

We are asked, Why, when life in the United States was so comfortable, did we leave and come to Cilicia when we knew that we were going into the jaws of death? Our response remains the same: What true Armenian would prefer a comfortable life when his family was under the yoke and being massacred by the Turks; when our entire nation was humiliated by the Turks and in the throes of the last moments of life? Of what use is the life of an individual when his entire nation is being murdered? You gladly sacrifice your life to justify your means of revenge.

Legionnaire Caspar Menag

Betrayed Dreams

THE ARMENIAN LEGION, 1916-1920

The Armenian Legion was formed during the darkest days of World War I, when the Allies (France, England, and Russia) found themselves pinned down in the trenches of Western and Eastern Europe, and the Armenians faced the bleak aftermath of the Genocide of their people at the hands of the Ottoman Turkish government.

In London, on October 27, 1916, the French and British governments reached an agreement with the president of the Armenian National Delegation, Boghos Nubar Pasha, to form an Eastern Legion (*Legion d'Orient*), consisting of Armenian and Syrian volunteers, led by French officers and financed by France, to assist in the war effort against Turkey. France and Great Britain promised autonomy for the Armenians in central and southern Turkey, an area that was allocated to France after the war according to

the terms of the secret agreement (Sykes-Picot) concluded among the Allies to partition Ottoman Turkey. During the 1915 Genocide Armenians had been driven from this area, particularly the southwestern section known as Cilicia, site of a medieval Armenian kingdom and for centuries the home of a large Armenian population. It was understood that the Legion would form the nucleus of an Armenian army to keep peace in the area.

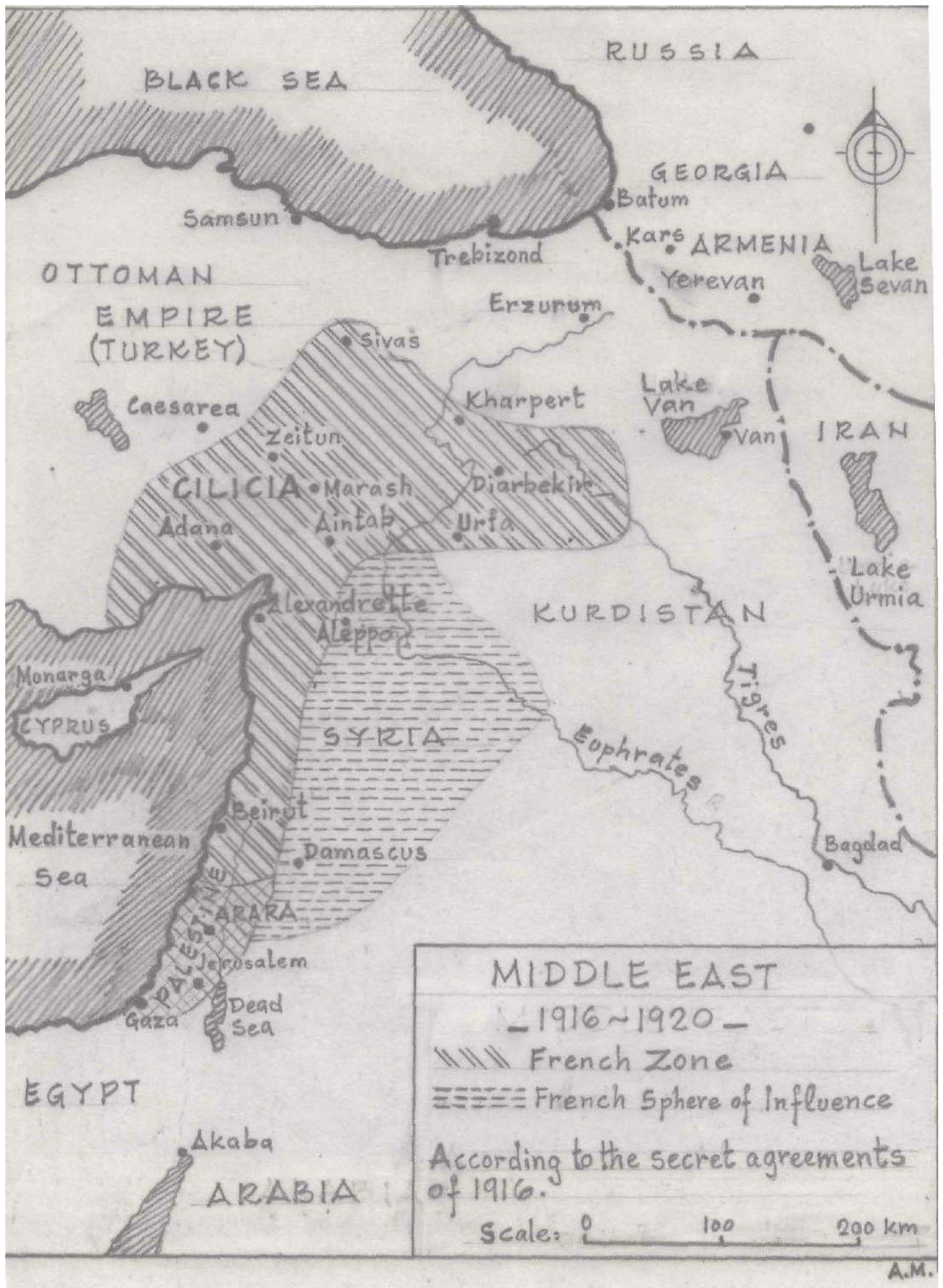
The core of the Legion consisted of about 500 able-bodied men from Musa Dagh, an Armenian village in Cilicia that had managed to hold out against the Turks until its inhabitants were rescued and evacuated by the French navy. Recruitment took place in late 1916 and early 1917 in Armenian communities around the world, as a result of which over 4,000

Recruitment of volunteers in the United States took place under the auspices of the National Union, an umbrella organization established and supported by the major Armenian organizations. Three leaders from abroad, Stepan Sapah-Gulian (*Hnchak*), Ardabast Khatchig Hanemian (*Dashnak*), and Mihran Damadian (*Ramgavar*), appeared at rallies across the nation to encourage the effort. Recruits received initial training in Patterson, New Jersey, embarked from New York City, and sailed to Bordeaux, France, where they were enthusiastically embraced by the French military and civilians. After processing, the men proceeded to Marseilles, were issued uniforms and weapons, and then shipped via Port Said, Egypt, to a military camp in Monarga, Cyprus, for 10 months of training.

Now ready for combat, the Legionnaires engaged in war maneuvers in Ismailia, and then marched through the desert to the Palestine front, to join the Allied forces commanded by British General Edmund Allenby. Facing enemy forces commanded by Mustafa Keinal, the Legionnaires were assigned to capture the Turkish position on the heights of Arara (south of Nablus).

The Armenian Legion was the first Armenian military force in centuries which was organized as a military army, in the true and full sense of the word, on the basis of governmental principles.

When the course of ethical and professional training of several months duration ended, the Armenian Legion gave the impression of being such a synchronized and prepared group that it could be compared with the best of armies.



BLACK SEA

RUSSIA

GEORGIA

Samsun

Batum

OTTOMAN
EMPIRE
(TURKEY)

Trebizond

Kars

ARMENIA

Yerevan

Lake
Sevan

Erzurum

Sivas

Kharpert

Lake
Van

Van

IRAN

Caesarea

Zeitun

CILICIA

Marash

Diarbekir

Adana

Aintab

Urfa

Lake
Urmia

KURDISTAN

Alexandrette

Aleppo

Euphrates

Tigris

Bagdad

Monarga

CYPRUS

Mediterranean
Sea

Beirut

Damascus

ARARA

Jerusalem

Gaza

Dead
Sea

EGYPT

Akaba

ARABIA

On September 18 [1918] we descended into our fortified trenches and waited for nightfall. At 3:30 a.m. the offensive began. Each commander, with his troops, followed the front-line intelligence and moved toward the enemy trenches a mountaintop where they had placed their machine guns. As we got close, the enemy detected our approach and opened concentrated machine-gun fire at our positions. Perfectly aimed bayonets firmly attached at the end of our rifles, we never felt any fear. Our primary objective was to settle accounts with the enemy for the Armenian Genocide and bring to justice as many Turks as possible.

As the enemy machine-gun fire was showering us like early spring hail, we moved forward without hesitation and fear. Under extremely difficult conditions, hanging between life and death for so many times, we finally reached the top of the mountain, and with a final blitzkrieg captured the enemy fortifications.

Legionnaire Hovhannes Garabedian

The day after this victory at the Battle of Arara, the men buried the 23 fatalities (65 men had been wounded). The Turkish army was now in full retreat, and Allenby met no resistance in his advance. The Legionnaires marched north through Palestine to Beirut, where the Syrian troops were separated and the Eastern Legion was renamed the Armenian Legion (*Legion Armenienne*). Turkey now withdrew from the war according to the terms of the Mudros Armistice, signed with Great Britain on October 30, 1918. Soon after, the victorious Allies ended the war with the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

The British and French took steps to bring about the partition of Turkey according to the terms of their secret agreements. As a ready force familiar with the territory, the Armenian Legionnaires were sent immediately into Turkey in December 1918 to occupy strategic points. As they entered Cilicia, the Legionnaires believed that they had finally realized their dream of defending and safeguarding part of the Armenian homeland.

The Armenian volunteers, with tears in their eyes, knelt and kissed their sacred ancestral soil. Carried away with overwhelming emotions of love and yearning, we experienced moments of rapture as if in a hypnotic trance. At that instant we became convinced that only a true patriot would feel the enormous power of the magnetic force of his native soil.

—Legionnaire Khan (Manoug Baghdasarian)

In the absence of available French troops, the British Army under General Allenby was in charge of the occupation of the major population centers in Cilicia, including Adana, Aintab, Marash, Urfa, and Hajin. Approximately 120,000 Armenian civilians deported during the Genocide now returned to their homes in Cilicia, believing themselves to be safe under the protection of the French and British forces. It was not until November 1, 1919, that French forces relieved the British.

By this time, Turkish armed opposition to foreign occupation began to be felt. Supported by the Nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal, this opposition grew in intensity and posed a serious threat to the undermanned and underequipped French units. The first serious sign of trouble came on February 10, 1920, when French forces were abruptly ordered to retreat from Marash following weeks of guerrilla fighting against Turkish irregulars, even though the Turks had indicated their intent to surrender. The stunned Armenian population followed the French retreat only to face a major snowstorm in which most lost their lives. The action taken by England in response, the military occupation of Constantinople, only stiffened Turkish resistance in the interior. In the weeks and months that followed, French retreats took place in Urfa and Hadjin, where Turkish attacks killed thousands of Armenians and forced others to flee. French forces, however, continued to stand firm in the major centers of Aintab and Adana, and French officers and enlisted men (chiefly Algerian and Moroccan) fought bravely under the most difficult conditions.

On the diplomatic front, however, as early as September 1919 France signaled a shift in its Middle East policy by making overtures to the Turkish Nationalists, when George-Picot, French High Commissioner for Syria and Armenia, met with Refet (Bele) in Konya and later (December) with Mustafa Kemal in Sivas. Exhausted by its losses in the Great War and overextended by its postwar commitments, France was seeking an accommodation that would provide commercial and economic advantages in Cilicia and secure its military position to the south, in Syria and Lebanon. French vacillation, along with disagreements among the Allies, played into the hands of the Turkish Nationalists, who were steadily gaining support in the countryside. In this situation, solemn promises made to the Armenians during the war were quietly but firmly put aside by the Allies.



Armenian Legionnaires on duty in Adana, 1920, with Aram Hovsepien in the foreground.

[The dissolution of the Armenian Legion] was not consistent, neither in letter nor in spirit, with the Accord of 1916 between the Allies and the Armenian National Delegation concerning the concession of Armenian autonomy in Cilicia and the formation of a national army of which the Legion would constitute the base. But this is not the first time in history that politics triumphed over law.

General Aram Karamanoukian.



Legionnaires posed for this photo near Arara.

After my departure from Cilicia, on my way back to America with my wife, I saw Legionnaire Hrant [Sarkisian] with his lovely, modest wife Vergin, in a hotel in Marseilles in December 1920. One day in Marseilles, we went with our families to a coffeehouse. Hrant, who sat shaking his head, said with bitterness,

Lad, everything is over for us. At least let s go to America and try to keep our people s interests alive towards our national cause, until such day that the star of our nation s freedom begins to shine.

—Legionnaire Khan (Manoug Baghdasarian)

During the spring of 1920, the French occupation forces began to disarm the Armenian volunteers, and by September 27, 1920, the dissolution of the Armenian Legion was completed. Some Legionnaires stayed behind to do what they could to help the local Armenians, who were now at the mercy of the Turks; others returned to their homes to try to rebuild their lives. The retreat of France from Cilicia was officially completed by the Ankara Accord of October 20, 1921, when France recognized Nationalist Turkey and agreed to withdraw all its forces from Turkish territory. No adequate provisions were made to safeguard the Armenian population from persecution and massacre..

This betrayal by France, which had stood for the Armenians as a symbol of freedom, democracy, and justice, was a bitter blow. The Armenian population of Cilicia was finally and brutally eradicated. Any hope by the Armenians for a return to their homeland in Western Armenia was now destroyed, while revolution and civil war in Russia ended all possibility of an independent Armenian state in Eastern Armenia. Even as the Armenian Legion was being disbanded in Cilicia, the two-year-old independent Republic of Armenia was being overrun by the forces of Soviet Communism (November 29, 1920).

Bitter, disillusioned, and disappointed, the Legionnaires gradually resumed their daily lives. Yet the ultimate failure of their hopes and dreams, through the perfidy of their friends and the ruthlessness of their foes, does not diminish their valor, sacrifices, and devotion to nation. Indeed, the ideals which had inspired the Armenian participation in the Legion were never lost, and the Armenian quest for freedom and independence continued (and continues) under different circumstances and on several fronts.

Brochure prepared by Barbara Merguerian

Sources

Arara, dedicated to the Fifth Anniversary of Arara (Boston, Massachusetts, 1923); *Tenth Anniversary Booklet of the Armenian Legionnaires* (Cairo, 1928); *Armenian Legion: Historical Memoirs*, by Dickran H. Boyajian (Watertown, Massachusetts, 1965); Pages from *the Battles of Marash*, by Krikor Ajemian (Cairo, 1928); *Les Etrangers et le Service Militaire*, by Aram Karamanoukian; *Honneur et Fidélité: Historique des Anciens Combattants Volontaires Arméniens*, edited by the Association des Combattants Arméniens; Autobiography of Legionnaire Hovhannes Garabedian; *Memoirs from the Days of the Cilician Legionnaire Movement*, by Legionnaire Khan (Manoug Baghdasarian) (Boston, 1943); *The Lions of Marash*, by Stanley H. Kerr (Albany, New York, 1973); *Les grandes puissances, l'empire ottoman et les Arméniens dans les archives françaises (1914-1918): Recueil de documents*, edited by Arthur Beylerian (Paris, 1983); John A. Shishmanian Archives, Hoover Institution, Stanford, California. Translations by Aris C. Sevag, Nugar Ashjian, Tamara Shakerjian, Nicholas Soghomonian, and Ara Ghazarian.

Armenian Legion

(1916-1920)

CHRONOLOGY

August 1914

Outbreak of World War I in Europe; Turkey allies with Germany and Austria against the Entente (Russia, France, and England).

April 24, 1915

Turkey unleashes Genocide against its Armenian population.

May 9, 1916

France and England reach a secret agreement (Sykes-Picot) on the postwar division of Turkey, allocating to France the area of southwestern Turkey known as Cilicia.

October 27, 1916

Boghos Nubar Pasha, president of the Armenian National Delegation, reaches an agreement with England and France to establish the Eastern Legion (*Legion d'Orient*), consisting of Armenian and Syrian volunteers, under French auspices, to fight against Turkey. Armenians are promised autonomy in Cilicia.

February - July 1916

Recruitment takes place in the United States, attracting over 1,200 volunteers.

April 6, 1917

United States declares war against Germany, but not Turkey.

August 1917

Formation and training of Armenian volunteers at Monarga, Cyprus (10 months).

June 1918

Legionnaires travel to Ismailia (via Port Said) for war maneuvers, then march through the desert to the Palestine front to join the Allied forces commanded by British General Edmund Allenby.

Sept. 19, 1918

At the heights of Arara (south of Nablus, in Palestine) the Legion defeats enemy forces (German and Turkish) under the command of Mustafa Kemal. Enemy front collapses.

Oct. 20, 1918

Legionnaires arrive in Beirut, after marching through Nazareth, along the Sea of Galilee, Jaffa, Haifa, Akia, and Juniyeh. Syrian troops separated, and Eastern Legion (*Legion d'Orient*) becomes Armenian Legion (*Legion Armenienne*)

Oct. 30, 1918

Turkey **withdraws** from the war according to the terms of the **Modros** Armistice with the British.

Nov. 11, 1918

Armistice ends World War I.

Dec. 1918

Armenian Legionnaires enter Cilicia, occupying Adana (Dec. 21) and other strategic points, as the Turkish army retreats according to the terms of the armistice.

Dec. 1918 to Nov 1919

British troops occupy Cilicia temporarily.



Starting for the firing line...

Approximately 120,000 Armenian survivors deported during the **Genocide** now return to Cilicia, believing themselves to be under the protection of French and British forces.

Sept. 29, 1919

In a change in policy, France makes its first overtures to the Turkish Nationalists when Georges Picot, French High Commissioner for Syria and Armenia, meets with Turkish Nationalist leader Refet (Bele) in Konya. Later (Dec. 5-7) he meets with Mustafa Kemal in Sivas.

Nov. 1, 1919

French troops, including Legionnaires, replace the British in Cilicia, occupying key positions in Marash, Aintab, Sis, Hajin, and Urfa. Armed opposition by irregular Turkish forces, violating the armistice terms but secretly supported by Turkish Nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk, begins.

February 10, 1920

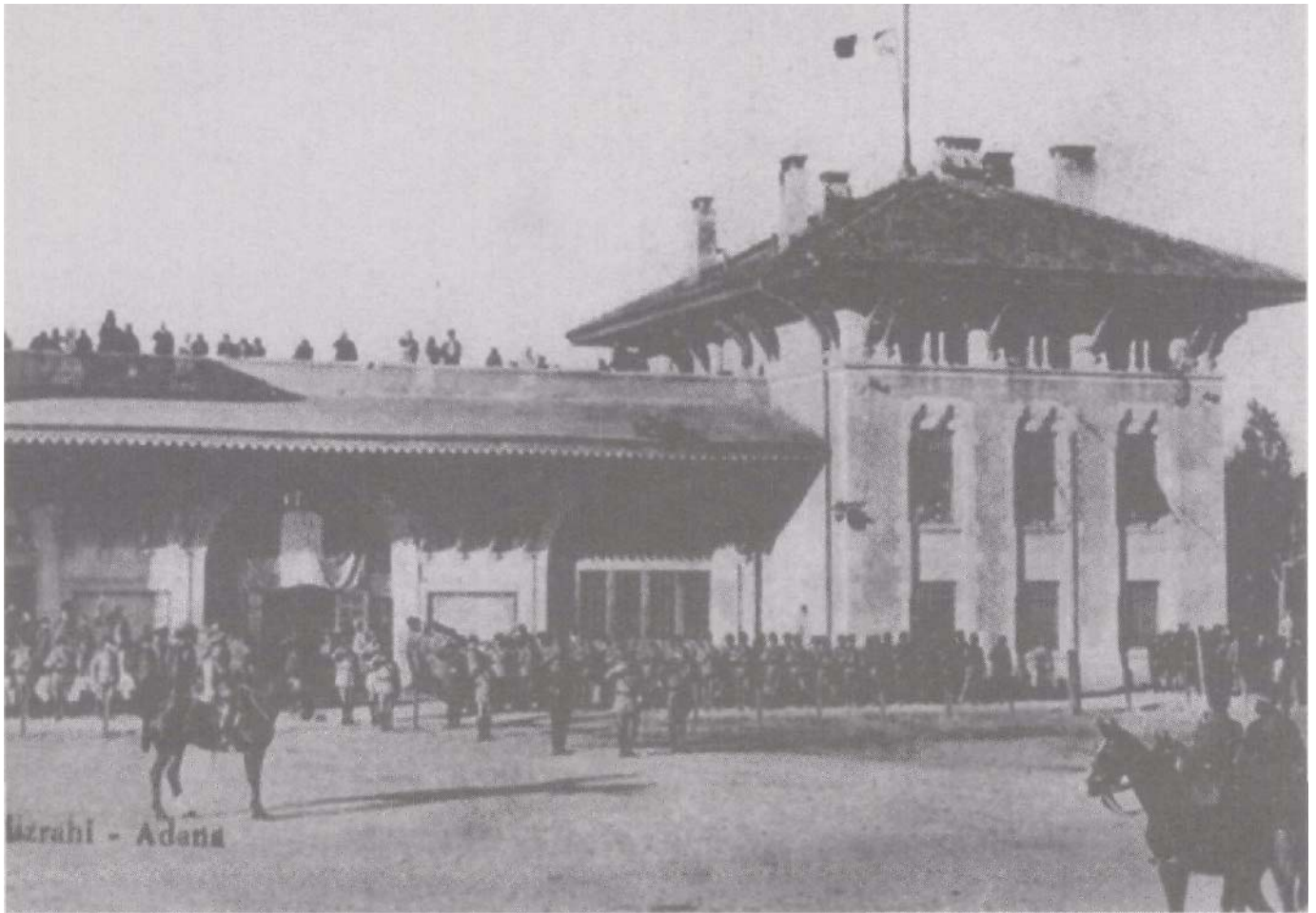
French forces abruptly ordered to retreat from Marash, following several weeks of guerrilla warfare with irregular Turkish forces. Armenian population stunned; most of them follow the retreating French despite a major snowstorm, and thousands are killed.

April 1, 1920

Turks begin attack on Aintab, but Armenian and French forces stand firm.

April 7, 1920

Attacks by Turkish irregulars intensify, endangering French and Armenian forces as well as the Armenian population. French withdraw from Urfa after 2 months of fighting; French commander negotiates agreement for safe withdrawal, but as he retreats his forces are ambushed and destroyed by the Turkish Nationalists.



French General Couraud's arrival at the Adana railroad station, 1919.

May 4-5, 1920

Armenians declare the independence of Cilicia under French Mandate. Mihran **Damadian** proclaims himself governor (in Adana), but French opposition brings a quick end after one day. French officers begin to disband the Armenian Legion.

Sept. 27, 1920

Disarmament and disbandment of Armenian Legion completed. Some volunteers remain to help defend the Armenian population.

October 20-1921

Ankara Accord signed; France recognizes Nationalist Turkey and agrees to the final withdrawal of French troops from Cilicia, leaving the Armenian population to the mercy of the Turks. **Armenians** are massacred or forced to leave the area.

Oct. 19 - Nov. 6, 1925

Bodies of 23 Legionnaires buried at Arara re-interred in Armenian Cemetery in Jerusalem; monument erected over common grave.

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Ardemis Matteosian

Guest Curator

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