attacks received minimal attention in Western media outlets, and no credit was ever taken by an organization, speculation has fallen on both ASALA and the ARF. The first was an attempted attack on a train traveling from Yerevan to Baku in May 1989. Fortunately, the suspected terrorist, an Armenian woman known as 'La Vartouche,' was apprehended before she was able to place the explosive device she was carrying. During the subsequent investigation, the woman claimed to be a part of the Armenian Secret Army (ASA), an organization with alleged links to ASALA and led by Teroyan and Sos Eloyan [7].

While ASALA was already floundering after the successful assassination of its leader, Haroution Takoushian (aka Hagop Hagopian), in Athens in 1988, it made sense that the ASALA operatives still in the field would make their way to the Caucasus, and based on the documents and material available today in English, at least eight ASALA veterans can be identified who were actively engaged in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, although undoubtedly there were more [8]. By the late 1980s, they were running of time, options and, more importantly, places to go. West European governments were no longer as sympathetic and forgiving to acts of political violence as they once were. Beirut, which had been the terrorist capital of

the world for much of the 1970s and 1980s, was slowly returning to normal and, therefore, no longer a guaranteed safe haven. Additionally, ASALA's support in Eastern Europe deteriorated in 1987, when Eastern Bloc intelligence agencies began to cooperate with the CIA on counterterrorism, and then in November 1989, when the communist regimes began to collapse [9]. Even the two most sympathetic nations to Armenian terrorism, Greece and Cyprus, had proven to be unsafe after Takoushian's assassination. This attempted attack on a train in May 1989, however, appears to be the only one that is attributed to ASALA or the ASA.

The first successful terrorist attack carried out against Azerbaijani civilians was on September 16, 1989, when a Tbilisi to Baku bus was bombed. The attack killed five and wounded 27, and was attributed to the ARF, which, it has been alleged, set up a new clandestine terrorist wing that operated out of the Soviet Union named Vrezh, or 'revenge.' [10]. This organization was believed to be run by an Armenian named Grayil Marukhian who operated out of the Russian city Rostov on the Don, where he is also credited with the murder of a Russian Interior Security Colonel [11]. Two months later, two Vrezh operatives were arrested while planning on attack on another bus in Azerbaijan's second largest city of Ganja, on March 26, 1990, a bomb on a train between Baku and Gazimahomet was defused. Both of these terrorist attempts have been attributed to Vrezh. On August 10, 1990, however, Vrezh was able to successfully detonate a bomb on a bus between Tbilisi and Agdam that killed 17 and injured dozens [12]. This was followed by attacks on the Moscow-Baku train lines in April and July 1991 which killed and injured dozens [13]. After a hiatus of nearly three years, Vrezh attacks appeared to resume on in February 1994, with the March 19 and July 4 attacks on the Baku metro system the deadliest. Combined, these attacks in 1994 killed over 30, and wounded almost 100 [14].

While the documentary proof regarding the existence of an organization named Vrezh and/or its connection to the ARF are non-existent in English sources, there is evidence that after being dormant for a number of years the ARF terrorist-wing reappeared briefly in the early 1990s, both outside and inside of the Caucasus. In January 1993, the FBI sent out what appears to be its last and most comprehensive analysis of the entire range the ARF's internal politics, organizations and 3 activities, including its terrorist and paramilitary operations, to all of the major FBI Field offices in the United States and to the FBI liaison in Canada. In it, sources confirmed to the FBI that while the JCAG/ARA had received no orders from the new ARF Bureau leadership, and there were no plans for a resumption of attacks in the United States, the organizational infrastructure of the terrorist group remained intact, and the efforts of the ARF were squarely focused on Nagorno-Karabakh. The source even gave the FBI the name of the individual who was the head of its three-man leadership committee [15]. There are two primary reasons why an inactive terrorist organization would keep its leadership and infrastructure in place: to either credibly threaten a resumption of attacks, as a

means of political leverage, or to facilitate the resumption of attacks. There is evidence that both scenarios took place.

Western governments had come to not only fear Armenian terrorism, but also to pay careful attention to threats of blackmail from ASALA and the ARF. Throughout the 1980s, a number of captured terrorists were either released or given light sentences due threats of violence. This may have been what the ARF was attempting to do in 1992, when the Justice Commandos released a statement to the press for the first time in years, threatening to resume attacks [16]. Shortly afterwards, the U.S. State department was convinced that there was a credible assassination threat to Azerbaijani President Elchibey when he visited the United Nations in the fall of that year [17]. Fear is a very powerful negotiation tactic, and it would seem likely that the ARF would use the leverage it had developed since the mid-1970s to pressure foreign governments into a more favorable resolution over NagornoKarabakh. It is also possible, however, that ARF terrorism actually resumed in the early 1990s.

According to a U.S. State Department telegram, a group of Azerbaijani speaking Armenians, who had the ability to move freely around Baku without arousing suspicion, had been sent to Lebanon for terrorist training [18]. It also seems that these groups were operating out of Dagestan, which would explain the premature train explosion there in April 1994 [19].

Conclusion

Between 1989 and 1994, Azerbaijan, and Baku in particular, suffered from a spate of deadly terrorist attacks that killed nearly 100 and wounded hundreds. While no organization ever took credit for the attacks, there is enough credible evidence to believe that an Armenian terrorist organization behind these attacks. Remarkably, in just five short years, this group or groups killed more in Azerbaijan than 15 years of Armenian terrorism in Europe, North America, Australia and the Middle East. While it is possible that a new, fourth Armenian terrorist organization emerged out of the conflict, speculation centered on either ASALA or the ARF. Since it is extremely unlikely that ASALA had the capabilities and resources to prepare and carry out these attacks by 1991, suspicion, therefore, falls on the ARF. Unfortunately, scholars must wait until the declassification of additional government documents, before the truth around these attacks will be know.

References

1. For just a sampling see Andrew Corsun, "Armenian Terrorism: A Profile," in Department of State Bulletin Vol. 82, No. 2065 (August 1982), 35; Michael Gunter, "Pursuing the Just Cause of their People": A Study of Contemporary Armenian Terrorism (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Anat Kurz and Ariel Merari, ASALA—Irrational Terror or Political Tool (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 39-52; Paul Henze, GOAL: Destabilization: Soviet Agitational Propaganda, Instability and Terrorism in NATO South (Marina del Rey, CA: European Institute for Security Research, 1981), 36; Andrew Mango, Turkey and the War on Terror: For

- Forty Years We Fought Alone (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12; Marvin Howe, "Turks Blame Cypriots for Attacks in Name of Armenians," *New York Times*, February 28, 1980; E.J. Dionne, Jr., "Armenian Terror: Tangle of Motives," *New York Times*, August 1, 1983; and *Armenian Terrorism, Its Supporters, the Narcotic Connection, the Distortion of History* (Ankara, Turkey: Ankara University, 1984).
2. "Armenian Terrorists," January 10, 1983, CIA, CIA-RDP88-01070R000100520004-4; "Patterns of International Terrorism: 1981," in *Department of State Bulletin* Vol. 82, No. 2065 (August 1982): 16; and Gunter, "Pursuing the Just Cause of their People", 1.
 3. Bilal N. Şimşir, *Şehit Diplomatlarımız (1973-1994)*, Vol. 2, (Ankara, Turkey: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2000), 967-968.
 4. Markar Melkonian, *My Brother's Road: An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 84.
 5. "Terrorism Review," CIA, Dec. 14 1989, CIA Doc No/ESDN: 0000258747, CREST.
 6. Christopher Gunn, "Turning Terrorists into 'National Heroes': ASALA & ARF 'Veterans' in Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Region of Azerbaijan," in *First International Forum of the Caucasus Studies Scholars*, Vol. 1 (Baku, Azerbaijan: Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Caucasus Institute, 2017): 53-61.
 7. Charles van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 159-160.
 8. This number was arrived at through newspaper reports and Markar Melkonian's account.
 9. Tim Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 195.
 10. "Violence Flares Again in Azerbaijan Republic," *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1989 and van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan*, 160.
 11. Van der Leeuw, 160.
 12. "Soviet Union Bomb Rips Bus, Kills 15 in Azerbaijan," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 11, 1990 and van der Leeuw, 160.
 13. "15 Die in Train Blast in the Soviet Caucasus," *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 1991 and van der Leeuw, 160.
 14. "12 Killed in Explosion in a Baku Rail Station," *New York Times*, March 20, 1994; "7 Die as Bomb Explodes on Azerbaijan Subway," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1994 and van der Leeuw, 181.
 15. "Armenian Revolutionary Federation, IT-Armenia," FBI, January 21, 1993.
 16. "ARF Leadership Calls For Withholding Support of Armenia: Justice Commandoes of Genocide State Intention to Resume Terrorism," *Armenian Reporter*, September 5, 1992.
 17. State Department Telegram, BAKU 00714, "Azerbaijani President to Attend UNGA," September 5, 1992.
 18. State Department Telegram, BAKU 01056, "Azerbaijani Officials Blame Armenian Terrorists for Metro Bombing," March 23, 1994; State Department Telegram, BAKU 001406, "Terrorist Activity," April 15, 1994.
 19. Fahrhad Mammadov, "Armenian Aggression Backed up by Terror," *Yeni Müsavat*, February 2