

ARMENIA

The Survival of a Nation

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CROOM HELM LONDON
ST MARTIN'S PRESS NEW YORK

Factional strife among the Armenians – a recurring impediment – forced it to close after less than a year; but in 1881 he was able to open another, the Central School (*Kendramakan Varcharan*). But this time it was the authorities that objected, and after four years of work the school was closed in March 1885. Portukalian left Van, to spend the rest of his life exiled in Marseilles.

It was as a direct result of his activity that the Armenakan party was founded in 1885; from Marseilles he himself kept in touch with its leaders, and published a journal of political and social enlightenment, *Armenia*. One of Portukalian's main points was that Armenians abroad should help those in their native land, both financially and by telling the world about their oppressed condition. Some experienced Armenians took note: in December 1885 an Armenian Patriotic Society of Europe was founded; its headquarters were in Chesham Road, Fulham – the private house of its leader, Garabed Hagopian. This society was to play an important part in disseminating news and arousing liberal opinion in Britain nine years later, when details of the Saran massacre began to leak out.

Despite the absence of their leading spirit, the Armenians of Van worked out their political principles. In great secrecy – in a tunnel used for pressing grapes, furnished with nothing but a straw mat – Portukalian's disciples met and hammered out their ideological platform. Their central aim, they decided, was to 'win for the Armenians the right to rule over themselves, through revolution'. The Armenakan concept of revolution was distinctly low-keyed, compared with that of succeeding organisations; terror, agitation and militant demonstrations were viewed with disfavour. The people were to be trained with arms, as guerrilla fighters, but essentially for defensive purposes, against the terrorism of the Ottoman empire. How would the land of Armenia be liberated from the Ottoman yoke – since self-defence and guerrilla warfare do not by themselves free a nation? Hope was placed in the great powers. Armenakans were to 'prepare the people for a general movement, especially when the external circumstances – the disposition of the foreign powers and neighbouring races – seem to favour the Armenian cause'.²⁸

It is arguable that this belief – that the great powers would intervene in the Ottoman empire, and rescue the Armenian people and their revolutionary leaders from the clutches of Turkish misrule – was the greatest single error of the Armenian revolutionary parties throughout the period 1885–1908. With hindsight we can see that after 1881, when Tsar Alexander II with his unpredictable idealism was no more, and when Gladstone's Liberalism had become tarnished by experience and failure, it was futile to hope that the solid, bourgeois powers of Europe would intervene in favour of a revolutionary uprising. But Armenians placed enormous faith in those twin creations of British diplomacy: the Cyprus Convention and article 61 of the Berlin treaty. They believed that under the terms of these two instruments the powers, and especially Britain, were bound to intervene in their affairs when Ottoman rule manifested its true face.