

Founding People's University of Yerevan

In 1917-1918 Transcaucasia found itself in a dire political situation. Making use of the retreat of the Russian troops, the Young Turks attacked. As a result, the continent found itself in a most difficult situation. The Transcaucasian SAYM was decomposed. On May 26, 1918 Georgia and on May 27 of the same year Azerbaijan announced themselves independent states. On May 28, 1918 with the majority of votes the National Council, proclaimed Armenia an independent country. The statehood that the nation had been deprived of for so many years was restored. This was a historical event in the life of the Armenian nation. For well-known reasons this period of our history was not paid proper attention to in following several decades. Whereas during its short life the Republic undertook to solve not only social, economic, but also cultural issues and did not spare efforts to realize the long-cherished dream of the Armenian intellectuals – the establishment of the national higher educational institution.

One of the dreamers, as stated above, was the All-Armenian poet H. Toumanian, who, on various occasions, voiced the necessity of raising the educational and intellectual level of the nation. Admiring the feats of the Armenian voluntary regiments fighting violence, in one of his conversations, Toumanyman called Armenians to rely on the power of reason rather than on that of weapons on the way to the salvage of the nation. He said: "If only after the war a culture-oriented army of 3000 healthy and brilliant young patriots were created, which would fuse with the nation and would spread the brilliant ideas of science and life over its darkest corners. That would be the only straight and shortest path leading the Armenian nation to salvage and rebirth".

The most prominent Armenian intellectuals began to raise the issue starting from the very first day of the declaration of independence especially when the neighboring countries had managed to set up their own ones.

Late in 1918 and early in 1919 the issue of founding a university received practical consideration once again. However, the National Council found it difficult to solve the problem because of the unfavorable situation in the country. Many thought that it was untimely to consider the idea of founding a university under such circumstances.

The establishment of a university was indeed hard and at times it seemed even impossible. There were other by-problems to be solved such as the construction of the university building and dorms for students, as well as the publication of the necessary educational material, handbooks, textbooks and many others.

It seemed that taking into consideration the existing harsh situation the country had found itself in, the idea of establishing a university should be discarded. However, the very fact that Armenia was having a difficult time, and namely because of its being cut from the civilized centres, compelled the authorities to establish a university which would serve as a magnet for the intellectuals and scientific circles spread all over

Europe, get their creative abilities together and employ them for the welfare of the country.

On May 7, 1919, RA National Council heard the report by G. Melik-Gharagiozian on “granting 500 000 roubles of allowance to the University of Transcaucasia”. The request was turned down. At the same session, however, the minister was assigned to come up with another report on founding a university in Armenia and to present its program and the expenses required.

The Ministry of Education prepared and submitted the proposal of founding a university in Armenia to the National Council for consideration.

On May 16, 1919, the national Council considered the issue and gave its consent.



The University Building in Alexandrapol

On June 1919 the Board of Ministers adopted the “Law on People’s University of Yerevan” and on July 8 it confirmed the “temporary regulations of the university”. Organizational work concerning the very opening of the university followed these decisions. Problem number one was to find a relevant house for the university in Yerevan. However, it was not an easy thing to do. After many unsuccessful attempts to find one, it was decided to establish the university in Alexandrapol before a suitable building could be found in the capital. The next problem to be solved was the formation of the staff. With this aim, a great many leading specialists in various fields were invited to give a lecture at the new university.

At last, on January 31, 1920, the university of Armenia was officially unveiled in Alexandrapol with grand celebrations. Present at the opening were members



N. Aghbalian

of the Armenian government led by Prime minister Alexander Khatisian, leaders of political parties, and other high-rank officials. Prof.

Youry Ghambarian, the Rector of the University, came up with the opening speech.

Nikol Aghbalian, Minister of Public Education and Art, was next to speak. In his speech he stressed the social-political role the University was meant to play: “Though our country is ruined, and our nation is in poverty, we are establishing a house for education. All that we have now, has been possible through the blood shed by many generations



A. Khatisian

who gave their lives to make this day close, so let us honor their memory. We are rebuilding our house and we are establishing temples of education without thinking what our enemies, who have always destroyed them, think. We deeply hope that this time the ship of the Armenian nation will pass through the storms safely. Our enemies will fail and the torch that we are holding over the Armenian plateau will never fade and will light up the progressive Asia”.

The first lessons in Alexandrapol were held on February 1, 1920. The famous scholar and Armenologist Stepan Malkhasian was the first to give a lecture.

On June 21, RA Board of Ministers came up with the decision to move the University from Alexandrapol to Yerevan.



The steam-engine in which the first specialists - Armenian by nationality and educated in different universities of Europe - arrived in Yerevan to start their occupation of Yerevan State University lecturer.