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FIRST-HAND RUSSIAN ACCOUNTS OF THE BATTLE OF SARYKAMYSH

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Summary

The Battle of Sarykamysh has been extensively researched in Turkey, primarily on the basis of Ottoman accounts of the battle, however there are a number of first-hand accounts in Russian written by commanders of the Tsar's army. This article provides a description of the most important Russian works, including information about the authors and their roles in the battle, as well as discussing their historical value in more fully understanding the events and outcomes of the Battle of Sarykamysh.

Key Words: The Battle of Sarykamysh, First World War, Russian historiography, Enver Pasha.

In 2014 the world commemorated the centennial of the start of the First World War, one of the most tragic global events in the history of mankind. It was a long, bloody war which lasted more than four years. Thirty-three countries participated in it, and many lives were lost; the total number of military and civilian casualties in the First World War was over 37 million. This war became a turning point in military practice and the development of military equipment; planes and tanks were used for the first time in this war.

The First World War was an event which had a decisive influence not only on the subsequent development of the Ottoman Empire, but also the Russian Empire, and played a major role in the later history of the 20th century. By 1914, Russia was included in the system of international alliances that had developed in Europe, and could not remain aloof from a world conflict objectively; but also did not meet its national interests by pulling out of the war. The war, which was called the Second Patriotic War (Vtoraja otechestvennaja vojna) or Great World Patriotic War (Velikaja vseмирnaja otechestvennaja vojna) in Russia, in many respects determined the historical

destiny of Russia.

The Battle of Sarykamysh, an operation which took place as part of the Caucasus Campaign during the First World War, was a confrontation between the Russian and Ottoman empires and took place from December 22, 1914 to January 17, 1915.

On 2 August 1914 Germany and the Ottoman Empire secretly signed the Ottoman-German Alliance, bringing the Ottomans in on the side of the Central Powers. The recovery of territory lost to the Russians in 1877-1878 during the Russo-Turkish War (Artvin, Ardahan, Kars and the port city of Batum) was the Ottoman government's primary goal.

For Russians the Eastern Front was of greater importance than the Caucasus front, and they were wary of operations in the Caucasus for the purpose of retaking Kars and the port of Batum.

However, Ottoman and German military planners began work on plans for offensive operations in the Caucasus. They believed that a campaign by Ottoman forces in the Caucasus could divert Russian forces and possibly achieve significant breakthroughs.

The operation began on December 22, 1914 in harsh winter conditions and on January 17, 1915 it was complete. The Russian Caucasus army was under the command of General A. Z. Myshlayevsky against the 3rd Ottoman army which was under the leadership of General Enver Pasha.

At the beginning of the war, the Ottomans had their Third Army based in the region with Hasan Izzet Pasha as commander in chief, while the Russians lined up their Caucasus Army under the command of the Chief of Staff, General Nikolay Yudenich. The deputy count Vorontsov-Dashkov was the nominal commander-in-chief. The assistant of the military unit was General Myshlayevsky.

The Ottoman Supreme Commander, Enver Pasha, had larger objectives in mind, envisioning an Ottoman conquest of the Russian Caucasus and bringing all of Central Asia under Ottoman control. His intent in this operation was to encircle the Russians, drive them out of Ottoman territory and then retake Kars and Batum. In late December 1914 he led approximately 100,000 troops in this operation. However, the Ottomans' direct attack on the Russians' mountainous positions in severe winter conditions resulted in heavy casualties at the Battle of Sarykamysh in December 1914. After this attack in winter, many of the surviving Turkish soldiers either froze to death or died from typhus.

The Battle of Sarykamysh ended in the full defeat of the Third Army which was completely destroyed. In the end, the Russians were victorious with Ottoman casualties exceeding 60%. By January 1915 the Ottoman Third Army was down to 42,000 men out of an original force of 118,000. Seven thousand had been captured, 10,000 had been wounded and 15,000 had died of typhus. Many of the remaining losses were from hypothermia – soldiers who froze to death in the crossing of the Allahüekber Mountains due to poor preparation and a lack of proper clothing for the bitter conditions. Russian casualties, while high, did not reach the level of Ottoman losses – 16,000 killed in battle and another 12,000 lost to disease and frostbite.

The creation of Russian historiography of the First World War began in the 1920s, towards the end of the Civil War (November 1917-October 1922), mostly by émigrés. In Russia itself, major historiographical works on the history of the First World War did not appear until the second half of the 20th century. B.D. Kozenko in his article titled “Otechestvennaja istoriografija pervoj mirovoj vojny” (Domestic Historiography on the First World) talks about the process of the historiography of the war as follows:

“The historiography of the First World War had several stages. By 1941 the process of its

development was completed. Positive developments were seen in the 30s under the pressure of Stalin's "cult". It created a negative impact, but development proceeded. After 1945 a new stage, which covers the 40-60s, difficulty for science began. The developments in the 70-80s which can be considered another stage, took place under the conditions of "neostalinism" and strengthened the politicization and the ideologization of the science within the frame of the "cold war". From the end of the 80s the following stage began – sharp criticism of the past and attempts to create a new historiography for the history of the war of 1914-1918”

The historiography of the First World War developed in the following main directions: military history, foreign policy, stories of the labor and socialist movement, history of the countries of the West during the time of war and the whole complex aspect of Russia's participation in war in the light of developing and victorious October Revolution.”

Analyzing Kozenko's article on the development of Soviet historiography, we observe that the main focus of Soviet historians was the history of the Western countries during the First World War, international relations and the foreign policy of the countries - participants of the Entente and the Triple Alliance - during the war. The other priorities of Soviet historiography were based on revolutionary subjects, all aspects of the history of the Bolshevik Revolution, and also the Civil War.

Historical information and sources about the events of the First World War that took place on the Caucasus front, and specifically on the Battle of Sarykamysh, are scarce for two main reasons: First, operations in these regions were minor compared to the main fighting on the Eastern Front and so were less written about; second, before the Bolshevik revolution there was turmoil in the Russian Empire (the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 — this was a major humiliation for "royal" Russia and the monarchy, Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg on January 22 1905, and the First Revolution in 1905. These last two events had common roots in the general poverty of the population, discontent with the monarchy, a pressing need for change in the country's basic power structure, and the majority's lack of a voice in government). Following the Bolshevik revolution which took place during the First World War, the new Soviet government pulled out of the war and turned all its attention to the ongoing Civil War. During this period more was written about the events of the revolution and the Civil War rather than about Russia's participation in the First World War.

In the 20th century the most important Russian historiography of the First World War generally belongs to generals and historians whose works include memoirs and first hand accounts of the operations during the war.

The first attempt to research the Caucasus front was made by General A. M. Zaionchkovsky in his book *Pervaja mirovaja vojna* (The First World War). In the third chapter of his book he gives a brief chronology of the operation. Despite the general character of estimates and conclusions, the author presented the chronology and stages of the main military operations on the Russian-Ottoman front of the First World War flawlessly.

The primary first hand Russian sources related to the battle that took place in Sarykamysh, such as E.V. Maslovsky's *Mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte 1914-1917*, Knigoizdatelstvo, Vozrozhdenie, La Renaissance, Parizh, 1933 (The World War in the Caucasus Front, 1914-1917), N.G. Korsun's *Kavkazskij front pervoj mirovoj vojny*, Tranzitniga, Moskva, 2004 (The Caucasus Front in the First World War), *Pervaja mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte*, Voennoje izdatelstvo, Ministerstvo Vooruzhennyh Sil Sojuza SSR, Moskva, 1946 (The First World War in the Caucasus

Front), and *Sarykamyskaja operatsija*, Voenizdat, NKO, SSSR, Moskva, 1937 (The Sarykamysk Operation), E. G. Berhman's *Sarykamyskaja operatsija, 12-24 dekabnja 1914 goda (nekotorye dokumenty)*, pod redaktsiej A. Andreeva, Parizh, 1934 (The Sarykamysk Operation, 12-24 December, 1914 (some documents) and V.P. Nikolskij's *Sarykamyskaja operatsija 12-24 dekabnja 1914 goda*, Drevne Bylgarija, Sofija, 1933 (The Sarykamysk Operation, 12-24 December, 1914) demand particular attention in this context.

E.V. Maslovsky's and N. G. Korsun's contribution for the history of the Battle of Sarykamysk is very important not only for Turkish researchers, but also for Russians because these authors used different sources. For example, Maslovsky (during operation he was a lieutenant colonel, chief of the operational office of the Caucasus army) in his *Mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte, 1914-1917* (World War in the Caucasus Front, 1914-1917) in addition to his own memoirs and documents, used the memoirs of Russian generals, their telegrams and official documents. Korsun (lieutenant general, doctor of military sciences and also professor, the chair of history of military art of the Military academy of M.V. Frunz) in his *Kavkazskij front pervoj mirovoj vojny* (Caucasus Front in the First World War) used Turkish staff colonel Koprulu Sherif Bey's and Chief of Staff Selahaddin Adil Bey's memoirs and Maslovsky's *Mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte, 1914-1917* (World War in the Caucasus Front, 1914-1917); and in his *Pervaja mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte* (First World War in the Caucasus Front) he used archival sources and the memoirs of the Turkish officers.

Authoritative émigré writer Maslovsky's *Mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte, 1914-1917* (The World War in the Caucasus Front, 1914-1917) was published in Paris and consists of 27 chapters. After introducing the political conditions before the operation he gives a detailed description of the operation using telegrams Russian General Istomin sent to General Berhman which are included in his book. In chapter 5, which deals with the Battle of Sarykamysk, Maslovsky describes Tsar Nicholas II's visit to Sarykamysk as a great risk before the operation.



Meeting Tsar Nicholas II at the station in Sarykamysk^[1]



Arrival of Tsar Nicholas II to Sarykamysh during his expedition to the front^[2]

Later in the same chapter he describes the operation in detail. From his description it is understood that the Ottoman forces commanded by Enver Pasha fought bravely and that Enver Pasha never gave up fighting. His comments on Enver Pasha and the Turkish soldiers are as follows:

“The Sultan’s representative, highest ranking general of all Turkey’s armed forces, Enver Pasha began the operation, and he was confident of success. The plan was conceived bravely and promised very good results that would be extremely favorable to Turkey.”

“...due to faultless reconaissance, excellent knowledge of the district, the enormous superiority of the forces assigned to the operation, and extreme endurance of the Turkish soldiers, the audacity of the plan paid off.”



Enver Pasha with German officers at the Caucasus front



Enver Pasha and Otto von Feldmann inspect Turkish units

This book also contains valuable information about the Erzurum and the Erzincan-Harput operations. In the appendix of his book he also gives the complete order of battle for both the Russian and Turkish forces.

Korsun's *Kavkazskij front pervoj mirovoj vojny* (The Caucasus Front in the First World War) was published in Moscow in 1937. In this book we get a more detailed picture of the region and the operation in Sarykamysh. Korsun, who served as a lieutenant general at the Caucasus front, described the events on the Caucasus front in detail. The book includes three chapters which have detailed information concerning the Sarykamysh, Alashgird-Khamadan and Erzurum operations.

In the first chapter, which deals with the Sarykamysh Operation, the author introduces the general atmosphere in the Caucasus theater before the Sarykamysh Operation. Later it gives a short description of the Caucasus – Turkish theater which covers a wide area: Erzurum, Batum, Ardakhan, Kars, Kagyzman and Koprukoy. Later in the book the condition of the Ottoman and the Russian army, the operative plans, the preparedness of the both army and the operation itself are discussed in detail. In this chapter he also introduces his tactical and general ideas.

Korsun in the eighteenth section titled “Assessment of the actions of the parties in the operational relation” talks about the condition of the Turkish forces:

“The Turkish armies were insufficiently prepared for the fighting and didn't possess the necessary supplies to carry out maneuvers on such a big scope. The main point — the Turkish command structure had no skills to take the initiative which was necessary for fighting in mountain conditions.”

Korsun's second book *Pervaja mirovaja vojna na Kavkazskom fronte* (The First World War in the Caucasus Front) was published in Moscow in 1946, and consists of eight chapters. The Battle of Sarykamysh is introduced in the third chapter. On page 38 he gives a similar assessment for the Turkish forces:

“...3rd army commander Hasan Izzet Pasha and also some generals from other corps were pessimistic about the possibility of the operation and Hasan Izzet Pasha abandoned his position and command of the 3rd army passed to Enver Pasha...The Turkish armies possessed neither sufficient combat training, nor organized support in the rear and their equipment was bad...3rd army commanders did not have even the most basic skills to lead the army in mountainous conditions”

“...During the operation of 1914 serious defects in command emerged both in Turkish and Russian forces”

Korsun, by criticizing both Turkish and Russian commanders, indicates that he is a relatively objective source.

Like Maslovsky, Korsun in his *Sarykamyskaja operatsija* (The Sarykamys Operation) also evaluates the plan of the operation favourably as in the following:

“About the Turkish plan it is possible to note the following:

1 . Enver Pasha’s plan was theoretically correct... it was difficult to execute such a complex operation in the mountains under winter conditions and with poor communications”

In addition to Maslovsky and Korsun, there are other authoritative émigré writers most of whose works on the Battle of Sarykamys were published outside of Russia. They were former imperial officers who served in the Caucasus during the First World War.

One of these writers is general E. G. Berhman, who commanded the 2nd Caucasus army on January 2, 1914. He compiled his memoirs in a book titled *Sarykamyskaja operatsija, 12-24 dekabnja 1914 goda (nekotorye dokumenty)* (The Sarykamys Operation, 12-24 December, 1914 (some documents)) and published in Paris in 1934. In this book he includes letters he wrote to Tsar Nicholas II, official reports, reports from General Vorontsov-Dashkov, and letters and telegrams to Generals Baratov, Gabaev, Myshlaevsky, and Yudenich. He begins his book with a telegram dated 22 December 1914 in which he reports that he is very happy to announce that the Battle of Sarykamys has ended successfully and the 9th and 10th army corps all surrendered and many Turkish officers were taken prisoner.

The other émigré writer to be mentioned is major-general V.P. Nikolskij. Nikolskij in his book titled *Sarykamyskaja operatsija 12-24 dekabnja 1914 goda* (The Battle of Sarykamys, 12-24 December 1914) uses Berhman’s *Sarykamyskaja operatsija, 12-24 dekabnja 1914 goda* (The Battle of Sarykamys, 12-24 December 1914) and other wartime documents.

Nikolsky on page 16 in the preface talks about Enver Pasha’s decision to execute such a complex operation:

“The Battle of Sarykamys for the Turks is an example of adventurous strategy and operations on the outer borders.

...

Enver the pasha did not take into account the high extent of combat training which special commanders of the Caucasus army possessed, and he based the success of the operation only on fast, sudden maneuver and on the superiority in numbers of his forces.”

The comments voiced by Nikolsky in the conclusion significantly clarify his objective stance on the operation:

“And, in fact, having developed a plan with extraordinary scope and extraordinary courage

to capture the Russians in Sarykamysh, Enver Pasha resolutely took the initiative into his hands and developed a vigorous approach, but he was unable to complete it. His courageous operation was poorly planned; he did not take into consideration his opponent's character, and the conditions of the region which were especially difficult during this period when the operation was conducted.

The strong will of Enver Pasha forced tough Turkish armies to overcome all terrible barriers."

On page 99 he talks about the Turkish commanders as follows:

"All Turkish commanders, led by army corps commanders, bravely and willingly fought in even the most hopeless offensives, and showed unbelievably strong persistence in defending their positions. Behind them Enver Pasha's cruel gendarms were waiting to shoot the soldiers who hesitated without showing any remorse"

Nikolsky, unlike E. V. Maslovsky who claims that the victory near Sarykamysh was won only thanks to General N. N. Yudenich, denies his major contribution to the operation. He mentions that in the operation Yudenich had not prepared any positive plan other than defense; it was Berhman who had prepared the plan for the successful assault. According to Nikolsky, without Berhman's plan the Battle of Sarykamysh would not have been successful.

There are sources related to the First World War published by numerous authors in the 21st century: A.V. Venkov and A.V. Shishov's *Belye generaly* (White Generals), collective authors's work (A.M. Ageev, D.V.Vepzhkhovskiy, V.I.Vinogradov, V.P.Gluhov, F.S. Krinitsyn, I.I.Rostunov, Yu.F.Sokolov, A A. Stokov) titled *Istorija pervoj mirovoj vojny 1914-1918 gg.* (History of the First World War, 1914-1918), military writer A.A.Kersnovsky's book *Istorija russoj armii* (History of the Russian Army), A.V. Venkov and A.V. Shishov's *Belye generaly* (White Generals) etc. All of these sources are descriptive, not analytic and their writings are based on the same previously published first hand accounts I have already mentioned in this study. They use no new original sources and provide no new analysis. In addition, none of these modern works are devoted solely to the Battle of Sarykamysh or the Caucasus front, instead, they only discuss the Battle of Sarykamysh as part of the general history of the First World War.

Conclusion

The sources we dealt with related to this tragic operation are all primary, first-hand accounts written by witnesses or participants in the events they describe. The authors of these sources are all prominent generals who led Russian armies in the Caucasus campaign during the Sarykamysh Operation. By being witnesses to the events in the Battle of Sarykamysh and because they present us a factual picture of the region, people and the operation, their writings are invaluable not only for the Turks, but also the Russians. They use a variety of sources - letters, telegrams, official documents and their memoirs - to describe the operation. Being émigré writers, they are not afraid to tell the truth and praise the enemy, they are very objective; and there are no traces of hostility towards their opponent in their works.

Sources written inside of Russia also are important in the sense that they also provide a detailed picture of events, however, their tone is less objective than the émigré writers since they

were subject to official pressure to produce politically correct histories.

[1] President's Library in the name of Boris Nicolayevich Yeltsin <http://www.prlib.ru/Lib/pages/item.aspx?itemid=50643>

[2] Russian Government Archive Electronic Fotocatalog (Rossijsky gosudartvennyj arkhiv kinofotodokumentov) <http://rgakfd.altsoft.spb.ru/showObject.do?object=1810348250>

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<http://www.prlib.ru/Pages/default.aspx>

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