

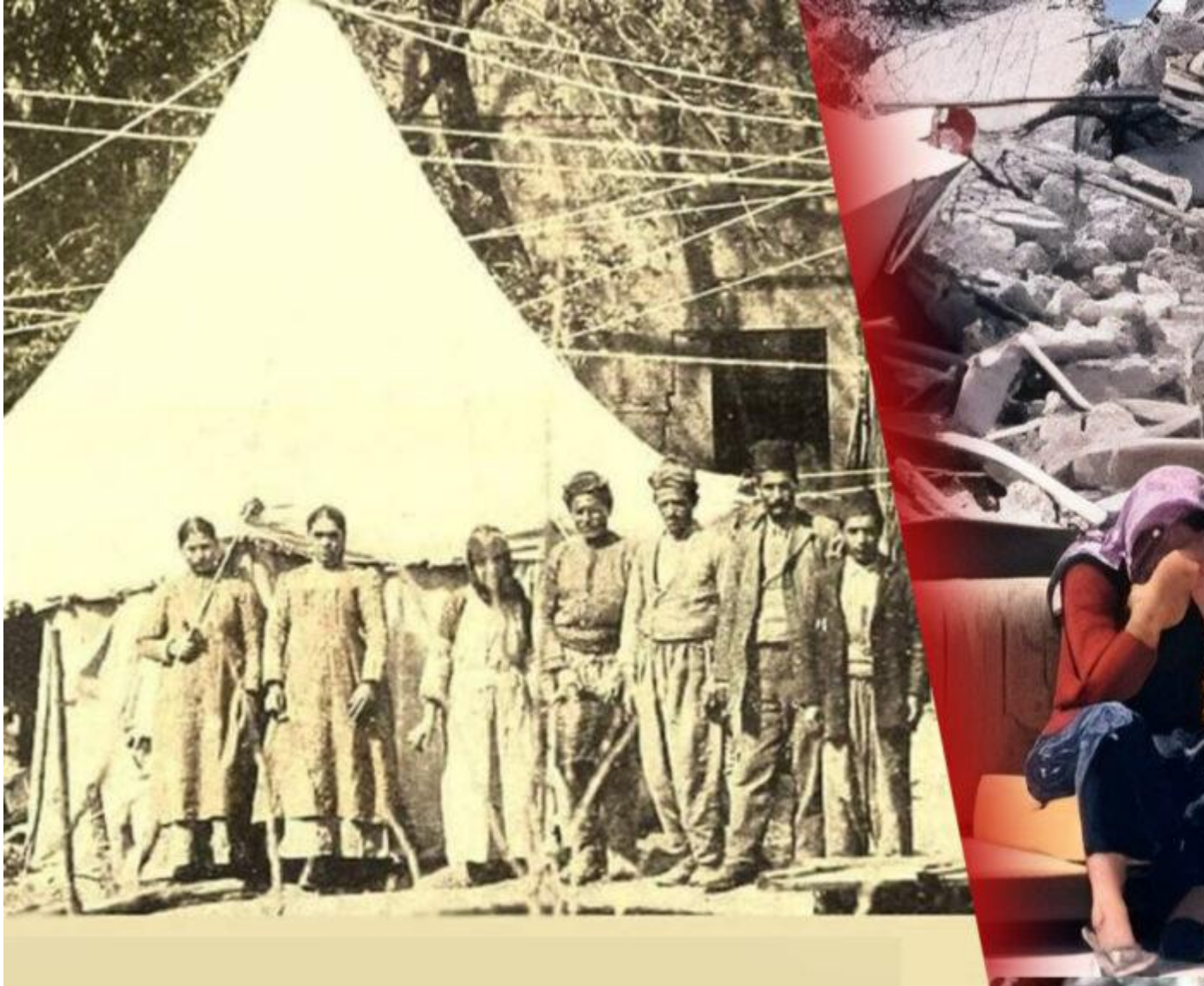
# Earthquake in Kurdistan: How it eventually changed Ottoman regime

A strong earthquake in 1907 that shook the Kurdish city of Bitlis (Bidlîs), today a province of Turkey, fuelled local unrest which soon turned into an all-out rebellion against the Ottoman governor of the city. The Bitlis uprising, with the full participation of the local population regardless of ethnicity or religion, initiated the chain of events that eventually forced Sultan Abdulhamit to re-enact the constitutional monarchy a year later, ending his authoritarian and arbitrary rule for 32 years.



*Prominent historian and Kurdologist Sedat Ulugana tells how the 1907 earthquake in Bitlis (Bidlîs) province under Ottoman rule and the subsequent popular uprising in the Kurdish city eventually led the old empire to its Second Constitutional Era, in an [article](#) penned for Yeni Yaşam newspaper on 21 February.*

*Ulugana's work shows us how disasters in Kurdish provinces in the early 1900s and related events set a striking example of how corruption, negligence and self-interest of central authority, along with solidarity between the victims of disaster and the people, can dramatically impact the aftermath.*



Inadequacy and selfishness of the central authority were two facts that the 1907 earthquake victims were familiar with too.

On 6 February, two major tremors of 7.8 and 7.7 magnitudes struck a vast area that covers almost a dozen of Turkey's provinces including the neighbouring Gaziantep (Dilok) and Kahramanmaraş (Mereş) as well as northern Syria, killing more than 50,000 people and leaving millions homeless in seconds.

With its deadliness and the horrible aftermath, the 6 February catastrophe was one of the greatest disasters known in the history of Turkey and Syria, as well as of the region

itself where several peoples, primarily Kurds, Turks and Arabs, have been living together for centuries.

However, neither this region particularly, nor northern Kurdistan is a stranger to earthquakes, with its cities and people having suffered from many of them throughout history. Successive deadly tremors that shook the vicinity of Lake Van (Wan) between 1891-1907, destroying the cities of Bitlis (Bidlîs) and Van are rather recent examples of these calamities in the history of Kurdish lands.

The 1907 Bitlis earthquake, as the final jolt in this series of disasters, together with its predecessor in Malazgirt (Milazgirdê) in 1903, bears striking facts in terms of its reasons and consequences, which may resemble what other cataclysms in the region have shown, such as the most recent one on 6 February.

#### **“Palace’s submission to rebelling Kurds”**

We can trace similar disastrous outcomes and consequent public anger as well in past earthquakes, Sedat Ulugana [said](#) in Yeni Yaşam on 21 February, as he told the story of the quake of 1907 in Bitlis under the last years of Ottoman rule.

The disaster which took place on 16 March 1907 was followed by a Kurdish rebellion in the province three months later. During the events that lasted 38 days with the full participation of the local population regardless of religion and ethnicity, the Bitlis governor Mehmet Ferit Pasha *“who is well-known for his huge network of bribery in the province”*, barely [escaped](#) the rage of crowds who had been suffering from similar fatalities and corruption for years.

Known as the Bitlis Uprising, not to be confused with the other in 1914, it ended in the dismissal of Ferit Pasha and the central authority accepting the demands of sheikhs who led the revolt, which Bertram Dickson, the British vice-consul in Van at the time, regarded in his writings as the *“Palace’s submission to rebelling Kurds”*.

According to Ulugana, the Bitlis uprising also initiated the chain of events that stormed through the Ottoman Empire thereafter, eventually forcing the Sultan Abdulhamit II to re-enact the constitutional monarchy in 1908, after 32 years of suspending the constitution under his authoritarian and arbitrary rule.

#### **Adequacy steeped in discrimination**

What made the death toll of 6 February so horrendous for Turkey is its corrupt [policies](#) that rely on renting and populism, such as in the case of the notorious

construction [amnesties](#) that condoned and encouraged a construction craze where quake-related legislations were mostly ignored, many agree today.

Another tragic oversight, [argued](#) to be a result of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's personalisation of the state authority, is his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's failure in disaster response, which presumably took many further lives during the vital hours and days following the tremors.

This includes not only a lack of response or judgement but also arbitrary and detrimental [decisions](#) that are accused by the [opposition](#) to be taken only with motives of self-assertion and denial of responsibility by Erdoğan's "*one-man regime*".

Inadequacy and selfishness of the central authority were two facts that the 1907 earthquake victims were familiar with too, in the form of discrimination, from the disaster that had occurred four years earlier in the neighbouring district of Malazgirt, which is now within the province of Muş (Mûş).

The work for aid and emergency response to the rubble in Malazgirt turned into a mess, says Ulugana, as the rescue teams, consisting of soldiers, gave priority to soldiers and their families who were trapped under the rubble of the regimental command in the district:

"Thus, hundreds of civilians were left to die. After the earthquake, the aid sent to the region was distributed to the tribes connected with the Hamidiye Regiments; the Armenians and the Kurds who were not members of the Hamidiye Regiments were devastated by hunger and cold."

### **Intervention of the "unknown"**

Vice-consul Dickson then went to Malazgirt and offered to deliver aid from his own budget to the people who were left to their own. However, the Bitlis Governorate and the Command of the Fourth Army Zeki Pasha did not accept the offer, claiming that "*the Ottoman government had already provided aid to all victims of the earthquake.*"

The malignity against Armenian and Kurdish victims in the Malazgirt quake was not limited to state intervention in civilian aid, but, as witnessed after 6 February, [extended](#) to obstructions by "unidentified" saboteurs:

"When the Pro-Armenia newspaper published in its headlines letters that were sent by many Armenian quake survivors emphasising this issue, the Armenian Patriarchate and the benevolent people in the surrounding provinces rushed to help these earthquake victims who

were left to die by the state. However, the donations made by the Patriarchate and the benevolent people were stolen by 'unknown' people."

Theft and discrimination caused a small-scale outrage in the neighbourhood after being heard of, forcing governor Hüsnü Bey resign. "*But the real outrage, which appeared to be a milestone towards the end of an era, would break out with 1907 Bitlis earthquake,*" Ulugana says.

#### **Women, men against ruthless officer**

"On 16 March 1907, at around 04:00 in the morning, a massive earthquake occurred in Bitlis. The city and its surrounding settlements were levelled with the ground during the tremor. According to reports, some 3,000 of the 4,000 houses in the city collapsed. Thousands of people were trapped under the rubble. So much so that even the governor's office, built with the most modern technique in the city, was razed to the ground. Even the new governor Ferit Pasha, appointed to replace Hüsnü Bey after his name was involved in theft cases in the 1903 quake, living on the top floor of the governor's office, barely saved his own life."

An inexperienced governor in his forties who had come to the countryside from Istanbul for the first time, Ferit Pasha was nevertheless "*one of the most ruthless administrators of the Abdulhamit regime*", according to Ulugana.

Three months after the deadly earthquake where he too lost his mansion, while he was working in the barracks he built in Gökmeydan neighbourhood on the morning of 22 June, he faced a large group of nearly 10,000 men and women consisting of Kurds and Armenians led by Küfrevi Sheikh Abdülaki, with other sheikhs protesting him, in fact, not for the first time:

"In May, a large crowd had gathered in front of the governor's residence to protest the devaluation of the currency. All stores were closed on that day, while the Armenians retreated to their homes fearing that 'there will be a massacre again'. However, Muslim protestors later persuaded the Armenians to join them. The governor had managed to disperse the crowd at that time. But this time he would not succeed because thousands of people from the surrounding villages and towns had also flocked to the city that day."

According to the Bitlis commander Celal Pasha, who could not succeed in calming the crowd, thousands of men and women with sticks in their hands tried to break into Ferit Pasha's office. While the governor finally managed to escape from the barracks, meanwhile shooting a protestor dead with his revolver, and taking shelter in the military garrison, his aide Ermenek Zeki could not avoid being lynched by the outraged crowd, Celal Pasha notes.

### **Protesters telegraph demands to Sultan**

The crowd of thousands of women and men then occupied the telegraph office and began to send telegrams to the central government in Istanbul with their demands, including the governor's immediate dismissal which was sent directly to Abdulhamit at Yıldız Palace. *"However, the expected response did not come."*

After that, Celal Pasha, under the sheikh's supervision, began to telegraph with Zeki Pasha, the Commander of the Fourth Army. Enraged by Celal Pasha's mediation of the people's wishes, Zeki Pasha decided to intervene in the rebellion with the soldiers he gathered from surrounding provinces in coordination with the central authority.

"Meanwhile, Celal Pasha sent another telegram, arguing that military intervention would completely mess things up. In that case, he stated, the sheikhs in the city would obtain armed forces from the surrounding tribes, which would trigger an undesirable larger-scale rebellion. [...] Zeki Pasha's opinion must have changed because the military units that set out from Erzurum, Van and Muş were put on hold in a place called Başhan, in order not to engage in conflict with the people. The central authority, realizing the severity of the situation a few days later, had to accept the demands of the sheikhs. He [Abdulhamit II] dismissed Ferit Pasha and sent Trabzon Governor Arnavut Tahir Pasha, who knew the region well, instead."

The events calmed down with the arrival of Tahir Pasha, however, this time the sheikhs and notables sought to get back the money they had given to Ferit Pasha. Increasing complaints about the former governor over time raked up the past, revealing the various reasons behind the rebellion, including hunger, poverty, bribery, embezzlement of tobacco taxes and demolition of houses of the poor due to road construction after the earthquake...

**"The regime could be shaken"**

Celal Pasha's avoidance of clashes with the people and his efforts as a mediator between the rebels and the state, which Dickson related to his sympathy to the reformist Young Turks, ensured the success of the uprising, Ulugana says.

As a result, the achievement of the earthquake-induced Bitlis Uprising in 1907 encouraged the Young Turk movement which would re-establish the constitutional order a year later, says Ulugana, "and it convinced them that even the Abdulhamit regime could be shaken."

*\*Sedat Ulugana is a historian and writer who has several important publications on subjects such as the Kurdish question in Turkey, the history of the Kurdish militias, Armenian genocide, tribal anthropology and oral Kurdish history. Ulugana, who received his doctorate in political history from the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in France, is one of the prominent Kurdologists of our time.*