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THE BATTLE OF AYRUM – THE STORY OF CAPTIVATION OF COLONEL VACHNADZE’S SQUAD (GEORGIAN-ARMENIAN WAR IN 1918)

At the end of 1918, the argument between two newly-formed Caucasian states, Georgia and Armenia, regarding the ownership of Borchalo and Akhalkalaki districts, turned into a war. Currently, historiographers are interested in the political, diplomatic and purely military aspects of this war. The given research focuses on the battle which took place at Ayrum railway station on December 15, 1918. During this battle, Colonel Vachnadze’s squad was ambushed by the Armenian army. Until now, there was certain information regarding this battle, but the archive case found in the Chancellery Fund of the Military Prosecutor of Georgian Democratic Republic, the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, regarding the investigation of the above-mentioned battle, has made it possible to restore the events in detail.

KEYWORDS: Georgian Democratic Republic, The Republic of Armenia, Armenian-Georgian war, military history, Caucasian history.

On December 15, 1918, during Armenian-Georgian war, a Georgian squad, led by Colonel Davit Vachnadze and consisting of about 300 soldiers, was crossing Bambaki gorge, when it was ambushed by the enemy near Ayrum railway station. During the battle, which lasted for 4.5 hours, 56 Georgian soldiers were killed and 78 were wounded (Fund 2018a). After the squad was run out of bullets, the enemy captivated 240 soldiers and officers (Fund 2018b). It is interesting to find out the causes of the military failure of the Georgian squad. Immediately after the war, in February 1919, the Military Prosecutor’s Office started investigating the case. An Investigation Committee was formed, under the leadership of General-Major Giorgi Arjevanidze (Fund 2018g). In the process of investigation, officers of the squad and other involved people were interrogated. The Committee did not accuse the Commander of the Squad or the officers. Based on this conclusion, on December 27, 1919, the Prosecutor’s Office ceased the inves-

1 The initial, non-scientific, popular version of the article was published on January 16, 2019, on the blog of the First Republic of Georgia -<http://pirvelirespublika.blogspot.com/2019/01/blog-post.html>

tigation (Fund 2018a).

In 1920, with the aim of investigating the case, a special Governmental Committee was formed, and, on December 2, 1920, this Committee concluded that it was impossible to interrogate the captivated soldiers, whereas the evidence given by the officers did not provide any reasons for accusing the Commander of the Squad. Further investigation was considered unreasonable, and, due to the lack of sufficient documents, the case was closed by the Military Court (Fund 2018d).

Generals – Giorgi Mazniashvili and Giorgi Kvinitadze have mentioned the captivation of Georgian soldiers in Ayrum in the memories. They correctly point to the place of the captivation as well as the name of the Commander. However, they both provide an incorrect date, and Mazniashvili also mixes up the sub-units of the squad (Mazniashvili 1927, 119; Kvinitadze 1985, 58). As for historiography, Archil Chachkhiani describes the battle of Ayrum in his book about the Armenian-Georgian war. He makes mention of the memories written by Mazniashvili and Kvinitadze, as well as a brief biography of Vladimer Barnabishvili – an officer who died during the battle at Ayrum. Chachkhiani also provides information from the military journal of the fifth regiment, regarding the detachment of a squad of the fifth regiment (Chachkhiani 2007, 334-335). The results of the battle are briefly described by the last Prime-Minister of the Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) Simon Vratsyan in his work published in Paris in 1928 (Virabyan 2016, 338). Richard Hovannisian gives brief information about the success of the right wing of the Armenian Army in Ayrum (Hovannisian 1971, 113).

The materials of the investigation of this battle have been unknown until now, the events were never investigated in detail. Therefore, the investigation documents, conclusions of the Prosecution and the Military Committee, reports written by officers and other sources provide important information on Ayrum battle and enable us describe the events in detail.

THE BEGINNING OF MILITARY ACTIONS, 9-13 DECEMBER

In December 1918, the argument between two newly-formed Caucasian states, Georgia and Armenia, regarding the ownership of Borchalo and Akhalkalaki districts, turned into a war. The war was preceded by the attempts to negotiate the issue. In October 1918, the Armenian side attempted to start military actions in the Southern part of Borchalo district, but the Georgian side successfully prevented this attempt, and the incident was qualified as a misunderstanding (Chachkhiani 2007, 229-253). Negotiations aimed at

the settlement of the territorial issue continued in November and December. Both sides put forward their arguments. The international situation was quite unfavorable for Georgia. Germany, which used to patronize Georgia, lost in the World War I, hence, the German army left Georgia. Instead, the British, who had won the war, appeared in South Caucasus. Armenia considered itself as an ally of the British; hence, the Armenians considered that the British would support them in the Caucasian conflicts. The Armenian side accused the Georgian army of oppressing the Armenian population in the South of Borchalo district. During the confrontation between the Georgian soldiers and the local population of the village Uzunlar, the Commissary of the village was beaten, and one local resident died (Hovannisian 1971, 103). On December 5-7, several incidents happened in Uzunlar: armed bands attacked Georgian soldiers several times, one soldier died, several were wounded, others were taken prisoner. General-Governor of Borchalo district, Giorgi Tsulukidze, decided to disarm the village population and allocated 80 soldiers for this purpose. However, the enemy, consisting of the local population and the 4th regiment of the regular army of Armenia, attacked Tsulukidze's small army located at Uzunlar-Sanahin (From the History of Armenian-Georgian Relations 1919, 88-90; Chachkhiani 2007, 287-292). At that time, the general commanded over an incomplete military company of Tbilisi Province Battalion, 1 Armoured train and a minor group of borderline forces – in all, approximately 200 warriors (Chachkhiani 2007, 291). On December 9, the enemy occupied Uzunlar and started to attack Sanahin. General Tsulukidze demanded additional forces from Tbilisi. On December 9 and 10, two squads of the fifth regiment were sent to assist the general. In all, there were 325 soldiers and 4 machine-guns (Fund 1878a). Meanwhile, the Georgian forces in Sanahin were sieged. Based on the General's order, two squads of the fifth regiment did not go to Sanahin and remained at its North, near Alaverdi. Out of these squads, a temporary battalion was composed, led by Coronel Mikaberidze. At 8 pm, on December 11, General Tsulukidze and his headquarters freed themselves from Sanahin siege. Yet, the Georgian Armoured train and its crew, incomplete company of the Battalion and minor borderline forces remained in Sanahin. The Armoured train at Sanahin was hampered by the geographical environment and the damage of the railway by the enemy. On December 13, general Tsulukidze attempted to attack Sanahin, but, due to the damaged railway and the shortage of military forces, he failed. Therefore, the General ordered the forces in Sanahin to break through the siege and retrace to Alaverdi (Chachkhiani 2007, 292-298). During this period, there were constant negotiations and exchanges of notes between the two republics, but, due

to military actions and damaged telegraph, some notes reached the destination too late. In parallel, the Armenian side enhanced its forces and prepared for a major attack. Georgian political and military authorities did not realize that they were facing a large-scale war. The Georgian side considered that they were confronted by local Armenian bands, supported by the Armenian republic and the regular Armenian army. The Georgian side hoped to settle the problem by way of negotiation. The Armenian side demanded withdrawal of the Georgian army from the Southern part of Borchalo district. Otherwise, they said they would start military actions. The case is that military actions had already been started, and beginning from December 13-14, a full-scale war was launched (Fund 1864; Public case N409 1918: 2; Public case N410 1918: 2).

According to Armenian sources, by December 13-14, they had gathered 28 infantry company and 4 cavalry squadrons. Their ammunition consisted of 26 machine-guns and 7 canons (Hovannisian 1971, 111). The Armenian forces were supported by militia squads consisting of the local population. According to the Armenian data, before the attack their army consisted of about 6000 soldiers (Virabyan 2016, 331), led by General Drasthamat Kanayan. The majority of these armed forces fought against General Tsulukidze's army, whereas 11 infantry company, 20 cavalry, equipped with 4 canons and 14 machine-guns fought against two hundred soldiers commanded by General Tsitsishvili in Vorontsovka-Privalnoe (Chachkhiani 2007, 321-323).¹

The initial aim of the Armenian forces acting against General Tsulukidze was to clean the Bambaki gorge from Alaverdi to Sadakhlo. As it turned out later, they attacked Alaverdi and the railway stations at its back. With distant wing maneuver, they reached Ayrum. By December 14, in Alaverdi, Tsulukidze commanded the temporary battalion of the fifth regiment, one military company of the sixth regiment and two incomplete artillery batteries, in all, about 500-550 soldiers (Chachkhiani 2007, 298-299). Two Georgian Armoured trains patrolled the 40 km railway area of Sadakhlo-Ayrum-Akhtala-Haghat-Alaverdi, in a narrow gorge of Bambaki, along the river Debeda, surrounded by hills and medium-height mountains. Sub-units of platoon size were located at the stations. General Tsulukidze urgently needed additional support.

¹ There are no exact data regarding the staff of General Tsitsishvili's squad. Yet, from his report, we can see that after the battle he had about 80 remaining soldiers, while 103 either died or, being wounded, were captivated by the enemy.

FORMATION OF THE ASSISTING SQUAD IN TBILISI

On December 14, in the period of a few hours, Commander of the Second Infantry Division of the Georgian Army, General Giorgi Mazniashvili formed a military unit to assist General Tsulukidze. The assisting forces consisted of two companies of the fifth infantry regiment, training teams and machine-gun units of the same regiment and one company of the fourth regiment. The commander of the military unit was Colonel Davit Vachnadze (Fund 2018e). According to the military journal of the fifth infantry regiment, the military unit consisted of 13 officers and 240 soldiers (Fund 1878a). It is highly probable that this information does not embrace 1 company of the fourth regiment. This conclusion is made based on the fact that one infantry company of the fifth regiment consisted of 83 soldiers (Fund 2018v), the training team embraced 35 soldiers (Fund 2018z), and the machine-gun unit embraced 27 soldiers (Fund 2018t), 145 soldiers in all. There is no information as to the number of soldiers in the second company of the fifth regiment or the company of the fourth regiment, although it is quite logical to think that in these two companies there would be more than 95 soldiers ($240-145=95$). According to machine-gun unit officer Qaraman Kutateladze, the military squad consisted of about 300-350 people (Fund 2018i). In my opinion, the squad must have consisted of about 300 private soldiers and officers. This assumption is based on the number of killed and captivated soldiers - 296 in all. We should also take into account that a military unit of twenty borderline-officers was located at Ayrum station and took part in the battle. It is also possible that a minor portion of soldiers escaped from the siege and were not captivated during the battle.

The majority of the staff of the forces composed in Tbilisi were inexperienced soldiers summoned to military service a few days before. They did not even know how to use the rifles (Fund 2018k). When Colonel Vachnadze told General Mazniashvili that they could not send totally inexperienced and disorganized soldiers to the gorge, and such soldiers would simply hamper him in the battle, Mazniashvili answered that it was all right, because they were not going to war, and they would learn everything on the spot (Fund 2018e). The General and the entire commandment thought that the events in Borchalo district would not lead to war. The problems of the military unit were aggravated by the shortage of ammunition. Each soldier of the companies of the fifth regiment had only about 120 cartridges (Fund 2018l), those of the fourth regiment had 30-40 cartridges (Fund 2018z). They did not have any machine-guns. Colonel Vachnadze was told that on December 13 they had sent 100 000 cartridges and machine-guns to Alaverdi

station. Thus, when they reached General Tsulukidze, they would obtain additional cartridges and machine-guns (Fund 2018z).

THE TASK OF THE SQUAD AND TRANSPORTATION FROM TBILISI TO AYRUM

The squad was to travel by train in the direction of Sadakhlo-Ayrum-Akhtala-Haghpat-Alaverdi and join General Tsulukidze's squad. Before the train left, General Mazniashvili told Colonel Vachnadze that the soldiers could sleep until they reached Sadakhlo station, but they had to be careful afterwards, especially when reaching Haghpat station, because, to his knowledge, at 12 o'clock on December 14, Armenian bands had started shooting in Haghpat (Fund 2018m). Indeed, on December 14, General Tsulukidze sent a telegram to the Defense Minister, saying that Haghpat station was surrounded by armed Armenians and a severe fight had started (From the History of Armenian-Georgian Relations 1919, 124). Based on Mazniashvili's information, Colonel Vachnadze worked out a detailed plan of movement. In Akhtala, the soldiers would get off the train; the training team, led by Captain Purtseladze, would explore the road to Haghpat and, after this, the entire squad would move towards Haghpat-Alaverdi (Fund 2018n). After the elaboration of the plan, the train started from Tbilisi station and at dawn, on December 15, arrived in Sadakhlo. The clerk on duty, or, according to some sources, the station master told Colonel Vachnadze that they had not received any information from General Tsulukidze, and that the road was free only until Akhtala. On December 14, the telephone and telegraph connections with Haghpat station were cut off. They knew nothing about General Tsulukidze and his squad (Fund 2018o). At this moment, Grigol Kvinikadze, aide-de-camp of the armoured trains squad commander Vladimir (Valodia) Goguadze, came to the station. According to Kvinikadze's information, it was highly probable that General Tsulukidze was at Alaverdi station. The road was free only until Akhtala station, from where he had come in the evening on December 14. The railway and telegraph connections with Haghpat were cut by the Armenians, but a squad of Georgian borderline forces was stationed at Ayrum (Fund 2018p). On December 14, based on Valodia Goguadze's command, Grigol Kvinikadze returned from Akhtala by an armoured locomotive with attached civil carriages. The aim was to avoid these carriages preventing the maneuvers of Goguadze's armoured trains squad. After the carriage loaded with ammunition arrived from Tbilisi in Sadakhlo, Kvinikadze was to take the ammunition to Akhtala (Fund 2018j).

On hearing this information, Colonel Vachnadze commanded the squad

to continue their way to Akhtala. He also commanded the supervising conductor of the train to tell the machinist to stop the train or retrace even if a single shot was heard. As it turned out later, the supervising conductor of the train had considered that there would be no danger, therefore, he had not told the machinist what Vachnadze had commanded (Fund 2018r).

As we can see from Colonel Vachnadze's report, later, an officer of the borderline forces stationed at Ayrum, Lieutenant Savaneli stated that at 8 pm on December 14, he warned Imnadze, the commander of borderline squad of Shulaveri, about the possible attack. Imnadze commanded Savaneli to telegraph this information to Valodia Gogvadze, commander of the armoured trains squad who was in Akhtala. In his turn, Gogvadze was to report this information to General Tsulukidze. Savaneli carried out the order in the presence of three witnesses. According to Savaneli, in the morning of December 15, fire was opened in the direction of Ayrum station. Savaneli notified Sadakhlo about this fact too (Fund 2018s).

THE ENEMY'S MANEUVER AND THE FATE OF TSULUKIDZE'S SQUAD ON DECEMBER 14-15

On December 14, the enemy started a massive attack against the Georgian forces stationed in Alaverdi. On the other hand, the enemy approached the Georgian forces from the North-East, and, in the afternoon, their reconnaissance detachments started moving down from the mountains to the back side of Alaverdi, along the railway leading to Sadakhlo. In the adjacency of Haghpat station (at 6 kilometers to the North of Alaverdi), they cut off telephone and telegraph lines (Fund 2018o). Simultaneously with the vanguard forces, in the evening, the main forces arrived in the gorge. By the morning of December 15, they occupied the strategic heights in the adjacency of Haghpat-Akhtala. On December 14, General Tsulukidze's small detachment fought against the enemy near Alaverdi. In the evening of December 14, the remaining soldiers, who had escaped from the siege of Sanahin, joined Tsulukidze's forces. At 18:30 pm, when the enemy's attack became more vigorous and the connection with Sadakhlo was no longer available, General Tsulukidze realized that he was being sieged, so he decided to break free from the siege and evacuate his forces to Sadakhlo (Chachkhiani 2007, 298, 301-302, 327, 331). The retrace was to be carried out in two columns. The main detachment, including the battalion of the fifth regiment, was to arrive in Sadakhlo by railway, while General Tsulukidze, with his headquarters and minor forces was to cross the mountains and reach Sadakhlo secretly, via Shamlugh village to the

North of Alaverdi and to the West of the railway (Fund 1878b.).

The army started retracing at 11 pm on December 14. The forces traveling by railway retraced to Haghpat with minor struggle. On the road from Haghpat to Akhtala, Georgian forces were hit by a Georgian Armoured train in the darkness. This Armoured train was traveling to assist the Georgian military forces. Both the Armoured train and the railway carriages were thrown off the rails. The soldiers had to leave the train and walk to Akhtala station. After several hours of marching, at dawn, on December 15, the battalion of the fifth regiment arrived at Akhtala station and immediately started fighting with the enemy (Chachkhiani 2007, 329-330; Fund 1878g). Meanwhile, at 15 km distance to their North, one more squad of the same regiment, commanded by Colonel Vachnadze, was approaching Ayrum station.

THE AMBUSH AND THE STRUGGLE AT AYRUM

At 7 am on December 15, Vachnadze's forces arrived at Ayrum. At a distance of about 1 verst (1.06 km) from the station, the railway carriage was attacked from both sides of the railway. The machinist, to whom the supervising conductor Chikhladze had not said anything about Colonel Vachnadze's command, increased the speed instead of stopping the train. After mass shouting and whistling, the machinist understood that he had to stop the train. By this time, the carriage had passed the station building by approximately three hundred steps. Thus, the train stopped at an extremely inconvenient place. From all sides, the enemy had opened fire. They had occupied important heights and shot with rifles and 2 machine-guns (Fund 2018p). According to the information provided by captivated Georgian officers, at Ayrum, the Armenian army was led by Colonel Korolkov. The army consisted of: one battalion of the sixth regiment of the regular Armenian army, one cavalry squadron, two company of militia, in all, about 700 soldiers. These forces were supported by an armed group of local Armenian population (Fund 2018t). According to Armenian historiographers, however, Korolkov was not a colonel, but lieutenant-colonel, and his forces consisted of: one infantry platoon of the 6th regiment, 3 cavalry squadron and 4 platoon of militia. They were equipped with 2 machine-guns (Virabyan 2016, 331).

The ambushed and sieged inexperienced young soldiers lay on the floor of the carriage in fear. Officers and experienced soldiers found it hard to get them off the train. Some soldiers were so scared that, after getting off the carriage, sat down in the open air and trembled with fear. They seemed

to await death patiently. Experienced soldiers and officers dragged these soldiers to big rocks to find shelter. The echo of mass shooting increased the panic of the inexperienced soldiers. They shot in panic, without looking at the target; some of them shot in the air, while others dropped their rifles and lay on the ground motionless. On the other hand, officers and experienced soldiers struggled selflessly. They managed to gather the scattered soldiers. Some soldiers managed to penetrate into the station building, which was actively aimed at (Fund 2018p). From the railway station, Colonel Vachnadze sent a telegram to the Commander of the division Giorgi Mazniashvili. Vachnadze also communicated with Colonel Imnadze at Sadakhlo station and asked him to support his squad with armoured train and ammunition. Initially, the answer from Sadakhlo was that they had no ammunition, but later they promised to send the armoured train, ammunition and two additional companys. Doctor Zedgenidze arranged a field hospital at Ayrum station and assisted the wounded. The struggle continued. The soldiers learnt that the armoured train was coming to assist them. This improved their moral condition. Yet, young soldiers, who comprised the majority of the squad, were still in panic (Fund 2018u).

The training team, consisting of experienced soldiers and led by Captain Purtseladze, was ordered by Colonel Vachnadze to occupy the height on the right side, to the North-West of the station. From this place, the enemy's fire was especially intense. The soldiers had to run 300-400 steps in conditions of permanent shooting. Despite several attempts, due to the intense shooting of the enemy, the soldiers failed to occupy the height. During this attack, out of the 60 Georgian officers and soldiers, 40 experienced soldiers of the training team and some officers were either killed or wounded, including a young officer, lieutenant Vladimer Barnabishvili (Fund 2018p).

The telephone connection between Ayrum and Sadakhlo was cut off. By that time, armoured train N4 had not yet arrived to Sadakhlo from Tbilisi (Fund 2018j). Two armoured trains struggled in Akhtala adjacency, while one more armoured train remained at Sanahin (Goguadze 1919a, 3; Goguadze 1919b; 3-4; Kartsvadze 1918, 2). Realizing the urgency of the situation, Grigol Kvinikadze, the adjutant of the Commander of the armoured train squad, attached a carriage loaded with ammunition sent from Tbilisi to an armoured locomotive. Kvinikadze took additional 17 000 cartridges from Colonel Imnadze, Commander of Shulaveri borderline detachment, and started towards Ayrum. At a small distance from Ayrum station, from the surveillance post of the locomotive, he noticed that the railway and a small bridge in front of them had been destroyed. At that moment, the enemy started shooting from all sides. Therefore, the loco-

motive, with attached carriage loaded with ammunition, had to retrace to Sadakhlo (Fund 2018j).

After the struggle near Ayrum station, which lasted for four hours and a half, the enemy's attack became more violent. Vachnadze's squad was run out of cartridges, and support from Sadakhlo failed to arrive. About 40 per cent of the squad were killed or wounded. In such grave situation, the soldiers of the fourth regiments company ran out of ammunition. They surrendered and waved a white flag. The ethnic Armenians in Vachandze's squad started shouting that they were Armenians and that they had been taken to this battle by force. Other inexperienced soldiers, who had run out of bullets, asked to save their lives. The Armenian soldiers started moving down from the height. Initially, the officers commanded to attach bayonets to the rifles and start hand-to-hand fighting, but soon they realized that this would just increase the number of victims without bringing any positive results, because experienced soldiers were either killed or wounded, whereas the younger ones surrendered to the enemy. The enemy had significant quantitative advantage; the soldiers were run out of ammunition; the supporting armoured train had failed to arrive from Sadakhlo. Thus, the officers and soldiers spent the remaining cartridges and, finally, surrendered to the enemy (Fund 2018k).

The result of the battle was as follows: Vachnadze's squad had lost 1 officer and 55 soldiers, 3 officers and 75 soldiers were wounded. On the enemy's side, 4 were killed and 20 - wounded (Fund 2018gh). According to Armenian historiographer, 2 Armenian soldiers had died and 7 had been wounded (Virabyan 2016; 338). As we can see from the list of captives, the Armenians captivated 240 officers and soldiers (Fund 2018b). They were led to Kulpi village (Fund 2018q)¹ located at 7 km distance to the East of Ayrum.

When Vachnadze's squad was taken prisoner, armoured train N4 led by Alfes Gogvadze arrived from Tbilisi to Sadakhlo station together with two companies commanded by Colonel Khimshiashvili. After a brief discussion, the armoured train, armoured locomotive loaded with ammunition and Khimshiashvili's train moved towards Ayrum. The armoured train went first, followed by an armoured locomotive with attached carriage loaded with ammunition, and, at one km distance, Khimshiashvili's squad. When the armoured train reached the destroyed railway and bridge near Ayrum, the enemy started fire, but the canons and machine-guns of the armoured train stopped the enemy. Some of the armoured train crew took advantage of the fire curtain and restored the rails and the bridge. The armoured train reached Ayrum station. By this time, Vachandze's squad

1 Current Kokhbi

had been captivated for about an hour. Georgian prisoners were moving towards Kulpi. From distant heights, they saw the events happening at Ayrum station. The locomotive and the carriage loaded with ammunition stopped near the station. At this moment, the Armenians started shooting at the train. The machinist lay on the floor. Captain Dadiani tried to stop the train. He succeeded, but slightly hit the carriage loaded with ammunition. The carriage went off the rails. Dadiani retraced the train to Sadakhlo. The Armenian forces kept shooting. Therefore, Kvinikadze untied the carriage from the locomotive. He went to Ayrum station and addressed the armoured train crew for help. The armoured train went back and started shooting at the Armenian forces. Meanwhile, part of the crew loaded the ammunition into the armoured train, threw the carriage off the rails and moved towards Sadakhlo (Fund 2018sh).

THE FATE OF TSULUKIDZE'S SQUAD

It is interesting to know what happened to General Tsulukidze's squad which was divided into two parts. It was retracing to Sadakhlo, and since the evening of December 14, there had been no information regarding their fate. One part of the squad, consisting of the General's military staff and several dozens of soldiers, moved to the West of the railway via Shamugh village, along mountain paths. At 8 pm on December 15, they reached Sadakhlo (Fund 1878d).

The other part of the squad reached Akhtala station with minor struggle. In the morning of December 15, the enemy, located on the heights on both banks of the Debeda river, started shooting (Fund 1878e). The squad found itself in a situation similar to Vachnadze's carriage at Ayrum. Yet, there were several principal differences between these two squads. The squad retracing from Alaverdi consisted of experienced soldiers. Besides, it possessed canons and artillery. At the same time, they were supported by two armoured train. The armoured train that had hit the carriage between Haghpatt and Akhtala was put back on the rails in the afternoon on December 15 (Kartsivadze 1918, 2). In the morning of December 15, Captain Kavkasidze's company occupied the height on the right bank. Although Kavkasidze himself fell from a cliff and damaged his legs and ribs, he led the company and prevented the enemy from occupying the height. In the morning, on December 16, Captain Amashukeli's company occupied a height on the left bank and prevented the enemy from occupying the station (Chachkhiani 2007, 330; Fund 1878e). In the evening of December 16, the squad decided to break through the siege and continue their struggle

to reach Sadakhlo. It was impossible to take the armoured train, because the railway from Akhtala to Ayrum was, in many places, damaged by the Armenian army (Goguadze 1919b; 3-4). The squad had to walk along the railway, overcoming 25 km distance to Sadakhlo. At 11 pm, on December 16, the squad left Akhtala. On the way to Ayrum, the Armenians made several attempts to besiege the squad, but the squad managed to free their way by struggling (Kartsivadze 1918,2; Fund 1878e). At Ayrum station, the squad met armoured train N4, which had been patrolling Sadakhlo-Ayrum stretch since December 15, permanently dealing with the Armenian army (Goguadze 1919b, 4). At 8 am, on September 17, the squad reached Sadakhlo (Fund 1878e). In the battle for Akhtala, about 10 soldiers and guardsmen were killed and about 25-30 were wounded (Kartsivadze 1918, 2).

In all, during the first stage of the war, in the period between 9-17 December, the Georgian side lost over 500 soldiers: some were killed, others were wounded, yet others were captivated by the enemy. The enemy also got hold of three armoured trains, canons, machine-guns and ammunition. It was clear that the sides were involved in full-scale war. Georgia declared war state and mobilization, and, in several days, Georgians took the initiative of military actions. However, this is a different story...

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MILITARY COMMITTEE AND PROSECUTION REGARDING THE ACTION OF VACHNADZE'S SQUAD

The investigation committee chaired by Giorgi Arjevanidze, which included General Giorgi Purtseladze, Colonel Tskhakaia and military investigator Lieutenant Cheishvili, studied the case, identified the circumstances leading to captivation, and, on July 31, 1919, stated that the captivation was not caused by the evil intentions of the battalion and its leadership, and that this fact could be explained solely by desperate situation. Thus, according to the Committee, the battalion did not bear any legal responsibility (Fund 2018ch). On December 27 of the same year, the Military Prosecutor's Office agreed with the statement of the Committee and concluded that the action of the squad was not criminal, hence, the case was closed. The Prosecutor mentioned arguments due to which the squad was not considered guilty: the war had not started officially, the squad was led by General Tsulukidze and did not have military aims; the squad had been told that the road to Akhtala was free, therefore, they moved around peacefully; Colonel Vachnadze took the necessary measures and warned the machinist to stop the train and retrace in case of fire, but the machinist increased the speed and, when he stopped the train, the enemy

had already started shooting; despite the unexpected attack and violent shooting on the part of the enemy, the leadership managed to organize the frightened soldiers; the location was not suitable for making an ambush – it was an open space, with mountains around, and these mountains were occupied by the Armenians; the majority of soldiers were inexperienced and did not know how to use weapons; the squad embraced ethnic Armenian soldiers, who dropped their rifles and started supporting the enemy; the enemy was far more numerous than Vachnadze's squad; the enemy had machine-guns and occupied an advantageous position. Despite the hard state, the leadership did its best to preserve the position of the Georgian squad and encourage the soldiers. The squad surrendered only when they ran out of cartridges and lost the best of soldiers. The squad fought for 4.5 hours in an unequal struggle with numerous military forces of the enemy (Fund 2018a).

In addition, we should mention that the tragedy in Ayrum was caused by a chain of mistakes: idealistic attitude of politicians who wanted to settle the problem peacefully and who stuck to this hope until the last moment. Besides, there were purely military mistakes of the leadership. Even though the clashes were not officially termed as war, it was a great mistake to send inexperienced and poorly armed young soldiers to the conflict zone, where military actions were taking place. All this was added by weak military intelligence and lack of coordination. In general, all these factors were interlinked and interconnected.

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Fund 1878g. Central Historical Archive, Fund 1878, Description 1, Case №1; 58, 63

Fund 1878d. Central Historical Archive, Fund 1878, Description 1, Case №1; 60

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