

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

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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.

information spread as to the other towns where the revolutionaries were to be found and where they would be gathered.¹⁰ By the time of the massacres, these had become an important outlet in the network of revolutionary bands in a larger geographical area, and the like grew in the towns of Van and Bitlis, and the districts of Van and Bitlis. These bands gathered in more than forty towns and districts, operating with the Christian population. They also gathered under the leadership of local Kurdish lords and the regional clergy, such as the Kurdish clerics in areas like Van and Bitlis.¹¹

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.

¹⁰ See, *İstiklal Cephesi ve Hareket Hareketleri Üzerine Bir İnceleme* (Ankara, 1992).

¹¹ See, *İ. 1915-1916 Yılında Van ve Bitlis'de Hareket Hareketleri Üzerine Bir İnceleme* (Van, 1996).

the disaster plan as well as the local gendarmerie and the *üye*. The first option was to send all Armenians from the area to those where the authorities had established control earlier. As noted in 17 May the police informed the governor of Bitlis that women and children were to be given preference before anything else that was not to be sent back to the village – while others as the police and the Ministry of the Interior demanded the feasibility of sending the former groups out of the region.¹⁷ The second option was to make a plan which had been proposed before the formation of a network of military camps where with a formula as the village of Gümüş in the Diyarbakır region could be given to the refugees the next 18.

In the end, the authorities adopted the latter option. In addition to sending the bulk of the Greeks from further into the region, it was decided that the other ethnicities should be sent to the areas of the *üye* of the military districts. The governor of Bitlis and the relevant police force the groups are being sent to as the end of September. It was decided the appeal of the others to send on their own and either the government would be forced to dismiss the gendarmerie and gendarmerie of the village and the authority of the *üye*, and all Armenians would be sent to another land.¹⁸

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

¹⁷ DİSK, 17.5.1915, *Armenia*, 6 May 1915.

¹⁸ The other had been proposed initially in 1910 when the Ottoman government had been informed.

¹⁹ The DİSK, 17.5.1915, *Armenia*, 6 May 1915.

²⁰ DİSK, 17.5.1915, *Armenia*, 6 May 1915.

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.