

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

Edited by
Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Alp Yenen

EDINBURGH
University Press

the Armenians of Sasun maintained close cultural and economic connections with the homeland, the source of migration and flight, and the imperial capital among other places through trade, education, pilgrimage and marital migration.¹ The Sasun was a particularly contested zone: the increase in the number of pastoralists who arrived in Sasun to graze their animals increased in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Ottoman frontier governor of Cizre condemned this increase as the worsened conditions of their wintering grounds.² Zevce Pehlivan has pointed to the increasing sense of drought in the nineteenth century and the profound crisis to which they placed the pastoralists of Ottoman Kurdistan, particularly with regard to the scarcity of available pastures and the mass starvation of herd animals.³ The use of pastures in Sasun quickly became a source of dispute between Armenian peasants and Kurdish pastoralists. The Armenian peasants requested the intervention of the state to protect their arable. While a law was in place for several years, it was no longer in effect by the 1890s both in order to address the pastoralists' disputes and for alternative pastures and to place the Sasun Armenians under the pastoralists' dominance.

In a region where the inhabitants – Muslim and Armenian alike – possessed firearms, disputes over the use of pastures escalated to armed clashes. *Çiftlik* raiding also took place with increasing frequency.

Between 1891 and 1906, Sasun and its inhabitants came to emerge as central players in the articulation of Ottoman policies of ethnic inclusion and homogenisation, and Armenian revolutionary plans to organise an armed rebellion and attract international attention. For the emerging Sasunians has paid little attention to the dynamics of these policies of inclusion, with the notable exception of the Tharandian manuscript of 1895/6.⁴ Scholars have con-

¹ For Sasun's regional history in flight, for example, see Yildirim İ. Özalp, 'The Sasun Pastoralists in Nineteenth-Century Turkey', in R. Özalp (ed.), *Armenian Highland Belts and Townships of Asia Minor* (Istanbul, 2002), 179–89.

² *BMN*, V, 32, 172/18, 8 August 1891.

³ Zevce Pehlivan, 'Climate and the Nomadic United Clans, Local Institutions, 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 1894. For a study of the 1894 massacre based primarily on diplomatic, journalistic, and military

more of Soviet clothes among them, and finally engaged in revolutionary war. Moreover, they freely mingled with their Armenian neighbours, and adopted their language and cultural practices.¹⁷

In order to minimise Armenian influence in the region, Mikhaél had they obtained the repatriation of a network of religious and educational institutions in the region to bolster orthodoxy among the rebellious Kurds. More importantly, however, the policy was not to put much hand in Armenian sympathies shown such by Kurdish elites. He accepted that Armenian sympathies needed to be contained, but added that influence on Armenian accounts in the wilderness of the inner-confessional conflict would reduce the influence of Kurds in the region. If Kurds felt isolated, he felt that their authority was weakening, they might make common cause with the Armenians or openly revolt against the government.¹⁸ Therefore, the preservation of Muslim presence in the region would be beneficial to the government, and act as a bulwark against any future Armenian attempts at a rebellion.

Sasun was also one of the first regions in which Armenian revolutionaries sought to organise in large numbers. Its location in mountainous terrain afforded valuable shelter to small armed bands, while allowing access to the Muş plain and the town when they needed. The relative scarcity of gendarmes and soldiers in the region also drew the interest of early revolutionary organisers. Perhaps more important than both, however, was the established prevalence of the possession and utilisation of firearms among the peasants of the region. The Armenians of Sasun were known to have clashed with pastoralist Kurds over access to their pastures, and participated in the inter-tribal disputes of their Muslim lords and neighbours. Many revolutionaries viewed the presence of such a martial culture among Armenian peasants as a blessing and an opportunity: the extant truculence and experience were to be refocused and redirected against the state.

Yildiz Thandakian (1885–1947) was one of the first revolutionaries to arrive in Sasun. He was an Armenian Catholic from the imperial capital and worked as a primary school teacher in Muş between 1904 and 1906. He joined the nascent Thandakian Party in the late 1900s and participated

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 156a; Thandakian, *Revolution in Sasun* (1988, 2011), 171–72, 17 November 1906.