

*Presented on the occasion of the opening of the exhibit Légion Arménienne: The Armenian Legion and Its Heroism in the Middle East”*

Sunday, November 1, 2009

Henry Madden Library

Prof. Barlow Der Mugrdechian

Coordinator, Armenian Studies Program

Good afternoon. On behalf of the Armenian Studies Program of Fresno State I would like to welcome you to today’s reception, marking the official opening of the exhibit “Légion Arménienne: The Armenian Legion and Its Heroism in the Middle East.”

I would like to thank Dean of the Madden Library, Peter McDonald for co-sponsoring today’s opening and reception and to thank his staff, especially Susan Christensen, for their assistance in mounting the exhibit. Thank you also to members of the Armenian Students Organization for providing directions to our guests.

The showing of this exhibit was made possible through the financial support the Armenian community has made to the Armenian Studies Program and on behalf of the Program I would like to thank you for that continued support.

“Légion Arménienne: The Armenian Legion and Its Heroism in the Middle East” is a traveling exhibit developed and prepared by the Watertown, Massachusetts-based Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA) in honor of the Legionnaires and their devotion to their nation and to the cause of liberty during World War I.

As you walk through the exhibit, you can explore the formation, training, military action, and

postwar activities of this all-volunteer force through photographs and narratives.

The Armenian Legion was formed in 1916 and was disbanded in 1920, a four year period in which momentous changes were taking place for the Armenians and for the world. The Armenians passed through a Genocide, through the Russian revolution, to the formation of the first Armenian Republic in 1918, to the communist take over of Armenia, and its eventual absorption into the Soviet Union. The courageous volunteers of the Armenian legion risked their lives to secure a better future for the Armenians.

The noted Boghos Nubar Pasha first formulated the idea of Armenians fighting alongside Allied troops in World War I. Boghos Nubar had traveled to Europe as head of the Armenian National Delegation, where he persuaded the Allies to allow the formation of an all-volunteer Armenian unit, with the sole purpose of “liberating Cilicia from Turkish rule.”

The Legion d’Orient (a neutral name that was chosen for the Armenian unit so as not to antagonize the Turks and endanger the lives of Armenian deportees in Syria) was established, under French military supervision in November 26, 1916, with the formation of its first battalion. The training of Armenian volunteers began at Port Said, Egypt. It is likely Port Said was chosen because of its proximity to the Armenian refugee camp where thousands of exiles from Musa Dagh were relocated after being rescued by the French navy in September 1915. Later the Legion training camp was moved to Cyprus, where volunteers from the United States and Europe joined the ranks. Close to 5,000 men were being trained by early 1917.

The British and French governments and the Armenians agreed to the following: The aim of creating the Legion was to allow Armenians' contribution to the liberation of Cilicia region in Ottoman Empire and help them to realize their national aspirations of creating a state in that region. The Legion was to fight only Turks and only in Cilicia. The Legion was to become the

core of a planned future Armenian Army. The number of volunteers was an equivalent of 6 battalions, each containing 800 volunteers, and another 6 battalions was planned to be formed. Armenian committees were organizing the conscription process to recruit these soldiers in France and United States. Ninety-five percent Armenian in composition, the Legion included Ottoman Armenian refugees, former prisoners of war, and permanent residents of Egypt, America, and Europe. The majority of the soldiers were said to be recruits from the Armenian-American community or embittered survivors of the battle of Musa Dagh who were living in refugee camps in Port Said, Egypt.

The most famous engagement of the Legion was in the Battle of Arara, which began on September 18, 1918, involving the Legion versus the Turkish army in Palestine. Four Armenian Legion brigades fought with the Allies to achieve a complete victory as the brave Armenians overcame the fortified Turkish heights. This victory soon led to end of the war for the Turkish Army, which was finally defeated in October of 1918, leading to the signing of the Armistice. The Legion then headed to Lebanon and to Syria, and finally ending up in Cilicia. At this point the Legion d'Orient was renamed the Armenia Legion (Legion d'Armenienne).

About a 150,000 Armenians repatriated to Cilicia following the end of the war. The Armenian Legion was to be the core of a new Armenian Army, but the French Military command and the French government soon lost interest in the occupation of Cilicia. As French attitudes changed, they began to see the Legion as a hindrance to the newly developing relations with the Nationalist Turks. Nearly half of the Armenian soldiers were discharged by mid-1919, and soon only about 500 soldiers remained in the Legion.

The story of the Armenian Legion reflects the community's attempts to come to grips with the destruction and devastation following the Armenian Genocide. It also represents the

successful efforts of Armenians from different social, economic and political backgrounds to work together for a common cause. The Legion encompassed a group of remarkable individuals – some officers, others of no special rank or distinction – who volunteered throughout the Diaspora, overcoming tremendous difficulties in order to serve their people and nation courageously, often at great personal sacrifice. Their lives are well worth remembering.

In recognition of the importance of remembering the Legionnaires and their devotion to their nation and to the cause of liberty, the Armenian Library and Museum of America prepared a major exhibit in 2001, curated by Ardemis Matteosian in close collaboration with ALMA Board Members Dr. Barbara J. Merguerian and Arakel Almasian. The enthusiastic response to the exhibit revealed a tremendous interest in this overlooked and in many ways unwritten story.

The traveling exhibit was made possible by a grant from the K. George and Carolann S. Najarian, M.D. Foundation with additional support provided by The Armenian-American Veterans of Milford, Mass., Inc.

You are encouraged to walk through the Exhibit to read and learn about this heroic episode in Armenian history and to honor those who fought, and those that lost their lives in the Armenian Legion.

At this time I would like to invite any members of the audience whose family were in the Armenian Legion to stand and be recognized. I would like to also thank the Machoian family for bringing artifacts and personal effects for display today.

The Armenian Studies Program is co-sponsoring several upcoming events in the month of November.

On Sunday November 8, Hasmik Harutunyan and the Kitka Choral Group of San Francisco

will be performing at 8:00PM in the Concert Hall on campus. Tickets will be available the night of the concert or by going to the Kitka home page.

On Thursday, November 12, the Armenian Studies Program lecture series continues with a presentation by Dr. Sergio La Porta, Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies at Fresno State, who will speak on “Armenia on the Edge: The Apocalyptic Tradition in Armenian Literature.” I would like to introduce Dr. La Porta and ask him to say a few words about his upcoming talk.

Thank you again. Please enjoy the exhibit and the refreshments.