

## The Kurds of the Caucasus

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In a book titled *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 190-1918*, Michael A. Reynolds, states that “Empires know no necessary obvious limits to their borders. This boundlessness offers pliability but also breed insecurity. This held especially true for the Ottoman and Russian empires, whose vast territories were contiguous and whose populations overlapped. Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Greeks, Tatars, Caucasian Turks, Assyrians, and Cossacks among others inhabited both empires and moved back and forth between them.”<sup>1</sup> Truly, the borderland between Russia and the Ottoman empires was overlapping; or as Reynolds claims “blurred into each other.”<sup>2</sup> In accordance with their territorial ambitions, both empires tried to manipulate the groups living in the edges of both empires. Needless to say, the inhabitants of these blurry areas were by no means passive bystanders in this historical imperial contest. Their most significant bargaining chip is the threat of switching political loyalties from one empire to the other.

It is in this context that we can bring in the Kurds and their relations to the surrounding empires and to other inhabitants in the region. Some sources claim that a group of people who were labeled as Kurds have lived in the Caucasus region for a millennium. However, there is no evidence to suggest that these groups defined themselves as Kurds. For example, we know that the well-known Shaddadid dynasty lived in the region; and they were labeled as Kurds at the present. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to indicate that the members of the Shaddadid

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<sup>1</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, 46. Here the author talks about eastern Anatolia but one can also add the Caucasus to this proposition.

emirate were self-consciously a Kurdish one. Defining an ethnic group is also a major problem for historians of the present. Such lack of clarity in identifying and categorizing this group of people in the Caucasus directly affects the historiography of the Kurds. Therefore, the first portion of this research will problematize defining the Kurdish identity in the Caucasus region.

Let me begin by referring to my earlier research on the formation of Kurdish identity. I have argued elsewhere that Kurdish nationalism emerged as a viable political movement during World War I. In other words, rise of Kurdish nationalism coincides with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. However, a multiform Kurdish identity existed prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This lack of uniformity is one of the reasons for the unreliability of statistics on the Kurds. This observation is visible also in the context of Kurds in the Caucasus especially around and the aftermath of World War I. The greatest challenge to make estimates on Kurdish presence in the Caucasus is to define who the Kurd is.

There is no comprehensive study on the Kurdish population in the area especially in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is understandable since World War I made it almost impossible to collect reliable data. Most reliable statistics on the Kurdish population comes from the early Soviet era. Focusing only on the Kurds in Soviet Azerbaijan, Daniel Muller presents authoritative figures. In his article “The Kurds of Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920-91,”<sup>3</sup> Muller also makes references to earlier periods:

A useful start is a list of settlements published in 1855 in the annual *Kavkazskii kalendar'* [Caucasian Calendar] issued by the viceroy's chancellery. The list covers all *Shamakhinskaia guberniia* [Shamakha governorate ], then

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<sup>3</sup> *Central Asian Survey* (2000), 19/1: 41-77.

comprising most of the territory of present-day ‘mainland’ Azerbaijan (...) minus the Nakhichevan enclave. No Kurds were listed there except in *Zangezurskii uchastok* [Zangezur division ], indeed only in two of its five *minbashestva* [headmanships]. These included most of the area later known as ‘Red Kurdistan’.

In his book, Reynolds brings in Mikhail Lazarev’s figure prior to World War I as 150,000 Kurds living under Russian control and 5 to 5.5 million under the Ottomans.<sup>4</sup> For comparison, we can state that Kemal Karpat estimated that, based on Ottoman official figures, between 1906-07, the total population in the Ottoman eastern vilayets was 3, 147, 880; of these 2,483,135 or 78.89% were Muslims and only 664,745 or 21.11% were non-Muslim.<sup>5</sup> Reynolds further claims that Armenians population was somewhere between one-quarter and one third of the six Ottoman provinces, which could be estimated to be somewhere around one million. In Russia's Caucasus, Armenian population was somewhere in between 1,118,094 and 1.5 million.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the borderland area where Kurds and Armenians lived, even prior to the end of World War I, the Muslims in general and Kurds in particular grossly outnumbered the Armenians. This fact is significant to understand inter-communal relations in the region and shifting attitudes of the Russian empire towards the Kurds.

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> This was cited in Reynolds but reference was not to the Karpat book but Hovannisian’s *Armenia on the Road*, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, p. 48. He arrives at this conclusion based upon several secondary sources, such as Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road*, pp. 35-37. According to Armenian Patriarchal records in 1912, the Armenian population in the Ottoman empire was 1,018,000 Armenians, claiming nearly 40% of the total population of the six Ottoman provinces.

## Russian Interests in the Kurds

In the course of the 19th century, Russia fought against the Ottoman Empire four times and Iran twice. What is telling for the purpose of this paper is that all these wars took place in the Caucasus. This fact alone clearly demonstrates the geostrategic significance of the region for all three empires. According to Celile Celil, however, despite this fact, Russia's political goal in the region was not territorial expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Celil claims that Russia had two main goals in determining her Caucasus strategy; 1) to counter British influence in the Near East and Central Asia, 2) to understand the political loyalties of the locals *vis-à-vis* the rival Ottoman empire.<sup>7</sup> In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia had only very limited diplomatic representation in the Ottoman Empire, hence her intelligence gathering was very limited. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the 1877-78 war with the Ottoman Empire, Russia felt the need for greater information about this rival empire and discovered the Kurds as potential allies that could be used against the Ottomans.

In order to understand the role of the Kurds in the Caucasus region, Russia's Caucasus chief of staff N. N. Belyavskiy charged captain P. I. Averyanov to prepare a report on the Russian-Kurdish relations during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Belyavskiy was trying to understand the following: what was the nature of the participation of the Kurds in the wars against the Ottoman Empire; what were the defining characteristics of the Kurdish/Russia relations; what was the current political standing of the Kurds in Russia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire; and what would be the possible position of the Kurds in case Russia fought against Iran and the Ottoman Empire? Averyanov was given access to rich Russian archives in Tblisi and produced a valuable work answering clearly the questions posed above. His report was later published in 1900 in Russian

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<sup>7</sup> "Introduction" in P. I. Averyanov, *Osmanlı, İran, Rus Savaşında Kürtler* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2010, p. 9.

and soon after it was translated into Turkish as the Ottomans found the report rather invaluable in understanding the Kurds in the region.

Averyanov's report is mostly descriptive allowing the historian to get a sense of how the Russians observed and defined the Kurds. In a section titled "Current Situation of the Kurds in Russia," the author claims that approximately 4 to 4.5% of the total Kurdish population lived under Russian control.<sup>8</sup> The Kurds in Russia are not rather too different from their other kinsmen living in Iran and Turkey (Ottoman Empire) in all aspect but one; that is tribal structure. Averyanov here claims that tribal structure of the Kurds in Russia was fast dissolving due to the fact that they live under Russian system for a century and their assimilation to settled life disrupted their tribal organizations.

Kurds seems to have problems with local Armenian security apparatus in the Caucasus. Averyanov claims that Armenian authority on the Kurds hurt the feelings of many Kurds as both people were hostile to each other for centuries. "While under Turkish sovereignty Kurds internalized hating the Armenians. When the Kurds became Russian citizens, they fell under Armenian authority. This event coincided with such a sensitive period that both parties did not recovered from past sufferings inflicted from the other side."<sup>9</sup> Ottomans were trying to lure the Kurds under Russian control with promises of land on the Ottoman side. Especially during the formative period of the Hamidiye Regiments, the Ottomans increased their recruiting propaganda from the Russian Kurds.

Averyanov lists a number of preventive measures to undermine the Ottoman attempts. For example, Russian side 1) increased the border security to prevent illegal passing of the Kurds

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<sup>8</sup> Information in this section comes mostly from Averyanov, pp. 255-65.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 258.

to the other side; 2) increased surveillance on the Kurds in Russia; 3) tighten the control over some significant personalities and tribes; and 4) rewarded loyal Kurds publicly. We are informed that many Kurds still managed to join in the Hamidiye Regiments.<sup>10</sup>

Averyanov continues to give us more information about Kurdish-Armenian relations in the Caucasus in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian captain observes “Kurds who are generally ignorant of power relations in the Russian Caucasus were abused and terribly exploited by Armenians who were better educated. For example, Armenians would first seize the land owned by the Kurds and then with a mock court decision, they would legally transfer these lands to themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Averyanov emphasizes that the Russian Kurds were almost entirely illiterate and did not speak Russian. Accordingly, in case of any conflict with the Armenians, the Kurds were always on the losing side, which weakened their loyalty to the Russian Empire. To prevent Kurdish migration to the Ottoman Empire, and to gain Kurdish loyalty, Averyanov suggests that a special regional administrative structure just for the Kurds should be created which could also assume advisory role to guide the Kurds. Such administrative sub-structures were envisioned before, according to Averyanov, but have not been realized. Furthermore, education of the Kurds should be a priority and schools should be opened up to educate the Kurds as they requested schools from the local governors many times. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was not even one Kurdish student enrolled in a school in the Caucasus. In his report, Averyanov concludes that literacy and education would enable the Kurds to have correct and positive information about Russia and encounter the negative image of Russia propagated by the Ottoman agents. This would also protect them from Armenian abuse.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 260.

In addition, Averyanov suggests in his report that the Kurds needed to be transitioned to be settled farmers and protected from raids, looting and robbery coming from the Iranian and Ottoman sides.

Averyanov's report is very descriptive of the daily life and political shortcomings of the Kurds in the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We also learn a great deal about Kurdish-Armenian relations and Kurds' position in regards to Russia and other surrounding empires. As a Russian officer, Averyanov depicted the Kurds as ignorant, wild nomads who did not have a clear national consciousness. They only have a raised sense of freedom (being free from any authority) and love and loyalty to their own tribe or the area they live in. Averyanov bases his other significant observation on one of the well-known Kurdish revolts, the Ubeydullah movement of 1880-81. Due to lack of participation and hence failure of this rebellion which was led by a Kurdish Sheikh in the region, Averyanov concludes that at the moment there was no religious fanaticism among the Kurds and religion was not sufficient to mobilize the Kurds. Consequently, there was no moral link between the Kurds and the Turks other than the religion they share. And this religious link had been weakening recently due to Kurdish sheikhs who had been for some time claiming that the Ottoman Sultans were not the real inheritors of the Caliphate. Averyanov closes his report with a statement: "therefore, what will determine the loyalty of the Kurds in a possible war between Russia and the Ottomans is the material gain, not religion."<sup>12</sup>

Even though the historian should not take Averyanov's observations and conclusions at the face value, he/she cannot deny them the due respect for the author's eye on the detail. We can substantiate several points in this report with other sources. For example, dealing with

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 231-32.

slightly later period as World War I, Zharmukhamed Zardykhan examines how the Kurds were depicted in Russian sources.<sup>13</sup> This article is about the Ottoman Kurds, however, the reader should keep in mind that they lived in this “blurry areas” that changed hands many times between the two imperial rivals. Therefore, terms “Ottoman Kurd” or “the Russian Kurd” do disservice to reader if it is perceived that they are entirely two distinct groups.

In any case, Zharmukhamed Zardykhan points out that more often than not, Kurds in Russian sources are described in a pejorative way, “emphasizing their savagery, arms-fetishism, and defiance.”<sup>14</sup> During the World War I period, this description of Kurd as savage by nature became a bit ameliorated. In a great example of Russian realpolitik, as the wars with the Ottoman Empire intensified, the image of the Kurd was transformed from “a nation of robbers by nature” to “victims of Ottoman neglect,” which left them no chance but to be savages. On the eve of World War I, Kurds were promoted from being “‘absolute evil’ to that of a minor strategic partner.”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, during World War I, Russian and Ottoman empires paid particular attention to the Kurds sharing their borders. This proposition is especially true during the 1915 Armenian massacres. A Russian Lieutenant-General N. G. Korsun estimated that prior to 1917, there were 75,000 Kurds serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Ottoman Armies.<sup>16</sup> There were also the reformed Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments under the new name of the Tribal Light Cavalry

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<sup>13</sup> “Ottoman Kurds of the First World War Era: Reflections in Russian Sources” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42/1 (2006), 67-85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> N. G. Korsun, *Pervaya mirovaya vojna na kavkazskomfronte: Operativno-strategicheskiy ocherk* (Moskva: Voenno-izdatel'stvo, 1946), 30 as cited in Zardykhan, p. 74. The author claims that “Despite the 66% decrease in the overall number of Kurdish soldiers, (...) the total number of Kurds in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Ottoman Armies amounted to 25,000 in 1917.” I was not able to confirm the validity of this number.



Regiments.<sup>17</sup> These Kurdish tribal forces were mainly utilized to counter and subdue the Armenian threat supported by Russia. Accordingly, as Zardykhan noted, these Kurdish regiments were mentioned in the writings of Russian officers. Russian assessment of them prior to World War I was somewhat dismissive, an appraisal based mainly on the observation that “German and Ottoman command did not trust the Kurds and deliberately equipped them with an insufficient amount of outmoded armaments and ammunitions.”<sup>18</sup> Towards the end of World War I, after the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Ottoman portion of the Kurdish areas, Kurdish fighters of the Ottoman Empire were labeled as “obnoxious traits.”<sup>19</sup>

Kurdish-Armenian relations are another subject to which Russian sources devote attention. Averyanov’s observations on poor Kurdish conditions under Armenians in the Russian Caucasus are contradicted by Kamal Madhar Ahmad’s conclusions on Armenians suffering under Kurdish dominance in the Ottoman side. According to Ahmad “the injustice done to Armenian farmers by the Kurdish *ağas* far exceeded that suffered by the Kurds, adding that certain cases of real slavery took place, where the Armenians were registered, sold and bought as the property of Kurdish *beks*.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1914, a Russian Armenian priest Ruben Bekgulyants remarked on the similarity between the Kurds and the Armenians in terms of social structure. Bekgulyants, amazed at the existence of nomadic Armenians, observed that “the only difference between [the Kurds and the

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on the Hamidiye see Janet Klein, *Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militia in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 3-6.

<sup>18</sup> Zardykhan, 74; see also Osman Aytar, *Hamidiye Alaylarından Köy Koruculuğuna* (Istanbul: Medya Güneşi, 1992), 140.

<sup>19</sup> Zardykhan, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 148 as cited in Zardykhan, 78.

Armenians], which had the ‘same morals and customs’, was the fact that the Armenians lived more cleanly and went to school during the winter.”<sup>21</sup>

In his survey depicting changing Russian attitude towards the Kurds around the World War I period, Zharmukhamed Zardykhan concludes that the representation of the Kurds in Russian sources before, during and after the Great War is not uniform. But, what was the attitude of the Ottoman government towards the Kurds residing in the buffer zone?

### **Ottoman Interest in the Kurds:**

We know from historical sources that Ottoman government saw allies in the Muslim Kurds in her competition with the Christian Russian Empire. This observation is most evident especially during the war time politics against Russia. The creation of the Kurdistan province in 1847 is a prime example for this claim. As wars with Russia intensified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire felt a great need to create a super-sized administrative unit in a place where Ottoman, Russian and Persian empires meet. The Ottoman government called this province the *Kürdistan Eyaleti* which shared borders with Russia and Iran. An imperial edict written on 6 May 1846, makes a case for choosing Ahlat, a small town near to Iran and Russia, as the headquarters of the Ottoman Anatolian Army. The *irade* reads:

Müşir Pasha firstly stated that the village of Harput, ... although it is a suitable place to station the army, is peripheral to the headquarters of the army. On the other hand, Ahlat—which is located on the other shore of Lake Van, and has suitable weather and fertile soil, and is located at the center of the Imperial Army (*Ordu-yu Hümayun*)—is, unlike Harput, close to the Iranian and Russian borders.

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<sup>21</sup> As cited in Zardykhan, 78.

Ahlat provides better transportation and logistical support and is located in the heart of Kurdistan, where the Kurds can be better controlled with the iron fist (*pençe-i satvet*), which proves to be necessary. Therefore, it is suggested to the exalted Sultan that Ahlat should become the headquarters of the Anadolu army. The appropriate action should be taken pending the Sultan's approval.<sup>22</sup>

Evident in this *irade* is also Ottoman government's desire to control the Kurdish population. In other words, creation of the Kurdistan province in the Ottoman Empire aimed at controlling the Kurdish aspirations and deterring any shift in their political loyalties towards the other neighboring empires. Related to this is the Ottoman desire to check the Russian territorial expansionist designs.<sup>23</sup>

The same sentiment is also true for the following centuries until the end of the Ottoman Empire. To demonstrate this, I can point out a memorandum by Mr. A. Ryan of the British High Commission of Constantinople in 1920 displaying the Ottoman attitude towards the Kurds on the Russian border. Mr. Ryan informs London of his meeting with Hamdi Pasha, former Minister of Marine. "I was approached, some days ago, by Hamdi Pasha (...) on the subject of the utilization of the Kurds as a barrier against the descent of the Bolsheviks towards Mesopotamia. (...) Hamdi Pasha said that the Bolsheviks had now extended to old Turco-Russian frontier and that they constituted an imminent danger to the countries lying south thereof, including Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. He urged that H.M. Government should use the Kurds as a barrier. " It is fair to say that using the Kurds as a barrier against the other empires in the region had

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<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister's Ottoman Archives, Mesail-i Mühimme, 1310.

<sup>23</sup> On a different scale, one can see similar moves by the Ottomans against the Safavid Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; see especially chapter 4 in Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004)

been a determining factor of the Ottoman administrative policies towards the Kurds. This memorandum clearly captures that sentiment.

### **KURDS AND ARMENIANS IN THE OTTOMAN PARLIAMENTARY DISCUSSIONS**

The first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very eventful for the Ottoman Empire. One of the events related to our discussion here is the rapprochement attempt by Kurds and Armenians at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Şerif Pasha, a Kurdish notable who was already in Paris,<sup>24</sup> and Bogos Nubar Pasha, the head of the Armenian delegation in Paris,<sup>25</sup> signed an agreement declaring that Kurds and Armenians long suffered under the Turkish administration. In pamphlet, titled *Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People*, Şerif demanded from the victors of World War I an independent Kurdistan. This claim for an independent Kurdish state clearly did not sit well with the Ottoman members of the Parliament (*Meclis-i Mebusan*). We have parliamentary minutes to make sense out of what the Ottoman politicians thought of the Kurds and their relations with the Armenians.

In a session on 26 February 1920<sup>26</sup> the members of parliament brought the issue of the Şerif Pasha's memorandum. In reference to, Serif/Bogos rapprochement MPs collected telegrams from local Kurds of the Ottoman Empire protesting the Kurdish/Armenian joint declaration. "In Paris Bogos Nubar and Şerif Pasha declared alliance," states Şefik Bey, a representative of Bayazıt—a town on the Russian border. "In their joint declaration, they mention that the noble people of the Kurds and Armenians come from the same race (*müşterek ve kardeş bir kavm ve cins...*) and decided that the two will secede from the empire with the hope of establishing a separate government. (...) The Kurds and Armenians are different peoples with

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<sup>24</sup> Şerif Pasha was an Ottoman diplomat and a son of a former Ottoman Foreign Minister, Said Pasha.

<sup>25</sup> Bogos (or Boghos) Nubar Pasha was a son of a former Prime Minister of Egypt.

<sup>26</sup> Session number 14.

different history”<sup>27</sup> After Şefik Bey, Hüseyin Avni of Erzurum added “the Kurds and the Armenians cannot be siblings. Today Kurds and Armenians are fighting and killing each other in month Ararat. (...) [They] drink each other’s blood.”<sup>28</sup>

### **British intelligence on Kurds in Caucasus**

Another important source for the Kurds in the Caucasus region at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the British sources. Consistent with their desire to establish their foothold in the region, British intelligence officers were busy collecting information on the Pan-Turanian movement in the Caucasus led by Enver Pasha. In one report, we can also find information on the Kurds and their relations with the Armenians. An intelligence report numbered CAB/24/33<sup>29</sup> makes the following observations. This is significant to demonstrate how an empire which is not indigenous to the region viewed the imperial competition between the rival Ottoman and Russian empires for the loyalty of the Kurds and Armenians.

*When the Osmanlis conquered Armenia at the beginning of the 16th century, their main concern was to establish a bulwark against Persia, and the Kurdish tribes served excellently for the purpose. Notwithstanding their Persian dialect, the Kurds have not, and never had a vestige of Persian national feeling. Their social consciousness is limited by the tribe, the sole object of tribal policy is to evade external control, and in the 16th and 17th centuries the Persian Government, which was near and powerful, seemed a more immediate menace to tribal independence than the distant Ottoman Government at Constantinople. The Ottoman Government was content with a nominal suzerainty over*

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<sup>27</sup> Meclis-i Mebusan, session 14, 26 February 1920, vol. 1, p. 209. Şefik Bey was possibly referring to a joint declaration by Şerif Pasha and Bogos Nubar Pasha, signed on 28 November 1919; see F.O. 371/4193.

<sup>28</sup> Meclis-i Mebusan, session 14, 26 February 1920, vol. 1, p. 210-11.

<sup>29</sup> “Report on the Pan-Turanian Movement” October 1917 Intel Report (Appendix I: The Kurds).

*the Kurdish chiefs, and in return the Kurds guarded the Ottoman Empire's Persian frontiers--playing the same role here as the Bosniaks and Albanians in the Balkans.*

*Friction between the Kurds and the Ottoman Government began in the early 19th century, when Sultan Mahmud reduced the semi-independent Kurdish chiefs in Armenia and Kurdistan, and set up the beginnings of an official Ottoman administration in their place. This centralizing policy was reversed about 1890 by Abd-ul-Hamid, who hoped to keep his various subjects in subjection by playing them off against each other and weakening them all. Abd-ul-Hamid gave the Kurds rifles, and their chiefs the title of commanders of Hamidie gendarmerie, and let them loose on the Armenian; but Ottoman policy was reversed again in 1908 by the C.U.P., who hoped to regenerate the Empire by unity and internal strength. The C.U.P. attempted to call the Kurds to order, and they had a notable success in subduing the practically independent Milli Confederation built up by Ibrahim Pasha. But they could not call in the arms which Abd-ul-Hamid had given out, though they improved the situation by allowing the Christian population to bear arms too.*

*As soon, however, as they intervened in the European War, the C.U.P. went back deliberately to Abd-ul-Hamid's policy. They distributed more arms to the Kurdish tribes, encouraged them to take part in the invasion of Azerbaijan, and incited them against the Christians. From April 1915 onwards, the massacres of Armenian convoys in course of deportation were generally carried out by Kurdish bands, reinforced by released criminals and Ottoman gendarmes. But not all the Kurd took the Government's side. In Cilicia, for instance, the Kurds deplored the treatment of the Armenians, as did the rest*

*of the Moslem population; and in the Dersim highlands the Kurdish or pseudo-Kurdish tribes have given shelter to Armenian refugees from Kharput and elsewhere.*

*The Kurdish sense of independence has been galled by the Ottoman conscription, and the percentage of Kurd[ish] deserters has notoriously been higher than that of Armenians, not to speak of Turks. Many of the Dersimli tribes refused altogether to supply recruits, and the Ottoman military authorities have failed to send effective punitive expeditions against them. At present the Dersim country is a kind of no-man's-land between the Turkish and Russian lines, and many Kurdish chiefs are under Russian influence.*

*This Russian influence dates from the Russian occupation of Azerbaijan for except in the Erivan district there are practically no Kurds in the Caucasus provinces, under direct Russian sovereignty. The occupation of Azerbaijan increased Russia's political prestige among the Kurds, and roughly coincided with the fall of Abd-ud-Hamid and the substitution of a regime in Turkey hostile to Kurdish privileges. The Russian governments as a power making for disorder from outside, was more congenial to many Kurds than the C.U.P. in its first genuine enthusiasm for order and good government.*

*During the War the partisanship of the Kurds has varied with the military situation. They were pro-Turk when the Turks were on the offensive in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus; they have turned pro-Russian in the Ottoman territories which the Russians have subsequently occupied. The Russian military authorities have treated these Ottoman Kurds with extraordinary favour, have left them their arms, and have*

*connived at their raids, not only upon returned Armenian refugees, but even upon the Russian line, of communications. The Kurds were naturally a more congenial element than the Armenians to the Tsarist Government, but the Armenians complain that even since the Revolution the military authorities, have continued their pro-Kurdish policy.*

*The Armenian volunteers in the Russian Army have taken opportunities of reprisals, and recently it was reported that a punitive expedition by Armenian volunteers against the Kurds N[orth] E[ast] of Lake. Van had resulted in massacres of women and children. It is significant that this alleged atrocity was taken up by the Tatar press of Baku. Hitherto Tatars and Kurds have had little to do with one another; but if Ottoman Armenia becomes incorporated with the Russian provinces of the Caucasus in a federal Russian Republic, it is possible that Kurds and Tatars may work together as an Islamic political bloc.*

*But the future of the Kurds lies less in Armenia (under whatever regime Armenia may come) than in Northern Mesopotamia, which is certainly on the eye of economic development. So long as it lay fallow, the steppe-country between Aleppo and Mosul was an Arab domain-though the Kurds drove their flocks there for the winter, and Ibrahim Pasha, the last great Kurdish chieftain, made his headquarters at Viranshehr, .on the edge of the plain. But agriculture is now following the Baghdad Railway from Aleppo towards the east, and where Kurd and Bedawi have taken to the land, the Kurd has shown himself so far to be the-better man. If therefore the agricultural development of the country proceeds gradually, and if the local population is not swamped by reservoirs of man-power from abroad, Northern Mesopotamia seems destined to become Kurdish*



*land; and; here, freed from their tribal tradition and their nomadic habits, the-Kurds will be more susceptible to the influences of civilization.*

*What will be the policy of the Ottoman Government towards the progress of the Kurds in Northern Mesopotamia, supposing it remains in their-hands at the peace-settlement? It is possible that they may try to carry out the threat of the Danish nurse's gendarme; but it is much more likely that they will seek an understanding with the Kurds, on the basis, of national autonomy instead of the old tribal independence. The Turco-Kurdish entente, in one form or another, is in the tradition of Ottoman statesmanship, but the future policy of the Ottoman Government towards the Kurds will be, a subsidiary consequence of their policy towards the Arabs. If they offer autonomy to their Arab provinces, the growing Kurdish agricultural population will share the benefit; if they decide for repression, and Turkification, Kurds and Arabs will suffer alike.*

These observations from 1917 by British intelligence did not foresee the collapse of the Pan-Turanian movement in the Caucasus but open up a window for us to see the interrelations between the Kurds, the Armenians, the Russians and the Turks. This document contains indications of how the British viewed the competition between the Russian and the Turkish empires. Interestingly, we also see how British sources viewed the relationship between the Kurds and the Armenians.

## **Conclusion:**

Depending on political motivations, one can subscribe to one of the explanations of what happened in the region. 1) This was an ethnic problem and one group tried to exterminate the other based on their ethnicity (religion), 2) this was a regional problem (Anatolian and trans

Caucasian problem) where involved parties tried to dominate each other but the weak one lost. In the current historiography, the Turks, in an attempt to minimize or absorb to massacres of Armenians, subscribe to the latter. Armenians, on the other hand, insist on the former. This is expected; however, what is significant is that Armenians and Kurds downplay the violent rivalry between them in favor of the narratives that present the Kurds as manipulated party by the Turks and hence form an alliance between two ethnic rivals at the expense of the third one, the Turks. Michael Reynolds correctly states that “Although rivalry with Kurds was at the center of the Ottoman Armenian concerns up through World War I, Armenian historiography generally glosses over this in favor of narratives that present Kurds as victims of the Turkish Republic. Kurdish historiography [on the other hand] has been preoccupied with the “failure” of Kurds to achieve a nation-state of their own. It has preferred to downplay conflict with Armenians in favor of emphasizing struggles for ethno-national self-determination against the Turkish, Arab, and Iranian states.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, “Abdürrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 12, 2 (Spring 2011); 411-50. Quotation is from page 13.