

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

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by the government of Berlin, and a general sense of rage against openly defiant Armenian behaviour.³²

On the other hand, some of the Sasun Kurds, who viewed themselves as the rightful lords of the Armenian peasants, continued to trade with them. Local officials expressed concern over the leaders of these tribes – namely, Hişman Ağa of Sasun and Hüseyin Ağa of Hiyan – who refused to isolate the Armenians. Allegedly, the ağas reacted with disdain to official instructions that they refrain from associating with the Armenians. They stated that the Armenians were their subjects/clients under protection, and hence would not pay taxes to the state (*bu Ermeniler bizim re'aya ve himayemizdedirler devlete akça vermeyeceklerdir*).³³ However, government policy during and after the summer of 1894 would make such a position untenable for Kurdish notables in the region.

The consensus of government policy became clearer when the same region of local officials in particular attacked the Sasun Armenians in return for assistance. There was no effort to restrain the local or provincial actions in the pursuit of Sasun despite the bloody clashes of summer 1894. In fact, the former has would later be listed as one of the reasons why the Armenians dared to engage in rebellion, the implication being that the provincial/conservatory demands had kept the Armenians phobic (and) a negative view before government. Later similar actions (and) intercommunal enmity/solidarity.³⁴ In July, the provincial started attacking the Armenians, who returned to the safety of the mountains. The band of revolutionaries and armed peasants engaged in several clashes against the provincial, which left several dead and wounded on both sides. Unlike the previous year, however, the provincial failed to make substantial advances.³⁵ The provincial were intimidated by the army's proximity at this point, and took their dead to the encamp-

³² Sheikh Mehmed el-Zahir was listed as one of the main subjects for provincial intervention into Sasun on the pages of *Meclis-i Mevazir-i Mülkiye* (Meclis-i Mülkiye 1304/5). The government of Constantinople reported that the same Sheikh had claimed that he would lead a large number of his men to avenge the killings of his kinsmen in 1893. *Meclis-i Mülkiye*, V. 32, 17/12/94, 29 June 1895.

³³ *Meclis-i Mülkiye*, V. 32, 17/12/94, 22 July 1894.

³⁴ *Meclis-i Mülkiye*, V. 32, 17/12/94, 1 August 1894.

³⁵ *Meclis-i Mülkiye*, V. 32, 17/12/94, 22 August 1894.

infrastructure appeared to be the main determinant as to which revolutionary party would be successful.

By the turn of the century, Istanbül had become an important node in the network of revolutionary bands in a larger geography which encompassed the May plain, the coast of May and Bilecik, and the districts of Akhisar and Kütahya. Revolutionaries continued to seize Armenian peasants and organise targeted attacks against government officials, Muslim lords, whom they accused of oppressing the peasants, and Armenian informers, whom they accused of cooperating with the Ottoman government. Their actions influenced the political atmosphere of the entire region. Bands by revolutionary bands under the leadership of Ismail Yamanian, and the imperial troops' search for them heightened tensions in areas like May and Bilecik.⁷¹

The government relied heavily on Muslim proxies on the ground in its pursuit of revolutionaries and terrorisation of Armenian peasants so that they would deny shelter and support. Kurdish lords and religious leaders were able to collect intelligence on which villages and which homes the revolutionary leaders frequented, which Armenians were sympathetic to the revolutionaries, and what the number of recruits was. Moreover, Kurdish lords and their retinues inflicted 'punishments' on Armenian villages suspected of aiding and abetting, and responded with greater alacrity than the authorities when they received reports of nearby revolutionaries. In return, they faced virtual immunity from discipline and punishment.

In summer 1895, the aforementioned Halil Beyaz Aga cooperated with military authorities to trap and bring Ismail Yamanian to the village of Çeleğören in Istanbül. Yamanian and most of his family were killed during the attack. The officer in charge of the attack dispatched his severed head to the coast of the province in Bilecik for public display.⁷² The police awarded decorations and promotions to the soldiers, gendarmes and others who had done their duty.⁷³ What the government viewed as a definitive victory over the

⁷¹ BSA, *İstanbul Tercüme Mektebi ve Muvahhik Kuvvetleri Mühürleri* (1905, 1906), 36, 36992, 29 May 1895.

⁷² BSA, V. 1905, 136, 4692, 7 November 1895; Istanbül, *İstanbul Tercüme Mühürleri*, 367-68.

⁷³ BSA, V. 1905, 136, 4692, 7 November 1895.

was alternative plans to settle the Sasun 'problem' once and for all. The first option was to expel all Armenians from the area in Sasun where the revolutionaries had established control earlier. As early as 7 May, the palace informed the government of Berlin that women and children were to be given 'appropriate lodging' – implying that they were not to be sent back to their villages – while officials at the palace and the Ministry of the Interior discussed the feasibility of extending the Armenian presence on the May plan.¹⁴ The second option was to realise a plan which had been proposed before: the construction of a network of military army camps with a barracks in the village of Gelişim so that Ottoman troops could be present in the region throughout the year.¹⁵

In the end, the authorities adopted the latter solution. In addition to extending the reach of the Fourth Army further into the region, an important reason for their choice was British opposition to the scheme of mass deportations.¹⁶ After a number of executive orders to complete the construction of the military installations, the government of Berlin privately informed the palace that the project was nearing completion at the end of September. He requested the approval of the Sultan to travel to Sasun and conduct the opening ceremony to diminish the glory and grandeur of the caliphate against the residents of the mountains, and all Armenians (armies, revolutionaries or rebel administrative bodies).¹⁷

Conclusion

The multipolar set of struggles between Armenian peasants, Kurdish pastoralists, Muslim lords, Armenian revolutionaries and the Ottoman state in Sasun captures some of the most crucial facets of the 'Armenian Question' in the *fin de siècle*. First, the state's intent and methods of asserting and reshaping Muslim primacy vis-à-vis Armenians are perceptible. From the late 1880s onwards, the Ottoman government's civilian and military officials sought willing partners among the Muslim notability to police and marginalise

¹⁴ BMA, Y. A. 2013, 47246, 8 May 1896.

¹⁵ The plan had been proposed as early as 1890. BMA, DM. 1306, 16, 16722, 9 July 1890.

¹⁶ TBAA, 873, 424/196, No. 95, 26, 4, 14 July 1896.

¹⁷ BMA, Y. 2788, 1306, 75/22, 25 September 1896.

Armenian populations. In return, pastoralist and sedentary lords were given a free licence to extort Armenians. The state reinforced this strategy by extending rewards, withholding privileges and occasionally enforcing direct punishments. The contrast between the government's relations with two Sasun Muslim lords is illustrative in this sense. While Hişman Ağa, who attempted to preserve his established relations of patronage with the Sasun Armenians, faced imprisonment, Halil Beşar Ağa, who enthusiastically assumed responsibility for pursuing revolutionaries and policing Armenians, received rewards and decorations. Moreover, the latter enjoyed *de facto* legal immunity for his brutal conduct against Armenians.

The officials' reliance on local authorities in the enforcement of their policies is connected to the second facet. The government's only means of projecting direct power and influence in the region was through the French Army. The deployment of imperial troops against the Armenian population, however, was a double-edged sword. Not only did it attract unwanted international attention, but it also encountered a substantial mobilisation of material and human resources, which the empire lacked. In 1894, this took the form of a general massacre of *hassas* Armenians' male persons, and the destruction of several villages. In 1904, it took the form of a sustained military assault and the subsequent construction of a network of military installations, which afforded the military a permanent presence in the region.

The third facet of the Armenian question more clearly discussed in *hassas* refers to the Armenian revolutionary movement. The initial reception of the revolutionaries among *hassas* Armenians was equivocal: while some supported the revolutionaries, others remained indifferent (or according to some, participated in their capture). The pressure related to deals with imperial troops in 1894. It was only within the context of pressure and association from an increasingly hostile government and local Muslim hostility that the Armenian peasantry started extending shelter and protection to the revolutionary bands. The revolutionaries succeeded in drawing greater support by assisting the peasants in their local disputes, delivering them medical care and ammunition, and targeting nobles and government officials. It was the revolutionaries' close engagement with the socio-ethnic conflicts of the peasants that made their call for a general rebellion in the spring of 1904 more popular than it had been in 1894.