

The Kurds

An Encyclopedia of Life, Culture, and Society

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REPORT BY THE BRITISH CONSUL ON THE SHEIKH UBAYDULLAH REVOLT **321**

. . . At the funeral, at which not only the Mir and his sister, but all the principle people and all the population of Jezira were present, Zin told her brother that she should not survive the death of her lover.

“And now,” she added, “that I am at the brink of the grave, I bear witness that our love was pure and blameless: You have done Mem a great wrong. But grant me, as my last request, three things. First, institute a festival on the day of my death, as you have done on the day of my sister’s marriage, and let all the people take part in it. Secondly, that all the people of our city follow my funeral. Thirdly, that my body may be laid near to Mem’s; and, at the moment when I am let down, say these words aloud: ‘With full consent I give Zin to Mem.’” The next day Zin died, and the testimony for which she asked was granted . . .

Sources: Mirawdeli, K. (2012). *Love and Existence: Analytical Study of Ahmadi Khani’s Tragedy of Mem u Zin*. Bloomington, IN: Author House.

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Report by the British Consul on the Sheikh Ubeydullah Revolt in 1880–1881

In the month of October in 1880, Sheikh Ubeydullah, a Naqshibandi sufi sheikh from the Nehri region of the Hakkari province in the Ottoman Kurdistan region, gathered tens of thousands of armed men from among the Ottoman and Iranian Kurds and seized several cities in the northwest of Iran. The Iranian army marched on the occupied regions after a short while and silenced the rebellion. Iran’s response involved great violence against the Kurdish tribes and villages. As a consequence, thousands of families were displaced.

Historians attribute several reasons for the rebellion by the Kurds: a Pan-Islamic agenda of the empire, growing dissention between the Shi’a and the Sunni population, the rise of nationalism among the non-Muslim minorities, and the activities of Christian missionaries in the region. Historians disagree over whether Sheikh Ubeydullah revolted due to nationalist sentiments or sectarian motives. Whether there was a sense of a common identity among the Kurds or not, most scholars

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consider the uprising the beginning of Kurdish nationalism. Official correspondence of various states and memoirs of missionaries in the region indicate that Sheikh Ubeydullah had projected a form of self-governance and autonomy under the banner of caliphate. Thus, his conversation with the British consul in Tabriz, William Abbot, in the aftermath of the revolt gives clues about the sheikh and his motives.

Metin Atmaca

Report from William Abbot

Tabreez, 1 October, 1881

I mentioned in my Dispatch No.27 of last year, which I had the honor to address to your Lordship that on quitting Oroomiah [Urmiya] I had an interview with the Sheikh Obeidullah [Ubeydullah]. Considerable interest appears to attach to that Kurdish chief who is now at Constantinople. I have therefore thought that a brief account of the conversation I had with him as well as a description of his person and character may prove interesting to her Majesty's government . . . He speaks Turkish and Persian fluently but with a Kurdish accent, and has a considerable knowledge of Arabic . . .

I had heard so much about him, but never anticipated that it would fall to my lot to be in personal relations with him. I appreciated the kindness and courtesy he had shown me and thanked him for the readiness with which he had listened to my representation on behalf of Christian and Mussulman non-combatants as well as for restoring property, which his troops plundered from Nestorian villages. I then asked the Sheikh what his programme was. He replied that he wished to reorganize Kurdistan. I enquired how he intended doing this, adding that he was neither justified in making war upon Persia nor raising a rebellion in Turkey, to attain his object. He then observed that he had been badly treated by both these powers. The Porte not has given him credit for good intentions. Kurdistan required to be ruled with an iron hand. No one understands its requirements better than he did. There remarked the Sheikh that he was treading on delicate ground. Did he imply that his object was to form Kurdistan into a separate Principality, independent of the Porte or merely to weld together its rude component elements, reduce order out of chaos and become the responsible head of Kurdish nation answerable to the Sultan for their good conduct as well as for the collection of the taxes? To this the Sheikh replied that nobody ever doubted his loyalty to the Sultan, but that he had a very poor opinion of the Pashas. He felt that the moment had arrived when something ought to be done for Kurdistan. He loved his countrymen. They were sorely in need of reforms. It was true that they were uneducated, undisciplined, addicted to brigandage and altogether in a most barbarous condition. He was anxious to remedy these evils and place his people in the position to which human beings they were entitled. The Kurds in Persia had been shamefully treated. Exaction, oppression, cruelty, violence, lust, every species of wrong, these had been the

prevailing characteristics of Persian rule in Kurdistan. Persia had done nothing to conciliate her tribal subjects. She had irrevocably alienated them . . .

Knowing the deep interest which HM's government take in the welfare of the Armenians and that it would be of small importance if a better understanding could be brought about between them and the Kurds in whose midst they live, -it appeared an opportune moment to report to your Lordship the statements made to me by the Sheikh. I cannot say how far his professions may be sincere or otherwise. Opportunities occur whilst he is at Constantinople, of testing his sincerity and above all his loyalty to the Sultan. Even if there were doubts on this latter point, it must be remembered that his religious and political influence throughout Kurdistan are very great. His majesty would probably exercise a sounder discretion by watching his movements and ascertaining his future plans than by treating him with harshness. He has been removed from frontier of Persia and it would be desirable to prevent his exercising in future any influence calculated to disrupt the peace of the Shah's dominions. But the Porte might have restrained him at the outset of his career if they had chosen to do so, and it would be difficult to understand upon what principles of justice or fair dealing he could now be visited with punishment . . .

William Abbot

Source: The British National Archives, Foreign Office (FO) 60/441.

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Sureya, Jaladet, and Kamuran Bedirkhan

Grandsons of Bedir Khan (1806–1869), the last emir of the Bohtan Principality in Ottoman Kurdistan. Their father, Amin Âli (1851–1926), was an Ottoman bureaucrat and a prominent figure of late-Ottoman-era Kurdish activism. Ahmed Sureya (1883–1938) and his half-brothers, Jaladet Âli (1893–1951) and Kamuran Âli (1895–1978), were born and raised in the Ottoman imperial capital, Istanbul. They studied in the European-style *Mekteb-i Sultânî* (Galatasaray High School) in Istanbul. Later, Sureya studied agricultural economics at Istanbul University. He was employed as an Ottoman subdistrict officer. Jaladet attended the Ottoman military