

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

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Fomenting and Seeding Disputes

In summer 1895, the Ottoman government found itself in a precarious position regarding the question of Armenian reforms. It had failed to pacify diplomatic pressures regarding the recent massacre of Sasun Armenians. Moreover, the Great Powers had presented the Porte with a reform plan in May. The Hunchakian Party organised a demonstration in the imperial capital at the end of September to protest the government's reluctance to implement the plan, during which several revolutionaries and policemen were killed. In October, Abdülhamid II announced his intention to implement the aforementioned reforms.⁶²

The empire-wide wave of anti-Armenian violence that which followed this announcement has been the subject of numerous studies.⁶³ Between autumn 1895 and early 1897, mobs, gendarmes and armed militias killed and wounded thousands of Ottoman Armenians in pogroms and massacres. Armenian property was looted and expropriated. In the countryside, many Armenians were forced to convert to Islam.⁶⁴ It is not within the scope of the current chapter to provide a comprehensive analysis of what came to be known as the Hamidian massacres. Nevertheless, their impact in May and Sasun would prove significant.

In spring 1895, French and British diplomatic representations had established a basic system of delivering aid to the Sasun Armenians to help them in their reconstruction of their villages and their resettlement in the region.⁶⁵ When the wave of anti-Armenian violence hit the province of Bitlis in autumn 1895 shortly after the announcement of the sultan's reform plan, the tide began to turn against the Sasun Armenians once again. Resembling many other pogroms during the Hamidian massacres, a Muslim mob attacked Armenian shops and homes after the Friday prayer in Bitlis

⁶² Haldunides, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, 122–4.

⁶³ For a representative sample, see Michael A. Khodanlou, *The Armenian Massacres of 1894–1896* (Lanham: The Cultural Complexification of the neo-Armenian State of 1895–1897), Chicago: Middle Eastern University Eastern Studies.

⁶⁴ Deringil, "The Armenian Question is Finally Closed".

⁶⁵ For assistance in kind, see TNA, FO, 424/187, No. 106, no. 2, 12 May 1896. For assistance in cash, see TNA, FO, 424/187, No. 225, no. 4 November 1896.

in late October. Hundreds of Armenians were killed, while others were left destitute as a result of the attack.⁶⁶

As the wave of anti-Armenian violence spread to the rest of the province, the aid programme to Sasun was left in a difficult position. According to the British vice-consul, the efforts of the district government of May had prevented the occurrence of a similar pogrom in the town. Nevertheless, relative peace and order had come at a price: the Muslim notables of the city called for a meeting with Ottoman officials and Armenian notables and incriminated the likelihood of a similar attack on May Armenians unless the missionaries and their aid workers helping Sasun left the city. The British vice-consul advised that the missionaries accede to these demands to preserve international peace.⁶⁷ The British aid relief programme persevered in a limited manner despite these pressures, entrusting the task of distribution to Ottoman officials, who were occasionally accused of embezzling the relief.⁶⁸

It was within this atmosphere of international and imperial neglect that Armenian revolutionaries resumed their efforts to arm Armenian peasants in Sasun, and turn them against the Ottoman government, while assisting them in their disputes with sedentary and pastoralist Muslims. The massacre of Sasun Armenians by the army, and government officials' obvious partiality motivated many local Armenians to join armed bands under the leadership of revolutionary leaders such as Serob Vartanian, Andranig Ozanian, Armenak Ghazarian and others.

Unlike the earlier burst of revolutionary activism in the region, however, it was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) that drew the Sasun revolutionaries to its ranks. It is likely that local recruits turned away from the Hunchakian Party in the wake of the organisation's internal turmoil in the aftermath of the Hamidian massacres, while the ARF succeeded in establishing a clandestine traffic of arms and people across the Russian and Iranian borderlands.⁶⁹ At least at the local level, organisational

⁶⁶ TNA, FCJ 426186, No. 751, 7 December 1895, no., 2, 8 November 1895, the Ottoman army governor blamed the missionaries and Armenian notables for having conspired to provoke Muslims to attack Armenians. FCJ, Yildiz Palace Archives (Istanbul) (Y. PAK, ARK.) 108103, 22 October 1895.

⁶⁷ TNA, FCJ 426182, no., 11 November 1895.

⁶⁸ For assistance in cash, see TNA, FCJ 426185, No. 229, no., 8 November 1895.

⁶⁹ Sasun, *Partiya-ha Tarzi-i Adharkan*, 538-40, 553-5.