

Years of Blood: A History of the Armenian-Muslim Clashes in the Caucasus, 1905-1906

By Mammad Said Ordubadi

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The first decade of the 20th century represents a very significant though turbulent period in the history of the Caucasian peoples. Not only had the region been shaken by the impacts of the drastic political changes taking place in the three neighboring empires—Russia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire—it had also become a scene of inter-communal violence due to the escalating tension between Armenians and Muslims of the Russian Caucasus. Although both communities had already been greatly influenced by the revolutionary ideas and movements of late 19th century, the real revolution for them had actually started with the bloody clashes in Baku in February 1905. The so-called Muslim-Armenian War of 1905-1906 was particularly influential on the national awakening of the Muslim Azeris as the Armenian community had already been very much organized as a result of the activities of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun) that was founded as early as 1890.

The celebrated Azeri historian Mammad Said Ordubadi's *Years of Blood: A History of the Armenian-Muslim Clashes in the Caucasus, 1905-1906* provides a very detailed and fresh depiction of the tragic events that took place between the Armenians and Muslims in the Russian Caucasus at the beginning of the 20th century. The book is an outstanding contribution to the field due to its reliance on first-hand data collected from original sources, including around 250 letters of correspon-

dence directly sent to the author by both Muslims and Armenians. It describes the bloody clashes that had spread all over the Caucasus in the course of a few years with very striking details—most of which were probably unknown to the readers. Here, it is important to indicate that the author does not focus on only one city or town, but includes stories from a larger region that includes Baku, Yerevan, Nakhciv-an, Shusha, Ganja and Tbilisi, along with many others. The detailed descriptions of the local political intrigues, brutally murdered people, plundered shops and burnt houses not only give a shuddery feeling to the readers, but also helps them appreciate the extent of Ordubadi's historical research which took almost two years to finish.

It is interesting to note that Ordubadi's book was actually published in 1911. However, since it did not meet the requirements of the official Soviet ideology, it was not until its second publication in 1990 that scholars of the field could learn about Ordubadi's first-hand impressions of the 1905-1906 incidents. The book has become increasingly popular in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, especially after the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Considering that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is still unresolved despite the two decades that have passed since the demise of the Soviet Union, the translation of Ordubadi's book into English can be regarded as a timely move in terms of anticipating the historical causes of the ongoing

enmity between contemporary Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Years of Blood is in general a collection of detailed depictions of the Armenian-Muslim clashes that are clearly documented with personal letters, speeches and eye-witness accounts of both the Armenian and Muslim people. In this regard, the book is based on plenty of data rather than the author's direct thoughts or assessments about the events. However, in the introductory chapter Ordubadı expresses his belief that there had been four major causes behind the escalation of tension between the two communities: a) provocative activities of the Armenian Dashnaksutyun Party, b) indifference of the Russian authorities due to their preoccupation with the Russian revolution of 1905, c) the Muslims' lack of knowledge and education as well as their ignorance about the real designs of the Armenians, and d) the Armenian nationalists' strong desire for autonomy from both Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

Ordubadı claims in the *Years of Blood* that he kept an equal distance from both the Muslims and Armenians and "tried to describe accurately and without bias the events which took place for nationalist reasons." Despite this, the readers will probably conclude that Ordubadı generally puts the real blame for the incidents on the shoulders of the Armenians. The author acknowledges that many Armenians along with Muslims lost their lives and property during the clashes, but he definitely has more sympathy and understanding towards the Muslims. In many parts of the book, he claims that Muslims protected their Armenian neighbors from looting and slaughter although the Armenians failed to reciprocate this noble behavior. At one point, he expresses his appreciation of the Muslims

by writing the following sentences: "Long live my merciful brothers! Glory to them because they spread the fame and might of Islam... Long live our honest and merciful mothers! May they live long and bring up merciful children." Such expressions inevitably make the readers question the impartiality of the author in judging the real nature of the incidents. However, it should be kept in mind that Ordubadı himself was a Caucasian Muslim who witnessed the 1905-1906 tragedies. Therefore, he was probably very much influenced by the prevailing atmosphere of terror caused by the Armenian groups against the Muslim towns and villages. The clues of this terror may be traced in his narration of an interesting speech delivered by an Armenian leader to the Muslim people where he threatened them with "punishment by Dashnaksutyun troops" in case they failed to follow the Armenian leadership for eventual autonomy from Russia.

Ordubadı believes that "along with the Russian and Caucasian press, European and American publications speak heatedly and exhibit the closest interest in these events and their causes. We should also know that the articles published in the foreign press are full of contradictions and differences." In this regard, despite its sympathy with the pains of the Muslims rather than the Armenians, *Years of Blood* is still a very significant historical survey that allows the readers to find out the real causes, main issues, evolution and consequences of the Armenian-Muslim clashes of the 1905-1906 period. Particularly this last point makes this rigorous study a must-read for both students and scholars of Caucasian history.

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