

Armenian Higher Education in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

After joining Russia, Eastern Armenia experienced years of economic and cultural growth.

Along with the general rebirth of culture, the demand for a national higher educational institution was naturally getting more relevant. And though Tsarist Russia was pursuing a policy of colonial pressure in the Transcaucasia, the leading Armenian intellectuals never gave up the idea of having a national higher educational institution.

The idea of establishing an Armenian university proved to be a matter of real concern for the devoted sons of Armenia since the 40s-50s of the 19th century. The issue was raised at different times by Khachatur Abovian, Hovhannes Tumanian, Michael Nalbandian and others. M. Nalbandian wrote: “Our nation should have the opportunity of receiving a regular education on trade, agriculture and economics to put both agriculture and trade on firm bases”. This statement by Nalbandian did not bear an abstract nature. On the contrary, he viewed the problem from the perspective of the challenges of the time. He was sure that the professional education should be result-oriented and should meet the requirements of the development of the material life in the country. “A certain branch of science may prosper in Armenia only if it leads to its well-being”. He added: “The university that may become an endless source of enlightenment for our nation should teach Armenian, Latin, Greek, French, German and Russian, general history, general geography, Armenian history, the history of Russia, law, commerce, the history of commerce, mathematics, physics, chemistry, agriculture, religious studies, painting etc. That is the university that we all long to have”.



Kh. Abovian

The problem of having their own educational institution was so evident that the nations of Transcaucasia turned to the Tsarist government urging to be allowed to set up their own national universities along with their demands for freedom of speech, press and association.

The issue of establishing an Armenian higher educational institution was once again emphasized particularly in 1912, on the 1500th anniversary of the Armenian alphabet and the 400th anniversary of that of the printing practice. Hovhannes Toumanian was one of the main proponents and advocates of the idea of establishing a national university or academy and he did not spare his



M. Nalbandian



H. Toumanian

efforts for its realization. At one of the meetings in his own house Toumanian said: “We must unite Armenian scientists, set up science in Armenia, a home of science – the Armenian Academy”.

This dream was to remain a mere dream for years to come. And this was not accidental. The policy pursued by Tsarist Russia, the economic and spiritual backwardness of Armenia, as well as the fact that the Armenian intelligentsia had spread all over the world for the lack of a relevant area of activity in the country, made it impossible to establish an Armenian university. Seeking to leave the small nations on the outskirts of the great country in ignorance, the Tsarist government rejected any application and explained its policy of suppressing the nations with the groundless argument of “Financial difficulties”.

Thus, Armenia, too, having no other higher educational institution except Gevorgian Chemaran, was deprived of the opportunity of training specialists and professionals inside the country. This was the reason why there were only 12 specialists of agriculture, 73 doctors, 107 teachers and a small number of other specialists in 1922.