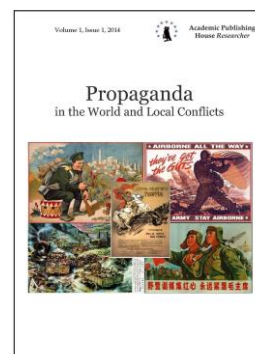


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## Foreign Units in the Russian Army during World War I. Formation of Armenian Vigilante Units in the Caucasian Front

Mikhail N. Kirilov <sup>a, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Military Training Scientific Center of the Navy “Naval Academy named after Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union N.G. Kuznetsova”, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation

### Abstract

The article analyzes the reasons and methods of forming Armenian vigilante units as part of the Russian Army in the World War I in the Caucasian Front. It is emphasized that according to the plan of the Caucasus Corps Command, Armenian vigilante units should have been not just auxiliary units of the Russian Army that were familiar with the area, providing all possible assistance to the troops, but they also had to resolve issues independently where it would have been impossible to use the Caucasus Corps Units for political or other reasons. Among other things, they were charged with maintaining order in the territory of Turkish Armenia after the victory and the transfer of Russian military units to other fronts. The article also provides detailed information about the combat training arrangements of these units.

**Keywords:** World War I, formation, Armenian vigilantes, Caucasian Front.

### 1. Introduction

One of the important goals in the World War I that was set by the government of Tsarist Russia was to solve the so-called Eastern question. The Tsarist government, seeking to weaken Ottoman Turkey in every possible way, considered it necessary to provide military support to the entire Christian population of the Ottoman Empire. One of the effective means of this struggle in the Caucasian Front was the formation of Armenian, Assyrian and Greek vigilante units within the Russian parts of the Caucasus Corps (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 646. L. 670b). Another important goal of the Armenian vigilante units formation was to create a basis of the future army of a new state, which according to the plans of the Tsarist government was to emerge after the war under the protectorate of the Russian Empire in Turkish Armenia (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 646. L. 49). Later in 1916, after the Russian troops succeeded in regaining control over Western Armenia, Emperor Nicholas II issued a decree establishing a new autonomous entity within the Russian Empire in the liberated territories with its center in Erzurum. In January 1917, the Euphrates Cossack Army was established by the order of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Caucasus Governor (Kersnovskii, 1999: 692). According to the plan of the Russian Empire military and political leadership, the new Cossack Army was to include Armenian refugees who survived Armenian genocide organized by the Ottoman authorities in 1915.

But in addition to political goals, Russia's military leadership also pursued quite practical ones. According to the plan of the Caucasus Corps Command, Armenian vigilante units should

\* Corresponding author  
 E-mail addresses: [mkirilov@mail.ru](mailto:mkirilov@mail.ru) (M.N. Kirilov)

have been not just auxiliary units of the Russian Army that were familiar with the area, providing all possible assistance to the troops, but they also had to resolve issues independently where it would have been impossible to use the Caucasus Corps Units for political or other reasons. Among other things, they were charged with maintaining order in the territory of Turkish Armenia after the victory and the transfer of Russian military units to other fronts.

It was also important in the formation of foreign units in the Caucasus War Theatre that with the beginning of the war, the Russian Command sent most of the Caucasus Military District troops to the Austrian-German front (Zaionchkovskii, 1938: 286).

Military development constantly required formation of new units. With the outbreak of World War I, the total composition of all priority units of the Caucasus Military District consisted of 118 battalions and militia units, 92 squadrons and militia hundreds. Of these, 72 battalions and militia units and 44 squadrons and militia hundreds were sent to the Western Front. 56 battalions and militia units and 48 squadrons and militia hundreds remained within the Caucasus area respectively. On October 15, 1914, 137 additional battalions of militia units and 175 squadrons and militia hundreds were deployed in the Caucasus Army. Military operations constantly required formation of new units, and by October 15, 1916, the Caucasus Army and the district already had 291 battalions and militia units and 294 squadrons and militia hundreds. The Caucasian Front also included three armored vehicle platoons, including an armored detachment of the English Admiralty (Cherkasov, 2009. F. 2168. Op. 1. D. 88. L. 2).

The militia groups formation also included subjects of the foreign countries, such as Turkey and Persia. The formation of Armenian, Greek and Assyrian militias in the Caucasian Front was an effective means of fighting against Ottoman Turkey (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 646. L. 67ob.).

## 2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Documents from the collection of the Russian State Military Historical Archive served as materials. An important place is occupied by modern research on the history of the formation of ethnicity-based units in the Russian army during World War I.

2.2. Methodological basis of the work was the fundamental methods of objectivity, consistency and dialectical interrelation of phenomena, methods of historicism, comparative analysis and synthesis, contributing to a critical and analytical understanding of events and facts of the distant past, critical attitude to sources, making judgments as a result of the analysis of the totality of facts, as well as showing the phenomena in the development and context of the historical situation.

The validity and reliability of the study is based on the analysis of a large number of archival materials and literature sources and is ensured by the scientific methodology, the integrated nature of the study, the systemic approach and is confirmed by the strict logic of conclusions in accordance with the goals and objectives set.

The results of the study can be used in educational process of higher education institutions, as well as a reference and analytical material for the specialists.

## 3. Discussion

In general, the topic of formation and participation of Armenian vigilante units in World War I as part of the Caucasus Corps was not given due attention neither in the domestic nor, especially, foreign historical literature. Usually this issue was only mentioned in passing, even in fundamental historical works. (Zaionchkovskii, 1938) So far, there have been no generalizing works that would objectively and comprehensively consider the issues of formation, combat training and combat use of the Armenian vigilante units in the Russian Army during World War I. Although it is not possible to say that this topic has gone completely unaddressed. For example, in the modern Russian historiography the issue of formation of Armenian vigilante units as part of the Caucasus Corps was considered by Professor A.A. Cherkasov in his article devoted to the participation of ethnic minorities of the Russian Empire in the World War I (Cherkasov, 2009: 21), as well as by S. Bazanov in the article "Complete Defiance of Death. Ethnic-based vigilante units in the Russian Army during World War I" (Bazanov, 2006).

At the same time, the study of available publications on the mentioned topic testifies to the fact that in their articles the authors, as a rule, considered Armenian vigilante units along with other ethnic-based military formations of the Russian Imperial Army, and no analysis of the

principles of their military organization, ways of manning, arrangements of combat training and armament was conducted. The purpose of this article is to complement precisely these issues of the already existing pieces of the authors who conducted their research on Armenian vigilante units in the Caucasus Corps.



**Fig. 1.** I.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov (1837-1916)

As early as in autumn of 1914, the Warrant Officer Badmayev of the Novocherkassk Regiment, a hero of the Russian-Japanese War, who was well acquainted with the Asian Turkey, petitioned the Minister of War to form a Turkish partisan detachment of Armenian vigilantes to act against Turkish troops. Preliminary formation was proposed to be carried out in Petrograd, combat training to be conducted with the help of trained instructors, i.e. Armenian students of the higher education institutions of the city and having a permanent residence in the areas where military operations were taking place. The petition was approved ([RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 729. L. 16](#)).

At a special meeting with the Caucasus Governor Count Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov (1837-1916) in early September 1914, General Alexander Zakhariyevich Myshlayevsky, chamberlain Nikolai Leonidovich Peterson, chief of staff of the Caucasus Military District General Nikolai Nikolaevich Yudenich, Tiflis Diocesan Chief Bishop Mesrop, Tiflis mayor A.I. Khatsov, chairman of the Armenian National Committee S.S. Arutyunov were involved. S.S. Arutyunov and Dr. Ya.H. Zavriev proposed to start the formation of special Armenian units called khumbs, under the command of the Armenian ethnic leaders ([RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 646. L. 60](#)).

Already in mid-September 1914, the Armenian National Council in Tiflis was given permission to form Armenian vigilante units in the Caucasus, however, with limited forces. At the end of October 1914, on the orders of the Caucasian Front Command, a draft appeal to the Turkish Armenians was prepared. The address stated that in case of entry of Armenian troops organized in Echmiadzin to the territory of Turkey “...The powerful leader of the Russian land guarantees the Armenian people the Autonomous Armenia establishment within the limits of six Armenian vilayets and inextricably linked to them Cilicia under the powerful protectorates of Great Russia...” ([RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 535. L. 116](#)). At the same time, on October 5, 1914, 120 Mannlicher rifles and 200 live rounds per rifle were issued to arm the local Armenian vigilantes to defend the Echmiadzin monastery ([RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 729. L. 7–8](#)). In the first months of the war, 1,200 Berdan rifles and 24,000 rounds of ammunition were secretly transferred to Turkey for arming the Armenian troops ([RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 135–135ob.](#)). The total number of people in Armenian khumbs as of November 30, 1915, was 3,150. There was also a special squad of

Armenian scouts. Soon the formation of Armenian vigilante units will begin in the Russian Army to replace the disbanded Armenian khumbs (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 2. D. 235. L. 29).

The Armenian units began to enroll volunteers mainly from Turkish subjects, the main number of Armenian subjects of the Russian Empire volunteered for the Russian Army. Enrolment of Armenian volunteers started literally all over the world in America, Great Britain, France, Romania, Bulgaria and Egypt (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 646. L. 61). A telegram of the Envoy of the Russian Empire in Bucharest city, No.77 dated January 9, 1915, listed 135 Turkish subjects of Armenian ethnicity as volunteers wishing to join the Caucasian Front (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 95–95ob.).

The main organizers of the Armenian vigilante units formation abroad were the active Armenian churches. At the same time, mass desertion of Armenian soldiers from the Turkish army began. Armenians from Turkish units deserted with their weapons making their way to the Russian Empire in order to join the Armenian militia being formed. Thus, on January 19, 1915, Armenians that deserted from the 4th regiment of the 2nd Turkish Corps were a sergeant-major, two non-commissioned officers and two privates (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 67, 71, 77).

On January 13, 1915, a petition was filed in the name of the Caucasus Governor, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, by the inhabitants of Kars who came from emigrants living in the Tez-Harab magal..." by Abraham Alexeyevich Kayamashev. It spoke about the permission to form an Armenian mounted flying squad of 300 people in the Caucasus Army, in the interests of the entire Christian population, against the ancestral enemy of Turkey. It proposed undergoing combat training according to the crash four-week program and then being at the disposal of the military authorities of the Caucasus Army. It asked to provide for the supply and armament at the expense of the treasury. Many of the newly recruited were Armenian immigrants from Turkish Armenia, who were well versed not only in Armenian, but also in Russian, Kurdish and Greek, and were familiar with the area as well. They also asked to assign officers of the Kars Station as instructors for training the vigilantes (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 19–19ob.).

In February 1915, representatives of the Armenians of the Turkish city of Zeytun addressed the the Caucasus Army Command and informed them that there were about 15,000 people, volunteers, ready to block the supply routes of the Turkish Erzurum Army, but did not have enough weapons and ammunition to do so, and for this purpose they asked to allocate enough weapons and ammunition to the Armenian vigilantes (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 172).

Another source for the formation of Armenian vigilante units was the Gnchak Armenian Social Democratic Party. On January 17, 1915, its activists formed a vigilante unit of 500 people, 50 of which were mounted. Military compensation of the vigilantes was 10 Rubles. (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 65). The Gnchak Central Body in the U.S. additionally sent 5,359 Rubles for military allowances. (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 557. L. 133).

According to the order of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief No. 65, dated January 29, 1915, a squad of Armenian scouts was formed (point 2) (Table 1). 163,705 Rubles were allocated for the formation and allowance of five Armenian squads (khumbs, point 3), the Salmas, Erivan, Kağızman, Sarıkamış and Oltin, and 10 Rubles per month were allocated for each squad (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 2. D. 306. L. 241).

**Table 1.** Temporary staff of the Armenian scouts special squad

No.	Rank names	Number	Notes
1	Squad commander, company officer	01 people	Receives a salary from the treasury by rank
Vigilantes			
2	Dismounts	100 people	
3	Mounted	100 people	
4	Total:	200 people	
5	Riding horses, state-owned	101	

Firearms and ammunition were supplied to the squad at the expense of the treasury. 130 Rubles were allocated to a mounted vigilante, 65 Rubles were allocated to a dismount for buying

uniforms, equipment and cold weapons. Allowance of the squad was at the expense of the treasury based on the calculation of 10 Rubles per month (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 2. D. 306. L. 2410b.).



**Fig. 2.** Andranik Ozanyan (1865-1927)

On the orders of the Caucasus Army Field Staff Chief, the following Armenian units were formed:

- 1st Armenian squad under the command of Andranik Ozanyan (1865-1927) in Persia;
- 2nd Armenian squad under the command of Drastamat Kanayan (Dro) (1883-1956), later under the command of Armen-Garo in the city of Iğdır;
- 3rd Armenian squad under the command of Amazasp Srvantstyan (Servastyan) (1873-1921) in Kağızman;
- 4th Armenian squad under the command of Arshak Gafavyan (Keri) (1858-1916) in Sarıkamış;
- 5th Armenian squad under the command of a Russian Army Lieutenant of Armenian origin in Kars;
- Reserve for manning Armenian vigilante units under the command of Vartan in Alexandropol;
- a detachment of scouts under the command of the Russian Army Staff-Captain Gagemov at the headquarters of the 1st Caucasus Army Corps (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 99).



**Fig. 3.** Drastamat Kanayan (1883-1956)

The total number of Armenian units was 2,500 vigilantes, and 600 more vigilantes as the reserve force. All the commanders of the Armenian units were leaders in the political struggle of the Turkish Armenians against the Ottoman government and troops even before the war. From January 29, 1915, the first two Armenian units were subordinated to the Commander of the 4th Caucasus Army Corps. The 3rd, 4th Armenian units as well as a squad of scouts were subordinated to the Commander of the 1st Caucasus Army Corps, the 5th Armenian unit was subordinated to the Commandant of the Kars fortress. The reserve was subordinated to the head of the Alexandropol Station (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 99ob.).



**Fig. 4.** Amazasp Srvantstyan (1873-1921)

Armenian units were armed with Mannlicher rifles and 140 rounds of ammunition on them (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 20). The Alexandropol units were armed with Berdan rifles (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 157). In January-February 1915, the command took a number of

measures aimed at some reorganization of the Armenian units in order to unify their composition, improve combat training, equipment and supplies. General of Infantry Peter Oganovsky (1851-1917) developed a project according to which each squad was to consist of 1,000 soldiers: 750 regulars armed with Russian three-line rifles and 250 irregulars armed with the Austrian rifles of the Mannlicher system. Also, cavalry units of up to 100 servicemen could be assigned to Armenian vigilante squads for reconnaissance, communication and special tasks. It was planned to send Armenian officers from regular units of the Russian Army as company commanders and instructors to conduct quality combat training in the Armenian squads. The Armenian units staffing was approved by order of the Chief of Staff of the Caucasus Army sent to the Directorate of the Quartermaster General, No. 1498 of February 24, 1915:

1. The unit consisted of four companies; each was to have a sergeant-major, a quartermaster, two chief and eight junior under-officers, 10 privates first class, a trumpeter, 200 vigilantes, 23 unarmed;

2. Among the regular vigilantes it was supposed to have 10 mounted warriors for messenger service; units (Tables 2, 3). The combined four Armenian vigilante units were named the Ararat Detachment, and came under the general command of Vartan who worked a lot in the partisan organizations of Turkish Armenia (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 66. L. 66). In the same period the 6th Armenian vigilante unit was formed. As of May 03, 1915, it included 700 vigilantes (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 555. L. 302).

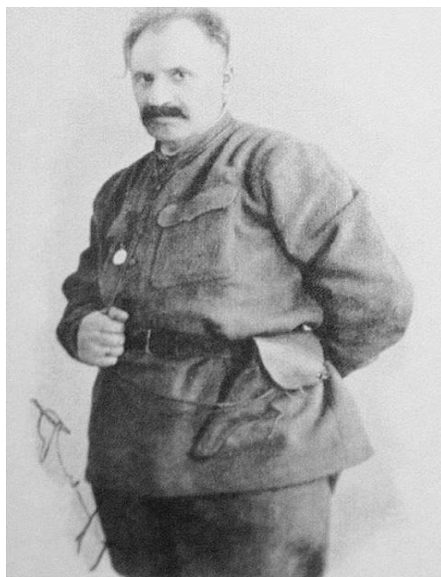
3. Each company, except the company trumpeter, was assigned a soldier to signal the formation. They were provided with signal horns along with other equipment (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 22). On April 06, 1915, the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasian Front approved the draft staffing of the Armenian vigilante units prepared by General Oganovsky.



**Fig. 5.** Oganovsky (1851-1917)

Deserters from the Turkish army as well as surrendered Armenians were included into formation of Armenian units. After their appeals to Emperor Nicholas II via the Chairman of the Armenian Society of Petrograd to give them an opportunity to serve in the Russian Army and to test their trustworthiness, they were enrolled in the Armenian vigilante units being formed (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 558. L. 373-379). The 6th Armenian squad was formed independently and had no connection with the four Ararat units (Fig. 7). The squad was part of General Nikolai Nikolaevich Baratov's detachment. This squad made many feats in the battlefield. The squad was formed on the initiative of the Gnchak Party and consisted mainly of members of this party. Permission for its formation was given by the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasus Army.

During the formation of this squad, an officer of the Russian Army, Armenian captain Dzhanpoladyan was appointed the head of the squad, and an Armenian, a Turkish subject Safaryan nicknamed Pandukht was appointed as his assistant (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 5. D. 66. L. 66).



**Fig. 6.** Arshak Gafavyan (1858-1916)

**Table 2.** Staffing of Armenian units

Rank names	Number of ranks	Allowance		Food money
		Main	Improved	
Officers				
Squad, company commanders and officer corps recruited From the squad	01 people			
Class ranks				
Clerk for the economic part	01 people	300 Rubles		300 Rubles
Treasurer aka quartermaster	01 people	300 Rubles		300 Rubles
Total of class ranks:	02 people			
Lower ranks				
Sergeant-major	04 people	108 Rubles		-
Quartermaster	05 people	72 Rubles		-
Chief Under-Officer	08 people	72 Rubles		-
Junior Under-Officer	33 people	18 Rubles		-
Squad trumpeter	01 people	72 Rubles		-
Company trumpeter	04 people	10 Rubles 30 kopeks		-
Squad signalist	01 people	72 Rubles		-
Private first class	40 people	19 Rubles 80 kopeks		-
Vigilante	856 people	09 Rubles		-
Total lower regular ranks:	952 people	-		-
Lower irregular ranks				
Squad scribe	01 people	108 Rubles		-
Senior scribe	01 people	72 Rubles		-
Junio scribe	02 people	18 Rubles		-
1	2	3		4
Senior paramedic	01 people	72 Rubles		-



Junior paramedic	01 people	72 Rubles	-
Company paramedic	04 people	72 Rubles	-
Gunsmith	01 people	09 Rubles	-
Junior workman	03 people	09 Rubles	-
Supply-train vigilante	18 people	09 Rubles	-
Total irregular ranks:	32 people	-	-
Total lower ranks:	984 people		
Scout squad			
Cavalry sergeant-major	01 people	108 Rubles	-
Chief Under-Officer	02 people	72 Rubles	-
Junior Under-Officer	04 people	18 Rubles	-
Private first class	06 people	10 Rubles 80 kopeks	-
Vigilante	58 people	09 Rubles	-
Total lower regular ranks:	71 people (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 2. D. 235. L. 2–22ob.)		

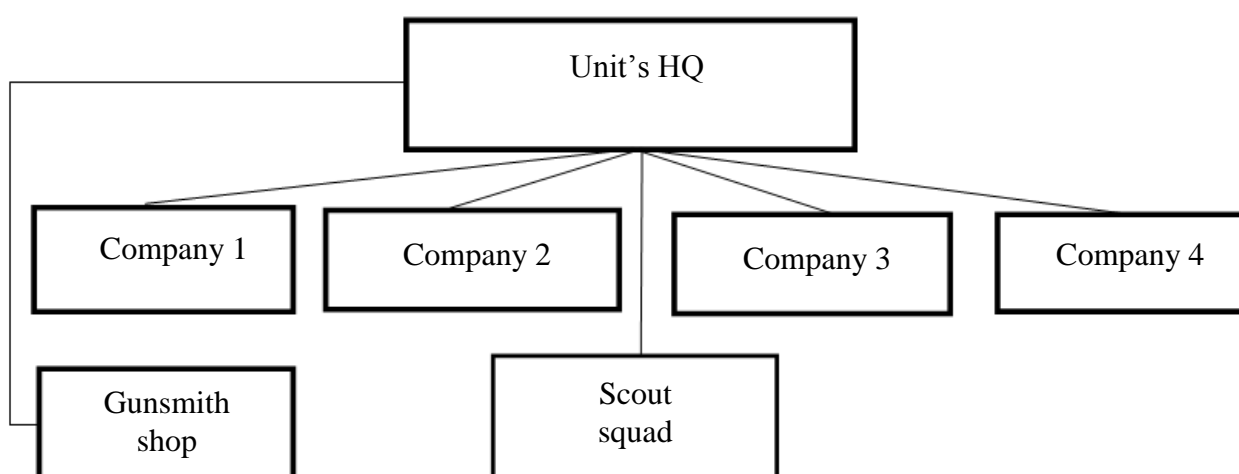


Fig. 7. Organization of the Armenian Vigilante Unit

Table 3. Staff of the Armenian Vigilante Company

No.	Name	Number
Officer corps		
1	Chief Officer	04 people
Lower ranks		
2	Junior Under-Officer	16 people
3	Sergeant-major	01 people
4	Private first class	20 people
5	Private	235 people
6	Total personnel (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 1. D. 557. L. 309–314)	276 people
7	Scout squad (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 5. D. 178. L. 130–131)	71 people
8	Squad total:	1,175 people

#### 4. Conclusion

The reason for the formation of Armenian vigilante units was the military and political situation in the region and the lack of own combat-ready units in the Caucasian Front. It can be concluded that the formation of Armenian vigilante units has several key features. First, it took place taking into account the traditions of the Armenian ethnic-based resistance groups, the khumbs, but at the same time, it was done according the procedures of the People's Militia of the Russian Empire. Secondly, the units were manned by representatives of the numerous Armenian

Diaspora around the world, not specifically particular region. In this regard, the squads were being manned easily throughout their existence.

Thirdly, a significant portion of the equipment and further maintenance of the vigilante units was provided by representatives of Armenian political parties and the Armenian Church (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 1. D. 178. L. 133), which, in turn, allowed the Caucasian Front Command to complete the training of Armenian squads and begin their combat use in the shortest possible time. Undoubtedly, the formation of Armenian vigilante units in the Caucasian Front should be considered fully successful.

The combat effectiveness of the Armenian vigilante units was low, especially in the initial period of military operations. Armenian units could only act effectively in cooperation with the Russian units (RGVIA. F. 2100. Op. 3. D. 501. L. 35). But later on, gaining certain combat experience, these formations were equally successful both independently and interacting with the Caucasus Corps units. The units were able to conduct offensive and defensive combat operations and were indispensable in a variety of combat uses. This particularly concerned reconnaissance operations and special events in the difficult terrain in the mountainous areas of the Caucasus Theatre of War (RGVIA. F. 1082. Op. 2. D. 209. L. 3). In general, Armenian vigilante units have shown their high combat efficiency during the military operations. They were deployed in close cooperation with regular military units of the Caucasus Corps and separately. As a result, the Caucasian Front Command decided to give the Armenian vigilante units the status of regular troops. In December 1915 it was decided to disband the Armenian vigilante units and form Armenian rifle battalions on their basis. On December 13, 1915, by order of the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, No. 366, the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasus Army was granted the right to form these battalions. Six Armenian rifle battalions were formed from six Armenian squads (RGVIA. F. 2003. Op. 2. D. 325. L. 5).

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