



# The General Ottoman and Turkish Contexts, From the Tanzimat (1838) to the Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion (1938)

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In order to understand mass violence in the late Ottoman Empire, one should refer to the period of reforms (1839-1876) and to the proclamation of a short-lived constitutional monarchy on the eve of the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War in the Balkans.

The administrative and judicial reforms known as *Tanzimat* (literally, re-organization) and the adoption of the Constitution (1876), which was an anticipated response to the Russian-European demands for political reform and protection of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, aimed to create legal Ottoman citizenship and establish true equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, these measures had a series of unintended consequences.

First of all, the reforms were already outdated by the time they were adopted. The Christian communities to whom they promised equality with Muslims had been under the influence of romantic forms of nationalism for decades, and considered themselves national entities. By the 1870s, some sections of the Christian elites were also under the influence of Socialist ideas and described the Ottoman Empire as a territory of barbarity and obscurantism.

Second, the Constitution of 1876 defined Islam as the State's official religion. This alone was not a breaking-point but it did, however, ossify and radicalize group identities: the very act of defining the State in religious terms also meant defining a political majority and political minorities through sectarian differentiations. Although the electoral code of 1876 was supposed to provide for genuine representation of the non-Muslims, it also established sectarian-based electoral lists, which, in turn, allowed the Christian communities to conceive themselves both as separate entities and as *de facto* marginalized communities.

As ^erif Mardin suggested, before the *Tanzimats*, the Ottoman State conceived itself as a bureaucratic organ totally separated from society. As other imperial states, of the past, it saw its role as the establishment and preservation of a harmonious world order (*nizam-i alem*) where all communities and social groups ought to be in their respective places. In contrast to this imperial doctrine, the new Ottoman doctrine elaborated during the Hamidian rule conceived the State primarily as a State of the Muslims, versus other communities. Thus, in the increasingly secularized Ottoman society, Islam was transformed into a quasi-national identity.

More importantly, to Abdulhamid II, who had ascended the throne in 1876, the reforms, but also the adoption of a Constitution, were strategic mistakes or, even worse, concessions made to European powers. They weakened the Empire, and they also failed to prevent European intervention and the Ottoman-Russian war. Throughout his long reign, Abdulhamid refrained from any adventurous foreign policies (and except for the war with Greece, which led to the proclamation of the autonomy of Crete in 1897, he faced no major foreign policy problems). However, he was convinced that the long peace achieved under his rule was only a prelude to new foreign interventions and wars, which would ultimately lead to the loss of the Empire. Thus, he believed, the State should strengthen its position in Anatolia, which the Sultan considered the only stronghold of Turkishness and Islam. This territorial hard core had to be surrounded and protected by a Muslim periphery of non-Turkish populations (Albanians, Arabs and Kurds). The enrolment of some Kurdish tribes in the Hamidiyye Light Cavalry in 1891 was not only a remedy to the tribal unrest in the Kurdish region, it also constituted a strategic step in protecting Eastern Anatolia against its external and internal enemies, Russia and Armenian revolutionaries.

## **Territorial Losses and the 1894-1896 Massacres**

As mentioned previously, Hamidian rule started with a debacle, the so-called 93 War (1877-1878). During

this armed conflict, the Ottomans lost large parts of Bulgaria, which formally remained under the rule of the Empire, but gained *de facto* independence. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina became a protectorate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although there are no reliable figures, we do know that up to a million Muslims residing in these areas were forced into exile in Ottoman Thrace and Anatolia. Some massacres probably took place, thus increasing the number of refugees who had been expelled from the Caucasus or decided themselves to settle in the Ottoman Empire throughout the 19th century. In 1897, the Ottomans also lost Crete; once again, the Muslim population, which probably constituted 45% of the total population of the island, was forced to leave.

Between 1894 and 1896, large-scale massacres of the Armenian populations of Eastern Anatolia took place. Zeki Pacha, the founder of the Hamidiyye Light Cavalry, played a decisive role in these massacres which followed three major acts of Armenian opposition: demonstrations held by the Hintchaksoutioun organization's militants in Istanbul, the Armenian revolt against the illegal taxes claimed by the Kurdish tribes in Sassoun, and the occupation of the Ottoman Bank by 26 militants of the Dachanksoutioun organization. It took heavy (and overdue) European pressure to stop the massacres which, as J. Verheij and C. Mouradian have suggested, cost the lives of between 100,000 and 300,000 Armenians.

Many survivors were compelled to migrate outside the Ottoman Empire. The conquest of Armenian lands by Kurdish tribal lords brought about the infamous Armenian agrarian question (i.e., their dispossession from their lands) and a real impoverishment of the Armenian peasantry.

## From the Hamidian Period to Unionism

Hamidian rule was contested by many Ottoman Muslim intellectuals who formed a de-territorialized space of opposition in Europe. Although many different protagonists were active in this space, the Young Turk opposition was structured by two major organizations: the Union and Progress Committee, whose main leader, Ahmed Riza, was a positivist with Ottomanist-nationalist leanings, and the Organization of Private Initiative and Decentralization of Prince Sabahaddin, who advocated radical administrative reforms, decentralization of the Empire and encouragement of individual entrepreneurship.

In spite of the spread of revolutionary ideas among them, for almost two decades, the Young Turks remained, on the whole, a pacific opposition movement. However, the fate of these dissenters changed between 1905 and 1906, when a new generation of militants trained by the ultra-nationalists Bahaaddin Akir and Dr. Nazim, along with others, took over the *de facto* leadership of the Union and Progress Committee. This new core did not reflect the sociological and ideological profile of the entire organization, of course. However, it had a clear axiological agenda and openly advocated a pan-Turkist (and to some extent, pan-Touranist) program. The second major change took place in 1908, when a few Unionist officers, including Enver, the future minister of Defense, entered a phase of armed struggle against the State and killed a few high-ranking Ottoman officers. Although this military uprising was in fact a small-scale event, it was sufficient to destabilize Abdulhamid II's regime. On July 23, 1908, more than 30 years after having suspended the Constitutional monarchy, the Sultan agreed to restore it. He was eventually deposed in 1909 after an insurrection in Istanbul.

The first years of the Constitutional Monarchy were characterized by an obvious contrast: on one hand, the Young Turk revolution (which was also called the French Revolution in the Middle East or the Proclamation of Liberty) was fully Ottomanist and led to genuine fraternization between the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. The Christians were allowed to have representatives in the Parliament and some of them could even become high-ranking civil servants. On the other hand, Turkish nationalism gradually became the dominant ideology among the Unionist leaders and young officers. The formation of

a series of ultra-nationalist or paramilitary organizations as *Türk Yurdu* (Turkish Fatherland), *Türk Gücü* (Turkish Power) and *Türk Ocakları* ( Turkish Hearths ) also transformed this nationalism into the dominant ideology among intellectuals and students. By 1912-1913, many Turkish nationalist intellectuals, as Yusuf Akçura, Ziya Gökalp and Tekin Alp (Moise Cohen) considered the Christian minorities as a privileged aristocracy and as internal enemies.

This process was accelerated following a few important events: in 1908, immediately after the Young Turk Revolution, Bulgaria officially proclaimed its independence and Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina. This led to a wide-spread boycott of Austrian goods, which actually took the shape of a boycott of Christian traders in the Ottoman Empire. In 1911, Italy occupied Tripolitania, thus convincing many Unionists that European aggression toward the Ottomans would continue in spite of their revolution. In 1912, during the First Balkan War, the Ottomans lost almost all of their European territories, including Thessaloniki, a stronghold of Unionism. Although the Ottoman armies were able to retake Edirne during the Second Balkan War in 1913, these wars, which led to the departure of tens of thousands of Muslims from the Balkans, played an important role in the further radicalization of Turkish nationalism.

The military setback of 1912 also set the stage for a Unionist coup d'Etat, which gave birth to a single-party regime. The liberal opposition was banned and its leaders were accused of the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmud Sevket Pacha in 1913 though there was no evidence against them. They were either executed or forced into exile.

## The Unionist Worldview

The Union and Progress Committee can be defined both as a secret and an open group. Its main leaders, namely Talaat, Enver and Cemal, who constituted the governing Triumvirate of the Empire after the 1913 coup, were public figures and their responsibilities were known. But the main decision-making bodies of the Committee remained secret. The Committee acted according to the principles of *Komitadjilik*, according to which the revolutionary or nationalist underground commitment was sacred. Fuat Balkan, himself a *komitadji*, defines *komitadjilik* in the following terms: "*komitadjilik* is not theft and pillage, as some suggest. On the contrary, you define exacerbated patriotism as *komitadjilik*. And a *komitadji* is someone who sacrifices everything he has, including his life, for the cause of his fatherland, and who ignores danger. When it is required, he burns, destroys and kills pitilessly for his fatherland and his nation. We too, we have acted in this way when the situation required it. (F. Balkan, 1998: 7)

The Committee considered itself the soul of the State and particularly after the revolutionary euphoria of 1908, it was profoundly suspicious of liberties and the doctrine of human rights. It accepted *zapt-u rapt* ( discipline and order ) as its main principle. Many Unionist ideologues considered that except for heroes and geniuses, the individual had no value (Ziya Gökalp) and advocated a society in which citizens refused to claim any individual rights:

"Never say: I have the right to  
The right doesn't exist, there is only duty  
I have no right, neither interest nor desire  
I have my duty, and I don't need anything else  
My soul, my heart do not think, they only hear  
They follow the voice coming from the nation  
I close my eyes and accomplish my duty  
(Ziya Gökalp)

Although it had no clear-cut definition of the nation, namely regarding its relationship with Islam, the Union and Progress Committee aimed to create a Touranian Empire which would bring the Turks of Anatolia and Central Asia &mdash; the cradle of Turkishness together. Many high-ranking Unionists were medical doctors and were heavily influenced by social Darwinism. But this doctrine had also an obvious impact among other Unionist intellectuals. For many Unionists, the Turks (or Anatolian Muslims) constituted both an oppressed class and an oppressed ethnic entity. Talaat Pacha, for instance, defined the Armenians as a group exploiting the Muslims. In their perspective, only the strength and organic cohesion of society could allow the Turks to win the war for survival.

## The War Years and the Armenian Genocide

The Ottoman entry into World War I was in total conformity with *Komitadji* principles: it was decided by the Unionist Triumvirate, which started the war against Russia and which only informed the Sultan, as well as the Prime Minister Said Halim Pacha, afterwards. The war was seen both as a historical opportunity to take revenge for the previous Ottoman-Russian Wars and the Balkan Wars, and to create the Touranian Empire. It was also conducted in a reckless way: in Sarikamich alone, tens of thousands of soldiers, who were not prepared for the difficult winter conditions, perished before they had a chance to fight the Russian forces.

During the war, the army, as well as the official State bureaucracy, were placed under the command of *Techkilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization), which was created in 1913 and was commanded by the underground Unionist leaders, such as Bahaeddin ^akir and Dr. Nazim. The Techkilat acted both as a bureaucracy and, through its recruits, as a gang. It played a decisive role in the propagation of the Turkish cause and in acts of sabotage in the Caucasus and in Persia, as well as in guerrilla warfare in the Arab provinces, and in the extermination of the Armenians.

The extermination of the Armenians started in the wake of the Deportation Act (*Tehcir Kanunu*) adopted on April 24, 1915, and was **LARGELY** finished before the end of the same year. Although the official objective of the deportation was to relocate the Armenians to safer sites, in many places, the massacres took place before relocation began. As Fuat Dündar has shown convincingly through a broad selection of the Ottoman archives, the extermination of the Armenians was run directly by Talaat Pacha, who was Interior minister from 1913 to 1916, and Prime Minister from 1916 to 1918. There is no doubt that the Unionist apparatus was the main organizer of the extermination. Locally, however, some non-State actors, such as the former Hamidiyye cavalry, or the urban militia formed in Diyarbakir by the Unionist governor Dr. Rechid, also participated.

The Unionist regime justified the deportation by arguing that the uprisings of the Armenian revolutionary committees and their cooperation with Russia constituted a serious threat to the State and weakened the Ottoman war effort. In fact, Armenian opposition remained extremely local during the year 1915 (it was mostly centered in the Van province) and did not, in any case, create a serious threat to the Ottoman military campaigns. It is true that some Armenians (mainly from the Russian Empire) collaborated with Russia or were enlisted in the Russian army. But the vast majority of the Armenians, including their two parties, *Dachanksoutioun* and *Hintchaksoutioun*, were totally unprepared to offer any military resistance. Contrarily to the Unionist statements, the Armenian soldiers did not desert from the Ottoman army and were disarmed in order to be enrolled in the Working Battalions (*Amele Taburlari*), then killed; they offered no resistance. *Dachanksoutioun*, one of the two main Armenian political parties, remained loyal to the government until the beginning of the war (the second party, *Hintchaksoutioun*, was part of the liberal opposition). Many leaders of these organizations were arrested and executed; they did not defend themselves. According to Donald Bloxham, the fact that the Armenians refused to fight for the Ottomans

against the Russians constituted one of the reasons behind the extermination process.

Beyond these factors, more structural reasons should also be mentioned. Although they constituted a minority in Eastern Anatolia, the Armenians were an obstacle to the prospect of the creation of a Touranian Empire by reconnecting the Ottoman Turks with Central Asia. They were also considered as a community with considerable resources. The liquidation of Armenian goods immediately after their deportation was instrumental in the creation of a Turkish national bourgeoisie, which had been one of the main objectives of the Unionist government since the 1908 Revolution.

As Dadrian has stated, the consequences of the previous wars, and particularly the Balkan Wars, which convinced the Unionist elite of the necessity of homogenizing Anatolia in demographic terms, were a more important factor. In spite of their collaboration against the Hamidian regime during the first years of the twentieth century, the Unionists also considered the Armenians ideal scapegoats, who should pay for the betrayal of the Ottomans by other Christians from inside the Empire. The fact that in Eastern Anatolia, especially in Diyarbakir, the policy of extermination also targeted other Christians besides the Armenians was an obvious sign of this large-scale an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth policy. Moreover, in the Unionist view, the Armenians, as Christians, were necessarily potential traitors and a biological threat. Dr. Rechid, the *vali* (governor) of Diyarbakir during the extermination, explains this point in the following words:

"The fact that I was a doctor couldn't make me ignore my nation. Rechid was of course a doctor and should behave accordingly to the obligation of medicine. But Dr. Rechid was born a Turk, before everything else (&). Your nationality comes before everything else (&). The Armenians of the East [Anatolia] were so excited against us that if they remained in their land, not a single Turk, not a single Muslim could stay alive (&). Thus, I told myself: oh, Dr. Rechid, there are only two options. Either they will cleanse the Turks or they will be cleansed by the Turks. I could not remain undecided between these two alternatives. My Turkishness overcame my condition as a doctor. I told myself: instead of being exterminated by them, we should exterminate them [*ortadan kaldirmak*]' (...). (quoted in T. Akçam, 1992: 175-176).

There is no doubt that the extermination of the Armenians corresponds to the definition of genocide, such as it was set by the UN Convention of 1948. One single piece of evidence would suffice to illustrate this fact: less than one year after the beginning of the deportations, on April 2, 1916, the Unionist state had effectively recognized the death of the Armenian men and authorized the marriage of Muslim men to surviving Armenian widows and girls, thus making births within the group materially impossible. Preventing a group from reproducing is explicitly accepted by the UN Convention as one of main characteristics of the crime of genocide.

## **A New War: 1919-1922**

The Ottoman Empire ceased to exist after the debacle of World War I. Great Britain and France occupied the Arab provinces of the country. Parts of Anatolia were occupied by France and Italy for a short while. In 1919, the Greek army occupied Izmir. Aiming to implement the Megali Idea (literally, Great Idea ; this was the irredentist Greek nationalist project for a Greater Greece which would include Constantinople and parts of Anatolia), it continued to advance deep into Anatolia. Finally, Istanbul, where the former Unionists were still very active in spite of the departure of the main leaders of the Committee (Talaat, Enver, and Cemal), was occupied by British troops in March 1920. Different resistance movements which started in various parts of Anatolia were gradually centralized under the leadership of a Turkish general, Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk). From 1920, Mustafa Kemal organized a new, centralized army and declared war against the foreign (mostly Greek) troops.

This war later became known as the War of Independence. But although it was mainly waged against foreign occupiers, violence was also used against the Armenians (both in Cilice, where Armenian detachments had collaborated with the French troops, and in the Caucasus, where an Armenian Republic had been formed), as well as against the Greeks of Pontus. Likewise, the occupation of Izmir by Turkish troops led to the total destruction of the Greek community of this important city.

To some extent, the Kemalist forces considered the War of Independence as military resistance of the Turkish/Muslim populations against the other ethnic communities of Anatolia. Thus, it was no wonder that the Republic of Turkey, which was proclaimed one year after the end of the war (on October 29, 1923) adopted an exclusive form of Turkish nationalism as the State's official doctrine and tried to continue the religious/ethnic homogenization of Anatolia by other means. In 1924, a vast movement of population exchange took place between Turkey and Greece: while some 400,000 Muslims were forced to leave Greece, 900,000 Greeks residing in the former Ottoman Empire also had to leave their birthplace in order to join a new country.

In 1914, almost 20% of the population of Turkey (Turkish Thrace and Anatolia) was composed of non-Muslims. By 1924, this proportion was under 2% (today it is less than 1%).

## **The Kurdish Issue**

The new Kemalist power, which had already evolved into a single-party regime by 1925, considered itself as the incarnation of Turkish nationalism, the Turkish revolution, and civilization (later on, this concept was gradually defined as genuinely Turkish). Thus, the Kurds, who rejected these categories, were necessarily becoming the internal enemies of the new regime.

During the War of Independence, many Kurdish dignitaries who were opposed to the prospect of the creation of an Armenian state in Anatolia actively supported Mustafa Kemal. Moreover, during the war years, Mustafa Kemal promised them that he would liberate southern Kurdistan, which was occupied by Great Britain at the time (and was later incorporated into the new Iraqi state), establish Kurdish-Turkish fraternity and preserve the Caliphate (which was in fact abolished in 1924). None of these promises was kept. On the contrary, Kemalism treated the Kurds both as human raw material to be assimilated in order to create the Turkish nation, and as an ethnic threat. Like its predecessor Unionism, Kemalism was in fact a social-Darwinist movement and considered the Kurds as a feudal ethnic group and class, which, through the centuries, had oppressed the pure Turks and compelled them to assimilate to Kurdishness. While the Turks were considered as the bearers of positive atavism, characterized by civilization, the spirit of independence, and progressivism, the Kurds were seen as the incarnation of darkness, enslavement, brutal force and religious reaction. Thus, the destruction of the Kurds as a feudal ethnic group and class was seen as a necessity for the emancipation of the Turks as an oppressed ethnic group and class.

Moreover, Kurdish nationalism was the last non-Turkish nationalism of the late Ottoman Empire still alive in the Turkish Republic. As a State judge reminded in 1925 following an important Kurdish rebellion, the nationalism of this Muslim community ought to be punished in the Kemalist view not only for what it was, i.e. a separatist movement, but also as the last of a series of separatist betrayals by sections of the non-Turkish Muslim group, including the Albanians, Bosnians and Arabs.

As a result of this new stage of State nationalism, a series of Kurdish revolts took place between 1925 and 1938, among them the Sheikh Said (1925), Ararat (1927-1930) and Dersim (1936-1938) rebellions. The repression of these rebellions involved massive destructions of villages and mass executions. According to Martin van Bruinessen, a well-known specialist of the Kurdish issue, the repression of the Dersim rebellion,

presented as the opening-up of Dersim to civilization, can be defined as an act of genocide.

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