

KURDISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE:
POWER STRUCTURES AND INTERACTIVE BEHAVIOR

by

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ABSTRACT

What explains collaboration and conflict between Kurdish and Armenian societies during the Late Ottoman period? In order to answer this question this thesis focuses on the relationship between structures in Kurdish and Armenian societies and political behavior. The significance of this study lies in that it provides a new angle from which to look at the Armenian question, in relation to the Kurds as opposed to only in relation to the Ottoman state and Great Power, and also in that it analyzes the impact of political, ethnic, and national consciousness on groups' interactive behavior. In order to explain conflict and collaboration, this study compares and contrasts the socioeconomic and political experiences that the Kurds and Armenians had with Ottoman state, examines the affect of the Ottoman policy on the local dynamics of power, and analyzes the role internal and external political factors on interactive behavior. It is argued that adjustments in the traditional power relationship, resultant from the implementation of various policy changes, gave rise to new political spaces through which new social structures were formed. The competition between new and old structures for power led some groups to radicalize their policies in order to secure their continued existence. The factors that determined a group's decision to ally with or fight against other groups was influenced by influential individuals' interpretations of the political situation and their internal and external structures.

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INTRODUCTION

The mid-1890s was the scene of massive violence and social strife among and between the Kurdish and Armenian populations of eastern Anatolia. Throughout this period Kurdish tribal chiefs contended among each other and also with Ottoman administrators for control of political offices; Kurdish and Armenian peasants suffered under the heavy hands of tribal and Ottoman administrative authority; and Kurdish and Armenian political groups clashed with one another (particularly during the 1890s) resulting in soaring death tolls. How does one account for the increased conflict between the Armenians and Kurds in the 1890s? Was it a result of an insidious government agenda to divide and conquer the Armenians and Kurds in order to thwart Armenian nationalist or separatist aims in eastern Anatolia and dissolve the control of the Kurdish tribes, or was it the result of an Armenian nationalist-induced rebellion which spurred already festering social tensions between Armenians and Kurds to culminate in bloodshed? To answer these questions this study examines various interactions among the Kurds, the Armenians, and the Ottoman government; looks at the effect of government policy on power structures within Armenian and Kurdish society, and explores the reasons for the ultimate inability of Armenians and Kurds to collaborate against the Ottoman government. Ultimately it seeks to offer a new understanding of the Kurdish-Armenian relationship as socially interstructural and interelite rather than interethnic, interreligious, intercultural, or international (in the sense of it being between

two people nations rather than two nation states).

Methodology

Although many studies of eastern Anatolia during the later Abdülhamid II period discuss Kurdish-Armenian relations, only a few articles have given a detailed analysis of this issue. The discourse on Kurdish-Armenian relations has largely been subsumed within the general narrative of the Armenian genocide debate, which itself is primarily concerned with the issue of culpability for the Armenian massacres, rather than the broader topic of the interactions between and among the groups. The general dearth of scholarship on Kurdish-Armenian relations can be attributed to a number of factors, and perhaps have to do with the fact that Armenian studies and Kurdish studies are not placed within the same area studies group within the area studies divisions: the former being placed in Central Eurasian Studies and the latter placed in Near Eastern studies. With few exceptions, studies have looked at the Kurdish-Armenian relationship as part of the Armenian question rather than the Kurdish question. Furthermore, the daunting task of gathering sources which are scattered throughout numerous archives in Russia, Istanbul, and Europe in a number of different languages has probably kept scholars from delving very far into this topic. Lastly much of the research on eastern Anatolia has been guided to fit questions particular to the Armenian Genocide debate, which continues to be highly controversial and a source of severe social tensions in some regions. As a result scholars have been drawn to study eastern Anatolia primarily in the context of the question of the Armenian genocide. One could speculate that were it not for the ongoing controversy surrounding this region during this period, the body of scholarship regarding Eastern Anatolia might not have been so large. Libaridian states that the dearth of scholarship

that focuses on Armenian-Kurdish relations can be attributed to the following:

Historians and scientists are not abstract entities who develop interests and conclusions in a vacuum. They usually begin with perspectives that predetermine the subjects to study as well as the questions to be raised with regard to that subject.¹

There are a few noteworthy studies of Kurdish-Armenian relations. The most comprehensive account was written by Garo Sasuni, whose book entitled *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve Ermeni-Kürt İlişkileri (15.yy'dan Günümüze)* [*The Kurdish National Movements and Armenian-Kurdish Relations (From the fifteenth Century to Our Day)*] was originally published in Armenian as an eighteen-part series in the Boston-based Armenian journal *Hairenik Amsagir* between 1929 and 1931, and subsequently translated into Turkish and published as a book in Beirut in 1969.² The book provides a detailed and intricate analysis of the Kurdish-Armenian relationship throughout numerous periods of time in the Ottoman Empire based on numerous archival sources, Armenian publications, and European reports. While Sasuni is undoubtedly intent on lending credence to the notion that the Ottoman Empire was only entity directly responsible for the massacres of Armenians, the concern to prove culpability actually appears subsidiary to his main argument: that a Kurdish-Armenian union was possible and necessary in order to put pressure on Turkey to create independent Kurdish and Armenian states. Throughout his book he cites instances of collaboration between Kurds and Armenians

¹ Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 170. This quote is taken from a chapter 9, "Ideology and History: Problems in the Study of Armeno-Kurdish Relations," which was first published in 1988 under the title "Studies of Armeno-Kurdish Relations and Its Problems" in *Studia Kurdica*, nos. 1-5 (1988), 63-76.

² For more background information on Sasuni see Tessa Hofmann and Gerayer Koutcharian, "The History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire,"

against the Ottoman Empire and attributes hostility between Kurds and Armenians to the Ottoman Empire's divide-and-conquer tactics.

A propaganda slant is evident in Sasuni's writings: "What is the goal of the Armenian and Kurdish friendship and union? The deliverance of Armenia and Kurdistan from the Turkish yoke."³ However his book represents a much more sophisticated approach to understanding Kurdish-Armenian relations than most of the Dashnak propaganda circulating during the 1920s. He presents a complex series of events between Kurds and Armenians in a cohesive and fluid manner, explaining reasons for both collaboration and conflict. Conflict, he asserts, was generally a result of the nefarious designs of Turkish divide-and-conquer policy and not part of any primordial cultural tension between the Kurds and the Armenians:

The fundamental reasons for enmity in past periods are no longer, and we must accept that the enmity is no longer for the [following] reasons: The Armenian was the servant and the Kurd was the master. In our day such a class relationship is no longer present. The Kurd was armed and the Armenian was unarmed and the Kurds' livelihood was dependent upon exploitation and robbery. Today this is no longer... if yesterday we were enemies today we are friends... we are not praising the Armenian-Kurdish friendship for reasons of tactical principle, but because this friendship is real.⁴

The article by Hoffman and Koutcharian covers Kurdish-Armenian relations between from the fifteenth century until WWI. Much like Sasuni, on whose work they rely significantly, they focus primarily on Kurdish-Armenian relations within the context

Armenian Review 4, no. 4-156 (Winter 1986), 3. Libaridian also includes some background information on Sasuni in *Modern Armenia*, 173-174.

³ My translation from the Turkish. Garo Sasuni, *Kürt ulusal hareketleri ve Ermeni-Kürt ilişkileri (15.yy'dan günümüze)* [The Kurdish National Movements and Kurdish-Armenian Relations (from the fifteenth century to our day)], trans. Bedros Zarataryan and Memo Yetkin (Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: Med Yayınevi, 1992), 224.

⁴ My translation from the Turkish. *Ibid.*, 223.

of the Armenian question and give the Kurdish question only a cursory glance.⁵ In a brief article on Kurdish-Armenian relations during the Sultan Abdülhamid II period, Janet Klein explores explanations for both conflict and collaboration between Armenians and Kurds focusing on the question of land ownership and power at local levels as determinants of interactive behavior rather than state policy and “primordial hatreds” alone:

Just as cooperation was not guided by ethnicity, neither was conflict shaped solely by communal concerns. Armenians were the primary targets because they had fewer protectors and could easily be denounced as traitors if they lodged a complaint against their aggressors. But Kurdish peasants and weaker tribespeople also fell victim to the same kind of violence, a fact that must be considered in this story of conflict.⁶

This thesis seeks to carve out a space from the existing scholarship by looking at the shifts in traditional power structures within Kurdish and Armenian society, and the consequent transformations of identity and social structure, as key determinants of conflict and collaboration. In addition, it further takes a structural approach to analyzing Kurdish-Armenian relations. It identifies the existing power structures and political identities to which Armenians and Kurds were bound, explains the factors that shaped power and identity in these societies, and explores the reasons why such structures were mutually compatible or incompatible.

This study recognizes religious and political institutions as the structuring properties that shaped Kurdish and Armenian society. It is assumed that ethnicity, culture, and religion cannot be understood without due consideration of the interaction of

⁵ Hofmann and Koutcharian, “The History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations.”

⁶ Janet Klein, “Conflict and Collaboration: Rethinking Kurdish-Armenian Relations in the Hamidian Period, 1876-1909,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 13, nos. 1&2 (2007: 153-166), 166.

certain societal elites with the predominant political and normative structures of both the government and the respective social structures of societies. Ethnicity, culture, religion, and nation can be seen primarily as abstract notions to which elites appealed in order to legitimize their rule, attract followers, and enforce policy, rather than as fixed identities that determined behavior. Though both Kurdish and Armenian society had a degree of cultural, religious, and ethnic distinctiveness, the boundaries of ethnicity, religion, nation, and culture were reified through this process of interaction of actors with contemporary social and political structures. In this study Kurds and Armenians are seen not as ethnicities, cultures, or religions as much as groups of individuals tied to a single structure or a number of structures existing within a political framework.

Periods of conflict and collaboration between Kurds and Armenians can be understood as composite rather than holistic. Kurdish and Armenian societies were not historically pitted against each other based on ethnicity, religion, culture, or national sentiment. Rather, the harmony or disharmony between them varied according to time and space. The factors that influenced Kurds and Armenians either to collaborate or be in conflict with one another can be explained by the interaction between a host of agents within the existing power structures both in the Ottoman government and in Kurdish and Armenian society, where social structures were reinforced and maintained as a result of Ottoman policy.

Layout

The layout of this study is as follows. Chapter 1 looks at the state of Kurdish-Armenian relations before the rise of Sultan Abdülhamid II to power. Of particular interest in this chapter is the question of identity and social structure in Armenian and

Kurdish society and how these relate to different internal and external factors. What differentiates a Kurd from an Armenian and how do their individual social and power structures differ from each other? How did the transformation of the policy of the Ottoman state affect power structures in Kurdish and Armenian societies? By analyzing the political geography of eastern Anatolia and the individual social structures present within Kurdish and Armenian societies, this chapter seeks to understand the role of ethnicity, religion, and culture in the Kurdish-Armenian relationship as it existed during the *tanzimat* period between 1839 and 1876.

Chapter 2 looks at the effects of the Russo-Turkish War and the Treaty of Berlin between 1876 until the mid-1880s. The two major questions that this chapter attempts to answer are 1) the role of the policy and interaction of the Great Powers and the Ottoman administration in shaping and enforcing power structures in societies by analyzing the effect of the Russo-Turkish War and its aftermath (specifically Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin) on Armenian-Kurdish relations and 2) the extent to which Kurdish and Armenian society were able to interact outside certain structures created and enforced both by the political and economic trends in the Ottoman Empire and by the existing power structures of their own individual elites.

Chapter 3 examines the Kurdish-Armenian relationship during the conflict in the 1890s. By exploring a host of European and Ottoman documents, a more subtle relationship between Kurds and Armenians than the conventional picture of continual conflict is revealed. The two most important political actors within Armenian and Kurdish society are considered here: the Armenian revolutionary parties and the Kurdish-dominated Hamidiye cavalry. In order to understand the role that each entity played on

the Kurdish-Armenian relationship this chapter seeks to place these groups within the socio-political and normative contexts in the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian revolutionary parties, it is argued, arose in response not only to the Ottoman government's failure to implement the reforms affecting the Armenians which had been agreed upon under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin, but also in response to the power struggle within the Armenian religious hierarchy. In essence, the parties appealed to ethnicity as a uniting factor among Armenians. The organization of the Hamidiye cavalry by the Ottoman government, which was designed to incorporate Kurds into the governing system, ended up having effects opposite of those which Ottoman administrators had intended: rather than dissolving power among the Kurdish tribes, it emboldened tribalism and fostered competition between them, thus resulting in political and social turmoil. Both the Ottoman government and the Kurdish tribal chiefs appealed to religion as a means of mobilizing power. The general trends in Armenian and Kurdish societies were going in opposite directions: Armenians were moving away from religion as a unifying factor, while Kurds were moving towards it.

CHAPTER 1

KURDISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS 1839-1876: TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL POWER STRUCTURES

The analysis of interactive behavior between two groups has tended to revolve around the structure vs. agents debate. Are trends in interactive political behavior more attributable to overarching political and social structures or to the agents acting within those structures? While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to flesh out an answer to this question, it is relevant to keep it in mind when analyzing social interactions between Kurds and Armenians. Is interactive political behavior between Armenians and Kurds a product of the individual structures in their societies and of Ottoman and global political structures which elite political figures have little impact on changing? Or do the actors themselves play a greater role in determining whether or not Kurds and Armenians collaborate or conflict? This chapter looks at the relationship between high level politics at regional and global levels and the power structures within Kurdish and Armenian society in order to determine whether structure or agents have great explanatory power for Kurdish and Armenian interactive political behavior.

Identity, Structure, and Agency in Kurdish and Armenian Societies

The interactive social and political relations between Kurds and Armenians in the late nineteenth century cannot be understood without discussion of the structural and

agency-related mechanisms of collective identity formation. Collective identification provides a basis for explaining conflict and collaboration, since it forms the fundamental element of group political formation and self-distinction. It can be defined as the basic unit of group cohesiveness based on shared social or cultural traits that manifests itself in interactive situations in which “the self” and “the other” are identified.

Collaboration and conflict based on identity (that is, not based on individual struggles) is rooted in groups’ politically conscious perceptions of “the self” and “the other.” However, the integration of social, political, and cultural identity is not a precondition for the existence of extended social harmony. Instead harmony or disharmony among different groups is largely dependent upon, in the words of Alexander Wendt, “how deeply the social structures [which groups] instantiate penetrate conceptions of the self.”⁷ Despite ostensible linguistic and religious differences, it cannot be said that Kurds and Armenians categorically regarded each other as outsiders and “others” socially, politically, and culturally. In fact there are many instances, as will be discussed later, in which Kurds and Armenians assimilated to each other culturally, religiously, and linguistically.

As definitions of “self” and “other” differed over time and space among Kurdish and Armenian society, it is most relevant in this study not to identify who Kurds and Armenians generally perceived as “the other,” but to identify the factors that influenced the conceptions of collective identification. Was the interactive political and social behavior of Armenians and Kurds more a product of the social and political structures in which both groups were situated, or was their behavior more a product of the agency of

various actors? While the bulk of this favors the hypothesis that agency was ultimately more a determinant of political behavior than structure, structure cannot be dismissed as an irrelevant factor. It is indeed the agency of actors that leads to various political outcomes; however, structure limits the number of avenues that actors can pursue. For instance, the Kurds could not become politically conscious without the existence of a socio-political structure which fostered the growth of a bourgeois class. Yet it was the agency of the Kurdish actors to make choices from a range of possibilities that resulted in the rise of political consciousness among Kurds.

Anthony Giddens' explanation of the relationship of structure and agency is fitting for the discourse about Kurdish-Armenian relations during the late Ottoman period. According to Giddens, there exists a duality in structuration in society according to which structure is "produced as an unintentional by-product of more concrete types of human activity. However, under some conditions it can be consciously steered and directed."⁸ Structure is neither inviolable nor permanent and is "both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices." Furthermore structure "enters simultaneously into the constitution of social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution."⁹ In Giddens' framework, identity in relation to structure emerges as both an intentional and unintended consequence of structure. Actors can consciously form and guide identities to the extent that they themselves are politically conscious. However, this does not mean that identity is purely the product of agency-driven social

⁷ Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994): 386.

⁸ Giddens summarized in Charles Crothers, *Social Structure* (London: Routledge, 1996), 54.

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Emile Durkheim* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 4.

construction; instead, structure can have a more subtle role in shaping identity among those who are less politically conscious: “structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity....Human history is created by intentional activities but is not an intended project: it persistently eludes efforts to bring it under conscious direction.”¹⁰ Agency, on the other hand, “refers not to the intentions of people have in doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place.”¹¹

Giddens’ analysis can be applied to the case of structures in Kurdish and Armenian society. For instance, the origins of the tribal structure in Kurdish society can be seen as the unintentional by-product of the need for protection in mountainous and barren terrain. However, the choices of actors were not guided by structure alone. Instead the tribal structure limited the options that tribal leaders could pursue as avenues to guide their tribes. Tribal leaders exercised the agency to ally themselves with or fight against neighboring tribes. However, the tribal structure in and of itself did not afford the tribal chiefs the option of participating in a social order beyond the tribe, such as civil society. Instead it was the intervention of agents both inside and outside the tribal structure, who had been influenced by other political and social structures, which could introduce ideas competing with those of the tribal leaders, thus leading to transformations in tribal society. The case of Bedr Khan, which will be discussed below, illustrates an instance of a tribal chief, influenced by ideas which he gained during his service in the Ottoman military and government, became an agent of transformation of Kurdish society

¹⁰ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 26-27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

in the Cizre region.

The social and power structures in society are rooted more in the agency of actors than biological human behavior. It is ultimately the collective interaction of actors, through their agency, that determines power distribution in society and thus produces various social and political outcomes. A social structure can be understood as an arrangement of relationships with members of society that is operated through the power structures. The power structure is the agency space of actors in society to act politically. Those at the top of the power structure have the largest allotment of agency space and those at the bottom of the structure have the least. Those who transgress their allotment of power within the structure often cause conflict and rifts. The origins of power structures in society are predominantly a product of human agency. For instance, the structure of the Gregorian Armenian church was determined and maintained by the leaders of the church who devise policies as a means of organizing the society around them and ultimately maintaining power. Structures that operated outside that of the Gregorian Armenian church were tolerated so long as these did not interfere with the structure of the church. The structure of the Armenian business class, headed by the *amiras*, was tolerated by the Patriarchate, despite operating largely outside the church power structure, mainly because it provided the financial foundations for the church. On the other hand, the Protestant and Catholic power structures, which formed in Armenian society in the early nineteenth century, were not tolerated because these directly challenged the authority of the Patriarch.

By the late nineteenth century the social structures of Kurdish and Armenian societies were no longer just basic family/clan structures whose members were generally

acquainted with each other; instead, the social structures included a substantial population whose identity was a product of identifications both from within and from outside their social structures. In order to maintain power, groups resorted to creating institutions for that purpose. Power in Kurdish society was originally maintained through the tribe, the leading *ağa* acquired power by proving that the strength of his group was greater than that of others. However, in the course of the eighteenth century, *sheikhs*, the spiritual leaders of Kurdish society, gained an increasing amount of powers.¹² They legitimized their power by their ties to higher ranking religious authorities and, in some cases, even claimed to be descendants of the prophet Muhammad. Armenians, on the other hand, did not organize themselves in tribal defensive units like the Kurds. They had infiltrated the commercial networks of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires and many, though by no means all, had acquired a great degree of wealth. Power was maintained in Armenian society through wide-ranging connections with global and regional commercial networks and also through religious institutions. Since the eighth century, the Armenian Orthodox church was the leading authority over the Armenian people. Under the Ottoman *millet* system,¹³ the structure of the Armenian Church was not only maintained, but actually strengthened, since the Sultan granted the Patriarch full power over the Armenian *millet*.

While it is clear that ethnicity among eastern Anatolian societies during the late Ottoman Empire did not have the same boundaries as it does today, the notion of ethnic distinction, nevertheless, was present in both Kurdish and Armenian society. Before the

¹² See Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992), 145-173.

¹³ A *millet* is a self-administrating non-Muslim religious groups throughout the Empire (i.e. Armenians, Greeks, Serbs, Slavs, etc.). The Armenians were the second largest *millet* in the Ottoman Empire after the Greeks.

rise of ethnic and nationalist consciousness among the members of their respective societies, the Kurds and Armenians can arguably be considered, in the words of Anthony D. Smith, *ethnies*, pre-national ethnocultural groups in which a type of ethnically-based identity existed which “tend[ed] to be exceptionally durable under ‘normal’ vicissitudes and to persist over many generations, even centuries, forming ‘moulds’ within which all kinds of social and cultural processes...unfold[ed].”¹⁴ The documents and writings of centuries past suggest that Kurds and Armenians have been collectively identified by outsiders and also have identified themselves for centuries as ethnically distinct groups. The preservation and propagation of their respective *ethnies* can be attributed to both religious and tribal institutions within eastern Anatolian society and to the parameters of Ottoman political culture.

The boundaries of the Armenian *ethnie* reified as a result of a combination of the policies of the Gregorian Orthodox Church and the Ottoman administration. The church served to preserve the language and ethnic identity of the Armenians and also distinguish them from their Muslim neighbors and other Christian groups. The Ottoman *millet* system recognized a basic distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Based on the Islamic legal *dhimmi* statute—which granted Christians and Jews living within *dar al-islam* (literally the domain of peace denoting the political area over which Muslims had control) certain political and economic privileges—the *millet* system granted non-Muslims (Jews and Christians) the privilege to administer over their own people in judicial and religious affairs under a state-appointed *milletbaşı* (head of the *millet*). The *milletbaşı* of the Armenians was the Patriarch of the Gregorian Orthodox church who

¹⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing,

resided at Istanbul under the supervision of the Sultan. Gellner argues that the *millet* system had the indirect effect of giving the Armenians, like other non-Muslim groups, a sort of “ethnic specialization,” which contributed to the perpetuation of their “ethnic distinctiveness,”¹⁵ although assimilationist trends were more common in the urban areas, particularly in the guilds, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁶ Ethnic distinctiveness appears to be more the result of the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, than a feature of the *millet* system. According to Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924), one of the leading ideologues of the Turkish nationalist movement in the early twentieth century, many Armenians and Greeks throughout the Empire, who had once been more assimilated to Ottoman culture, began to “revive their languages after they had been Turkified.”¹⁷ The *millet* served mainly to preserve the power structures associated with the religion, than to produce ethnic nationalism directly. Ethnic nationalism rose outside the *millet* rather than within it. As will be later shown, the *milletbaşı* of the Armenian *millet* during the late nineteenth century tended to be against nationalist groups. Islam was, as Gellner describes it, a “trans-ethnic” and “trans-social” religion: “it did not equate faith with the beliefs of any one community or society.”¹⁸ As the Kurds were predominantly Muslim (with pockets of them adherents of Yezidism and Alevism, both deemed heretical by Sunni Muslims) the Ottomans did not include them under the

1988), 16.

¹⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 26.

¹⁶ See Abdul-Kareem Rafeq, “Craft Organization, Work Ethics, and the Strains of Change in Ottoman Syria,” in *Journal of American Oriental Society* 111, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 495-511.

¹⁷ Ziya Gökalp, *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Gökalp*, ed. and trans., Niyazi Berkes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 130-131.

¹⁸ Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101.

umbrella of the *millet* system throughout most of their rule over eastern Anatolia, nor did they attempt to impose a certain ethnic identity or social practices on them. Instead, according to the law, the Kurds, as Muslims, enjoyed equal status with other Muslims throughout the empire. The fact that the Kurds identified themselves primarily according to tribe and lineage rather than ethnicity suggests that their ethnic identity evolved largely as outside themselves, an identity which Ottomans and Europeans used to identify the nomadic and pastoral peoples inhabiting eastern Anatolia, rather than self-identification. The Kurds were not only competing for power and resources along with other non-Kurdish groups in eastern Anatolian society—including Nestorian Christians, Armenians, and Turks—for status in the Ottoman Empire, but also with each other.

Given that the Armenians and Kurds have a long interactive history, it appears that in some areas they assimilated to an extent. In 1869 Consul J.G. Taylor of the British consulate in Erzurum reported that the Kurdish Mamakanlee tribe inhabiting the region around Erzurum believed themselves not to have emigrated from Diyarbakir, as had other Kurdish tribes in the region, but rather as being “descended from the Armenian Mamagonians, who are natives of the [Erzurum] soil.”¹⁹ In 1914 S. Zarzecki echoed the notion that many of the Kurds were Armenians who had assimilated to Kurdish culture:

When the Kurds were converted to Islam, many mountain-dwelling Armenians followed their example, embraced the faith of Muhammad, mixed with the Kurds, and thereby increased their number. This presumes that Armenian blood runs through the veins of a great number of these ferocious Kurds who have made the Armenians undergo such terrible suffering during the last twenty years of the reign of Abdulhamid. If one asks the Kurds themselves of their origin, they are quite uncomfortable and respond in an evasive fashion; some claim to be indigenous, while others assert that their ancestors come from Iran and are

¹⁹ Consul Taylor to the Earl of Clarendon, Erzeroum, March 19, 1869, in *British Documents on Ottoman Armenians*, ed. Bilal Şimşir (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1982), 1: 62.

blended with the Armenians who became Muslim; finally their chiefs and principally their *shaykhs*, who are numerous throughout their people, claim Arab descent.²⁰

A letter submitted to the Ottoman Sultan in 1884 by the governor of Van confirms the notion that Kurds in some regions were indistinguishable from Armenians:

“[R]eciprocal material and spiritual relations between the Armenians and the Kurds,” claimed the governor, “are closer than their individual relations with other societies.”

The governor further reported that many Kurds claimed that they were of “Armenian stock” and were often mistaken for Armenians by Ottoman officials.²¹

The idea that the Kurds and Armenians had a shared ethnic origin was certainly popular among the Armenian Dashnak party, whose members often appealed to the notion of a shared past with the Kurds as a means of gaining Kurdish support against the Ottoman administrators. Hagop Shahbazian, a sociologist and leading member of the Dashnak party, made the same claim in his book published *Krda-hay patmutiune* [Kurdish-Armenian History], published in Istanbul in 1911,²² that the Armenians and the Kurds were of the same ethnic origin: “believe it or not, they [the Kurds and Armenians] are originally of the same blood, divided [only] by religion and tribe.”²³ Some of the Dashnak propaganda circulating throughout the region during the 1920s also emphasized

²⁰ My translation from the French. S. Zarzecki, “La question kurdo-arménienne,” *La Revue de Paris* 21, no. 12 (March-April 1914): 881.

²¹ Ertuğrul Zekâi Ökte, *Ottoman Archives: Yıldız Collection, The Armenian Question*, (Istanbul, Turkey: Historical Research Foundation, İstanbul Research Center, 1989), 3: 325.

²² Shahbazian’s work cited at length in the Garo Sasuni. I have not been able to locate this document nor find any evidence that it was originally published in 1911 except in Libaridian, *Modern Armenia*: 179.

²³ My translation from the Turkish. Celilê Celil, *XLX. Yüzyıl Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Kürtler* [Kurds in the Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire], trans. Mehmet Demir (Ankara: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1992), 131.

the shared ethnic past of Kurds and Armenians.²⁴ The following conversation between an Armenian agent and a Kurdish tribesman which was reported to a British Air Force intelligence agent in a memo from the Iraqi Police Criminal Investigation Department in 1930 indicates the continuing spread of such propaganda:

A (Armenian agent): What is the difference between you and Armenians?

K (Kurdish tribesman): religion

A: What about nationality?

K: None. As Kurds, Armenians and Yazidis are from the same origin, that is Armenians.²⁵

Not only did the Dashnaks maintain that the Kurds and Armenians had a common lineage, but the Young Turks were keen on the idea of peoples' shared ethnic pasts. According to Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924), Turkish tribes living in the rural areas of eastern Anatolia would become "Kurdified" and the Kurds in the urban areas of the cities would become "Turkified." Unlike the Dashnaks, however, the thrust of the argument of Gökalp and other leading Young Turks was to advocate that all ethnicities in the Ottoman Empire should unite by adopting a Turkish ethnic identity and thus abandon the ethnic nationalism that had been the source of so much political division.

The rootedness of Kurdish and Armenian ethnic identity tended to vary according to the surrounding social circumstances. Whereas the assertion of *Kurdiyeti*

²⁴ During the late 1920s the Dashnaks offered to allow the Kurdish Khoybun party to assemble in their meeting houses in Beirut and communicate between individuals throughout Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. Leaders of Khoybun and the Dashnaks would travel between Beirut and Eastern Turkey where it is very likely that they would spread propaganda among Kurdish tribes of a union between Armenians and Kurds. See Mohammad Mulla Ahmed, *Jama'iyat Khoybun wa al-'Alaqaat al-Kurdiyya al-Armaniyya* [The Khoybun Society and Kurdish-Armenian Relations] (Bonn, Germany: Kawa Publishers, 2000), 133-146.

²⁵ Cited in Nelida Fuccaro, "Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture, and Identity" in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 205.

(Kurdishness) tended to be stronger in rural regions where Kurdish tribal structure was dominant, the assertion of Armenianness tended to be stronger in urban areas where the Armenian Orthodox clergy and the wealthy Armenian *amira* class were dominant. Furthermore Kurdishness and Armenianness were not consistent throughout eastern Anatolia as ethnic identities. Based on its ethnic proportions, economic linkages, and natural geographic boundaries, eastern Anatolia was not an interconnected region, but rather a region forged through external political forces. Ottoman control over eastern Anatolia had always been rather limited. It conquered much of region in the early sixteenth century, but the Ottoman administration could implement long-term control only in certain areas, largely because the region's largely mountainous terrain made it difficult for government forces to control. In addition the fact that much of it was barren and infertile gave the Ottomans little incentive to invest in securing the few economic benefits that it had to offer. Hence Ottoman interest in eastern Anatolia was primarily geopolitical. As a means of staving off potential incursions from the Persians to the East and the Russians to the northeast, the Ottomans set up garrisons in a number of towns. Trends towards assimilation between the Kurds and the Armenians was to come to an end in the mid-nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire gained greater control of eastern Anatolia and implemented political mechanisms that distinguished between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Socio-Economic Geography of Eastern Anatolia

It was in the Ottomans' interest to protect themselves against the threat of Kurdish tribal confederacies mobilizing any significant numbers against them. The Ottomans chose to invest enough administrative effort to place the plains regions of eastern

Anatolia under control, while allowing the more meddlesome and stronger Kurdish tribal confederacies to maintain relative autonomy. In areas in which Kurdish tribes were less powerful and more disparate the Ottoman government formed *sancaks* (an administrative division of the *vilayet*) in which Kurdish chiefs were allowed to serve as *sancakbeğis* (heads of the *sancak*) under the supervision of government-appointed non-Kurdish *beylerbeğis*. All necessary tax collection and military service administration controls were applied to the inhabitants.²⁶ However, in regions where more powerful Kurdish tribal confederacies were dominant (typically regions which were more inaccessible), Ottoman administrative and military intervention was rare. Though keeping these regions under their suzerainty, the Ottomans allowed these more powerful Kurdish groups to form *hükümet*s (governments) which were not subject to taxation or military service. Land ownership was dealt through local regulatory mechanism in accordance with Kurdish tribal administrative tradition.

The protection afforded to some regions in eastern Anatolia by the Ottoman administration allowed for a number of trade routes to emerge. Eastern Anatolia became one of three main trading zones for the Ottoman Empire, connecting trade with the Persian Gulf region and the lands to the East to Western Anatolia and the Black Sea. The forests of eastern Anatolia provided lumber and the cities were major transit points for the silk and spice trades.²⁷ However, as trade with Europe gained in volume and importance during the nineteenth century, trade with the East diminished and the cost of

²⁶ van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 159.

²⁷ Mehmet Bulut, *Ottoman-Dutch Economic Relations: In the Early Modern Period 1571-1699* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), 18. According to Bulut the other two trading zones in the Ottoman Empire were the “island-coast” and “Mediterranean-Indian

maintaining overland trade routes through harsh desert and mountainous terrain and maintaining security for them began to outweigh the benefit of trade with the East. The Trabzon-Tabriz route, which passed through Erzurum and Van, maintained its vitality on account of British interest in finding a shorter trade route to obtain silk from the Gilan region and the fact that Russia levied duties on goods passing through the Georgia trade route.²⁸ However, by the nineteenth century most of eastern Anatolia had become economically independent, and domestic trade was more important than trade with other Ottoman regions and international trade in terms of both volume and value. Regional trade became a significant means of subsistence for the inhabitants of eastern Anatolia. In 1890, the value generated by regional trade between Mosul, Diyarbakir, and Harput was equal to approximately 5 percent of the total export trade in the Ottoman Empire, which, given the relatively insignificant status of the cities in the Ottoman economy, is a remarkable figure.²⁹

Geographically, eastern Anatolia consisted of four different types of settlements: cities, smaller towns, rural mountainous areas, and rural plains areas. The major cities and larger towns in eastern Anatolia were Diyarbakir in the west, Van in the east, and Erzurum in the north. These three cities served as the major economic centers of the region and had a strong Ottoman military and administrative presence. In an effort to outbid each other politically and protect their individual economic and geopolitical interest, the Russians, French, and British had assigned consuls to all three cities (with

Oceans” zones, which were from the Aegean and lower Mediterranean coasts to Europe and the Red Sea to India respectively.

²⁸ Charles Issawi, “The Tabriz-Trabzon Trade, 1830-1900: Rise and Decline of a Route,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1970): 18.

the exception of the Russians at Diyarbakir) by the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰ The Ottoman government maintained a strong administrative and military presence in all three cities, designating each one as the administrative center of the respective Diyarbakir, Erzurum, and Van *vilayets* and establishing each as a military base. The Ottoman military presence in Van functioned to protect the Empire from Persian influence and the military presence at Erzurum served to protect the Empire from Russian influence. At both Diyarbakir and Van the Ottoman army presence was instrumental in staving off major Kurdish and Armenian insurrections. In terms of ethnic composition, Van and Diyarbakir (and Erzurum to a lesser degree) consisted of a high number of both Kurdish and Armenian inhabitants. In order to rule Van and Diyarbakir, the Ottoman administration relied on many of the leading Kurdish families. As a result local politics were often rife with factional struggles for power between clans and families. In 1819 the Şeyhzade family, which had been gaining increasing power in Diyarbakir, for instance, was toppled by Ottoman forces which formed an alliance with Behram Paşa, a member of a rival Kurdish clan in the Diyarbakir region, who became the *mutesarraf* of the Diyarbakir *vilayet*.³¹

²⁹ Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 128-129.

³⁰ Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to the Caucasus* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), 131. In the 1860s the British and the French set up consulates in Van in order to counteract the Russian influence generated by the establishment of a Russian consulate not long before. Subsequently the British, Russians, and French maintained a more minor consular presence at Diyarbakir and Erzurum.

³¹ See Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire: Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Leiden, Boston: E.J. Brill, 2004), 191-193. Also see Stephen Duguid, "The Politics of Unity: Hamidian Policy in Eastern Anatolia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 155. The Kurds in Diyarbakir and Van were extremely influential on the

As the Ottomans began to establish a greater military and administrative presence in eastern Anatolia in the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Kurds migrated to the cities and the surrounding areas. These migrants to the cities tended to de-emphasize their tribal identity and even abandon their Kurdishness in some cases. Many Kurds dwelling in the cities of Diyarbakir, Erzurum, and Van in Eastern Anatolia attempted to flee the vicissitudes of the power struggles inherent in the tribal lifestyle. Frederick Millingen, who traveled in the region during the 1860s, wrote the following of the Muslims living in Erzurum, the majority of whom were predominantly of Kurdish origin: “if a stranger were to ask one of the native Mussulmans of Erzerum whether he is a Koord by nationality, the individual would undoubtedly consider the question an insult, as he claims to belong to what he supposes to be a higher caste.”³² Harry Lynch observed that many Kurds settling in the city of Van, “disown[ed] the name of Kurds and affect[ed] that of Osmanlı, or Turks of the ruling race.” These Kurds, Lynch goes on to say, “do not belong to any Kurdish tribe,” or at least claimed that they did not.³³

While the Kurds had a fair degree of control on the administration of the cities, the Armenians tended to control economic affairs. The guilds, trades, banks, and businesses in the cities of Van, Diyarbakir, and Erzurum were predominantly Armenian-controlled. Kurdish feudal lords relied on Armenian traders for the purchase of

Ottoman administration. The effectiveness of Ottoman rule on the regions was largely dependent on the state of their relations with the predominant tribes.

³² Major Frederick Millingen, *Wild Life Among the Koords* (London: Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1870), 149.

³³ Harry Finnis Blosse Lynch, *Armenia, Travels, and Studies* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965, originally published in 1896), 83.

“agricultural tools, other means of production . . . , and other necessities.”³⁴ By the time of Abdülhamid II eastern Anatolia had become more integrated into the capitalist market and had begun to use money as a regular unit of exchange. As the Armenians were traditionally well-versed in financial and economic matters, they became money-lenders to the Kurds, who were generally unacquainted with capitalism. The introduction of circulating currency into the region had a profound impact on social relations between Kurds and Armenians in many regions. In one case in 1893 in the Dersim region, one of the most economically and politically remote regions of eastern Anatolia, Armenian financiers managed to seize property from Kurds who had mortgaged their land in order to cover the expenses of the bride price and the wedding ceremony, which of course left the Kurdish tribes incensed at their creditors.³⁵

Towns in eastern Anatolia were different from cities in that, while the population consisted of diverse groups, one group tended to dominate the local administration. Whereas the Ottoman government had a greater degree of control over the administration of the cities during the nineteenth century, and had parceled out administrative control to different tribes and groups, the administration of a number of towns was largely under the control of a dominant tribe. Among the towns of economic significance in eastern Anatolia were Bitlis, Muş, Harput, and Mardin, which had originally been largely Christian settlements which had become more inhabited by Kurds and Turks over time. While Harput remained predominantly Armenian, with Armenians dominating its

³⁴ Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 146.

³⁵ İbrahim Yılmazçelik, *XIX. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında Dersim Sancağı: İdari, İktisadi ve Sosyal Hayat*, [The Dersim Sancak in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: Administrative, Economic, and Social Life] (Elazığ, Turkey, 1999), 147.

administration in addition to merely dwelling there, this appeared to be an exception to most of the towns in eastern Anatolia.³⁶ The extent to which Armenians dominated political affairs in Harput can be seen in the fact that the Americans established a widely supported mission to benefit the Armenians. Bitlis, nestled in the mountains between on the West side of Lake and Northeast of Diyarbakir, had a mixed population of Arabs, Armenians, Jacobites, and Kurds. Wealth was generated by the numerous merchants who pass through on their way to Diyarbakir or Van and its population was sustained by the mountain pastures and agriculture in the fields towards Muş to the northeast. The extent to which the Kurdish *mirs* (leader of a semiautonomous principality) controlled the area can be seen in the portion of the taxes that they kept and they used to pay the salaries of many high-ranking Ottoman officials.³⁷ In Mardin, the Ottoman administration still found itself forced to share power with the major Kurdish tribes, who continued to control the major means of production and distribution, even after the destruction of the power of the *mirs* in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁸

The rural mountainous areas of eastern Anatolia were difficult for Ottoman forces to penetrate. As such the inhabitants, who were mostly pastoral and seminomadic, had a strategic advantage over the invaders. The Ottoman administration typically exempted the inhabitants from taxes, military service, and the application of legal and administrative procedures. The isolation of the Dersim region, to the north of Diyarbakir

³⁶ Edwin Munsell Bliss et. al, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities* (Edgewood Publication Co., 1896). Here he talks about the invading *redifs* who were Turkish soldiers disguised as Kurds.

³⁷ van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 162-170. The sources that van Bruinessen uses are largely from the seventeenth century traveler Evliya Çelebi. However much of the same structures appeared to be present until the mid-nineteenth century.

and southwest of Erzurum, was such that the Kurdish tribal inhabitants (in many cases referred to as the *kızılbaş*) spoke a dialect (Zaza) which was completely different from other Kurdish dialects, and also maintained significantly different religious practices, most of them adhering to Alevism. The relationship between the Kurds and Armenians in Dersim was traditionally much closer than in other regions. Even during the tumultuous times under the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the atrocities of WWI, pockets of the Dersim region (as the region was by no means ever unified under the control of a single tribe or individual) served as an area of refuge for Armenians fleeing conflict and deportation. It was reported that Kurds of Dersim provided a safe haven for more than 5,000 Armenians during the 1915 massacres.³⁹ Armenians and Kurds in the Dersim region worshipped at many of the same holy shrines. Thus Kurds throughout Eastern Anatolia would make the pilgrimage to the Armenian monastery of St. John the Baptist (Surp Garavet Vank in Armenian) in the town of Khozat to be cured of diseases.⁴⁰

The Hakkari region, located to the south of Van was, much like the Dersim region, quite mountainous, although less isolated. Located on the trade route between Van and Urmia in western Iran, its inhabitants profited from collecting *jamarik* (customs) from traders passing through the region.⁴¹ The climate and soil of the Hakkari region was ideal for the growth of quality tobacco. By the beginning of the Abdülhamid II period, Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah, a prominent Kurdish spiritual leader backed by many different

³⁸ Suavi Aydın, *Mardin: Aşiret, Cemaat, Devlet* (Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 2000), 257.

³⁹ Ahmad, 173.

⁴⁰ L. Molyneux-Seel, “A Journey in Dersim,” *The Geographical Journal* 44, no. 1 (Jul., 1914): 63. Molyneux-Seel writes that Kurds would continue to make such pilgrimages to the monastery during his visit to eastern Anatolia in the early 1910s.

tribes in the region, controlled the tobacco trade, even to the extent of rivaling the French tobacco company Régie. During the late 1870s and early 1880s, the Ottomans struggled to dislodge the control of the Kurdish tribes over the tobacco trade, which took away from the demand for French-cultivated tobacco. However, the mountainous terrain of the Hakkari region gave the tribes an advantage in protecting their tobacco and prevented Ottoman forces from intervening effectively.⁴² That of the villages scattered throughout the mountains in the Hakkari region were named after the predominant family and land ownership was not solely in the hands of Kurdish tribes. There were many instances in which Assyrian (Nestorian) tribes had control over Kurdish peasants in the region.⁴³

There were a number of relatively autonomously ruling elites in the areas of Zeitoun, north of modern-day Kahramanmaraş, and Sasun, north of modern-day Batman. These were the mountain Armenians who were regarded as “patriot[s] and freedom fighter[s]” against the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁴ According to Aghassi, a prominent Dashnak writer during the 1890s, the Zeitoun Armenians even helped the Ottomans fight the Kurdish rebels at one point in their history.

While the Ottoman troops continued to be worn out by the Kurds in the other locations, the Zeitountsis, after having taken the fortress, attacked the Kurds from behind and made them suffer considerable loss.... The grand-vizier marveled at the ability and the bravery of the Zeitountsis and came up with the idea of forming an avant-garde regiment in his army to put down the rebellious tribes.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Celil, *Intifadat al-Akrad 'Am 1880* [The Uprising of the Kurds 1880], trans. Siyamand Sirti (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab Press, 1979), 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴³ van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 118; David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations during WWI* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2006), 126. Rather than pay taxes, many tribes paid a small tribute to the Ottoman government in order to ensure their autonomy.

⁴⁴ Libaridian, 75.

⁴⁵ My translation from the French. Aghassi, *Zeitoun: Depuis Les Origines Jusqu'a L'Insurrection de 1895* (Paris: Édition du Mercure de France, 1898), 103-105.

The status of both Kurds and Armenians living in the lowland rural areas was far from enviable. A saying circulated among highlander Kurdish tribes of the lowland villager Kurds: “Ta ji mirine çetire” (malaria is better than death).⁴⁶ According to the explanation given by Ziya Gökalp, this meant that it was preferable to dwell in the mountains and may be exposed to malaria than to face the gruesome existence of lowland village life where people were exploited by tribes and Ottoman officials, seeking taxes and money.

The Kurdish tribes were the predominant force throughout the rural lowland regions of eastern Anatolia. It was to the advantage of Kurdish peasants to ally themselves with a powerful tribe for protection from outside enemies and for economic security, but Armenian peasants were also dependent on the Kurdish tribes for protection. They paid the *hafir* tax which “consist[ed] of a certain portion of all their crops, cattle, silver, ore, with the addition of articles of clothing, agricultural implements” in exchange for the protection of the Kurds.⁴⁷ In addition to the *hafir* tax, the Armenians and peasant Kurds who were affiliated to a powerful tribe were to provide *kişlak*, or winter quartering for Kurdish nomadic and pastoral tribesmen, which drew complaints from many Armenian peasants to the European consuls and to the Armenian patriarchate.⁴⁸

This feudal relationship between the Kurds and the Armenians was not entirely burdensome for the peasants; in some cases it was actually beneficial. Thus the

⁴⁶ Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt Aşiretleri Hakkında İctimai Tetkikler* [Sociological Analysis of Kurdish Tribes], (Ankara: Komal, 1975), 85.

⁴⁷ FO 424/183, Inclosure in No. 59, Therapia, August 15, 1895, p. 203, no. 192, *Turkey* no. 1 (1895) Part I, p. 132, no. 252, 252/1, *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 4: 94.

⁴⁸ Arshag Ohan Sarkissian, *History of the Armenian Question to 1885* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1938), 32-33.

Armenians under the control of Mehmet Sadık of the Hayderanlı tribe were actually quite wealthy. Even the poorest of the Armenians under the control of Mehmet Sadık, possessing at least a hundred sheep per farm, fared much better than poor Armenians in other regions. Mehmet Sadık, it should be noted, was not particularly kind towards Kurdish tribes and Armenians in other regions and was a notorious raider and plunderer.⁴⁹ Yet as the Ottoman government began to centralize greater control over Eastern Anatolia and to collect taxes from the inhabitants, the *hafir* tax levied by the Kurdish tribes became increasingly burdensome. By the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II, powerful Kurdish tribal confederations were not completely dissolved, and continued to levy the tax to raise funds to counter the spread of Ottoman control in the region. As a result many Armenians and Kurdish peasants were double-taxed.⁵⁰ The failure of Armenians to pay the *hafir* tax was frequently met with severe punishment.

Typically, the Kurds and Armenians living in lowland rural regions had good mutual relations and relied on each other for defense against more powerful tribes. The Armenians of Eastern Anatolia were largely of the *rayah* class, a landless peasantry that was illiterate, uneducated, and generally detached from the Armenian clergy and business classes. The *rayah* were offered little support even from the clergymen of lower status who competed with them for prestige and access to sustenance from within the religious institution.⁵¹

Whereas the identity of Armenians was strongly connected to religion, that of the Kurds was strongly connected to the tribe. Many Armenians in Western Anatolia did not

⁴⁹ FO 195/2284, Dickson to Lowther, September 22, 1908, cited in Justin McCarthy et al, *Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2006), 36.

⁵⁰ Sarkissian, 33.

speak Armenian. American Protestant missionaries in the Ottoman Empire requested that copies of Christian literature be published in Turkish for the Turkish-speaking Armenians in the West. One of the Tokat-based Armenian Altruistic Society's main functions in the 1860s was to "hold Sunday classes in the Armenian language for Turkish-speaking Armenians."⁵²

The main unit of self-identification for most Kurds was the clan and the tribe rather than "Kurdishness" by itself, since the Kurds as a whole were divided both religiously and linguistically. While most Kurds were Sunnis, more specifically of the Shafi'i *madhhab* (which is more conservative than the Hanafi *madhhab* to which most Turks adhered), the Kurds of Dersim were Alevi, the Kurds in Iran were largely Shi'i, and many Kurds in the Mosul province were Yezidis. The Kurdish dialects of Kurmanci, Sorani, and Zaza were mutually incomprehensible. Yet there were frequent power struggles between tribes of similar linguistic and religious backgrounds. During the Sultan Abdülhamid II period the Shikak and Hayderanlı tribes of Iran never managed to mobilize sufficient power to maintain an edge on their competitors. Within the Shikak tribal confederacy alone there were seven major tribes and numerous subtribes which regularly sought to dominate each other, although they would come together to compete with rival groups. McCarthy mentions that the "paramount chief" of the Shikaks was most likely a weak leader overall.⁵³

⁵¹ Libaridian, 75.

⁵² Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 91.

⁵³ See McCarthy, 50.

The *Tanzimat* and Kurdish Society

The *tanzimat* were a series of reforms undertaken by the Ottoman administration from 1839 to 1876, aimed at centralizing control, industrializing the economy, and forming an official military. Ottoman defeat by the Russians during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and Egypt's secession from the Ottoman Empire under Muhammad Ali—which culminated in Egypt's invasion of Syria in the 1830s—gave more liberal-minded administrators the upper hand in promoting such reforms. Sultan Mahmud II commenced the period of the *tanzimat* in 1839 with the declaration of the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane (The Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber). The edict “abolished” tax-farming, reorganized the finance system, and civil and criminal codes, based on the French model, and reorganized the military, regularizing its method of recruitment and fixing the duration of service. Not all of the reforms, however, were actually put into practice.

During the 1840s many of the powerful Kurdish *beys* were upset at the *tanzimat* reforms on the ground that it upset the “traditional” arrangements between themselves and the state. Before the reforms, many Kurdish tribes had been exempted from paying taxes in exchange for keeping the peace and not interfering in the trade routes between the commercial centers of eastern Anatolia. The predominantly tribal structure in Kurdish society was one of two institutions through which Kurdish individuals could achieve power, status, and wealth. *Beys* and *ağas* were the predominant land-holders, tax-collectors, and commanders of the Kurdish military force. As the village elder, the *ağa*'s influence did not usually extend beyond his tribe and village. The *bey*, on the other hand, tended to own much larger amounts of land and had stronger ties with a network of

ağas and tribes.⁵⁴ While the *beys* had been granted a functionally autonomous status by the Ottoman state between the sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries, they would often forge alliances with key state officials against rival Kurdish *beys*.⁵⁵

As a result of the reforms, eastern Anatolia gradually became incorporated into the tax-collection system of the Ottoman state. Locals complained of the irregularity of its tax collecting methods; thus Bedr Khan, a prominent Kurdish *bey* who commanded the allegiance of several large tribes throughout the Bohtan (the area in between modern-day Siirt and Cizre) and Hakkari regions, wrote in a letter to Ottoman administrators: “The Kurds’ fundamental complaints are not that taxes are burdensome; rather, it is that taxes are not fixed and are subject to the whims of tax-collectors and officials. It is appropriate that the taxes be levied equally and be extracted according to the amount of one’s property and possessions.” He further complains that the local Kurdish *beys* were being replaced by official administrators as tax collectors. “The task of tax collection has been given to the *mütesellims* [state appointed regional officials in charge of tax-collection]. They do not get things done equally, [even] to the point of forcing the people to rebellion.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Sheikh, and State*, 81. The Kurdish *ağa* is simply a leader of his village and people and is often poor and landless. The *beys* tended to function as the landholder, who derived his power from his networks and ties with the business and military classes.

⁵⁵ Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53-59.

⁵⁶ My translation from the Turkish. Nazmi Sevgen, *Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu’da Türk Beylikleri: Osmanlı Belgeleri ile Kürt-Türkleri Tarihi* [Turk Beyliks in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia: Ottoman Documents and Kurdish-Turkish History] (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1982), 63.

Bedr Khan

It is widely believed that the ascent of the Kurdish *bey* Bedr Khan to power in the 1830s stands as an instance of Kurdish national cohesion aimed at forming an independently ruling Kurdish state. For many Dashnak party members the period Bedr Khan's rule was an ideal time of peace and prosperity between Kurds and Armenians. Bedr Khan, it is believed, held "political independence as the highest priority" and "considered Armenians and Kurds on equal terms."⁵⁷ Shahbazian, a member of the Dashnak party and an Armenian sociologist of the early twentieth century, asserts that Bedr Khan had close relations with the Armenians of his *beylik* (the domain of the *bey*) and to have "arranged" marriages between Kurds and Armenians.⁵⁸

Dr. Lepsius, a German explorer of eastern Anatolia during the late nineteenth century, wrote the following in an article entitled "Kurds-Armenians" in a journal entitled *The Christian East*:

Until 1848 the relations between the Kurds and Armenians were becoming increasingly friendly. There were many marriages between Armenians and Kurds. In these situations the marriage was conducted by the Armenian priest in the Armenian church and the Kurds acted with respect towards the Armenian clergymen and the monks and prayed in churches.⁵⁹

Perhaps in an effort to appease Bedr Khan, the Ottoman government appointed him commander of a brigade sent against Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt in 1839. Rather than meekly carrying out Ottoman orders, however, Bedr Khan used his position to gain more power over both the Kurdish tribes in the region and the Ottoman lands. His independent actions were deemed insubordinate by the Ottomans and he was dismissed from his

⁵⁷ Hagop Shahbazian, *Krda-Hay Tarihi* (Constantinople, 1915), 86 cited in Sasuni, 71.

⁵⁸ Celil, *XIX. Yüzyıl*, 131.

⁵⁹ Doctor Lepsius cited in *Ibid.*, 132.

position. Subsequently he made appeals to the *valis* of both the Diyarbakir and Mosul provinces requesting that they annex the *kaza* of Cizre and recognize him as leader, but his appeals were declined.⁶⁰

Disillusioned with the Ottoman state, Bedr Khan turned his attention to the *beylik* of Hakkari for support, hoping to unite a force of Kurds and Nestorians against the central government. Nurullah Bey, who had usurped power from the former *bey* of Hakkari, allied himself with Bedr Khan. As Nurullah Bey had the support of Sayyid Taha, the leading Sufi of the holy city of Şemdinan (southeast of Hakkari), the alliance was significant.⁶¹ One of Nurullah Bey's main concerns was that the *tanzimat* would allow the Nestorian Christian tribes, the majority of whom dwelt in the Hakkari region, to gain increasing power. As such he bade Bedr Khan to chastise the Mar Shimun, the religious leader of the Nestorians, and lead an attack against those Nestorian groups who refused to ally themselves with the Kurdish force.⁶² Those Nestorians who backed Mar Shimun were killed in vicious attacks throughout the southeastern region. The Bedr Khan coalition gained strength during the early 1840s and managed to expand its control over parts of Mosul, Diyarbakir, and as far as the borders with Iran by 1845.⁶³

In an attempt to counteract the spread of Bedr Khan's influence the Ottoman authorities attempted to win over clans opposed to him by offering them positions in a newly created Kurdistan *vilayet*. In 1846 the grand vizier issued an *irade* (imperial order) that a separate Kurdistan *vilayet* be created comprising the "Diyarbakir province and

⁶⁰ Sevgen, 67-70.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶² Sarah Shields, *Mosul Before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 55.

Van, Muş, and Hakkari districts and Cizre, Botan, and Mardin sub-districts.” The *vilayet* was furthermore to be granted “special status and autonomy [*idare-i mahsusa ve müstakil tahtına konulması*].” However, the fact that in the same *irade* the grand vizier also named a strategic location (the town of Ahlat on the west side of Lake Van) where the “Kurds can better controlled with the iron fist [*pence-i satvet*]”⁶⁴ reveals the Ottomans’ ulterior motives in such a move. In fact, the *vilayet* of Kurdistan did exist from 1847 to 1867, but it was ruled directly by the Porte and appeared to not be fully *müstakil* (autonomous) as proposed in the *irade*. By the mid-1860s the Porte undertook significant changes to its borders and eventually merged the *vilayet* of Mamuretülaziz with the Diyarbakir *vilayet* in 1868 and did away with the Kurdistan *vilayet*.⁶⁵

By 1847 Bedr Khan was forced to surrender and was subsequently exiled. While his removal marked the end of the *beyliks*, the Ottomans did not completely replace the Kurds’ control with their own. In fact the Ottoman presence in eastern Anatolia only limited the degree to which the Kurds could mobilize through forming tribal confederacies and, Kurdish feudalism continued to be the dominant factor in the remote regions. That the Kurdish tribes continued to control much of eastern Anatolia is evidence of the failure of the Land Reform of 1858 end the control by powerful landlords and transfer land ownership to the peasant occupiers in eastern Anatolia, where the clause in the Land Reform that stipulated the creation of the *tapu*, title deeds given for peasant proprietors, had little effect. The peasantry was unaware of the changes and the tribes failed to comply with the law. Ziya Gökalp observed the following concerning eastern

⁶³ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 45-47; van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 178-180.

⁶⁴ Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, 60-61.

Anatolia: “although forms of *zeamet* like *sipahilik*, *yurthluk*, *ocaklik* have been formally legally abolished, they are in actuality and in fact still in existence.”⁶⁶

The *sheikh*, the spiritual leader, filled the power vacuum in Kurdish society between 1848 and 1876. The increased Ottoman presence in eastern Anatolia made it difficult for any of the *bey*s to emerge and form a powerful tribal confederacy like the one under Bedr Khan. Tribes became increasingly disunited, fighting each other for power. On the other hand the *sheikhs*, the religious leaders of the Kurds were unaffected by the Ottoman’s centralization campaign and filled the power vacuum left by the decline of the *beyliks*. The *sheikhs* were not dominant in all of eastern Anatolia; rather, their power was limited to more isolated regions where there were no rival religious orders. According to McDowall:

Shaykhly dynasties were most important in areas where tribes were most numerous and prone to feuds. Here they prospered on conflict resolution (and provocation) that made their own mediation skills indispensable. They were less influential in those areas either where there were still strong tribes, for example the Jaf, or where the area was basically non-tribal, for example the lands around Diyarbakir, and where consequently tribal conflicts requiring mediation either did not, or seldom, occurred.⁶⁷

The *sheikhs* were especially powerful in the region of Hakkari. Şemdinan, nestled in the mountains southeast of Hakkari near the border of Iran, served for centuries as the religious center for Kurdish followers of the Naqshbandi order. The holy families dwelling there claimed descent from the prophet Muhammad and commanded the allegiance of tribes throughout the southeast, even those who were at odds. Sevgen

⁶⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁶ Nur Yalman, “On Land Disputes in Eastern Turkey,” in *Islam and its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustave E. von Grunebaum*, ed. Girdhari L. Tikku (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971: 180-218), 187.

⁶⁷ McDowall, 52.

portrays Şemdinan as a center for corruption where the *sheikhs* dwelt in luxury in the midst of the abject poverty of their Kurdish disciples. “Their bedrooms were covered with full length mirrors, and furnished with rugs to the walls.”⁶⁸ Although the Ottoman administration maintained a presence in Şemdinan, the officials assigned to Hakkari and Şemdinan had little recognition from the locals. Moreover many of them were venal and accepted bribes. According to Sevgen the religious leaders would prepare daily meals for the *kaimmakam* and other leading officials.⁶⁹ Hakkari became the center of Kurdish resistance during the 1870s and 1880s under the leadership of Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Following Bedr Khan’s deposition in 1847, military security posed a problem for eastern Anatolia. As the Ottoman forces could not afford to maintain conscript regiments throughout the rural parts of the region to patrol the villages, ensure tax collection, and recruit soldiers; they became increasingly reliant for security on *başıbozüks* (irregular forces). Throughout the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire sought to take measures to modernize its military. It dissolved the Janissary corps in 1826 and sought to implement a system of conscription modeled along European lines. While the Ottomans may indeed have preferred to use *başıbozüks* as a means of minimizing the potential of the military to seize control from the state, the system in eastern Anatolia was highly ineffective. Unlike local militiamen and regular military regiments, *başıbozüks* could clear the battlefield with hardly any repercussions. The weapons that the Ottomans distributed among the Kurdish *başıbozüks* went unaccounted for and served as a means for Kurds to undertake feuds and vendettas against their rivals. Christians also suffered

⁶⁸ My translation from the Turkish. Sevgen, 170.

severely as a result of raids by unruly nomadic Kurdish brigand groups, many of whom were loosely connected to the Ottoman military as *başıbozüks*. One observer said the following of the *başıbozüks*: “they are...restless, turbulent, and impatient of discipline; and, like the members of that fallen corps, are a bad specimen of the soldier and the citizen.”⁷⁰

While the Ottomans could easily employ Kurds as irregulars, it was difficult to maintain their allegiance. By and large the Kurdish *başıbozüks* paid more allegiance to their own individual tribes than to the Ottoman state. Accompanying a group of Kurdish *başıbozüks* headed by a French captain, Noë, on route to Bulgaria in 1854 was a female religious leader (*sheikha*) whom Noë reported to be in her seventies. As she enjoyed particular religious prestige among the Kurds, the Ottoman and French leaders of the regiment found themselves needing to win her respect in order to be able to command the other Kurds. At one point in the journey the Kurdish *shaikha* became upset over a French officer, Capitaine de Sérionne, drawing a sketch of her, and abandoned the regiment with her Kurdish followers in following weeks.⁷¹

The Tanzimat and Armenian Society

As far as the Armenian *millet* was concerned, the *tanzimat* reforms had the unintended consequence of weakening the traditional power structure among the Armenians, which had been crucial in keeping the Armenian subjects in line with the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Richard Madden, *Turkish Empire: Its Relations with Christianity and Civilization* (London: T.C. Newby, 1862), 1: 500-501.

⁷¹ Louis Robert Jean Noë, *Souvenirs d'Afrique et d'Orient: Les Bachi-Bozouks et les Chasseurs d'Afrique: La Cavalerie Régulière en Campagne* (Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1861), 37.

Ottoman state. This opened up political space for other segments of the Armenian population, especially those who were not tied to the clergy or the *amira* class, to emerge and arouse the consciousness of the Armenians throughout the empire of the injustices which they suffered. In 1856 the Ottomans undertook another series of reforms issuing the Hatt-ı Hümayun (Imperial Rescript) which abolished the *cizye* tax on non-Muslims and allowed them to serve in the military. This part of the *tanzimat* reforms, which came about largely as a result of pressure from Britain and France to liberalize policies related to non-Muslims in exchange for their help in the Crimean War, led towards the reformation of the *millets* and of the traditional Armenian power structure.

Traditionally, as has been mentioned, the Ottoman state administered the non-Muslim groups through the *millet* system which allowed the *milletbaşı* (head of the *millet*) to administer their own *millets* in judicial and religious affairs. The head of the Armenian *millet* was the Patriarch of the Gregorian Armenian church who was appointed by both the Sultan and the Armenian *amira* class (nobility) and was given nearly unchecked authority over the Armenians. While Kurdish religious figures were filling the political vacuum that the Ottomans had created since the ending of the power of the *bey*s, the Armenian patriarchate's power over the Armenian people was becoming increasingly limited. In the first place European missionary infiltration into the Ottoman Empire had led to the conversion of numbers of Armenians to Protestantism and Catholicism who were subject to persecution by the Gregorian Armenian Orthodox clergy. At the behest of the British Ambassador the Ottoman Empire created separate *millets* for the Armenian Protestants in 1847 and the Armenian Catholics in 1850, ensuring them protection from the hostility of Orthodox Armenians and placing them

outside the jurisdiction of the Gregorian Orthodox *millet*.⁷² In addition groups of Armenians both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire began to put forward philosophies that advocated the redistribution of power in the Armenian *millet*. Inspired by the bloodless revolution of 1848 in France, a group of Armenian intellectuals in Paris, known as the Young Armenians, put forward the notion of an Armenian nation and advocated the creation of school curricula that promoted the Armenian language and sought to instill the Armenians with a sense of their own ethnic identity.⁷³ With the division between the Armenian Orthodox clergy and the Protestant and Catholic Armenians, the ideas put forward by the Young Armenians served as a means of cohesion between the conflicting groups within the Armenian *millet*. What had begun as a literary and linguistic movement under the auspices of the Young Armenians, the *Araratean Enkerut'awn* (Ararat Society), eventually grew to encompass political and social matters. During the 1850s and 1860s the Armenian community, which had fallen into considerable social disorder on account of its fragmentation into three separate *millets*, felt the impact of liberal ideas of the Young Armenians. By 1863, a group of enlightened liberal Armenians introduced an Armenian Constitution, which redistributed the power within the Armenian *millet*, allowing middle-class Armenians to have a role in the election of the patriarch and legislative assembly. The constitution expanded the accountability to which the patriarch was held, and elements of Armenian society, other

⁷² Hagop Barsoumian, "The Eastern Question and the Tanzimat Era" in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997: 175-201), 182-185. Also see Karpat (1982), 164.

⁷³ Vartan Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System in the Ottoman Empire: A Study of Its Historical Development* (Istanbul: 1988), 64-65.

than the nobility and the clergy, were now able to play a role in politics.⁷⁴

Though the Ottoman state clearly intended the *millet* groups to have greater representation in the administration through administrative assemblies, thus supplanting the absolute control of the patriarch or other religious authority, it was hoped that allowing greater freedoms would ultimately stem resistance or separatist movements. In fact, the reforms did not achieve the initial ideal of creating an ‘Ottoman’ identity to replace the former *millet* identity. Horizontal alignment based on class could not vertical alignments based on ethnic and religious identification.

Until 1860, the Armenian patriarch in Istanbul had nearly absolute authority over Gregorian Armenian religious and social affairs. Granted the rights of tax collection (a function to which he appointed many of the upper-class *amira* families), property administration, control over religious and secular education, control over the tribunals and courts, and the right to censor publications in Armenian, he was the main link between the *millet* and the Ottoman administration. As he also maintained the right to exile and to execute Armenians insubordinate to his rule, he was widely feared in the Armenian community.⁷⁵ However, upon *millet* reform the patriarch’s power over the Armenian *millet* became severely limited, in both temporal and religious affairs, although here his power was maintained to some degree. He was able to continue to enforce the rule that Armenians who did not fast during the week before Easter receive twenty-five lashes.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Hagop Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question and the Tanzimat Era” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New York: St. Marten’s Press, 1997: 175-201), 185.

⁷⁶ *Masis*, 20 March 1893, #3983, 163 cited in Artinian, 52.

The restructuring of power through the *millet* reforms was also coupled with resettlement measures in the Eastern provinces. While the Ottoman state, following the Crimean War of 1853, eventually came to the realization that its aim to maintain control over the Balkans would be untenable in the long run, it sought to strengthen its position in eastern Anatolia. The eastern Anatolian project aimed to place all Armenians under the control of the administrative council and dissolve the dissenting power blocs. Zeitoun was one particular area in which Armenians enjoyed relative autonomy, and suspicions of revolutionary activity spurred the Ottomans to undertake a resettlement campaign under which land in nearby villages was given to Circassians and Turks in an effort to weaken potential resistance. The continuing activity of Armenians, the amassing of weapons, tax evasion, and minor disputes with non-Armenian locals during the early 1860s, gave the then governor of nearby Marash, Aziz Pasha, the pretext to intervene with his army, loot and pillage Armenian lands, and establish a military base to keep the area under state control.⁷⁷

By the 1870s, the formerly “uncaring” wealthy Armenian business class in the urban areas of Western Turkey was becoming increasingly aware of the situation of the Armenian peasants in eastern Anatolia. Increased ethnic awareness among Armenians was largely due to the efforts of Mkrtych Khrimian, a clergyman and activist from Van who sought to disseminate information about the plight of the eastern Anatolia

⁷⁷ Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 100-102. Aziz Pasha's engagement in morally reprehensible military tactics of burning houses and raping women spurred the Ottoman state to dismiss him. The Zeitoun inhabitants and clergy sent a delegation to both Istanbul and Paris to appeal for intervention. Ultimately the Turkish military blockade of Zeitoun was lifted in exchange for the establishment of a military base. Also see Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question,” 200-201.

Armenians among the Armenian elite. Through the *Artsvi Vaspurakan* (The Eagle of Vaspurakan) newspaper in 1855 and later the *Artzvik Taron* (The Eaglet of Taron) in 1862, he was influential in drawing attention to the treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Increasing social awareness among the Armenian elites, coupled with the growth of political and national/ethnic consciousness among young Armenians largely as a result of the growing number of Armenian schools in Turkey,⁷⁸ contributed to the rapidly spreading internationalization of the Armenian Question. Britain and Russia established consulates in Diyarbakir, Erzurum, and Van during the 1860s and 1870s both as a geopolitical strategy of preventing each other from gaining greater hegemonic control and also as a means of monitoring Ottoman treatment of the Armenians.

With the Ottoman administration was becoming increasingly encumbered by the number and force of the secessionist movements in the Balkans, administrators sympathetic to the Christian minorities were becoming fewer in number and losing support within the higher ranks of the Ottoman government. In the face of losing significant portions of territory and bankruptcy, proponents of liberalization through the *tanzimat* reforms were forced to take more stringent attitudes towards reforms which benefitted the minorities. The passing of Ali Pasha in 1871, one of the most influential figures behind Ottoman liberalization extinguished the hopes of many activists concerned with achieving greater rights for eastern Anatolian Armenians. In 1872 and 1876, the Armenian National Assembly's appeals to the Ottoman government to lighten burdensome taxes, provide protection from marauding Kurdish tribes, dissolve the feudal system under which many Armenians lived, provide greater recognition for non-Muslim

⁷⁸ Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenian Van/Vaspurakan* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda

testimony in courts, and other matters stipulated in the *tanzimat* reforms were largely in vain. The further suggestion that criminal and commercial cases be placed in the hands of separate Armenian courts received no response.⁷⁹

The *tanzimat* reforms significantly affected patterns of interaction between Armenians and Kurds. It weakened the power structure in Kurdish society, leading to increased rivalry for power between Kurdish tribes, which in turn worsened the plight of the Armenian peasants who perished in the crossfire. The Ottoman Empire's *millet* reform had the paradoxical effect of creating political space for a new Armenian class to achieve power by overturning the traditional power structure of Armenian society. The *tanzimat* never fully achieved its aim of centralizing administrative control over eastern Anatolia. Kurdish tribes and the Ottoman state continued to share power throughout the 1850s and 1860s, albeit with the Ottomans increasing their control. Despite the continued presence of nomadic tribal Kurds and feudalism throughout eastern Anatolia, Kurdish identity experienced a major transformation. However, the *tanzimat* reforms prevented the emergence of a strong representative of Kurdish ethnic identity to extend his influence far beyond his own tribe, and actually fostered the fragmentation of Kurdish identity. The *tanzimat* reforms left an enduring political vacuum in eastern Anatolia during the 1850s and 1860s which, in part due to the tenuous Ottoman presence, no significant figure could fill.⁸⁰

Overall Kurdish-Armenian relations began to deteriorate significantly as a result

Publishers Inc., 2000), 3.

⁷⁹ Edmund Herzig, Marina Kurkchian, *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity* (London: Routledge Press, 2005), 77.

⁸⁰ Due to the paucity of sources, this analysis of eastern Anatolia during the 1850s and 1860s is largely speculative.

of the centralization of Ottoman control in the region and the consequent weakening of the power structures in Kurdish and Armenian society. One of the major problems of the *tanzimat* reforms was that they were generally weak and ineffective in eastern Anatolia and could not provide the security enforced by the Kurdish *beyliks* which had kept the region relatively peaceful. Consequently a power struggle ensued between various Kurdish tribes ensued, which destabilized the region.

CHAPTER 2

THE RUSSO-TURKISH WAR, ITS AFTERMATH,
AND ITS EFFECTS ON KURDISH AND
ARMENIAN SOCIETY 1876-1882

The Russo-Turkish War and the subsequent Treaty of Berlin (1877-8) was a critical moment for Kurdish-Armenian relations. From one angle the war and the treaty appeared to divide the Kurds and the Armenians, since many Kurds fought on the Ottomans' side while many Armenians fought on the Russians' side. The settlement of the war at the Congress of Berlin resulted in the independence of several predominantly Christian regions in the Balkans and sparked increasing Armenian nationalist sentiment. It is not clear whether the war and the Treaty of Berlin were catalysts for division between the various Armenian and Kurdish factions. In *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri* Garo Sasuni makes the assertion that the war and its settlement caused an unprecedented divide to come into being between the Kurds and the Armenians which the Armenian revolutionaries, despite their efforts, were unable to fill.⁸¹ Enver Ziya Karal, founder of the state-sponsored Turkish Education Association (Türk Eğitim Derneği) in 1961 and dean of Ottoman historians, goes as far as to assert that the "Armenian Question" did not exist before to the ascension of Abdul Hamid II in 1876. Hostility between Armenians and Muslims, he asserts, arose as a direct result of Armenian political opportunism

following the Treaty of Berlin.⁸² This chapter reassesses the effects of the Russo-Turkish War 1877-8 and the Treaty of Berlin on Armenian-Kurdish relations.

The Russo-Turkish War 1877-8

By the mid-1870s the Ottoman sultanate was reeling back and forth in the diplomatic tug-of-war between Western Europe and Russia. Intent on gaining back territory that it had lost during the Crimean War, Russia was encouraging Balkan nationalism. With the help of a number of Russian volunteers, Serbia and Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire on June 30, 1876. Desperate to cling onto the Balkans, the Ottoman forces launched an offensive deep into Serbia to undermine the resistance. By October a Russian ultimatum persuaded the Ottomans to cease military action and sign a truce with Serbia. Although the Ottomans were capable of defeating the Balkan separatists, the stronger hands of Russia and Western Europe prevented the Ottomans from achieving a political victory. In December Western European and Russian officials met to work out a political compromise in which Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina would become autonomous under joint European control. On December 23, 1876 the Ottoman Empire announced its rejection of the agreements reached over the Balkans by declaring a Constitution that recognized the equal rights of non-Muslims. After the failure of the Ottomans to comply with Russian demands for reform in the Balkans in ensuing months, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire on April 24, 1877.

The war of 1877-8 was hugely damaging for the Ottoman Empire. Although the

⁸¹ Sasuni, 94-97.

⁸² Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, Vol. VIII (Ankara, 1962), 126.

Ottomans had a technological advantage on the Russians, since they had British military equipment, the Russian forces outnumbered the Ottomans nearly three to one in the Balkans and four to one in eastern Anatolia. In the west Russia managed to capture the Balkans and advance its armies deep into Thrace in the direction of Istanbul before Britain intervened at San Stefano (modern-day Yeşilköy), a village just west of Istanbul, and urged the Russians to declare a truce and sign a treaty. In the east, in the Caucasus, the Ottomans fared somewhat better against the Russians, although the Russians had taken Bayazid, Ardahan, and Kars by mid May. By the end of May, they proved themselves against all odds by liberating Kars and keeping the Russians from taking Erzurum.⁸³ In July the Ottomans launched a counteroffensive in Ajaria where they dealt the Russians a heavy blow.

The global financial crisis of 1873 had severely affected the Ottoman Empire. The reverberations of the “international financial panic” of the 1870s were felt deeply in eastern Anatolia. With low returns on agricultural produce, increasing taxes, and the sense of imminent war in the early and mid-1870s, the farmers and peasants who tilled the eastern Anatolian soil had little security of tenure.⁸⁴ Economic hardship forced many Kurds and Armenians to abandon their villages and migrate eastward towards Russia in search of greater economic stability. Massive out-migration to Russia aroused fears among Ottoman officials, already bracing themselves for a widespread separatist outburst in the Balkans, that similar social movements would arise in the east. According to the

⁸³ The British consul of Erzurum began sending out warning signals that the Russians would penetrate deeper into the east. *New York Times*, May 25, 1877.

⁸⁴ Donald Quataert, “The Age of Reforms 1812-1914” in Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *The Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 2, 1600-1914 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 790.

Russian consul in Erzurum, the Pasha of Erzurum commissioned the *kaimmakam* of Basin to personally visit surrounding villages in the Erzurum *vilayet* to obtain signatures from the migrants affirming their loyalty to the sultanate and asking for their eventual return to Turkey. The Armenians of Basin adamantly refused to sign the form.⁸⁵

Russia had an advantage against the Ottoman Empire in its ability to gain the support of the Armenians. Russia's appeal for the enforcement of Christian rights and liberties in the Ottoman Empire certainly drew many Armenians to its side. During the 1870s many Armenian peasants, then under the heavy burden of Ottoman taxation, eagerly anticipated a Russian invasion. In a visit to the Erzurum region in 1869, Consul Taylor reported that an Armenian village representative in one instance mistook him for a Russian consular official and declared that "he and all his flock were anxious at once to become loyal subjects of the Czar, and ready to do his bidding in the event of any future war."⁸⁶ Yet Russia also had an advantage over the Ottomans in attracting Armenians to their side in that a large percentage of the Armenian population dwelled in Russian territory in the Caucasus mountains. Prominent Caucasus Armenians Beybut Shelkovnikov, Mikhail Loris-Melikov, Ivan Lazarev and Arshak Ter-Ghukasov, all served as generals in the Russian army.⁸⁷ A number of Armenian revolutionaries based in Tiflis (Tbilisi in Georgia) voiced their outright support for banding together with the Russians. The Tiflis-based Armenian newspaper *Mshak* stated: "if Turkey vanishes from the face of the earth as a nation, the Armenians of Turkey must try every means to join

⁸⁵ Foreign Policy Archives of Russia, the Russian Consulate in Istanbul, 1873, Division 517 Doc. 732, p. 59 cited in Celil, *Intifada*, 27.

⁸⁶ Inclosure in No. 25, March 18, 1869, Turkey No., 16 (1877), p. 16-36, no. 13/1, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 56.

Russia.”⁸⁸

It was not in the interest of all Armenians to side with the Russians. Many Armenians enjoyed high positions in the Ottoman state and relied on the maintenance of the Empire’s integrity in order to maintain their status, and feared Russian intervention would disrupt the existing social structure. According to one report, upon hearing the news that the Russian Ambassador Ignatiev had issued an ultimatum to the Ottoman government, the Armenian Patriarch swore his allegiance to the sultanate in the event of war: “if this great state is destined to be demolished, we consider it our duty to be buried under its ruins.”⁸⁹ This sense of loyalty to the Ottoman Empire was shared by a host of other Armenians in high-ranking positions. On the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War on April 25, 1877 Manon Efendi, the Armenian deputy for Aleppo, stated: “We, the Armenian Christians, wish to announce that we do not need the protection of Russia.... We never deserted our Muslim friends, nor can we desert them now.”⁹⁰

The Ottomans and the Russians struggled for the loyalty of the Kurds. Most Kurds in eastern Anatolia were primarily interested in either gaining or maintaining the upper hand against rival tribes in the region. According to Colonel Henry Atwell Lake the Kurdish *başibozuks*, tribal leaders, and religious *sheikhs*, were “at all times ready to enlist under the banner of those who possess the means and the inclination to pay

⁸⁷ Victor Hambartsumyan, “The Russo-Turkish War, 1877-1878,” vol. 10 of *Soviet Armenian Encyclopedia* (Yerevan, 1984), 93-94.

⁸⁸ Nalbandian, 53.

⁸⁹ Sadi Koçuş, *Tarih boyunca Ermeniler ve Türk-Ermeni İlişkileri* [Armenians and Turco-Armenian Relations Throughout History] (Ankara, 1967), 75, cited in Salahi Ramsdan Sonyel, *The Ottoman Armenians: Victims of Great Power Diplomacy* (London: K. Rustem & Brother, 1987), 43.

⁹⁰ Hakkı Tarık Us, *Meclis-i Mebusan, 1293-1877*, I, 170-1, cited in Sonyel, 43.

them.”⁹¹ The Russians were well aware of the need to forge an alliance with the Kurds. The Russian Consul Avreyanov wrote to the Czar: “It is necessary for the leadership of the Caucasus to win over the Kurds and establish secret connections with them as in past wars, otherwise it will be easier for the armed Kurdish populace to be flattered by the Turkish administration and the tricks of the English in fighting against us.”⁹²

In the mid-1870s the Ottomans had launched a campaign to subdue the tribes of Dersim in hope of expanding their tax and military bases. Samih Pasha was commissioned to go to Dersim in 1875 for the purpose of winning over a number of Kurdish tribal leaders to the Ottoman cause. His recruitment campaign among the tribes, however, was met with fierce resistance by the Kurdish religious class, which had infiltrated tribal politics to a great degree. Sheikh Suleiman Pasha managed to mobilize a formidable force of 12,000 soldiers, the militias of numerous tribes, against the Ottoman forces. Aligning himself with the Russians he accumulated a large supply of weapons with which his forces were able to withstand the Ottomans. However, his force was eventually routed and he was exiled.⁹³

The conflict in Dersim was a graphic revelation for the Ottomans that in the advent of war with Russia, the Kurdish tribes could be a thorn in the side. However, the most effective way for the Ottomans to overcome potential widespread Kurdish collaboration with the Russians was to forge alliances with the Kurdish elites rather than put further political impositions on them. The Ottoman strategy was to entice influential Kurdish leaders to side with them against the Russians by offering them positions in the

⁹¹ James J. Reid, *Crisis in the Ottoman Empire: Prelude to Collapse: 1839-1878* (Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2000), 159.

⁹² General Avreyanov, cited Celil, *Intifada*, 33.

state administration, tax-exemptions, and wealth. The Ottomans managed to gain the support of three of the sons of Bedr Khan, Hüseyin Kenan Bey, Ali Şamil Bey, and Bedri Bey, who gathered a volunteer force of Kurds from Adana, Istanbul, and Syria totaling approximately 3800 and persuaded several Kurdish *sheikhs* in eastern Anatolia to fight with the Ottomans.⁹⁴

Perhaps most significantly, Ottoman officials also won the allegiance of the prominent religious leader Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah by appointing him as the leader of a Kurdish tribal force. This brief alliance with this *sheikh* was no small matter. ‘Ubaydullah hailed from the holy Kurdish city of Nehri nestled in the Kandil mountains in the Hakkari region. He was a member of the prestigious Şemdinan family that had enjoyed high-ranking religious status among the Kurds of the Van and Hakkari regions during the nineteenth century. Claiming descent from the prophet Muhammad, ‘Ubaydullah established his spiritual legitimacy before thousands of Kurds. As the leading religious figure of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in the Van region he “formed an administrative establishment that is above the tribes” and enjoyed the loyalty of numerous tribal leaders, many of whom were at odds with each other.⁹⁵ Not only did he acquire wealth through donations from his followers, but he also dwelled in one of the few regions where the Armenians did not have the upper hand in trade and commerce. The Kurds in Hakkari dominated tobacco production and trade. In consequence, ‘Ubaydullah amassed sufficient revenue to purchase large tracts of land in many parts of

⁹³ Ibid., 30-31.

⁹⁴ Sevgen, 119.

⁹⁵ My translation from the Turkish. Muzaffer İlhan Erdost, *Şemdinli Röportajı* (Yenişehir, Ankara: Onur Yayınları, 1993), 161.

eastern Anatolia and Iran.⁹⁶

Stridently aware of the possibilities of obtaining high ranking positions in the Ottoman state by offering his loyalty, ‘Ubaydullah eagerly accepted the position of militia leader. His appointment was a historic moment for the Kurds, whom the Ottomans had been avidly seeking to subdue and divide throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Jwaideh writes, “certainly, [the] appointment [of ‘Ubaydullah] left no investiture, conferring upon him what had been denied to any other Kurd since 1847.”⁹⁷

As Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah’s authority only extended to certain tribes in certain regions, he was unable to call upon the nomadic tribes to cease the violence. Moreover he was involved in other engagements with his militia. According to Seyit Islam Geylani, one of his recruits, Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah led a militia of some 40,000 irregular horsemen from Diyarbakir, Suleimaniyah, and Urmiya against the Russians.⁹⁸ However, his loyalty appeared to be divided between the Ottomans and another local Kurdish overlord, Sheikh Jelaluddin. While ‘Ubaydullah was the key religious figure, Jelaluddin maintained the bulk of political influence and military clout. While ‘Ubaydullah and his militia carried out military operations under Ottoman orders in Bayazid in June 1877, some reports suggested that his militia acted as a rogue force under the influence of Sheikh Jelaluddin.⁹⁹ Sheikh Jelaluddin, who came from Urmiya, also participated with

⁹⁶ Özoğlu, “‘Nationalism’ and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman and Early Republican Era,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 3 (August 2001): 387-388.

⁹⁷ Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 77.

⁹⁸ Geylani makes this claim in an interview with Erdost in the 1950s. Erdost, 160.

⁹⁹ Norman describes ‘Ubaydullah as operating “under the flag of Jelaluddin.” Charles Boswell Norman, *Armenia, and the Campaign of 1877*, (New York: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), 278.

the Ottomans in raising Kurdish cavalry regiments to fight the Russians. Jelaluddin's intent in participating along side the Ottomans appeared to be more insidious than that of 'Ubaydullah. While 'Ubaydullah sought to acquire status within the Empire during the war, Jelaluddin sought to completely undermine the Ottoman and Qajar authority in the Kurdish-populated regions over which he had influence. The Persian foreign minister complained of Sheikh Jelaluddin's "habit of transferring his allegiance backwards and forwards from Turkey to Persia...extending his marauding expeditions to both."¹⁰⁰ Unlike other Kurdish leaders, however, Jelaluddin appeared to be a sworn enemy of the Russians, believing that an alliance with them would lead to further occupation and subjugation.

The attitude of the *sheikhs* during the war was not exactly benevolent towards the Armenians, especially as Sheikh Jelaluddin came from a fanatical sect of Islam that disdained Christians. His father, Sheikh Sabadullah, reportedly donned a face veil when traveling, for he considered it a sin merely to glance at Christians.¹⁰¹ The actions of Sheikh Jelaluddin suggest that he continued his father's bigotry towards Christians. Under the prodding of Jelaluddin, 'Ubaydullah engaged in a number of activities to promote the cause of Kurdish autonomy from the Ottomans and Qajars. Most notoriously the Kurdish militia force brutally massacred the inhabitants of a number of Armenian villages in Van on suspicion of collaborating with the hated Russians.¹⁰² The Sublime Porte appeared to recognize Jelaluddin as a greater security threat than 'Ubaydullah, and after the Kurds' crushing defeat at Beyazid and their military

¹⁰⁰ Mr. Layard to the Earl of Derby, Therapia, July 10, 1877, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 81.

¹⁰¹ Sasuni, 90.

indiscretions against the Armenians, the *vali* of Van had Jelaluddin poisoned at the order of Sultan Abdülhamid II. On the other hand the Sultan only had ‘Ubaydullah exiled temporarily to Mecca on the *hajj*.¹⁰³

Other Kurdish groups’ switched loyalties back and forth between the Russians and the Ottomans. The Hayderanli tribe in the Muş and northern Van regions was growing in power and influence during the mid-1870s. By 1876 its chief, Mehrdad Bey Khatun-oğulları, and his son, Yusuf Bey, coerced Ottoman officials to grant their family the appointment of *kaimmakam* over the Shura-gel district (east of Van), threatening to cause widespread chaos if the Ottomans did not comply. Controlling most of the economic activity in the east, he was able to accumulate a great deal of wealth with which he was able to bribe Ottoman officials, and even conducted raids into Russian territory well before war was declared. Yet in time Yusuf Bey proved to be a double-dealer, striking a deal with the Russians to send provisions to their troops in exchange for a large sum of money:¹⁰⁴

It is a well-known fact, and I have it from an officer high on the Commander-in-Chief’s staff, that Youssouf Bey, son of the late Mehrdad Bey, and nephew of Kurd Ismail Pasha, has been bought over by the Russians, and since the commencement of the war has been supplying them with grain. This man is an inhabitant of the village of Digor, and only a few days before I left the camp a party of Russians proceeded to that place to pay Youssouf Bey a friendly visit, who, fearing that a knowledge of the enemy being so close to the rear of his camp might come to the ears of the Marshal, determined to take the bull by the horns, so, warning them of their danger, he galloped off to Mukhtar Pasha’s camp, and told him that a body...¹⁰⁵

In Dersim the Russian victories in Kars and Beyazid emboldened the local tribes

¹⁰² Norman, 278.

¹⁰³ Sasuni, 95.

¹⁰⁴ Reid, 160.

¹⁰⁵ Norman, 293.

to engage in battle with occupying Ottoman forces. In order to preempt the Kurds from gaining upper hand in Dersim, the 4th Turkish brigade stormed a number of villages in the Toshik mountains driving the rebels out into the mountainous wilderness. Upon hearing the news of the Turkish forces' siege, local Kurds and Armenians took up arms and together summoned the support of neighboring tribes, forcing the Turks to retreat to the plains.¹⁰⁶

Despite the Ottomans' meager successes in the war, the Ottomans were bracing themselves for massive territorial loss and economic damage by the time the Russians accepted a truce on January 31, 1878. Although the war did not directly affect most of eastern Anatolia, it destabilized the region as a whole, leaving its inhabitants to compete for power and resources. The misery that both Armenian and Kurdish peasants suffered at the hands of dominant marauding Kurdish tribes—who acted with near impunity—multiplied as a result of the looming Russian invasion and the lack of security. The Russo-Turkish War spawned internecine conflict between Kurdish tribes in most regions of eastern Anatolia, in the midst of which scores of Armenian peasants were victimized. Thousands of Kurdish and Armenian peasants were wounded, killed, and left homeless.

The Aftermath of the War

On March 3, 1878 the Treaty of San Stefano was signed, recognizing the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania and the autonomy of Bulgaria. As for eastern Anatolia, the Ottomans were to cede Ajaria to the Russians in exchange for war reparations. Additionally, because it was feared that the Kurds and Circassians would take reprisals against the Armenians, Article 16 stipulated that Russian troops

¹⁰⁶ Celil writes that many songs refer to this battle. Celil, *Intifada*, 36.

would remain in the areas that were ceded to the Ottomans until the Sublime Porte implemented feasible reforms to protect them. Significantly, the treaty acknowledged the concerns that the Armenian National Assembly had put forth during the 1870s against the oppressive rule of the Kurdish tribes over the Armenian peasants in eastern Anatolia and ensured increased security in the region.¹⁰⁷ While the Armenian masses largely welcomed Russian intervention in Armenia to relieve them of the burdens of Ottoman/Kurdish rule, the majority of the Armenian educated elite opposed Russian intervention and promoted Armenian autonomy hoping for the arrangements similar to those made for regions in the Balkans.¹⁰⁸

Fearing that the Treaty of San Stefano would give the Russians too much power in the Balkans and Eastern Anatolia, British and French negotiators pressured Russia to reconvene at Berlin to rearrange the provisions. A delegation led by Mkrtych Khrimian went to Berlin on behalf of the Armenian National Assembly and Patriarch Nerses in order to lobby for the creation an autonomous Armenia. In a letter to Lord Salisbury, Khrimian dwelt at length on the grievances of the Armenians at the hands of the Kurds, claiming that such a rough history of coexistence made it impossible for Christians and Muslims to live together. The only fair solution, he claimed, was the creation of an “autonomous Christian organization” much like Lebanon in order to ensure the protection

¹⁰⁷ Article 16 of the Treaty of San Stefano reads: “As the evacuation of Russian troops of the territory which they occupy in Armenia, and which is to be restored to Turkey, might give rise to conflicts and complications detrimental to the maintenance of good relations between the two countries, the Sublime Porte engages to carry into effect, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security from Kurds and Circassians.”

¹⁰⁸ According to Sonyel, the majority of educated Armenians were opposed to Russian occupation while the majority of uneducated masses were in favor of it. Sonyel, 43-53.

and prosperity of the Armenians in eastern Anatolia.¹⁰⁹

To the chagrin of the Armenian delegation to the Congress of Berlin, its advocacy of an autonomous Armenia was to no avail. British negotiators deemed that autonomous Armenia would give an advantage to Russia and hence placed Armenia in the hands of Sublime Porte in hopes that they could gain a greater supervisory role over the region. The Treaty of Berlin reversed the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano in relation to the Armenian question. According to Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin the Russians were to withdraw troops from all of eastern Anatolia, and the Sultan was to assume full control of the region and take responsibility for the implementation of reforms for the Armenians under the loose supervision of the European powers: “The Sublime Porte undertakes to carry out, without further delay, the ameliorations and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and the Kurds.”¹¹⁰ For many Western politicians, the Treaty of Berlin was, in relation to control over eastern Anatolia, a success in keeping the Russians at bay in the region that was least accessible to Western Europe. However for other Western observers of the Armenian question, Article 61 was an impending disaster. The Duke of Argyll cynically summed up his point of view on the overall effect of the inversion of the articles: “What was everybody’s business was nobody’s business.”¹¹¹

Upon his return from Berlin, Khrimian openly expressed his dismay at the Congress of Berlin in an inflammatory speech entitled “The Paper Ladle.” In the speech he highlighted the futility of his petitions and documents, his paper ladle, in dipping into

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁰ Treaty of Berlin, Article 61.

¹¹¹ Duke of Argyll, *Our Responsibilities for Turkey* (London: J. Murray, 1896), 74.

the international “heriseh” (an Armenian stew that he uses as a metaphor for territory from which “large and small nations and governments would draw their portion”) against those with iron ladles, weapons and arms: “where guns talk and swords make noise, what significance do appeals and petitions have?” He further called upon the Armenians to take up arms and fight for their liberty: “when you return to the Fatherland, to your relatives and friends, take weapons, take weapons and again weapons.... Use your brain and your fist! Man must work for himself in order to be saved.”¹¹² This speech significantly influenced the rise of militant separatist Armenian nationalism. Most notably Khrimian did not attach blame primarily to the Kurds and Circassians who were directly perpetrating atrocities against the Armenians; rather, he pointed his finger at the higher powers for neglecting their responsibilities in providing security for their citizens.

The Ottoman Empire was in a state of dire economic need as a result of the war. Aside from amassing a huge public debt to European creditors, it came under the further burden of war indemnities owed to Russia. These indemnities, which were settled in the 1880s, gave Russia an economic foothold in the Empire, where it had none before the 1877-8 war. For the Ottoman Empire the indemnities “increased Ottoman indebtedness by one-sixth” and placed the Empire’s already unstable credit in further jeopardy.¹¹³ Tax collection became an even greater necessity in eastern Anatolia, although this yielded little success in the more remote regions. In 1881, Hussein Bey, one of the sons of Bedr

¹¹² Mgrditch Khrimian, “The Paper Ladle,” cited in Haig Ajemian *Hayotz Hairig*, “*Navakogh vushditz haireniatz hayotz*, trans. Vazken Movsesian (Tavriz: Adurbadagani hayotz temagan dubaran, 1929), 511-3, <http://armenianhouse.org/khrimyan-hayrik/loving-father.html> (accessed April 2008).

¹¹³ See Michael R. Milgrim, “An Overlooked Problem in Turkish-Russian Relations: The 1878 War Indemnity” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9, no. 4, (October 1978): 519-537. Quote is on page 522.

Khan, stirred up the Kurds in the Dersim region to rebel against the Ottoman government, claiming that the Ottomans were destroying Kurdish villages that did not pay taxes.

Hussein Bey managed to convince the *shaykh* of an impending Ottoman invasion. He gathered a force of 500 armed Kurdish soldiers to hide in the mountains and seal off all mountain passes. While the Ottoman army was able to drive back the Kurdish rebels, the operation elicited a strong response from the Russian consul: “Sending the army to collect taxes during such a time for the purpose of collecting taxes is a dangerous undertaking.”¹¹⁴

The Rise of Sultan Abdülhamid II: Perceptions of Him in History

Although Sultan Abdülhamid II came to power in 1876, the influence of his policies was not widely felt until after the Russo-Turkish War. Sultan Abdülhamid II came onto the political scene during a time when the Ottoman government was divided over the proper direction in which to steer its policy. On the one hand liberal Western-influenced politicians sought to bring a Western-model constitutional system to the Empire which would ultimately limit the power of the sultanate and vest power in a representative parliament. On the other hand, conservative politicians promoted a strong sultanate and sought to move away from Westernizing the political system. Abdülhamid II was part the latter camp, those who promoted the restructuring of the Ottoman political system to reflect what it had been before the introduction of the Westernizing *tanzimat* reforms.¹¹⁵ With the promulgation of the constitution failing to deter the greater powers

¹¹⁴ January 25, 1880 telegram sent to the commander of the fourth division of the army Fadli Pasha by the Russian Consul in Van, cited in Celil, *Intifada*, 105.

¹¹⁵ For further details on the divide in the Ottoman government see Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Sultan and the Bureaucracy: The Anti-Tanzimat Concepts of Grand Vizier Mahmud

from intervening in the Ottoman Empire, the Russo-Turkish War provided the impetus for the Sultan to dissolve parliament and suspend the constitution on February 14, 1878, only two weeks after the Russians accepted a truce. This commenced a new era of Ottoman government in which power was vested completely in the sultanate and in which what was claimed to be traditional Islamic norms became the medium of governance.

Following the war, Sultan Abdülhamid II was obliged to acknowledge the Balkans as “limbs...that could be amputated without fatal effect;” central and eastern Anatolia, on the other hand were “the body of the Ottoman state.”¹¹⁶ Either by fate, or Machiavellian scheming, Abdülhamid managed, during his thirty-three years in power, to end up winning a long and drawn-out contest for eastern Anatolia against the tenacious arms of the British, the Russians, and the Armenian nationalists, although he achieved much notoriety on a global level in the struggle to realize such victory over the region. His critics blamed him for creating division between the Kurds and Armenians and massacring tens of thousands of Armenians, frequently referring to him as the “Red Sultan,” “the butcher,” and “Armenophobe.” “He it is who is responsible,” wrote James Wilson Pierce in 1896, “not the Kurds and Turks, who have only been the instruments of his cruelty.”¹¹⁷ Most remarkable, however, is that after the conflict in the mid-1890s the legacy of Sultan Abdülhamid II in eastern Anatolia appeared to cast a shadow over the factors that had led to the rise of the Armenian question before the Russo-Turkish War.

Nedim Pasa,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 3 (August 1990): 257-274.

¹¹⁶ Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Armenians in the Service of the Ottoman Empire 1860-1908* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul Ltd., 1977), 7.

The notion that Armenian and Kurdish society suddenly became divided and polarized upon his rise to power began to take hold after the conflict in the 1890s. General Mayewski, Russian Consul General to the Ottoman Empire in Bitlis and Van, wrote: “Before the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877, no enmity was witnessed between [Kurds and Armenians] and they generally got by like brothers.”¹¹⁸

Abdurrahman Bedr Khan, who came out against the sultan and sided with his opponents the Young Turks, wrote in the journal *Kurdistan* in 1900:

Before [Abdülhamid II] ascended the throne, the Kurds were knowledgeable and civilized people, having brotherly relations with Armenians and avoiding any kind of confrontations. Then what happened? Did [Kurdish] civilization and knowledge turn into barbarity, ignorance, and organized rebellion? Who else carries out the atrocities in Kurdistan but the members of the Hamidiye divisions, who are armed by the sultan and proud of being loyal to him?¹¹⁹

Given the level of hostility voiced towards the sultan later in his reign, it is remarkable that immediately following the Russo-Turkish War, British officials regarded him as compliant. According to Sir Henry Layard, who was in charge of implementing the reforms for the Armenians in 1878, the sultan appeared to be “a liberal and enlightened monarch.”¹²⁰ It is further remarkable that Abdülhamid’s “personal finances were handled by a well-known Armenian Galata banker, Hagop Zarifi Bey, from whom he gained a knowledge of finance and economics that was to serve him well in later

¹¹⁷ James Wilson Pierce, *Story of Turkey and Armenia* (R.H. Woodward Company, 1896), 91.

¹¹⁸ General Mayewski, *Rus General Mayewski'nin Doğu Anadolu Raporu: Van ve Bitlis Vilayetleri Askeri İstatistik* (Van: Van Belediye Başkanlığı, Kültür ve Sosyal İşler Müdürlüğü, 1997), 171.

¹¹⁹ Abdurrahman Bedr Khan, “Kürdler ve Ermeniler” [Kurds and Armenians], *Kurdistan* 26, (Dec. 14, 1900), cited in Klein, “Power in the Periphery: The Hamidiye Light Cavalry and the Struggle over Ottoman Kurdistan, 1890-1914” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2002), 96.

times.”¹²¹ No matter what the sultan’s initial intentions may have been in relation to the Armenians in eastern Anatolia, his loss of the war made him appear even more powerless. Kurdish and Armenian leaders were predominantly preoccupied with the political actions of Russia and Britain and rarely expressed unease or concern at the fact that the sultan had seized complete power in 1878 by dissolving the parliament and suspending the constitution.

Effects of the War on Armenian and Kurdish Loyalties

The war had a paradoxical effect on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the inhabitants of eastern Anatolia. On the one hand, the war prompted the Ottomans to penetrate deeply into regions of eastern Anatolia that had hitherto been relatively autonomous in order to gather resources, taxes, and military recruits; on the other, the Ottomans’ removal of troops from many regions of eastern Anatolia to fight in other parts of the Empire decreased overall security and created a political vacuum in the region of which many Kurdish and Armenian leaders, who had been anticipating windows of opportunity to mobilize power and take greater control, took advantage.

In October 1877 it was reported that many nomadic tribes inhabiting the Sasun mountains had descended upon villages in Diyarbakir and Mush provinces engaging in blood feuds with rival tribes in an attempt to regain power and land lost to them decades earlier. Kurds and Armenians perished their campaigns. One reporter writes: “While I was in the Pashalic of Diarbakir, no less than three Mahommedan chiefs were murdered

¹²⁰ Layard, *Therapia*, to Salisbury, 126 of November 22, 1879, F.O., 424/91, cited in Duguid, 142.

¹²¹ Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2: 172.

by these robbers for the sake of their property.”¹²² Pent up tensions between tribes were high and conflict was reported to have arisen over such paltry matters as the possession of a gun. The local authorities in Van and Diyarbakir were too often too weak to stave off the onslaught of nomadic Kurdish tribes, arrest them, or prosecute them for criminal acts. The Ottoman military was off fighting in the northeast and the armed forces available to them often consisted of Kurds whose loyalty was questionable.

Armenians in the Zeitoun region, who had been fiercely independent since the Crimean War, staged a rebellion against the Ottomans. In 1877 an influential Armenian leader in Zeitoun by the name of Babek rallied a number of Armenians together to revolt against the Ottomans on the grounds of their continual and burdensome demands for money and animals from the Armenians to support the war effort. For months Babek and his men wreaked havoc upon surrounding Turkish villages, looting, plundering, and murdering. The unrest prompted the Ottomans to intervene physically in Zeitoun in September 1878. After a visit to the area, Lieutenant Chermiside reported that “the condition of the town and people of Zeitoun is a disgrace to any Government.”¹²³

Although the declared aim of the Ottomans was to restore order in Zeitoun, the move provoked a number of Armenians, hitherto not involved in the Babek revolt, to take action. In November, an Armenian cleric by the name of Deli Papaz (Crazy Priest), who considered the Ottoman presence in Zeitoun an occupation, traveled from Istanbul to Zeitoun and incited the Armenians to rebel yet again.¹²⁴ Conflicts between Armenians,

¹²² Mr. Rassam to Mr. Layard, Van, October 15, 1877, FO 424/62, pp. 142-145, no. 245/1 in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 97.

¹²³ *Turkey* No. 1 (1880), 73 (Parliament: Sessional Papers. Accounts and Papers. Turkey, for the years 1877-1881), cited in Sarkissian, 102.

¹²⁴ Sonyel, 67.

Kurds, and Turks escalated to a wider area throughout the Zeitoun region. By February 1879 numerous clashes between armed Muslim groups and Armenians broke out, prompting British officials to demand the Ottomans to launch an inquiry into the matter and expedite reforms affecting the Armenians. A renewed effort by the Ottomans to intervene in Zeitoun proved to be a failure and prompted increased clashes between Armenians and Muslims. It was only when the British intervened diplomatically, offering Babek protection from Muslim reprisal in exchange for a truce with the Ottomans, that the debacle in Zeitoun was eventually settled in November 1879.¹²⁵

The Babek revolt was a loss for the Ottomans. They failed to oust the Armenian rebels from the mountains, Babek gained an amnesty, and they were coerced by the British to provide protection for the rebels in their mountain refuge. Babek gained widespread popularity among the Zeitouni Armenians as a result of the revolt, and was eventually named the president of the municipality of Zeitoun. The arrangements particularly angered the Muslim administration in the *vilayet* of Maraş whom the British suspected of trying to plot revenge against him. These suspicions were confirmed in July 1884 when the *kaimmakam* of Maraş attempted to arrest Babek on charges of tax evasion, but managed to escape to the mountains with some two hundred to three hundred followers. The *kaimmakam* organized a force to pursue the fugitives and provoked a group of armed Armenian resisters to fire on them. The event alarmed both the British and the Porte who admonished the *vali* of Aleppo and the *kaimmakam* of Maraş not to take rash action and to refrain from stoking the fires of yet another rebellion.

Interestingly the turf battle planted the seeds of discord between the Armenians

¹²⁵ Consul Henderson to Sir Henry Layard, Nargizlik, June 26, 1879, FO 424/85, p. 98-

themselves more than between the Ottomans, who were diplomatically bound by the British at the time, and the Armenians. Gregorian Orthodox Armenians, fearing reprisals would be aimed at them, placed the blame on the Armenian Catholic Bishop of Maraş and his flock for provoking the incident.¹²⁶

Many Armenians, mostly the educated urban elite, did not regard the Kurds alone as the greatest threat to the Armenian peasantry. Rather, many Armenians saw a greater threat in the power struggle between Kurdish tribes for control of the land. The following report from Major Trotter shows that in many parts of eastern Anatolia, Kurds and Armenians were not pitted against each other based on ethnic distinctions; rather, Armenians were merely caught in the middle of the rampages of outsider Kurds—mostly tribal-nomads—attempting to collect dues, assert authority over rival tribes, or repel Ottoman control:

I stopped a few minutes at the village [Madrak, in the Chabakchur district]¹²⁷ and was at once surrounded by a crowd of Armenians, who, while loudly complaining of the misdeeds of the Kurds from the neighbouring country, professed to be on good terms with, and well treated by, the Kurds of their own village; and in truth the Kurdish priest or imam was standing by, and joining in all the assertions of the Armenian priest, who was the principal spokesman. There is no doubt that not only do both Christians and Kurds suffer terribly from bands of roving insurgent Kurds from the neighbouring mountains, but in many villages the Armenians also suffer terrible oppression at the hands of their own [Kurdish] beys and aghas, the old feudal lords of the soil. As far as I can make out, these beys, however oppressive themselves, are willing to protect their own subjects, as far as lies in their power, from external violence, but in the present disorganised state of the country they can defend neither their Christian serfs not their own coreligionists.¹²⁸

99, no. 185/1 in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 461-462.

¹²⁶ Acting Consul Calvert to the Earl of Dufferin, August 11, 1884, FO 424/141, p. 4, no. 43/1 in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 499.

¹²⁷ Chabakchour is the Armenian name for the modern city of Bingöl located southwest of Erzurum.

¹²⁸ Turkey no. 10 (1879), p. 15, cited in Walker, 123.

In some instances it appeared that the war brought Kurds and Armenians closer together. Colonel Wilson reported that many Shi'i Kurds complained of Turkish officials' ill treatment towards them and even considered conversion to Christianity in order to avoid military service. Other Kurdish tribes of Armenian origin, he wrote, expressed the desire to convert to Christianity in the hope of being able to take part in the governance of an autonomous Armenia. He further believed there to be possibilities of an alliance between Kurds and Armenians: "It seemed to me preposterous that there should be any harmony between two races apparently so antagonistic, but it appears that negotiations, under the pretext of trade, are at this moment being carried on with the Dersim Kurds, and also with a powerful Chief in the neighborhood of Mush."¹²⁹ Shaykh 'Ubaydullah, it was believed, was also considering joining such an alliance on the condition that he would play a leading role.¹³⁰

Kurds throughout eastern Anatolia, particularly in the southeast, were fearful that Ottoman actions were indeed carving out a geographic space for an autonomous Armenia. Shaykh 'Ubaydullah apparently said the following to an Ottoman official in reaction to the ongoing political developments in eastern Anatolia:

What is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects? I will never permit it, even if I have to arm the

¹²⁹ Memorandum by Lieutenant-Colonel Wilson on Anatolia and necessary Reforms, June 22, 1880, FO 424/107, pp. 2-4, no. 2, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 70.

¹³⁰ Şimşir, *British Documents*, 2: 172. In January 1881 Colonel Wilson later dismissed his belief that a Kurdish-Armenian alliance would form: "A rumour of a *rapprochement* between Kurds and Armenians is not one to which I would attach much importance. In many districts, however, common animosity to the Turk, and Christian traditions, have maintained kindly feelings between the Armenians and Kizil-Bash Kurds (not in Kurdistan)."

women.”¹³¹

In 1878, anticipating that major administrative reforms would be imposed that would alter the Kurds’ role in local politics, Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah established an organization known as the Kurdish League, joining together a number of prominent Kurdish tribal chiefs and *beys*. One of the sons of Bedr Khan, Bahri Bey, acted as an emissary for the Kurdish League, gaining the support of Kurdish tribal leaders in the surrounding areas, particularly Cizre, where he and his family had the most influence.¹³²

Many British officials initially feared that Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah would maintain his alliance with the Ottomans and initiate a military campaign against the Armenians in Van and Hakkari to prevent them from seizing control. British Ambassador Layard suspected that Samih Paşa, the Fourth Army commander, was bribing ‘Ubaydullah and other Kurdish chiefs—whose prior actions against the Christians, according to the report, ‘*mérité la corde* [warrant the noose]’—with gifts and money in order to maintain their loyalty.¹³³ Abbott, the British consul in Tabriz, believed the sheikh to be “carrying out the wishes of the retrograde party in Turkey” and advised the British government to keep him under surveillance.¹³⁴ The Armenians also feared an alliance between the Kurds and the Ottomans. In a letter to the Armenian patriarch, Khrimian stated his suspicion that the formation of the League was an Ottoman ploy to undermine Armenian political aims: “A Kurdish League is about to be formed at the instigation of the Central Government,

¹³¹ Enclosure in No. 7, Clayton to Trotter, Bashkale, July 11, 1880, Great Britain, *Turkey No. 5 (1881)*, 7.

¹³² Jwaideh, 86-88.

¹³³ Layard to the Marquis of Salisbury, Therapia, November 17, 1879, *Turkey*, no. 4, 1880, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 599.

¹³⁴ Consul-General Abbott to Earl Granville, Tabriz, July 13, 1880, Great Britain, *Turkey*, no. 5, (1881), 8, cited in Jwaideh, 86.

which desired to stifle the Armenian question by raising a new one, that of the Kurds.”

In the letter Khrimian further claims that the League was “the Ottoman policy, the Shaykh Ebedullah its nominal center; Bahri Bey its assiduous emissary.”¹³⁵

Despite suspicions that the Kurds were operating under secret Ottoman command, there is no evidence for this. On the contrary, there was a palpable fear among Porte officials that the Muslim and Christian populations would unite and stage a massive rebellion. In the fall of 1878, the sons of Bedr Khan, Hussein Bey and Osman Bey, led a number of Kurdish tribes to take their homeland Cizre, located between Mosul and Diyarbakir. Local Ottoman officials, doubting the power of their own armies to prevail against the Kurdish tribal forces, fled in terror, and the Kurdish forces entered Cizre unchallenged. This movement towards what appeared to be the establishment of an ‘independent’ (most likely autonomous) Kurdish state was not, however, long tolerated by the Porte. Sending in some seventeen military regiments from Diyarbakir, Erzincan, and Erzurum, the Porte sought to curtail the spread of the campaign of the sons of Bedr Khan and eliminate all resistance. Although the Kurdish tribal force was able to fend off the Ottoman forces for a while, it could not withstand a major influx of Ottoman regiments in the region and eventually surrendered.¹³⁶

A number of other factors drove the Kurds to join the banner of ‘Ubaydullah. Increases in property taxes (*emlak vergisi*) and sheep taxes (*ağnam vergisi*), imposed by the Ottomans to offset the economic crisis of the 1870s severely affected the majority of the rural, predominantly pastoral-nomadic Kurdish population. The appointment of state-

¹³⁵ Mgrditch Krimian to the Armenian Patriarch, Van, June 20, 1880, in Great Britain, *Turkey*, no. 5 (1881), 8 cited in Jwaideh, 87.

¹³⁶ Celil, *Intifada*, 46.

employed tax-collectors further upset those Kurds who had enjoyed either tax exemption or tax collection privileges. Increased taxation of agriculture, compounded with rising inflation and the devaluation of the currency, forced up prices of grains and bread throughout the semiurban areas of eastern Anatolia, and the administrations of Erzurum, Diyarbakir, and Mosul reported massive food shortages and rioting in 1879 and 1880.¹³⁷ According to a petition by the Armenian Patriarch dated May, 1890, widespread famine was behind the raids of the Kurds against the Armenians.¹³⁸

‘Ubaydullah’s exact political aims following the Russo-Turkish War are unclear, and some of his letters suggest that he was pursuing a Kurdish nationalist agenda. He wrote to Vice-Consul Clayton: “The Kurdish nation is a people apart. Their religion is different, and their laws and customs are distinct.... We want our affairs to be in our hands.... Otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands.”¹³⁹ However, given his constant shifting of loyalties, and his habit of forming alliances with whatever power would give him a high-ranking position, his appeal to an independent Kurdish state appears to be nothing more than rhetoric influenced by contemporary nationalist trends among the various Christian groups in the Ottoman Empire. In a letter to the Mar Shimun, the leader of the Nestorian Christians, ‘Ubaydullah clarified his opposition to the Ottoman presence in eastern Anatolia but suggests paying a degree of tribute to the Ottomans in order to gain the status of “independent princes in their

¹³⁷ Halpin, *XIX. Yüzyılda Kürdistan Üzerinde Mücadeleler* (Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: Komal Basım-Yayım-Dağıtım, 1992), 80.

¹³⁸ Mehmet Fırat Kiliç, “Sheikh ‘Ubaydullah’s Movement” (Master’s thesis, Bilkent University, 2003), 63.

¹³⁹ Cited in Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 2.

respective countries.”¹⁴⁰ The suggestion that tribute be paid to gain Ottoman recognition of autonomy bore some semblance to the political strategies that had been employed by Bedr Khan in the 1840s: making bids to a number of actors for the purpose of gaining increased political power.

‘Ubaydullah’s attempt to rally support from local Christian groups can be interpreted as a move towards attracting Western European sympathy for the Kurdish cause, and as a way of offsetting the establishment of an Armenian state. The Mar Shimun rejected ‘Ubaydullah’s bid for a union between the Nestorians and his Kurdish followers, stating his distrust for the sheikh based on his earlier indiscretions against Nestorians and other Christians. ‘Ubaydullah also called for the cooperation of local Armenians, who, like the Nestorians, were wary of his true objectives.¹⁴¹

Between 1880 and 1882 ‘Ubaydullah embarked on a lengthy and complex bid for power. In 1880 he launched an invasion of Persia with Ottoman backing; a year later he incited the Kurds to rise up against the Ottomans. Ultimately he was deemed an untrustworthy character in eastern Anatolia and was forced to surrender after an attempt to take the town of Amadia with his son Abdülkadir. He was exiled to Medina where he died in 1883.

One of the major obstacles facing the Porte in implementing security in eastern Anatolia was not the strength of the rebellion throughout the countryside, but the greed and venality of its own officials. Rebellion was so widespread that Ottoman forces were unable to implement overall security readily and effectively. Furthermore many Ottoman

¹⁴⁰ Captain Clayton to Major Trotter, Van, November 14, 1879, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 1: 624-625.

officials were corrupt and turned a blind eye to the genuine grievances of Kurdish tribal lords in exchange for bribes. In 1881 the Earl of Dufferin, then British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, submitted a report detailing the actions of some of the *valis*. Izzet Paşa, the *vali* of Diyarbakir, failed to quell crime, often accepting bribes from rabble-rousers in exchange for their acquittal. He miscalculated the need for grain to offset the severe famine in Diyarbakir as a result of the widespread rebellion during the war. Consequently riots broke out in the city in 1879 and 1880. Due to the failure of the *vali* to supply Malatya, northwest of Diyarbakir, with sufficient necessities and security, the Kurdish tribes, reported Dufferin, were “in a chronic state of rebellion.” While no counts of corruption were attributed to the *mutesarraf* of Maraş, Munif Paşa (who oversaw Zeitoun), he was reported to be weak and incapable of implementing any effective security measures. The *vali* of Erzurum forced the inhabitants to pay for the grain that the Ottoman government had sent as a gift to offset the famine. As a result of his corruption, it is reported that forty-five Kurds died of starvation.¹⁴²

The Russo-Turkish War disrupted the balance of power between Ottomans and Kurds that had only been held tenuously in place by the relatively weak Ottoman security forces. Ottoman losses in the war encouraged elements of Armenian and Kurdish society to make bids for power. However, as most of these resistance efforts lacked organization, training, and equipment, they were generally no match for the Ottoman military. As such a greater number of groups, including several formerly fragmented Kurdish tribes and particular groups of Armenians and Nestorians, began entertaining the

¹⁴¹ Captain Clayton to Major Trotter, Van, November 9, 1880 in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 151.

¹⁴² Inclosure no. 93, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 275-277.

notion of an alliance; however, their overall lack of organization and cohesion prevented such an idea from ever materializing. The activities of Shaykh 'Ubaydullah in Hakkari and that of the Armenians in Zeitoun were the most prominent movements. But their greatest effect was that they heightened the concern of the Ottomans and prompted them to install tighter security. As the Ottomans began to increase security throughout eastern Anatolia, the traditional power structures in Kurdish society became increasingly broken down and at the same time, more and more Armenians began to lose faith in the Ottoman-backed Patriarchate.

CHAPTER 3

THE EARLY SULTAN ABDÜLHAMID PERIOD 1882-1896:

THE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS OF CONFLICT

BETWEEN THE KURDS AND ARMENIANS

By the beginning of the 1890s the majority of Kurdish and Armenian peasants were still not integrated into the Ottoman system. While Sultan Abdülhamid II was beginning to win the allegiance of the major tribes, they still had free rein over much of the territory; albeit to a more limited degree. Support for the Armenian revolutionary movement had begun to spread among the Armenians in the cities most of whom were tied in with either the *esnaf* (merchant class) or the clergy. However, since the Porte exerted significant pressure to contain Armenians and bolster the Patriarchate against the dissidents, the revolutionary movement failed to blossom significantly inside the Empire. On the other hand, the movement witnessed dramatic growth outside the Empire in the early 1890s and began to infiltrate eastern Anatolia, where it gained considerable popularity among the peasantry. This chapter explores the series of events that led up to the conflict between the Kurds and the Armenians in the mid-1890s and seeks to understand the rise of this conflict in the context of the strengths or weaknesses of the power structures within Kurdish and Armenian society.

Armenian Revolutionaries and the Kurds

Armenian-Kurdish relations during the 1880s and 1890s cannot be understood without reference to the role of the Armenian revolutionaries. The activities of the two leading Armenian political parties, the Dashnak party and the Hunchak party, had a tremendous impact upon the social and political atmosphere of eastern Anatolia in the 1890s. Their activism towards the liberation of the Armenians in eastern Anatolia, which they referred to as Western Armenia, greatly influenced the attitudes of the Armenians towards the Kurds.

One factor that set the Armenians apart from the Kurds was that they were much more politically organized both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, largely because of the *millet* system, which had long set the Armenians apart both from the Muslims and from other Christian groups. It gave the Armenians a greater sense of ethnic identity at all social levels in the sense that Armenian peasant in eastern Anatolia and a high-ranking Armenian government official both identified themselves as Armenian. While these were almost certainly high-ranking officials of Kurdish origin, none of them identified themselves as such, since they tended to assimilate to Turkish culture and adopt a Turkish ethnic identity. It was much easier for Armenian political leaders to mobilize a force of Armenians by appealing to the ethnic identity than for their Kurdish counterparts.

The impetus for the Armenian revolutionary movement derived from grassroots Armenian political activity in the 1860s. The Armenian rebellions of 1862 in Zeitoun, Van, and Erzurum came at a significant time during the history of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, when the power of the clergy and the Armenian *amira* class was beginning to wane. An emerging Armenian bourgeoisie, which was involved in trade

and commerce, was beginning to enjoy greater powers under the Armenian constitution and in addition the Catholic and Protestant Armenians were no longer subject to the authority of the Gregorian Patriarch. The Ottoman government's confiscation of Armenian property, out of fear of growing Armenian accumulation of power after the Crimean War in the late 1850s incited the Armenians in Van, Muş, and Zeitoun (all regions that were dominated more by merchant classes than by the clergy and the *amira* class) to revolt.

The Zeitoun revolt was the most significant of these rebellions in that, although the Armenians were unable to defeat the Ottoman forces militarily, they managed to outwit them and achieve a political victory. By achieving the intervention of the French under Napoleon III and with the help of influential Armenian *amiras*, the Zeitounis gained enough leverage to force the Porte to withdraw its troops and concede autonomy to them.¹⁴³ The rebellions at Van and Muş were less successful and resulted in heavy casualties on the Armenian side. Remarkably the Armenians involved in the uprising at Van managed to persuade a number of Kurdish tribes to join with them in their attacks on Ottoman forces. Millingen, however, reports that such collaboration was exceptional. According to Millingen, the Armenians throughout most of the Van province were 'serfs' under the feudal rule of the Kurds.¹⁴⁴ In Muş the Kurds did not collaborate with the Armenians, but fought against them.¹⁴⁵

The rebellions instilled a sense of Armenian solidarity among many segments of the Armenian population, particularly those outside the avenues of power within the

¹⁴³ Walker, 102.

¹⁴⁴ Millingen, *La Turquie sous le Règne d'Abdul-Aziz 1862-1867* (Paris, 1868), 168-170.

¹⁴⁵ Millingen, *Wild Life*, 264.

clergy. The first Armenian revolutionary society, the Union of Salvation, was established in Van in 1872. As Van was one of the only cities in the Ottoman Empire with an Armenian majority, it was not surprising that it was one of the main centers of the revolutionary movement. Not much is known of the Union of Salvation, but a few documents reveal that its aim was to establish greater ties with the Russians and to ensure the protection of the Van Armenians against the Kurds and Ottoman oppression by acquiring arms. Although the organization did not last many years, partly because of its underground nature and the consequent failure to attract large numbers of supporters, it provided the foundation for the development of the first Armenian political party, the Armenakan Party, established in Van in 1885.¹⁴⁶

After the Russo-Turkish War and the Treaty of Berlin, Armenian revolutionaries were generally in accord on the following issues: an autonomous or independent Armenia, increased protection for Armenians both against organized military operations and brigandage (generally from nomadic Kurdish tribes), the creation of societies that would include all Armenians, and the acquisition of weapons for self-defense. However, there was significant disagreement both inside and outside the Empire regarding the direction which Armenian political activism should take. Liberal Armenians were the main proponents of Armenian political activity. Most conservatives were tied closely to the clergy and as such feared voicing strong opposition to the Porte. In a letter to Granville, Wyndham reported that the Patriarch Nerses, even after his resignation in 1881, still pledged his loyalty to the Sultan in his dealings with the Armenians. The Patriarch said that he was “anxious not to see the Armenians of Turkey fall under the

¹⁴⁶ Nalbandian, 80-83.

despotic rule of Russia...[and] that he wished them to continue under that of the Sultan, but in an improved condition.”¹⁴⁷

The debate between Armenian revolutionary conservatives and liberals was particularly highlighted in the Armenian newspapers *Mshak* (cultivator) and *Meghu Hayastani* (the Armenian Bee) in Tiflis. While the Armenian activists hovering around *Mshak* were more liberal and favored a political trajectory of Westernization for the Armenian society, the *Meghu Hayastani* was more conservative and favored traditional Armenian norms over more progressive ideas in establishing a foundation for political activity.¹⁴⁸ The division between the two was further represented in their stances on Armenian relations with the Kurds. The *Meghu Hayastani* promoted Armenian exclusivity in political activity and, although it advocated friendship with the non-violent Kurds, it frowned upon joining political agendas with them. According to one writer in the *Meghu Hayastani* the Kurds’ religion was one of the main reasons for their tendency towards violence.¹⁴⁹ In contrast *Mshak* was much more in favor of a Kurdish-Armenian alliance against the Ottomans. In the late 1870s it revealed that a number of Armenian gunsmiths were already involved in Kurdish political activity in Iran, hiring themselves out to Kurdish militiamen fighting against the Ottoman and Iranian governments.¹⁵⁰ “If the Bulgarians rose up against the Turks and killed them,” asserted one writer, “then the Armenians should undertake more dangerous activities, attempting to Armenize the

¹⁴⁷ Wyndham to Granville, Constantinople, December 31, 1882, no. 1160, FO 424/140, p. 1, no. 1, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 446-447.

¹⁴⁸ Vahé Oshagan, “Modern Armenian Literature and Intellectual History from 1700 to 1915,” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Hovannisian (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1997: 139-175), 165.

¹⁴⁹ Celil, *Intifada*, 58.

Kurds and instill them with our culture.”¹⁵¹ After the Russo-Turkish War, the Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians finally had a single and shared interest to fight against the Ottomans: “they all share the burden that Turkey has placed upon their shoulders.”¹⁵²

The Black Cross Society was established in 1878 in Van, most likely in response to the devastation which the Russo-Turkish War wrought upon the *vilayet* of Van. The society functioned much like a cult and was even more secretive than the Union of Salvation. Its members were to take an oath of secrecy and those who broke this were cursed with the mark of the ‘black cross’ and killed. Much like the Union of Salvation this society aimed to acquire arms and form a militia for the protection of their compatriots. The society failed because of its lack of funding and limited support.¹⁵³

In 1882 another secret revolutionary organization, the Protectors of the Fatherland, was formed in Erzurum. It was far more successful than the Black Cross Society and the Union of Salvation because of its appeal to Armenians from all social strata. Members of the organization were skeptical of the Porte’s expressed the intention of implementing the reforms promised under the Treaty of Berlin and aimed to take measures to protect the Armenians from the Turks, Kurds, and Circassians. The organization aroused the suspicion of the Porte when large numbers of its members were found crossing the borders into Russia to solicit the financial and military support of Russian Armenians. Subsequently, the Porte placed seventy-six Armenians on trial on charges of conspiracy, forty of whom were found guilty. The trial, the first of its kind

¹⁵⁰ Hourì Berberian, *Armenians and the Constitutional Revolution 1905-1911* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 59.

¹⁵¹ Celil, *Intifada*, 56.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁵³ Nalbandian, 84.

against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, left an indelible impact on Armenians within the Ottoman Empire and abroad, who claimed injustice and oppression. Nalbandian notes that the occurrences at Erzurum during 1882 and 1883 inspired a common revolutionary song “The Voice Resounded from the Armenian Mountains of Erzerum.”¹⁵⁴

It is significant that Armenian revolutionaries did not promote the idea that the Kurds were categorically marauders and anti-Armenian. Rather, after the Treaty of Berlin, there was a general sense among the Armenian revolutionaries that the Kurds could in some ways be useful to their cause. News of a Kurdish-Armenian alliance spread throughout many avenues of communication. The newspaper *Osmanlı* published an article on the possibility of a such an alliance. The Armenians, it claimed, were luring Kurds to their side by “preaching Christianity to them” and offering them education.¹⁵⁵ In reality it appears that conservative Armenian revolutionaries favored developing political movements that included Armenians only, while more liberal Armenians entertained the idea of including the Kurds in their movements.

Complaints of Kurdish Attacks

Although the Ottomans did manage to control much of eastern Anatolia, certain regions were still unsecured. During the early 1880s Ottoman control over the *sancak* of Muş was weak. The remoteness of the region from any lucrative trade routes provided little incentive for the Ottoman Porte to provide security, and as it was also distant from any Russian or British consulate, Armenians who had complaints about the situation had to travel long distances in order to file a report. The Porte’s constant rearrangement of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 85-89.

¹⁵⁵ Celil, *Intifada*, 56.

the borders of the eastern *vilayets* left many areas of eastern Anatolia unaccounted for and there was generally little order. While the cities of Van, Diyarbakir, and Erzurum were the main centers of Ottomans political and military authority, Muş was an inconvenience for the Porte. While it was originally a part of the *vilayet* of Van, it was placed in the Bitlis *vilayet* in 1880.¹⁵⁶

It seems that the Ottomans entrusted Musa Bey, an eminent Kurdish chief in Muş, with the responsibility of providing the security for the region. He had acquired a leading position in the *vilayet* of Bitlis for some time in the early 1880s, most likely because of his clout among the Kurdish tribes of the region. As such he had tremendous influence on the *vali* of Bitlis and appeared to have nearly free reign throughout the Muş region. During the 1880s Musa Bey gained widespread notoriety among Armenians and British. He became infamous as the Kurdish chief that attacked and robbed Dr. Reynolds, an American physician, and M. Knapp, a missionary, who were traveling between Muş and Bitlis in 1883.¹⁵⁷ According to the missionaries the sultan did not punish Musa Bey sufficiently and did not give indemnities to either of the two victims until nineteen years after the incident.¹⁵⁸

According to a letter from a missionary in Van 1886, Musa Bey appeared to be at large in the region creating havoc with his tribal followers who “roamed freely” and were

¹⁵⁶ Vahakn Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 141.

¹⁵⁷ Protestant missionaries Grace Knapp and Clarence Douglas Ussher note that they passed by the village of Musa Bey who “[inflicted] several sword wounds on Dr. Reynolds’s head, face and hands [and] left [him] bound in the woods, some distance from the road.” Grace Knapp and Clarence Douglas Ussher, *An American Physician in Turkey: A Narrative of Adventures in Peace and War* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 32.

“heavily armed,” which was contrary to the law.¹⁵⁹ Other documents report that Musa Bey led his tribe, which was seminomadic, from village to village in order to collect dues and build alliances. Some villages were more resistant to his demands, refusing him entrance, and others were more welcoming, perhaps in the hope of gaining the protection of his clan.¹⁶⁰

In response to claims of Kurdish violence against the Armenians, Colonel Chermiside, the British consul in Erzurum, was commissioned by British officials to conduct a fact-finding mission in Van, Bitlis, and Muş in the summer of 1889. Chermiside reported that there was significant tension between the Kurds and the Armenians and that the many of the educated Armenians in the cities were pro-West. He further added that many Armenians treated him as if he were a representative of their own government, and were more than willing to give him information about their feelings towards the Kurds and their own situation.

Contrary to the hopes of many Armenians that he would find convincing evidence of the Porte’s neglectfulness in providing security, Chermiside reached the conclusion that relations between the Kurds and the Armenians had undergone a marked improvement from what they had been a decade before. “[O]utrages by the Kurds on Christians, inter-tribal feuds, highway robbery, cattle lifting, all exist;” but “none appear to [be] as

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 78. Dr. Reynolds reportedly used this money to construct a church which he referred to as the church “built by the Kurds.”

¹⁵⁹ FO 424/143, pp. 30-31, no. 35/1, Van, August 31, 1886, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 524.

¹⁶⁰ Stephen G. Svajian, *A Trip through Historic Armenia* (Greenhill Publishers, 1977), 282. “Vartenis village prevented a Kurdish chieftain by the name of Musa Bey from passing the night in that village, but in the village of Khars a despicable character known as Hovsep considered it an honor to accept Musa Bey in his home.”

frequent and as wholesale as they were” ten years ago when he was last there.¹⁶¹ Aside from the indiscretions of Musa Bey in the region of Muş, Kurdish attacks on Armenians were “rare.” He also found that the Ottomans had managed to establish a significant presence in traditionally lawless and unruly regions, such as Hakkari and Bohtan. The Kurds, however, were afforded little participation in government affairs; Chermiside wrote that he came across only two Kurdish functionaries in the government while he was there. The Ottomans were more likely to integrate the Kurds into the military as conscripts than into the administration.

Chermiside’s report also described the social relationship between Kurds and Armenians throughout eastern Anatolia. Although the population of eastern Anatolia was no longer affected by war and famine, it continued to suffer as a result of the decline in trade and commerce. Feudalism continued to be dominant in more remote regions, particularly “Hakkari, Bohtan, and a great part of the Bitlis vilayet” where the Kurdish *ağas* would collect the *kabal* tax from the Armenians *rayahs*, and most Christian villages were in abject poverty. As a result many Armenians emigrated from the countryside to the cities of Diyarbakir, Erzurum, Bitlis, and Van where the economy was relatively vibrant.¹⁶² The majority of rural Armenians migrating to the urban areas found employment under the Armenian-dominated textile industry, which was continuing to experience growth during the 1880s as a result of Sultan Abdülhamid II’s military expansion and the consequent rising demand for uniforms. Agriculture, on the other

¹⁶¹ Consul Chermiside to Sir W. White, Inclosure in no. 331, FO 424/162, p. 77, no. 80, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 659-664.

¹⁶² Although Chermiside believes that the Ottoman economy was generally in recession.

hand, was plummeting.¹⁶³

Chermside's Armenian deputy Mr. Boyadjian agreed that Kurdish attacks against the Armenians had decreased significantly. Boyadjian expressed his belief that the Armenian newspaper *Hayastan* was merely spreading unsubstantiated rumors about increases in attacks and of a secret plot designed by the Kurds to take over the eastern provinces.¹⁶⁴

By 1889 several unconfirmed reports surfaced concerning Musa Bey's involvement in a number of savage attacks on Armenian villages, in which women were reportedly raped, crops pillaged, and villages plundered. After scores of Armenians, including a delegation from Muş, gathered in front of the house of the Patriarch in Kumkapı, Istanbul to protest Musa Bey's actions, the Ottomans finally inquired into the situation.¹⁶⁵ Musa Bey sent a petition to the Sultan insisting that the claims against him were groundless and indicated his willingness to defend himself against such claims in court. Subsequently the Porte arraigned him in November 1889 and issued an edict that

¹⁶³ See Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64-71. According to Krikorian's statistics the textiles industry was predominantly occupied by Armenians and served as a significant source of wealth for Armenians in urban and semiurban areas. See *Armenians in the Service of the Ottoman Empire*.

¹⁶⁴ Arman J. Kirakossian and Arman Dzhonovich, *British diplomacy and the Armenian question: From the 1830s to 1914* (Princeton, New Jersey: Gomidas Insitute Books, 2003), 153-156. Boyadjian was by and large more sympathetic towards the Kurds than many other Armenian officials. In a letter to Graves he writes: "The Kurds are a fine and intelligent race, but extremely poor. There not being sufficient arable land for cultivation and having no confidence in local authorities, they do not dare leave their mountain homes in order to pursue a lawful calling and thus gain livelihood; but being compelled by the instinct of want, they commit all sorts of depredations, and thus become the terror of the districts surrounding the mountains." Boyadjian to Graves. [No. 24] Harput, July 18, 1892 (FO 424/172; FO 195/1766).

¹⁶⁵ White to Salisbury, FO 424/162, p. 30, no. 37 in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 615.

all plaintiffs must bring their charges against him “in the regular way” and go immediately to Istanbul to submit a complaint.¹⁶⁶ Musa Bey had three charges brought against him: arson of a storage unit for agricultural tools, looting, and assault. At the end of the tribunal proceedings, however, the Ottoman court acquitted Musa Bey and allowed him to return to Muş on the grounds of lack of evidence.¹⁶⁷

The case of Musa Bey and his subsequent acquittal, which was widely publicized in Western newspapers, sparked the outrage of the British and Armenians who called for further investigation into the security situation in eastern Anatolia. Further reports began to surface that along with other Kurdish *derebeys*, Musa Bey had become emboldened by the court’s decision and decided to take revenge on the Armenians responsible for outing them.¹⁶⁸

The case of Musa Bey marks a significant breach of Armenian confidence not only in the Ottoman government, of which Armenians had been suspicious for years, but also the British government. The Armenian revolutionary message of independent action, as opposed to that of dependence on the Great Powers, aimed at independence and freedom, became increasingly popular throughout eastern Anatolia among the *rayah*, particularly those in the semiautonomous regions of Zeitoun and Sasun.

The Emergence of the New Armenian Revolutionary

During the mid-1880s Armenian revolutionary activity took a new turn. Since the secret societies that had been cropping up throughout cities with a high concentration of

¹⁶⁶ Şimşir, *Documents Diplomatique Ottomans: Affaires Armeniennes* (Ankara: Türk Tarihi Kurumu Basımevi, 1985), 1: 53.

¹⁶⁷ *Turquie*, November 26, 1889, cited in *British Documents*, Şimşir, 2: 667-670.

¹⁶⁸ Svajian, 285.

Armenians were easily dissolved by the Ottoman authorities, Armenian activists found greater success in developing societies outside of the Ottoman Empire. The most notable of these societies were the Armenakan, the Hunchaks, and the Dashnaks.

The Armenakan Party was founded in Van in 1885 by Mkrtich Portugalian and a number of other prominent Armenians in Van. Portugalian himself was an educator who had been involved in a number of political activities before the Russo-Turkish War. He was part of the Altruistic Society, which had been established in Tokat in 1869, and the Ararathian society, established in Van in 1876, both of which promoted the spread of education to the Armenians. Through these societies he managed to build his network of contacts with high-ranking Armenians. Following the Russo-Turkish War, Portugalian sought support from the Great Powers, including the United States, in sponsoring the establishment of schools for both youth and adults. The higher education establishments for Armenian adults aroused the suspicion of the Ottomans who suspected these facilities to be promoting revolutionary ideas. For his activities he was exiled from Van to France, where he established the journal *Armenia* which advocated liberal democracy. Calling for self-determination for Armenians by means of revolutionary thought and action, including the dissemination of propaganda and military training, *Armenia* also promoted raising the awareness of the outside world of the situation in Armenia, sending financial aid to the 'homeland' to fund endeavors towards education and self-defense projects, and disseminating Portugalian's own political and social ideas.¹⁶⁹ "What made the party revolutionary," according to Hovannisian, "was its advocacy of self-reliance and armed

¹⁶⁹ Nalbandian, 94.

resistance against state terror.”¹⁷⁰ The party, however, did not openly advocate terrorism as a political tactic, although “[this] policy was ignored by certain individuals.”¹⁷¹ In 1889 the Ottoman authorities stopped an Armenian caravan from at the border town of Başkale en route to Van for inspection. It was discovered that the traders were smuggling arms to an Armenian militia. Additionally the Ottomans discovered that they were carrying a letter from Mkrtich Portugalian which detailed a plot for revolution. As the Ottoman border guards motioned to arrest the traders, the local Armenians opened fire on the Ottoman forces, leading to a number of casualties on both sides.¹⁷²

Although Nalbandian claims that the party was exclusive in its selection of membership, not recruiting outside Turkey—let alone Van—other exiled members of the Armenakan party, particularly Mkrtich Terlemezian, encouraged Armenians to forge ties with the Kurds to support them against the Ottomans. According to Libaridian, Terlemezian, whom he claims was the actual leader of the Armenakan party, “could not leave the Kurds out of his worldview” and advocated, in several articles in *Armenia*, “the translation of objective realities into a common political program.”¹⁷³

The Hunchak (Bell) Party was founded in Geneva in 1887 by a group of six Armenian students, although it was not called such until 1890. Party members boasted their adherence to Marxist ideology, but their culture and mentality bore the semblance of

¹⁷⁰ Richard G. Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire 1876 to 1914,” vol. 2, in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, 213.

¹⁷¹ Nalbandian, 171-172.

¹⁷² Aram Ruben, *Hai Heghapokhakani Me Hishatakneri* [Memoirs of an Armenian Revolutionary] (Los Angeles, 1952), II, 268-269. Also see Sonyel, 115.

¹⁷³ Libaridian, 176.

populism.¹⁷⁴ Originally sympathizing with the cause of Portugalian's Armenakan Party, having published numerous articles in his journal, they pressed for a more militant version of Armenian nationalism. Finding that Portugalian would not support their more radical viewpoint, they decided to establish their own party and started publishing material openly criticizing the Armenakan journal *Armenia*. In time the party formulated a more concrete agenda by which it would try to achieve its goal of an independent Armenia which would include the eastern provinces. First they sought to tear down the old orders of power in Armenian society and develop a new nationalist order in its place, based on the principles of socialism and humanitarianism.

A common theme in Hunchak rhetoric was not only Ottoman exploitation of the Armenians, but also the oppressive nature of the authority of the Armenian patriarch. It envisaged an Armenia whose citizens were ruled by an elected legislative assembly, enjoyed absolute freedom of speech, press, assembly, and organization, performed military service, had full access to education; and paid taxes according to their income.¹⁷⁵ Unlike the Armenakan, which advocated "revolution" through education and nonviolent resistance, the Hunchak party advocated immediate social action, widespread demonstrations, and brute force as means of achieving independence. Nalbandian writes that the Hunchaks believed that the political situation of the Armenians could actually be altered by using a combination of "propaganda, agitation, terror, organization, and

¹⁷⁴ Anahide Ter Minassian, "The Role of the Armenian Community in the Foundation and Development of the Socialist Movement in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1876-1923," in *Social and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Mete Tunçay and Erik Zürcher (London; New York: British Academic Press in association with the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1994), 112.

¹⁷⁵ Nalbandian, 109.

peasant and worker activities.”¹⁷⁶

The Hunchaks were not entirely opposed to assistance from any of the European Powers, but they insisted that the Powers should not intervene in the internal affairs of the Armenians, since the cause of Armenian independence was to be undertaken by the Armenians themselves. In an excerpt from the first editorial of the journal *Hunchak* such independent resolve is stated:

if we fold our hands and wait for European intervention, the Armenian people will sink into unbearable misfortune. . . . [w]e must add that the present policy and diplomacy of the European Powers is like a windmill—it turns in this direction of the wind today, while tomorrow, according to the pleasures of the same wind, it may turn in the opposite direction.¹⁷⁷

The Hunchaks operated as an underground organization based in Istanbul with a large network of Armenian supporters throughout Europe, Russia, and the United States. Their main areas of interest were initially in the main cities in eastern Anatolia. Since they were rivals of the Armenakans, who were strong in Van, the Hunchaks had little appeal in the Van region. They had some success in Erzurum, undertaking the construction of a foundry that manufactured arms in 1890. The project to arm the Armenians through the production of weapons within the Ottoman Empire failed after skirmishes between a number of Armenians and Muslims in Erzurum in June 1890 in which the revolutionaries were easily overcome.¹⁷⁸ The Hunchaks were also bitterly opposed to the Patriarch and carried out a plot to assassinate him in 1890. White reported to the Marquis of Salisbury about a riot staged by the Hunchak revolutionaries at Kum Kapı, Istanbul in August 1890: “The riot was apparently got up against the Patriarch. An

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 110.

¹⁷⁷ Cited in Ibid., 115-116.

Armenian wilfully fired at his Beatitude, and subsequently killed a gendarme after the police had been brought into the church in order to restore order amongst the rioters.”¹⁷⁹

Following the Ottoman’s quelling of the Erzurum and Kum Kapı incidents, the Hunchaks moved their center of operations to the more remote and mountainous regions of Sasun and Zeitoun where the Armenians were more independent of Ottoman intervention.

The Dashnak party, also known as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), was organized in Tiflis in the 1890s. It was formed from a merger between various other Armenian revolutionary groups in the Caucasus who were united in their anti-Ottoman and anti-Czarist sentiments. At their inception the Dashnak and Hunchak parties had few differences between them, although one major difference surfaced over the question of the devolution of power. Whereas the Hunchaks favored a more centralized administration of their organization, the Dashnaks sought to decentralize power into the hands of a representative body of Armenians. Another major difference between the two parties was over ideology. Although the Dashnak party was based on socialist principles, and even formed an alliance with the Hunchaks for a brief period, they were arguably less prone to populism and advocated more careful and drawn-out stages of preparation before commencing revolutionary activity. The Hunchaks, by contrast, favored swift armed action against the government. The Hunchaks later disassociated themselves with the Dashnaks in 1891 on the grounds that they were insufficiently Marxist.¹⁸⁰ Towards the mid-1890s, the rift between the Dashnaks, the

¹⁷⁸ Said Pasha to Rustem Pasha, June 27, 1890, *Turkey no. 1* (1890-91), pp. 50-51, no. 62/1, cited in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 701.

¹⁷⁹ Sir W. White to the Marquis of Salisbury, Therapia, August 21, 1890, *Turkey no. 1* (1890-1891), p. 66, no. 86, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 2: 712.

¹⁸⁰ Libaridian, 103, 106.

Hunchaks, and Armenakans grew. In his memoirs, the prominent Dashnak activist

Vahan Papazian reveals his disdain for the Hunchak and Armenakan parties:

we did all we could to reach common ground with the Hunchaks and the Armenakans. Because of their conservative and fanatical elements, and—I must confess—some of our careless and ignorant members...armies of foes formed against us, composed of the most humble groups in our society. It was not a struggle of ideas, but rather a vulgar animosity, with no holds barred, just to conquer a few villages.... This ‘activity’ was more evident in the Armenakan and Hunchak parties, because they did not have competent leaders, and there was no party discipline in their ranks.¹⁸¹

The Dashnak party was open to the possibility of forming alliances with Arabs, Kurds, Turks, and peoples in the Balkans as a means of gaining support for the cause, which would lessen the necessity for an alliance with the Russians or the British, for both of whom they had developed deep distrust. The Dashaks also attempted to form an alliance with the Kurds. In *Droshak*, the Dashnak newspaper, there were letters written in Kurdish summoning the tribal leaders to join the party and thus to create a more formidable resistance to Ottoman forces. It warned the Kurds to not “fall into the traps” of the Ottoman government, which was attempting to lure them into its military, and in fact many Kurdish tribal leaders in the Dersim area were receptive to the bid of the Dashnaks. Keri of Erzincan, a Dashnak representative, resided with the Kurdish tribes in Dersim during the mid-1890s spreading revolutionary ideas among them. It even initiated dialogue with Kasım Bey, the brother of Musa Bey, and attempted to curry favor with the Kimlik tribe which was predominant in the Muş and Dersim regions.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Vahan Papazian, *Im Hushere*, [My Memoires], vol. 1, (Boston: Hairenik, 1950), 353, cited in Marc Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century*, (Reading: Taderon, by arrangement with the Gomidas Institute, 2002), 182.

¹⁸² Esat Uras, *The Armenians in History and the Armenian Question* (Sirkeci, Istanbul: Documentary Publications, 1988), 801-802.

During the early 1890s there was not only rivalry between the clergy and the revolutionaries for power, but also between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Armenian populations. Boyadjian reported a case of a family rivalry between Armenian families in the Harput region in the villages of Haim and Blaidar, one Catholic and the other Orthodox, in which both sides hired the services of Kurds to kill the other.¹⁸³ It was largely because of the religious rivalry among the different Armenian sects that the revolutionaries had appeal: they stood for Armenian unity and equality rather than religious supremacy.

The Formation of the Hamidiye Cavalry

Abdülhamid II's policy of alliance building with the Kurds during the 1880s and 1890s won him the affectionate title of *bavê kurdan* (father of the Kurds in Kurdish). His creation of the predominantly Kurdish Hamidiye Cavalry Regiment is a manifestation of his attempts to integrate the Kurds into the state through diplomacy. Zeki Pasha, the commander of the 4th brigade in Erzincan, was put in charge of the organization and command of the Hamidiye cavalry. As Zeki Pasha was of Circassian origin and well-acquainted with the geography of eastern Anatolia, he was considered an ideal candidate for the position. In November 1890 he summoned a number of prominent Kurdish tribal chiefs to Erzurum to discuss the arrangement of cavalry organization of the cavalry. Some of the larger tribes were to form entire regiments on their own and lend 800-1000 of their men to the cavalry. Smaller tribes were attached to regiments led by larger tribes. Gradually the number of regiments increased; there were 40 regiments in 1892 and 56 in

¹⁸³ Rustem Pasha, Ottoman Ambassador to London, to Said Pasha, Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs, London: Feb. 22, 1890, No. 13690/49, in *Documents Diplomatique*

1893.¹⁸⁴

The main motive behind the formation of the Hamidiye was to centralize government control over eastern Anatolia for the immediate purpose of providing security against internal rebellion and thus to stave off Russian and British intervention.

Abdülhamid II stated the following in his memoirs concerning the Hamidiye:

These Kurdish regiments, which are fashioned after the manner of the Russian [Cossacks], can be of great service to us. Additionally the ‘concept of obedience’ that they will learn in the army will be beneficial to them. The Kurdish *ağas* to whom we have given the title of officer will be esteemed in their new positions and a number will make an effort to enter by force. The Hamidiye Regiments...will become a valuable army.... I know that I am criticized for bringing the children of some of the Kurdish *ağas* to Istanbul and installing them in certain offices. [But] for years the Christian Armenians have occupied positions in the ministry. What harm can there be to draw the Kurds, who are of our same religion, nearer to us?... I am convinced I am in the right in the Kurdish policy that I have undertaken. Zeki Paşa, who has examined the [political] situation at hand [in eastern Anatolia], has shown the most effective way in putting forth the idea of forming regiments from Kurdish Cossacks.¹⁸⁵

There is considerable debate over the role of the Hamidiye regiments in the Armenian massacres. One camp asserts that the development of the cavalry was part of Abdülhamid II’s Pan-Islamic vision of integrating the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, a large majority of whom lived relatively isolated tribal lifestyles, into the state. Bayram Kodaman is one of the leading proponents of this notion, stressing that the creation of the Hamidiye regiment was innocuous, generally beneficial, and generally accorded with other integration projects for Muslims in the hinterlands. The Ottomans created the *aşiret mektebi* (the tribal office) for the children of leading Arab and Kurdish tribal chiefs, the

Ottoman, ed. Şimşir, 74.

¹⁸⁴ Bayram Kodaman, “Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları (II. Abdülhamid ve Doğu Aşiretleri),” [The Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments], *Tarih Dergisi* 32, (1979), 463. 451.

saray mühafiz birliği (palace guard union) for the Albanians, and the Hamidiye regiments for the Kurds. The creation of the regiment had the added benefit of impeding the Armenian revolutionaries from creating a state, but served the main purpose of providing protection.¹⁸⁶ The Ottomans' "random" policies of favoritism to one tribe over the other caused "jealousy and competition among the tribes" and eventually led to "infighting,"¹⁸⁷ which in turn spread to affect the Armenians.

Others view Abdülhamid's reasoning behind the creation of the Hamidiye as directed towards thwarting the Armenian revolutionaries by any means possible. According to Nalbandian, the Hamidiye not only strengthened Sultan Abdülhamid II's "Pan Islamic policy," but also "provided a method of separating the Moslem Kurds from possible cooperation with the discontented Armenians."¹⁸⁸ She goes on to state that Abdülhamid's real purpose was to incite the Kurds against the Armenians by "allowing" them to engage in murderous activity with impunity.

The more pertinent question remains, however, if the purpose of the Hamidiye was merely to incorporate the Kurds into the system more fully and provide security in eastern Anatolia (especially at a time when the British Consul in Erzurum and his Armenian deputy were reporting conditions in eastern Anatolia to be more secure and that the Porte was already establishing connections with various tribal chiefs), why Abdülhamid II did not form such an additional cavalry regiment until over a decade after

¹⁸⁵ Sultan Abdülhamid II, *Sultan Abdülhamid'in Hatıra Defteri*, ed. İsmet Bozdağ (Istanbul: Pinar, 1986), 75.

¹⁸⁶ Kodaman, *Osmanlı Devrinde Doğu Anadolu'nun İdari Durumu* [The Administrative Situation of Eastern Anatolia in the Ottoman Period] (Ankara: Anadolu Basın Birliği, 1986), 91.

¹⁸⁷ Kodaman, "Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları," 463.

¹⁸⁸ Nalbandian, 161.

a the Russo-Turkish War.

The establishment of the Hamidiye regiment in the early 1890s was part of Abdülhamid II's centralization effort. According Janet Klein, Abdülhamid was intent on "bring[ing] the region in the Ottoman fold, and to ensure, by almost any means necessary, that it remained there."¹⁸⁹ The mechanisms by which the Kurds and Armenians had been contained in eastern Anatolia in 1880s had a number of limits. Putting security measures in practice necessitated disarming of the tribes, settling the nomads, blockading certain migration routes, and installing security checkpoints throughout eastern Anatolia and on the borders with Russia and Iran. Completely disarming the Kurdish population proved nearly impossible; not only had the Ottomans distributed weapons among the Kurds during the 1860s and 1870s when they employed them as *başıbozüks*, but the Kurds had been smuggling weapons across the porous borders of Iran for years. Settling Kurdish nomads throughout eastern Anatolia necessitated stationing troops across relatively unknown territory. Securing mountainous areas such as Dersim, Sasun, Zeitoun and Hakkari was a perpetual struggle for Ottoman forces which, although easily able to rout Kurdish, Armenian, and Nestorian insurgents, could not contain them. As a means of settling the tribes, one of the key security measures that the British officials required of the Ottomans, the Porte had established checkpoints throughout eastern Anatolia throughout the 1880s. One of the main problems with the checkpoints, however, was that they were difficult to maintain completely secure, since guards were often venal and did little to implement proper security. Again Ottoman security measures could only control the activities of the

¹⁸⁹ Klein, "Power in the Periphery," 6.

Armenian revolutionaries to the extent that they visibly organized within the Empire. The Ottoman government was much less capable of dealing with the well-organized network of Armenian revolutionaries operating outside the Empire and infiltrating Armenian society within its borders through underground means.

The Hamidiye cavalry served the ultimate purpose of balancing the power of the Armenian revolutionaries, whose rise to greater power is the most likely reason why the sultan stepped up his policy of integrating the Kurds into the Ottoman military system and containing the centrifugal elements in Kurdish society.

The formation of the Hamidiye unit included several recruitment challenges. One was that being in or commanding a regiment was a coveted position with a number of advantages, including the right to bear arms and status in the military, and engendered rivalry between tribes. As such the Porte secretly appointed many of the tribes to the cavalry in order to stave off internal disputes. Notwithstanding the advantages that membership in the Hamidiye offered, many Kurdish tribal chiefs initially had reservations about joining up, suspecting that it would subdue their freedom. The Kurdish chiefs in the Dersim region saw the Ottoman initiative as a means of spreading Sunnism in their predominantly Alevi abode.¹⁹⁰

Already in November 1891, not long after the creation of the regiments, reports surfaced concerning various problems surrounding the Hamidiye. Many of the tribes, it was found, were much like the *başibozuks* in that they were insubordinate to Ottoman command and abused their military power. The British Consul in Erzurum wrote:

The formation of the new Kurdish cavalry appears so far to have but little restraining effect on these outrages, in which many members, and even prominent

¹⁹⁰ Kodaman, "Hamidiye Hafif Süvarî Alayları," 447.

officers of the new force, are accused of taking part. . . . It is said that the Kurds of the Sibkanlu tribe, who are members of the new cavalry avail themselves of that pretext to take forage, food, etc., from the villagers of Alashgerd without payment. This system of military robbery has hitherto been the speciality of the police and regular cavalry patrols.¹⁹¹

Several other consular reports detail the involvement of those who appeared to be members of the cavalry regiments in criminal activity.

The Ottomans were particularly keen on recruiting the more powerful tribes into the Hamidiye. In one case it even offered amnesty to Mustafa Pasha, a prominent Kurdish leader of the Miran tribe in the Bohtan-Cizre area, who was facing charges for stealing hundreds of sheep from a merchant in Urfa, in exchange for his participation in the Hamidiye.¹⁹² Mustafa Pasha's appointment to the Hamidiye only served to confirm the suspicions of many locals, including Armenians and Kurds already angered over the acquittal of Musa Bey, that the Porte would turn a blind eye to Kurdish criminal activity to suit its own socio-political interests in the region.

Another issue that surfaced in consular reports concerned the actual strength and size of the regiment. The French Consul in Erzurum testified that many of the Kurds "have neither a horse nor the means to buy one." The Ottoman prohibition on the import of certain breeds of horses into eastern Anatolia (perhaps implemented as a means of preventing the Kurds from building a military), according to the official, caused the horse breeders, for lack of a market, to "abandon the industry." The report goes on to say that Zeki Pasha was obligated to content himself with the amount of horses provided to him, but doubted his ability to build a sustainable cavalry: "In order to not go back on his

¹⁹¹ Hampson to White. Erzurum, Nov. 7, 1891 (FO 195/1729/FO424/169), cited in Klein, "Power in the Periphery, 51.

¹⁹² Klein, "Power in the Periphery," 52.

promise...to raise forty or fifty regiments...he has lined up regiments which [in reality] are but a mere smokescreen.”¹⁹³

Many reports in 1892 and 1893 criticize the Hamidiye for its overall lack of training, organization, and reliable equipment. Consul Graves attended a pageant organized by Zeki Pasha in Erzurum in which the newly created regiments paraded alongside the regular troops. The Hamidiye cavalry, who totaled approximately 1500, marched behind the regular troops in the parade. “With the exception of some of the chiefs,” observes Graves, “the Kurdish horsemen had made little or no attempt at uniformity in any respect, and the great majority of their horses were of very inferior quality...[M]ost of them carried Martini and Berdan carbines, besides other very miscellaneous weapons, and...there were a large number of elderly men and very young boys in their ranks.”¹⁹⁴

The irregular Hamidiye Cavalry Regiments had an impact on Kurdish and Armenian society remarkably similar to that of the *başibozuks* three decades earlier: they weakened the power structure in Kurdish society and impeded the formation of Kurdish confederations under the leadership of a powerful *bey* or *sheikh*. Van Bruinessen captures the ongoing effect that the different periods of Ottoman policy had on the Kurds:

The tribal entities that we see articulating themselves in each consecutive phase of administrative centralization became correspondingly smaller, less complicated, and more genealogically homogeneous: emirates gave way to tribal confederacies, confederacies to large tribes, large tribes to smaller ones.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Wigoreaux to Ambassador Cambon, No. 21, Dec. 5, 1891, cited in Klein, “Power in the Periphery,” 54-55.

¹⁹⁴ Graves to Ford, no. 38. Erzurum, June 22, 1892 (FO 195/1766; FO 424/172), cited in Klein, “Power in the Periphery,” 58-59.

¹⁹⁵ van Bruinessen, “Kurds, States, and Tribes,” in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

From Tension to Conflict

The conflict between Kurds and Armenians in the mid-1890s can be understood as the culmination of conflict between the Ottoman state and the Armenian revolutionaries that trickled down into the lower ranks of society. It began in June 1893 in Muş. In a letter to Sir Arthur Nicolson, Consul Graves reported that the administrative district of Muş had recently come under economic hardship, “partly owing to the failure of the crops last year and the gloomy prospects of this year’s harvest, and partly owing to the insecurity resulting from Kurdish lawlessness.” Damadian, a notorious Hunchak revolutionary, was residing in Sasun and reportedly encouraging the Kurds to revolt against the Armenians, although he had been captured by Ottoman authorities earlier in the month. The Hunchaks were also beginning to spread rumors of Kurdish massacres of Armenians, many of which were found to be untrue. Nevertheless the rumors prompted government officials to intervene and search for weapons. The arrest of the Armenian bishop of Muş on charges of sedition, for his alleged communication with Damadian, made many of the Armenians in the region increasingly bitter towards the Ottomans.¹⁹⁶

In July 1893 the Ottomans lifted restrictions on the passage of the nomadic Kurdish Bekran tribe through the Sasun mountains, which had always passed through annually before the new security measures. The Bekran reportedly met with resistance upon their entrance into a village in the predominantly Armenian Talori region, whereupon they killed the resisters and plundered the village,¹⁹⁷ leaving nine Armenians

¹⁹⁶ Consul Graves to Sir A. Nicolson, Erzurum, June 28, 1893, FO 424/175, 1893, pp. 138-139, no. 136, in *British Documents*, Şimşir, 3: 236-238.

¹⁹⁷ Said Pasha to Rustem Pasha, Sublime Porte July 20, 1893, in *Documents Diplomatiques Ottomans*, Şimşir, 355.

and three Muslims dead. Subsequently Mustafa Pasha of the Hamidiye regiments was sent to restore order to the region. However, he ended up arrested a number of Armenians whom the British Consul Graves believed to be of the “aggrieved party.” In other reports officials suspected a government conspiracy which secretly incited the Muslims of Bitlis to rise up against the Armenians thus putting an end to the relative autonomy of the region.¹⁹⁸

According to Ottoman documents it was the Armenians were regularly accused of stirring up activity among the tribes. Zeki Pasha claims in a telegram to the Porte that the army was sent only in order to keep Armenian separatists from inciting violence in the Talori and Muş regions. Military forces were dispatched to the Muş region “to check ill-intentions and separatist activities of Armenians” which were blocking the “annual safe passage” of the Bekran tribe, which was “blocked by the governorship of Bitlis for the past couple of years due to groundless and misleading complaints of the said separatists.” Troops were dispatched in order to prevent Armenian misdeeds (*fesadât*) and acts of hostility (*şekavet-i merviyeler*).¹⁹⁹

This incident came in a particular sore spot in eastern Anatolia. While the massacre of Armenians by Kurds in another region may have gone relatively unnoticed, the Hunchaks, who had gained increasingly popularity in the early 1890s, set up one of their bases in Sasun, primarily because of its relative remoteness from Ottoman gendarmes. Sonyel writes: “the Armenian revolutionaries operated by preference in areas

¹⁹⁸ Sonyel, 156.

¹⁹⁹ Zeki Pasha to the Office of General Staff, July 22, 1894, in *Ottoman Archives: Yıldız Collection, The Armenian Question: The Talori Incidents*, ed. Ökte, 1: 101- 103.

where the Armenians were in a hopeless minority, so that reprisals would be certain.”²⁰⁰
 The incident, although relatively small, fit the leitmotif which Armenian revolutionaries and their sympathizers sought to accentuate regarding the situation of the Armenian peasantry. The Hunchaks deliberately incited the Ottomans and the Hamidiye cavalry to intervene by attacking gendarme stations, cutting telegraph wires, bombing government buildings, and raiding Kurdish villages in the hope that this would provoke widespread Armenian revolt.²⁰¹

Although actual membership of the Hunchak party was small, it gained widespread support from Armenians abroad, and throughout eastern Anatolia. Mavroyeni Bey, the Ottoman Envoy at Washington (himself an Armenian), wrote to American Secretary of State Gresham in 1893, calling attention to a resolution drafted by Armenian missionaries in Pennsylvania which expressed sympathy with the aims of the revolutionaries. The resolution reiterated the provisions of Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin and stressed the Ottoman government’s failure to comply with it. According to Mavroyeni’s statement:

The civilized world was justified in expecting prompt amelioration of the deplorable state of affairs in Armenia, but instead oppression and anarchy have since increasingly prevailed.... [F]erocious and uncivilized Kurds and Circassians... continue with impunity to rob, burn and devastate, to torture, violate and murder.²⁰²

During the winter of 1893 and the spring of 1894 the Hunchak revolutionaries built up their forces in the mountains and the Bekran Kurds exacted revenge against the Armenians villages. In June 1894 the villagers of Talori refused to pay taxes unless

²⁰⁰ Sonyel, 156-157.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 157.

proper action was taken to prevent the Kurdish tribes from attacking them. According to the Consul Graves' account the *kaimmakam* of Muş came down to Talori to dissolve the protestors by "abus[ing] them and maltreat[ing] them." The Turkish version, however, states that the *kaimmakam* was greeted by a group of armed Hunchak sympathizers. Subsequently the *kaimmakam* summoned military help from the *mutessarif* of Gence in order to disperse the Armenians. The arrival of the army provoked the Armenians to stage an insurrection in which they punished the surrounding Kurdish villages. Kurds responded by destroying the Armenian villages of Şenik and Semal, which were Hunchak strongholds. The Hamidiye cavalry was subsequently ordered from Erzincan to pursue a force of some 10,000 Armenians lodged in Mount Andok.²⁰³

According to the Ottomans the Hamidiye regiment was pulled back before it entered Mount Andok. Vice-Consul Hallward in the consulate at Van relays the Ottoman version:

The Bekiranli [Bekran] Kurds who come from Diarbekir to pass the summer on the Antogh Dagh [Mount Andok] where there are several large Armenian villages, made a raid on the Armenians, and carried off cattle and other plunder. The Armenians, in hope of recovering their property, made an attack on the Kurds, and in the encounter two or three persons on either side lost their lives. The affair was greatly exaggerated by the Governor of Bitlis, who applied for a large number of the troops in order to suppress the disturbance. About the middle of August seven battalions of troops and one Hamidieh Regiment arrived here. The Hamidieh Regiment, however, never got as far as the Antogh Mountains, and left after ten days.²⁰⁴

However, the Armenian revolutionaries give a significantly different report of the incident. According to the Armenian historian Varandian, the Hunchaks were "in a weak

²⁰² Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, Washington, November 5, 1893, No. 6716/18 in *Documents Diplomatiques Ottomans*, ed. Şimşir, 496.

²⁰³ Sonyel, 158.

position” and “anxious to do something as quick as possible to cause a stir.” While the Armenians were equipped to fend off an onslaught by the local Kurds, they were not strong enough to overcome the Ottoman troops:

In August 1894 the Armenians annihilated the Kurds after a successful onslaught and were about to carry off their flocks when they were suddenly surrounded on all sides by troops. No one has ever been able to give even an approximate number of the Armenians killed. Some say six or seven thousand, others say around one thousand. Probably the latter is nearer the truth.²⁰⁵

While the exact course of events will probably always be shrouded in nationalist rhetoric, the Sasun incident ushered in widespread political and social chaos throughout eastern Anatolia. Hunchak sympathizers throughout the major cities of eastern Anatolia rose in rebellion against the government and the Kurds. Fearing an Armenian takeover, many prominent Kurdish leaders crushed Armenian villages. Likewise Armenian revolutionaries led Armenian militias to wipe out Kurdish villages. Overall, the conflict was predominantly between the Kurds and the Armenians, many of whom were manipulated by the Ottomans and Hunchaks, respectively, to take military action and many of whom fought for sheer survival. While it is beyond the scope of this study to touch on the issue of culpability it is worth looking at a couple of instances of violence between Kurds and Armenians.

The Hunchaks had been amassing power around Diyarbakir quite rapidly during 1894. An outbreak of cholera in the region served the Hunchak’s purposes of instigating conflict, as they accused the Ottomans of failing to provide treatment for the Armenians affected by the epidemic, thus gaining further sympathies with the Ottoman locals. The

²⁰⁴ Sir P. Currie to the Earl of Kimberley, October 4, 1897, FO 424/178, p. 213, no. 231, in *British Documents*, ed. Şimşir, 3: 384.

²⁰⁵ Mikael Varandian, *History of the Dashnaktsutiun* (Paris, 1932), 146.

poor state of the economy in the rural areas created an influx of Armenian in-migration to Diyarbakir. Unable to find work, many of the migrants were attracted to the Hunchak revolutionary message. In October 1895 the *vali* Sırrı Paşa, who was regarded as more benevolent, was replaced by the infamous Enis Paşa, the former *mutesarraf* of Mardin, who had a year earlier “shown hostility toward the Capuchin fathers and especially toward Father Salvadore, who would be assassinated in November 1895.”²⁰⁶ According to Meyrier, Enis Pasha pressured local Armenian clergymen to give their allegiance to him as acting *vali*. This gesture upset the Armenian population who closed their churches and bazaar in protest against the clergymen who complied with his orders.²⁰⁷ Only spiritual and tribal leaders from among the Kurds were present at Enis Pasha’s inauguration ceremony in late October; “no non-Muslims were found.”²⁰⁸

Rioting broke out on Friday, November 1, 1895. Shops throughout the city were set ablaze and fighting continued for three days. A telegraph from Süleyman Nazif, an administrator in Diyarbakir carrying four hundred signatures appealed for government intervention to calm down the scene of violence throughout the *vilayet* and accused the Armenians of pitting the Muslims against each other: “We want justice. The Armenian traitors’ aim is to break the state’s sacred bond between the caliphate and the Islamic people, who are most brave and noble.”²⁰⁹ Further rioting and conflict spread throughout the countryside. According to Ottoman reports the death toll was approximately seventy

²⁰⁶ Claire Mouradian, “Gustave Meyrier and the Turmoil in Diarbekir, 1894-1896,” in *Armenian Tigranaker/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 215.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁰⁸ Şevket Beysanoğlu, *Kültürümüzde Diyarbakir* (Ankara: San Matbaası, 1992), 12.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Muslims and three hundred Armenians.²¹⁰ Meyrier estimates the death toll throughout the *vilayet* to be near 15,000.²¹¹

Hunchaks also penetrated the region of Zeitoun during 1894 and 1895, arming the Armenian inhabitants and indoctrinating them with revolutionary rhetoric. It was reported that Zeitoun had become a place of refuge for Armenians fleeing Maraş and İskenderun. In November 1895 a force of some 4,000 rebels out of a population of some 35,000 staged an insurrection throughout the region which resulted in approximately 1,250 casualties. The Ottoman forces finally defeated them in December after cutting off food and ammunition supplies.²¹²

Just as the conflict in eastern Anatolia was beginning to abate, however, a rebellion broke out in Van in March 1896. Kurdish attacks on four Armenian villages in March had prompted Ottoman officials to send Sadettin Pasha into Van to restore order. Unlike other areas of eastern Anatolia, the Hunchaks were unpopular in Van. However, the Dashnaks still played a revolutionary role. According to the British Consul in Van the Dashnak revolutionaries managed to mobilize a force of some six hundred Armenians, arm them with Russian rifles, and dress them in “distinctive uniforms.”²¹³ The revolutionaries apparently used tactics similar to the Hunchaks in that they sought, either through direction instigation or deception, to provoke unrest in order to gain international attention. In his account of Kurdish-Armenian relations in Van, Sadettin Pasha writes of an incident of deception in the village of Kızıldağ in the mountains south of Van:

²¹⁰ Ibid., 15-16.

²¹¹ Mouradian, 219.

²¹² Uras, 750.

I saw three-fourths Kurds in all of the villages in the surroundings. I asked whether or not these [Kurds] were of the [village] people. They said that the [Kurds] were not of the village and that they were guards hired by the [local] Armenians. Nevertheless in the village of Kızıldaş approximately 400 sheep were still stolen even while the Kurdish guards were there. Since this matter caught my attention, I pursued it further by asking the *kaimmakam* of Vestan:

He said: “this is a trick of Van Bishop. The local Van Kurdish *beys* also benefit from this.... The Bishop wants that Armenians to appear oppressed.... By giving 30-40 liras to the Kurds they bring them to the villages as guards. This sum mainly comes from the Van elites. The thefts that occur in the villages is done by these guards at the behest of the Armenians.”²¹⁴

The conflict in the mid-1890s was not only a power struggle between the Armenian revolutionaries and the Ottoman Empire, but among and within different segments of Kurdish and Armenian society. One of the main problems with eastern Anatolia was that Sultan Abdülhamid II’s administration had never managed to rearrange the social arrangements in eastern Anatolia and integrate the Kurds and Armenians fully into the state. According to Lynch, feudalism and serfdom continued to exist in many of the more rural regions:

Serfdom is an institution which is not unknown in the country, though its existence is softened over by the Turkish authorities, who shrink from dispensing a purely nominal sovereignty. The serfs, who are Armenians, are known as *zer kurri*, signifying bought with gold. In fact they are bought and sold in much the same manner as sheep and cattle by the Kurdish *beys* and *aghas*. The only difference is that they cannot be disposed of individually; they are transferred with the lands which they cultivate. The chief appropriates as much as he wishes from their yearly earnings, capital or goods; and in return he provides them with protection against other Kurdish tribes. Many stories are told to illustrate the nature of the relation. A serf was shot by the servant of a Kurdish *agha* who possessed lands in the neighborhood. The owner of the serf did not trouble to avenge his death on the person of the murder, still less upon that of the *agha*, his neighbor. He rode over to the *agha*’s lands, and put bullets through two of his

²¹³ Ibid., 757.

²¹⁴ Sami Önal, *Sadettin Paşa'nın Anıları: Ermeni-Kürt Olayları (Van, 1896)* [The Memoires of Sadettin Pasha: Armenian-Kurdish Episodes] (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2003), 148.

serfs, the first that he happened to meet.²¹⁵

By the mid-1890s, Armenians were either connected with the revolutionaries or with the clergy. There were representatives in Armenian society on both sides that guided the behavior of the Armenians, but Ottoman policy kept such a representative figure from ever emerging in Kurdish society during this period. Some of the Hamidiye cavalry regiments cooperated with Ottoman military commanders, whereas others were insubordinate. The nomadic Kurdish tribes tended to plunder Armenian villages and kill the inhabitants, whereas settled Kurds tended to have better relations with the Armenians.

Many of the Kurds appeared to believe that the spread of Islam among the Armenians was the best method of achieving power. The nomadic Ömerli tribe in the Diyarbakir *vilayet* came down from the mountains to avenge the death of one its members. Upon reaching the village of the Armenians whom they believed were responsible, they offered three alternatives that the Armenians could take to avoid being killed: “that all of them should turn Moslem, that four virgins should be surrendered to the men of Ömerli, [or] that payment should be made to the family of the murdered Kurd of 25,000 piasters.”²¹⁶ Using a number of German sources to gather information about the conflict of 1894-1896, Johannes Lepsius compiled some statistics that show the Kurds’ bid for power by means of Islamization: 2,493 villages were forcibly converted to Islam, 456 churches and monasteries were desecrated, and 649 churches were converted

²¹⁵ Lynch, 430-431.

²¹⁶ Şimşir, *British Documents*, 4: 255.

into mosques.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Johannes Lepsius and J Rendell Harris, *Armenia and Europe; an Indictment* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), 330-331.

CONCLUSION

This study of Kurdish-Armenian relations has attempted to reveal the network of both agency-based and structure-influenced interactions that led to instances of both collaboration and conflict between Kurdish and Armenian groups in the late nineteenth century. Three main conclusions can be reached through this analysis. First, trends in conflict and collaboration and collaboration between the Armenians and the Kurds are largely a product of the asymmetry in the Kurdish and Armenian social and power structures. While the social and power structures of Armenian society gave rise to widespread political consciousness among Armenians, those in Kurdish society did not generally awaken the Kurds to a consciousness of political identity.

The division of the Armenian *millet* during the 1840s and 1850s into the Protestant, Catholic, and Gregorian *millets*, and the Armenian constitution of 1861, severely weakened the power of the Armenian Patriarch and opened up space for the emergence of new representative elements of Armenian society. It was the efforts of the newly emerging Armenian bourgeois class during the 1860s and 1870s, which infiltrated the traditional Armenian power structure, to draw the attention of the Ottomans and the Europeans to the plight of Armenian peasants in eastern Anatolia that gave rise to the Armenian Question and instilled Armenians throughout the Empire with an increased sense of ethnic and national consciousness. The failure of Armenian political activists to achieve an autonomous Armenia at the Congress of Berlin, in addition to the subsequent

failure of the Ottomans to implement the necessary reforms for the Armenians, led many Armenians to take more radical measures to gain independence. While the Ottomans were able to dissolve the power of Armenian nationalist groups within their domain, these groups gained unchecked popularity outside of the Empire.

By contrast to Armenian society, there was no urban-based bourgeois class that emerged in Kurdish society during the late nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s the religious class was the only body left in Kurdish society that had sufficient clout to unite the Kurds behind a single political cause. However, the religious class proved to act much like the *beys* in that they switched back and forth between loyalties in order to suit their own political interests. While Shaykh ‘Ubaydullah made claims of a ‘Kurdish question’ and even called for the creation of a Kurdish state, his political actions were not grounded in any sort of nationalist ideology. Rather he appeared mainly motivated out of concern that the Ottomans would undertake the reforms for the Armenians that would lead to the creation of an independent Armenia and the subsequent loss of his power. He was compliant with the Ottomans to the extent that they granted him certain ruling privileges.

Second, the factors that influenced the interactive behavior of the Kurds and the Armenians extended well beyond individual localities. Trends in conflict and collaboration between Armenians and Kurds are interconnected with not only local eastern Anatolian politics, but also regional and global politics. The power struggle between Russia and Britain over hegemonic control of the Ottoman Empire made eastern Anatolia, a region that was once a hinterland insignificant to outside interests, into a zone of strategic interest. The political strategies of Britain and Russia to co-opt resistance

movements throughout the Ottoman Empire prompted the Ottomans to reform their governing system and reinforce their presence in areas over which they had previously had tenuous control. Ottomans' continual attempts to centralize control over eastern Anatolia, both during the *tanzimat* period and the Sultan Abdülhamid II period, had a tremendous impact on the traditional power structures in Kurdish and Armenian society which had kept eastern Anatolian society relatively intact during earlier periods. The dissolution of the power of the Kurdish *bey*s led to the fragmentation of Kurdish society and fostered greater competition between Kurdish tribes for power. In the midst of the power struggle between the Kurdish tribes both Kurdish and Armenian peasants suffered the most.

Third, while the structures limited the available choices from which actors could choose, conflict and collaboration between the Kurds and Armenians was the result of a complex network of agency-driven decisions that actors made at both high and low levels. Actors' decisions had a direct impact on the arrangement of the power structures in society. For instance, it was the policies and decisions of Sultan Abdülhamid II that either prompted change in power-sharing arrangements or perpetuated already existing arrangements. His decision to form the Hamidiye Cavalry produced a power-sharing environment that perpetuated existing structures in Kurdish society. The Hamidiye cavalry essentially restored the power of many influential tribal chiefs whose power had begun to wane as a result of the *tanzimat*.

While some of the Armenian revolutionaries were against the idea of non-Armenian participation in the nationalist cause, others parties favored a Kurdish-Armenian alliance against the Ottomans. Likewise, many of the Kurdish chiefs saw

friendly relations with the Armenians as generally advantageous to their political cause. Therefore, the conflict between Kurds and Armenians in the 1890s cannot be seen as a product of the lack of options for collaboration. Instead, conflict arose as a product of the growing influence of the Hunchaks in eastern Anatolia, the Ottomans' cooption of leading Kurdish chiefs to guard against the revolutionaries, and the failure of the Sultan Abdülhamid II to provide sufficient security to halt internecine skirmishes. The Hunchaks' espousal of instigative tactics as a means of gaining an autonomous Armenian state had a marked effect on the state of relations between Kurds and Armenians. It was as a result of their activism in the early 1890s that there came an upsurge in violence in eastern Anatolia, which had been increasingly orderly and calm in the late 1880s according to some reports. While the Ottomans had been attempting to gain the allegiance of the Kurdish tribes during the 1880s, the Hunchak movement was one of the main reasons that Sultan Abdülhamid II took further steps to integrate the Kurds into the state through the formation of the Hamidiye Cavalry. Although the Hamidiye Cavalry was established with the intent of providing security, it tended to fan the conflict rather than quell it. Hamidiye chiefs in essence received a *carte blanche* from the Ottomans to acquire power over rival Kurdish tribes and Armenians by whatever means possible.

While one can only speculate whether or not Kurds and Armenians would have assimilated and collaborated to a greater extent were it not for the Ottoman Empire's policies which distinguished between Muslim and non-Muslim, it is clear that such distinctions of identity were perpetuated through institutions, whether the political institutions of the Ottoman Empire, or the political and social institutions of the Kurds and the Armenians. Collective interactive behavioral trends between two groups can be

largely explained as a result of the power structures and the agency of those in power rather than as a consequence of their primordial (ethnic, religious, and cultural) identities.

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