

## LAY-LED CAMPAIGNS FOR ARMENIAN CHURCHES: WHY SO RARE?

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This paper examines two rare campaigns in the late Soviet period to save and reopen Armenian Apostolic Churches, one in Rostov-on-Don in Russia and one in Leninakan in Armenia. Both were inspired by individuals who tried to mobilize popular support. Both failed.

**Introduction:** Spontaneous campaigns to defend threatened Armenian Apostolic churches in the later Soviet period were rare. Two such campaigns – one in Rostov-on-Don to try to save St Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral from destruction and the other in Leninakan to reopen Holy Saviour Church for worship – involved multiple supporters, but each was initiated by one individual. Tshkhugi Samurgasheva in Rostov died within a year of launching her campaign, but it continued after her death, while Vahan Terteryan in Leninakan pursued his campaign over decades. Neither succeeded in persuading the Soviet authorities.

Compared with members of other faiths in the Soviet Union, Armenian Apostolic believers were slow during the later Soviet period to try to stand up for their rights against the depredations of the Soviet regime. The growing human rights movement and self-confidence of religious believers of a variety of faiths saw an upsurge in protests, petitions, campaigns and independent writing. While Armenia itself shared in this growth of independent thought, writing and campaigning – with self-produced (samizdat) articles and journals circulating, as well as letters to the authorities – most of the content related to national issues, primarily recognition of the Ottoman era genocide and the destiny of the Armenian nation. Few known campaigns were launched among Armenians to defend imperilled churches – even during Nikita Khrushchev’s violent anti-religious campaign of 1959-64 which saw mass closures and destructions of places of worship of all faiths – or to reopen long-closed churches afterwards. Certainly, Catholicos Vazgen raised his concerns in private with any senior official who would listen. But spontaneous, lay-led campaigns were relatively rare.

Among the known campaigns were two which are of interest, one in Rostov-on-Don in the early 1960s and one in Leninakan which lasted from at least 1965 to the early 1980s. Significantly, both were led by apparently strong-willed individuals, Tshkhugi Samurgasheva in Rostov and Vahan Terteryan in Leninakan, who seem to have been able to mobilise wider popular support for their campaigns. Both campaigns also failed to achieve their objectives: Rostov's Surp Grigor Lusavorich cathedral was not reopened and indeed was soon bulldozed (after the main campaigner had died), while Leninakan's Holy Saviour Church was not reopened, despite the long-running campaign.

Neither campaigner appears to have been intimidated by the very real threat of government reprisals. When from the early 1960s Boris Talantov, a maths teacher and Russian Orthodox layman from the Russian town of Kirov, began protesting against church seizures and destructions, he was arrested in 1969 and died in a labour camp in 1971. The organisers of petitions to hand back the Catholic church in the Lithuanian port city of Klaipeda – which the authorities seized as soon as it had been completed in 1961 and before it could be opened – suffered severe KGB harassment.

The Soviet authorities had many means at their disposal of crushing any undesirable popular campaign or movement (indeed, they regarded any such activity as undesirable), as individuals were entirely dependent on the state for their income and well-being. The party could arrange for party members to be thrown out, individuals could be sacked from their jobs, officials could warn them of possible harm if they continued their campaigning, police and prosecutor's offices could consider punishments and, if all else failed, the KGB could intimidate and if necessary have them jailed.

During the post-war era, government control over religious life was publicly enacted through the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) and the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) in Moscow (which were united as the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) in 1965) and, in Armenia, by the Council for the Affairs of the Armenian Apostolic Church (CAAC). The KGB controlled these Councils behind the scenes.

#### **The Rostov campaign**

By the late 1950s, Rostov region in southern European Russia had five functioning Armenian churches, according to the local commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults Aleksandr Baikov in his 23 December 1957 report.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the anti-religious campaign in 1964, this had fallen to just two. The Surp Grigor Lusavorich cathedral in the Proletarsky district of Rostov (formerly Nakhichevan-on-Don) was closed on 26 June 1959 after a brief state-organised campaign which local Armenians tried to counter in vain. A 'group of workers from the Krasny Aksai factory' wrote to the local authorities asking for a site to build a house of culture on Karl Marx square, where the cathedral was located. In addition, on 11 June 1959 the Rostov regional commissioner for religious cults had written to the council of ministers in Moscow with a draft resolution 'to remove the former technical station, currently used as an Armenian cathedral'. The commissioner claimed that on the anniversary of the end of the second world war, 9 May 1959, an eternal flame had been lit at the burial site of fallen soldiers. The site was visited 'by numerous workers every day and especially on anniversaries', the commissioner claimed, 'and the presence at this location of an Armenian cathedral is inappropriate'. Moreover, 'one should bear in mind that this premises is situated on a square near the monument to the founder of scientific atheism, Karl Marx'. On 29 July, four weeks after the cathedral's closure, the

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Documentation of Recent History of Rostov Region. f. R-9. op. 3, d. 491. pp. 82-83.

authorities had come at night to remove the cross from the dome and the bells. All the sacred vessels and other items of gold, silver and jewels were seized by the state finance authorities, while other property was handed to the city's Surp Karapet church. On 30 July the building was handed to the children's technical station.

Vazgen did what he could to try to save the cathedral, which he had visited in 1957, meeting Sergei Gasparyan, head of the CAAC, to urge the authorities not to confiscate it. He also wrote directly to the Soviet government on 17 June 1959. However, as CAAC acting head Suren Hovhanesyan wrote on 22 July to Aleksei Puzin, the head of the CARC in Moscow, Gasparyan gave Vazgen a 'direct explanation' of why the cathedral had been closed, telling him that towns are now being rebuilt and, of necessity, homes and churches need to be demolished. This 'inevitable process should not be regarded as an excuse to close any particular church, mosque or prayer house', Gasparyan claimed. He pointed out that the cathedral had been closed because of the reconstruction of the park 'and its use for other purposes'. He told Vazgen that his appeal to the city authorities 'cannot be satisfied'. 'Despite Gasparyan's explanation, Vazgen insisted that his letter be sent on to you,' Hovhanesyan told Puzin. Hovhanesyan added that the CAAC believed Vazgen's appeal should be rejected. Puzin responded to Hovhanesyan on 31 July, explaining the background to the closure. He noted that the building had been a children's technical station in 1939, but that 'prayer gatherings started during the [Nazi] occupation'. Reconstruction of Marx square had already begun, while the closeness to the eternal flame and the site of a proposed statue of Marx was a concern. Puzin claimed that local people had appealed to the city's Proletarian district and city executive committees calling for the children's technical station to be reopened there. 'Fulfilling the wishes of the city residents', the city executive committee had ordered the cathedral's closure. The CARC had approved the closure as located not far away was another Armenian church 'where Armenian believers of the city of Rostov can fulfil their religious needs'. The CARC instructed CAAC to pass on this message to Vazgen.<sup>2</sup>

On 11 July 1960, officials took the final decision to demolish the cathedral. A 9 August letter to Leonid Brezhnev, chair of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, from a group of Rostov cathedral parishioners led by Tshkhugi Samurgasheva courageously raised their complaints. The 79-year-old Samurgasheva, who died in April 1961, was from a prominent local Armenian family. She and the other complainants pointed out that the Soviet Constitution and laws proclaimed freedom of conscience for all, adding that nowhere was it allowed for local authorities 'to restrict believers, create obstacles to the carrying out of religious rituals or, all the more, to take away a church building from believers'.

We believers and parishioners of the Armenian cathedral in the city of Rostov-on-Don, just as millions of believers of other ethnicities, had at their disposal the cathedral building to be able to pray and satisfy our religious needs as the canons of the Armenian-Gregorian faith demand. The cathedral building handed to our religious community has always been kept in order, all legal demands of the administrative organs have been fulfilled and all taxes levied have been paid.

Samurgasheva and her fellow parishioners noted that the building was also recorded as a historical monument, and that during the Second World War, church members had contributed generously – as had other local Armenians – to the collections to support the war effort and wounded soldiers. They complained also at the way the local authorities had taken away the building 'in violation of Soviet laws and the rights of believers protected by these laws'. The retired priest Fr Kevork Darbinyan, who was no longer able to serve because of his health, had

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<sup>2</sup> Armenian National Archive, f. 823, op. 3, d. 159, pp. 26-27, 30-31.

‘exceeded his powers’ by agreeing to the closure, as had two members of the church council ‘who had not found in themselves the civil courage to protest against Darbinyan’s illegal actions’. Parishioners complained that the seizure of the cross from the dome and the bells less than two weeks earlier in the middle of the night was ‘to avoid the discontent of [ethnic] Armenian citizens’. Describing themselves as angry, the parishioners called on the cathedral to be handed back for worship and an investigation to be launched into how it had been taken away. In a telling conclusion, the parishioners explained that they had waited more than a year to write the letter ‘because we had hoped for the intervention of our spiritual leaders, our diocesan head Archimandrite [Karekin] Ter-Hakopyan and Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I, but as our hopes and expectations have not been justified we decided to appeal to you directly, hoping for your just decision.’ Although Samurgasheva gave her address at the foot of the letter, no reply came and the cathedral remained closed.

The veteran local priest (officially the church’s assistant priest), Fr Mkrtich Chorchoyants, lost his home when the cathedral was closed and was ‘literally thrown onto the street’, as he complained in a 7 April 1960 letter to Nikita Khrushchev, the communist party general secretary. ‘I can’t allow that in the free Soviet country they can leave an old man without a crust of bread, and therefore I urgently beseech you, Nikita Sergeevich, to issue an appropriate instruction to allow me, a Soviet citizen, to continue service in the cemetery church of Rostov-on-Don to support my family.’ Fr Chorchoyants cited what he regarded as a cynical suggestion from Rostov’s CARC commissioner Nikolai Yendakov (a former secret police officer) that the cemetery chapel already had a priest and thus did not need another, and that therefore he should retire. Interestingly, Fr Chorchoyants made no overt complaint about the closure of the cathedral as a place of worship. (In a sign of further state retribution, the priest’s daughter was also barred from working as a foreign-language teacher in Rostov. She was told she would be allowed to teach only if she moved elsewhere.)

In May 1966, in a last-ditch effort to save their cathedral, a delegation of parishioners travelled to Moscow to petition the authorities. They were told at the Cabinet of Ministers that a government decree specified that historical monuments, including places of worship, were to be preserved. However, at night on 18 June, while the delegation was still in Moscow, the local authorities blew up the cathedral, choosing the night time to avoid popular protests. Local leaders had sent a Komsomol member to the mining town of Shakhty 70 kms north of Rostov to acquire explosives, and he helped the sappers place the explosives in the cellars of the cathedral. However, when the cathedral was built, egg yolk had been mixed with the cement which appears to have strengthened the structure, so after each of the first two explosions the sappers had to add more explosives. Only with the third explosion was the cathedral destroyed, together with the tombs it contained and the khachkars placed in the church walls, some of which had come from the medieval Armenian city of Ani. The Komsomol member soon moved into a bigger flat and his career flourished. However, it seems he died relatively young of cancer, while some of the other officials involved in the cathedral’s destruction are said to have had early deaths. In 1970, the Krasny Aksai factory’s house of culture was built on the site.<sup>3</sup> Georgy Bagdykov, born in Rostov the following year, recalled that on the day the cathedral was destroyed, local Armenians ‘wept

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<sup>3</sup> **Malkhasyan A.** Armyanskie tserkvi na donsokoi zemli //,Nakhichevan-na-Donu (Rostov-on-Don). "Nos. 9-12 2010; **Vartanyan V., Kazarov S.** Istoriia Armianskoi Apostolskoi tserkvi na Donu, XVIII--XX vv.2nd edition, Taganrogskii institut upravleniia i ekonomiki, Taganrog, -2008. pp. 98-109; The August 1960 letter is in State Archive of Rostov Region, f. 4173, op. 3, d. 27, pp. 288-289.

with grief that tore their hearts'. He remembered the older people going to the site of the former cathedral where the house of culture had been built, where they 'knelt, wept and prayed'.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Leninakan campaign**

Leninakan, Armenia's second city with a population in the early 1970s of more than 170,000 and where the population was regarded as being devout, had just one church, the Holy Mother of God (Surp Astvatsatsin) Church, located on May Victory Square in the city centre. The city was also the centre of the Shirak diocese, led in the late 1970s by Bishop Narek Shakarian, and several priests lived with the bishop.

Campaigners in Leninakan had long fought to reopen a second church in a city where, according to the Council for the Affairs of the Armenian Church's own figures, some 20,000 people attended the church over Easter 1978. Campaigners focused on trying to have Holy Saviour (Surp Amenaprkich) Church – then used as a philharmonic hall – handed back for worship.

The CAAC's deputy chairman Andranik Asratyan reported to Eduard Galustyan of the Moscow Council for Religious Affairs on 16 November 1978 that the Council and the Leninakan executive committee had been considering such requests since 1969. Asratyan reported that the church the campaigners wanted to reopen, Holy Saviour Church, was being used as a philharmonic hall and - what was worse - was located right next to a school. Asratyan reported scornfully that the reopening of the church was 'not desirable' as less than 100 metres away on the same square was the town's working church, Holy Mother of God (Surp Astvatsatsin) Church, 'which fully satisfies the needs of believers'. The CAAC chairman had been to Leninakan to hold an 'explanatory conversation' with the organiser of the campaign to reopen the church, Vahan Terteryan.<sup>5</sup> Terteryan had collected many signatures on numerous petitions to the authorities (more than 1,000 signatures in 1965 and again in 1975) and was clearly not impressed by the CAAC chairman's arguments. He had written to Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin on 15 September 1978 and wrote again on 22 November. In what was presumably meant to be a reply on their behalf, Galustyan wrote to Terteryan from Moscow on 6 December explaining why the church could not be reopened. Terteryan persisted, with a 500 signature petition in 1981 and a letter to the CPSU Central Committee on 27 October 1981, but this resulted again only in a visit by a CAAC official in December 1981. The church remained closed.

### **Motivations**

Sadly we do not know what made Tshkhugi Samurgasheva and Vahan Terteryan choose to risk possible punishment to try to protect rights to have places of worship. Nor do we know how much (if at all) they coordinated their campaigns with Church leaders. But both led campaigns at a time when information the government did not approve for publication was hard to come by and organising groups of people outside the framework of official organisations was a cause for suspicion and potentially dangerous.

While Samurgasheva died less than a year after launching the campaign, other former parishioners battled – in vain - to preserve the by now closed cathedral. Terteryan was persistent in his campaign, repeatedly addressing Soviet leaders in both Yerevan and Moscow. Religious affairs officials who visited to talk to him must have been frustrated and baffled as to why he failed to accept that he was not going to get his way.

**Conclusion:** Why were such campaigns so rare? Russian-based Armenians were far more likely to campaign for their places of worship than were Armenians in Soviet Armenia, as

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<sup>4</sup> Bagdykov G. Armyanskie svyashenniki Dona "Veda". Taganrog, -2016. p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1336, p. 29. See also pp. 31 and 34.

other campaigns against the destruction of Armenian churches in southern Russia attest. Explaining this is hard. Perhaps for Armenians in Russia their church was, in addition to being a place of worship, a cultural centre and an important symbol of national identity which they wished to cling on to amid a Russian-speaking world. If a church in one location closed, it was often some distance to the nearest functioning Armenian church.

In Armenia itself, a church was clearly not the only centre where Armenian identity could be expressed. Besides, Armenians often travelled from elsewhere in Armenia to noted religious sites on pilgrimage – such as to Echmiadzin, Geghard or Khor Virap. Many were used to travelling to Echmiadzin for baptisms. So the relatively few open churches in Soviet Armenia were offset by the habit of travel to religious sites. In addition, many Armenians were closer to folk beliefs than to organised church activity, and saw less need to go to a church to join the liturgy than to venerate holy objects at home or to visit a holy site (surp) that was recognised by the people, not necessarily with the Church's approval.

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*Քորլի Ֆ.*

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Հայաստան, Լենինական, Ռուսաստան, Դոնի Ռոստով, եկեղեցի, սուրբ ծառայություն:

Ինքնաբուխ արշավները, ի պաշտպանություն վտանգված Հայ Առաքելական եկեղեցիներին, սովետական ուշ ժամանակահատվածում հազվադեպ բնույթ էին կրում: Երկու այդպիսի արշավներ մեկնարկեցին. մեկը՝ Դոնի Ռոստովում, որը միտված էր փրկել Սուրբ Գրիգոր Լուսավորչի տաճարը կործանումից, իսկ մյուսը՝ Լենինականում՝ Սուրբ Փրկչի տաճարը վերաբացելու նպատակով: Ուշագրավ է այն, որ այս գաղափարը նախաձեռնել էր Դշխուհի Սամուրգաշևան Ռոստովում: Նրա մահից հետո էլ այդ արշավը շարունակվեց: Լենինականում Սուրբ Փրկչի տաճարը վերաբացելու՝ Վահան Տերտերյանի առաջնորդած արշավը նույնպես տասնամյակներ շարունակվեց: Ըստ էության, հնարավոր չէրավ համոզել խորհրդային կառավարությանը:

## ЗАЧЕМ БЫЛИ РЕДКОСТЬЮ СПОНТАННЫЕ КАМПАНИИ В ЗАЩИТУ АРМЯНСКИХ ЦЕРКВЕЙ ?

*Корли Ф.*

**Ключевые слова:** Армения, Ленинакан, Россия, Ростов-на-Дону, церковь богослужение.

Спонтанные кампании в защиту находящихся под угрозой армянских апостольских церквей в поздний советский период были редкостью. Две такие кампании - одна в Ростове-на-Дону, чтобы попытаться спасти собор Святого Григория Просветителя от разрушения, а другая в Ленинакане, чтобы вновь открыть храм Святого Спасителя для богослужений, - привлекли сторонников, но каждая была инициирована одним человеком. Дшхуи Самурга-

шева в Ростове умерла в течение года после начала своей кампании, но кампания продолжалась после ее смерти, в то время как Ваган Тертерян в Ленинакане продолжал свою кампанию на протяжении десятилетий. Уговорить советскую власть не удалось.

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