

Age of Rogues
Rebels, Revolutionaries
and Racketeers at the
Frontiers of Empires

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the Armenians of Sasun maintained close cultural and economic connections with the homeland, the source of their wealth and the imperial capital among other places through trade, education, pilgrimages and married migration.¹ The Sasun was a particularly contested zone: the increase in the number of peasants who arrived in Sasun to graze their animals increased in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Ottoman Empire's governor of Van witnessed this increase in the wretched conditions of their wintering grounds.² Zevce Pehlivan has pointed to the increasing sense of drought in the nineteenth century and the profound crisis in which they placed the peasants of Ottoman Kurdistan, particularly with regard to the scarcity of available pasture and the mass starvation of herd animals.³ The use of pasture in Sasun quickly became a source of dispute between Armenian peasants and Kurdish peasants. The Armenian peasants requested the intervention of the state to pasture their animals. While a law was in place for several years, it was no longer in effect by the 1890s both in order to address the peasants' disputes and for alternative pasture and to place the Sasun Armenians under the peasants' dominance. In a region where the indigenous – Muslim and Armenian alike – possessed firearms, disputes over the use of pasture resulted in armed clashes. Cattle raiding also took place with increasing frequency.

Between 1891 and 1904, Sasun and its inhabitants came to occupy a central position in the articulation of Ottoman policies of ethnic exclusion and hierarchisation, and Armenian revolutionary plans to organise an armed rebellion and attract international attention. For the ensuing Ottoman has paid little attention to the dynamics of these policies of exclusion, with the notable exception of the Hamidian massacres of 1895-6.⁴ Scholars have

¹ For Sasun's regional history in history, for example, see Yildirim S. Özalp, 'The Sasun Peasantry in Nineteenth-Century Turkey', in S. Özalp (ed.), *Armenian Highland Villages and Towns* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2002), 175-89.

² *BMN*, V, 32, 172-18, 2 August 1893.

³ Zevce Pehlivan, 'Drought and the Peasantry: Global Climate, Local Conditions, and the Crisis of Pastoralism in Late Ottoman Kurdistan', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, forthcoming. I am grateful to the author for sharing it with me before publication.

⁴ This is also true in relation to Sasun: most recent research focuses on the massacre of 1895. For a study of the 1896 massacre based primarily on diplomatic, journalistic, and military

studied the economic and demographic impact of the large waves of pogroms and massacres against Armenians, and discussed the indirect influence of government policy in exacerbating the scale of the violence.⁸ Nevertheless, the singular focus on that episode of mass violence needs to be supplemented with studies which outline the dynamic processes by which a combination of Hamidian policy, Great Power posturing, Armenian revolutionary agitation, and the initiatives of local actors transformed ethno-confessional hierarchies over the course of the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II.⁹

At the turn of the twentieth century Sasun became one of the most important testing grounds and showcases for Ottoman policy regarding Armenians. *Mobilization of local Muslims in the policing and suppression*

see generally, for Ottoman policy, Tessa Morris-Fesham, 'Massacres, Deportations, and Resettlement in the east of the Ottoman Empire: 1894-1896', *Columbia University*, 2011. For a study that goes beyond studies of the Ottoman policies, see William P. Fitt, 'The Complex Role of a Christian: The Young Muslims of 1894-96', in Tessa Morris-Fesham, *Ottoman Christians and the 1894-96* (2010). On Ottoman policy in the Ottoman Empire, see Tessa Morris-Fesham, *Massacres and Politics* (London, 2010). Tessa Morris-Fesham, 'The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire', in Tessa Morris-Fesham, *The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010). For an exploration of the role of the Ottoman Empire in the Ottoman Empire, see Tessa Morris-Fesham, *The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010).

⁸ Robert H. Bates, 'A Historical Inquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894-1896', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19(1) (1977), 101-110. John H. Coatsworth, 'The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire', in Tessa Morris-Fesham, *Ottoman Christians and the 1894-96* (2010). For an exploration of the Ottoman Empire, see Tessa Morris-Fesham, *The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010). For an exploration of the Ottoman Empire, see Tessa Morris-Fesham, *The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010).

⁹ Two important works on the revolutionary spirit include David Collier, 'What was Revolutionary about Armenian Revolutionary Parties in the Ottoman Empire?' in *Revolution in the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010). Tessa Morris-Fesham, 'The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire', in Tessa Morris-Fesham, *Ottoman Christians and the 1894-96* (2010). For an exploration of the Ottoman Empire, see Tessa Morris-Fesham, *The Ottoman Empire: The Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2010).

By the turn of the century, Sasun had become an important node in the network of revolutionary bands in a larger geography, which encompassed the Muş plain, the towns of Muş and Bitlis, and the districts of Ahlat and Kulp. Revolutionaries continued to assist Armenian peasants and organise targeted attacks against government officials, Muslim lords, whom they accused of oppressing the peasantry, and Armenian informers, whom they accused of cooperating with the Ottoman government. Their actions influenced the political atmosphere of the entire region. Raids by revolutionary bands under the leadership of Serob Vartanian, and the imperial troops' search for them heightened tensions in towns like Muş and Bitlis.⁷⁰

What the government viewed as a definitive victory over the

revolutionaries – much as they had done at the conclusion of the massacre in 1894 – would be a turning point in the escalation of internecine violence among Muslims and Armenians in the region, and the participation of the government in the further marginalisation of Sasun Armenians.

The following summer, the British Embassy approached the Porte with a request for an inquiry regarding allegations of mass violence against Armenians in Sasun. According to British reports, a 'sizeable group of gentlemen and local Kurds had arrived at the village of Haghark in pursuit of revolutionaries, pillaged it, killed dozens of persons and razed a number of buildings'.¹⁷ The salute accorded to the British request and dispatched two high-ranking officials – Brigadier General Ezer Paz from the General Council of Military Superiors (Tefik-i Umumi) Akbar Karamanli Akil and Mehmed Elmal from the Constantinople Council of Second Instance.¹⁸

Two separate sets of instructions are on file for the officials. The first, entitled set of instructions constitutes a brief summary of the allegations reported by the British Embassy, the military official's denial, and notes orders for the conduct of a fair and impartial inquiry (*Önce muayin tespit kâğıtları tahsis kâğıtlarıyla birlikte; vilayet ve kaza meclisleri ayrı ayrı gönderilsin*).¹⁹ The second set of instructions clarified the true expectations of the police. The officials were ordered to call foreign consuls to the region that their only concern was in the discovery of the truth. In fact, however, they were ordered to instruct all necessary officers to improve the conduct of the foreigners to establish an official investigation before localised news or information got distorted (*Önce muayin tespit kâğıtları tahsis kâğıtlarıyla birlikte; vilayet ve kaza meclisleri ayrı ayrı gönderilsin*).²⁰ In other words, the officials were instructed to make an appearance of an impartial inquiry while compiling a simple collection of all allegations, and acquiring a collective signed statement from local Armenian groups which attested to their affliction.

Unsurprisingly, Ezer Paz and Mehmed Elmal submitted an official report exactly as their office. They stated that Ak Paz had personally led a detachment of imperial troops to the village of Haghark after receiving

¹⁷ TNA, FO, 404/200, No. 81, 27 July 1900.

¹⁸ BNA, V 22, 422, 22 August 1900.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ BNA, V 22, 422, 22 August 1900.