

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

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EDINBURGH  
University Press

of the state which he created – amongst widely acknowledged subjects of legitimate authority?'

The police did nothing to punish Halil Beşar Ağa for what was, in the eyes of Ottoman officials, a role not entirely in keeping with the law. In autumn 1900, however, the revolutionaries in Sasun waylaid Halil Beşar Ağa and killed him. Andranig Ozanian, who was one of the rising figures within the ARF, led the attack and cut off the Kurdish lord's head.

The act was a deliberate response to both the killing of Hovak Hovakian the previous year and the recent sack of the village of Haghpark.<sup>1</sup> The governor of Bitlis welcomed the response that the local administration had caused a terror among the Kurds, and that orders had been dispatched to local officials and military authorities to prevent a general Kurdish revolt in the province.<sup>2</sup>

The police's covering up of the Haghpark massacre and its promotion of the prosecution of the revolutionaries after the Sasun massacre in 1894. The conflict lay in the government's marginalisation of Sasun Armenians and increasing reliance with a limited contribution of soldiers between the Armenians and Kurds of the region. Hovak Ağa, who had acted as deputy for Hovakian from the government and police, had lost his influence in the region after his dismissal in 1894. Halil Beşar Ağa, whose brother had acted as opposition leader in 1894, had become one of the chief exponents of government policy.<sup>3</sup> However, he had used his newly expanded power and influence to terrorise and kill.

The revolutionaries inserted themselves at the centre of the growing conflict between Kurdish lords with a licence to extort and punish, and the Sasun Armenians, for whom armed clashes became an increasingly frequent occurrence. They went further than their predecessors before the 1894 massacre; they targeted gendarmes and soldiers as well as the likes of Halil Beşar Ağa. The latter was not only a powerful Kurdish lord, but also one of the most important agents of the government in pursuing revolutionaries and consolidating the marginalisation of the Sasun Armenians.

<sup>1</sup> *Asya-i Samiye* (Istanbul), 10 October 1899.

<sup>2</sup> *Asya-i Samiye* (Istanbul), 10 October 1899.

<sup>3</sup> *Asya-i Samiye* (Istanbul), 10 October 1899.

<sup>4</sup> *Asya-i Samiye* (Istanbul), 10 October 1899.



Although the revolutionaries' successful escape was an embarrassment for the authorities, they still failed to attract international attention to their cause. In 1904, the revolutionary groups in Sasun received orders from the ARF congress to prepare for an armed rebellion against the state. They were to invite additional fighters from surrounding areas, and collect weapons and ammunition.<sup>85</sup> It is likely that the timing of this call for a rebellion was deliberate: the Ottoman government had recently succumbed to international pressure regarding the administration of political reforms in Macedonia after a failed rebellion in 1903.<sup>86</sup> Even if the armed rebellion in Sasun were to fail, the international pressure which would come to bear on the Ottoman government would facilitate reforms.

In order to sustain an armed rebellion for an extended period of time, the revolutionaries sought to draw fighters, produce, and import weapons and ammunition from across the border with mixed success. Of the 200 ARF fighters in Sasun in early 1904, the overwhelming majority still hailed from the Daron region, which included the districts of Kulp, Bulanık, Genc and Sasun, with only fifteen fighters from Transcaucasia.<sup>87</sup> For ammunition, they established makeshift workshops to produce gunpowder within Sasun. Their efforts to import weapons were sometimes cut short by the joint actions of Ottoman and Russian authorities. In early 1904, the Russian police confiscated 120 chests of ammunition and seventy-eight modern rifles in response to a tip from the Ottoman authorities to the Russian consul in Erzurum.<sup>88</sup>

The first stage of the rebellion was marked by two developments: first, revolutionaries killed several Muslims from the mixed villages of Tapik and

<sup>85</sup> *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909.

<sup>86</sup> *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909. *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909.

<sup>87</sup> *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909. *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909. *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909. *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909.

<sup>88</sup> *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909.

<sup>89</sup> *İzmir, 1904-1905, 1906-1907, 1908-1909* (1909), 1909.

Laçkan, whom they viewed as agents of the state, and expelled the rest after torching their homes.<sup>89</sup> According to Ottoman reports, they also took hostages from the Muslim populace.<sup>90</sup> Second, several revolutionary bands travelled across Sasun to escort the Armenian inhabitants of the outlying villages to the heights of Antok, where they would be safe from the advancing troops and pastoralists. They torched Armenian villages in order to deny food and lodging to the advancing Ottoman troops.<sup>91</sup>

Many male peasants from the districts of Sasun, which became the centre of the rebellion, also joined the revolutionaries' armed rebellion. According to Garo Sasuni's estimates, some thousand peasants fought against the imperial troops.<sup>92</sup> The governor of Bitlis stated that a local Muslim preacher in Sasun estimated that 2,000 peasants had joined the revolutionaries.<sup>93</sup> The contrast with 1894 is clear: whereas peasants had been reluctant to fight against imperial troops a decade before, they were willing to attempt a defence of their villages in 1904. The experience of the 1894 massacre obviously motivated many Armenian peasants to join the revolutionaries.

However, the revolutionaries had succeeded in obtaining a network of supporters in the Armenian villages who had provided them with food and shelter in the previous years. Finally, the absence of serious Ottoman military forces near the Ottoman empire also a prolonged rebellion and the weakness of the Great Powers – were also central factors with the presence of some 200 experienced fighters.

When news of these developments reached the palace, the French Army continued its efforts to organize an offensive against the revolutionaries before they could reach the headquarters of foreign governments in Constantinople. The palace also sent their emissaries out to convince the Muslim population in the military districts, the village head the revolutionaries of the Great Powers.<sup>94</sup> Despite the efforts of the French Army continued and the local authorities, however, the bulk of the troops only reached the village under the revolutionaries' control by late March due to poor weather conditions.

<sup>89</sup> *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarih-i Vakıfı*, 1912, c. 1, 2, 1912, 1919A, 19 April 1904.

<sup>90</sup> *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarih-i Vakıfı*, 1912, c. 1, 2, 1912, 19 April 1904.

<sup>91</sup> *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Tarih-i Vakıfı*, 1912, c. 1, 2, 1912, 19 April 1904.

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