

The Armenian Massacres  
in Ottoman Turkey

A Disputed Genocide

Guenter Lewy

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## Preface

The literature on what Armenians call the first genocide of the twentieth century and what most Turks refer to as an instance of intercommunal warfare and a wartime relocation is voluminous. Yet despite the great outpouring of writing, an acrimonious debate over what actually happened almost one hundred years ago continues unabated. The highly charged historical dispute burdens relations between Turkey and Armenia and increases tensions in a volatile region. It also crops up periodically in other parts of the world when members of the Armenian diaspora push for recognition of the Armenian genocide by their respective parliaments and the Turkish government threatens retaliation.

The key issue in this quarrel, it should be stressed at the outset, is not the extent of Armenian suffering, but rather the question of specific intent: that is, whether the Young Turk regime during the First World War intentionally organized the massacres that took place. Both sides agree that large numbers of Christians perished and that the deportation of the Armenian community was accompanied by many excesses. Several hundred thousand men, women, and children were forced from their homes with hardly any notice; and during a harrowing trek over mountains and through deserts uncounted multitudes died of starvation and disease or were murdered. To the victims it makes no difference whether they met their death as the result of a carefully planned scheme of annihilation, as the consequence of a panicky reaction to a misjudged threat, or for any other reason. It does make a difference for the accuracy of the historical record, not to mention the future of Turkish-Armenian relations.

The situation today is highly polarized and is characterized by two distinct and rigidly adhered to historiographies. The Armenian version maintains that the Armenians were the innocent victims of an unprovoked act of genocide by the Ottoman government. Large numbers of Western scholars have embraced this position. The Turkish version, put forth by the Turkish government and a few historians, argues that the mass deportation of the Armenians was a necessary response to a full-scale Armenian rebellion, carried out with the support of Russia and Britain, and that the large number of deaths—the "so-called massacres"—occurred as a result of famine and disease or as a consequence of a civil war within a global war. Both sides make their case by simplifying a complex historical reality and by ignoring crucial evidence that would yield a more nuanced picture. Professional historians in both camps copy uncritically from previous works when a reinvestigation of the sources is called for. Both parties use heavy-handed tactics to advance their cause and silence a full debate of the issues. The Turkish government has applied diplomatic pressure and threats; the Armenians have accused all those who do not call the massacres a case of genocide of seeking to appease the Turkish government. In 1994 the well-known Middle East scholar

Bernard Lewis was taken to court in France and charged by the plaintiff with causing "grievous prejudice to truthful memory" because he denied the accusation of genocide.

This book subjects the rich historical evidence available to the test of consistency and (as much as the state of knowledge allows) attempts to sort out the validity of the rival arguments. Unlike most of those who have written on the subject of the Armenian massacres and who are partisans of one side or the other, I have no special ax to grind. My purpose is not to put forth yet another one-sided account of the deportations and mass-killings; still less am I in a position to propose a conclusive resolution of the controversies that have raged for so long. Important Turkish documents have disappeared, so that even a person who knows Turkish and can read it in its old script most likely would not be able to write a definitive history of these occurrences. My aim has been to deal with this emotion-laden subject without political preconceptions and to carry out a critical analysis of the two historiographies. Time and again, it will be seen, authors on both sides have engaged in highly questionable tactics of persuasion that include willful mistranslations, citing important documents out of context, or simply ignoring the historical setting altogether. After this uninviting task of "cleaning out the stables" (the results of which probably will please neither side), I attempt a historical reconstruction of the events in question—to show what can be known as established fact, what must be considered unknown as of today, and what will probably have to remain unknowable. My hope is that such an undertaking will clarify and advance our understanding of these fateful occurrences and perhaps also help build bridges between the two rival camps.

The Turkish government has issued collections of pertinent documents in translation, but the material from Western sources outweighs the available Turkish records (translated and untranslated), if not in quantity then in importance. The reports of American, German, and Austrian consular officials who were on the spot in Anatolia and Mesopotamia have been preserved, and many of them have written memoirs that draw on their personal observations. American, German, and Swiss missionaries who witnessed the tragic events have written detailed accounts. We have a large memoir literature composed by Armenian survivors and their descendants. Also of interest are the published recollections by members of the large German military mission who held important positions of command in the Turkish army. The availability of these highly informative sources in Western languages means that even scholars like me who do not read Turkish can do meaningful work on this subject. Indeed, a requirement that only persons fluent in the Turkish language be considered competent to write on this topic would disqualify most Armenians, who also do not know Turkish.

I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the rich holdings of the archive of the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin, the Public Record Office in London, and



the National Archives in Washington. All of these sources yielded some findings that I believe are new. More importantly, many of the documents cited by Turkish and Armenian authors and their respective supporters, when looked at in their original version and proper context, yielded a picture often sharply at variance with the conclusions drawn from them by the contending protagonists. Both Turkish and Armenian authors, it turns out, have used these materials in a highly selective manner, quoting only those points that fitted into their scheme of interpretation and ignoring what Max Weber called "inconvenient facts." Both the Turkish and the Armenian sides, in the words of the Turkish historian Selim Deringil, "have plundered history"; and, as if the reality of what happened was not terrible enough, they have produced horror stories favorable to their respective positions.

While working on this book, I sometimes had the feeling that I was a detective working on an unsolved crime. Clues to the perpetrators of gruesome massacres lay hidden in dusty old books and journals. I experienced the surprise and amazement of finding still another footnote that did not substantiate what the author in question claimed for it. It was fascinating to find corroboration for hunches in unexpected places, which made it possible to firm up conclusions. I hope that my readers too, while following the unfolding argument of this work, will share some of the satisfaction I experienced in finally coming up with an interpretation of these calamitous events that is supported by the preponderance of the evidence and is plausible. I may not have solved the crime in all of its complicated aspects, but I hope to have thrown some significant new light on it.

In the interest of a treatment in depth, I have limited the scope of this study to the events of 1915-16, which by all accounts took the greatest toll of lives and lie at the core of the controversy between Turks and Armenians. I make only brief references to the fighting between Turks and Russian Armenian units in 1917-18 and to what Armenian historians call the "Kemalist aggression against Armenia" in the wake of the Treaty of Sevres of August 10, 1920. These topics raise important but different questions that deserve treatment in their own right. I also quite intentionally have not discussed each and every allegation, no matter how far-fetched, made by Turkish and Armenian authors in their long-standing war of words. To do so would have required a tome of many hundreds of pages. Moreover, it would have resulted in a work of gossip rather than history that no serious person would have been interested in and willing to read.

Finally, I have endeavored to avoid becoming entangled in problems of definition and nomenclature. For example, the question of what constitutes genocide—whether according to the Genocide Convention approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948, or in terms of other rival definitions—is often far from simple; and the attempt to decide whether the Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey fit all, some, or none of these definitions strikes me as of limited utility. I have therefore concentrated on what appears to me

to be the far more important task of clarifying what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. The issue of the appropriate label to be attached to these occurrences is relevant for the ongoing polemics between Turks and Armenians. It is of secondary importance at best for historical inquiry, because the use of legal nomenclature does not add any material facts important for the history of these events.

As those familiar with the field of Middle Eastern studies know, English transliterations of Turkish and Armenian words have produced great variations in the spelling of places and personal names. As much as possible I have resorted to the most common styles; I have not changed the spelling in quotations, though I have omitted most diacritical marks. The difference between the Ottoman or Julian calendar and the European or Gregorian calendar (twelve days in the nineteenth century and thirteen days in the twentieth century) presented another problem. In most cases I have used the dates given in the sources utilized. The few instances where the interpretation of an event depends on the precise date have been noted in the text.

I would like to express my thanks to the archivists and librarians here and abroad, who have aided me in my research, as well as to those who have translated some important Turkish materials for me. I also acknowledge with gratitude a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). As it is customary to note, none of these institutions and individuals are responsible for the opinions and conclusions reached in this work, which remain my personal responsibility.

## **Part I**

### **THE HISTORICAL SETTING**

#### **Chapter I**

##### **Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the Nineteenth Century**

Armenian history reaches back more than two thousand years. In AD 301 the Armenians were the first people to adopt Christianity as their official religion; the Holy Apostolic and Orthodox Church of Armenia (also known as the Gregorian Church) has played an important role in the survival of a people who for much of their history have lived under the rule of foreigners. The last independent Armenian state, the Kingdom of Cilicia, fell in 1375, and by the early part of the sixteenth century most Armenians had come under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Under the millet system instituted by Sultan Mohammed II (1451-81) the Armenians enjoyed religious, cultural, and social autonomy. Their ready acceptance of subservient political status under Ottoman rule lasted well into the

nineteenth century and earned the Armenians the title "the loyal community."

Over time large numbers of Armenians settled in Constantinople and in other towns, where they prospered as merchants, bankers, artisans, and interpreters for the government. The majority, however, continued to live as peasants in the empire's eastern provinces (vilayets), known as Great Armenia, as well as in several western districts near the Mediterranean called Cilicia or Little Armenia. We have no accurate statistics for the population of the Ottoman Empire during this period, but there is general agreement that by the latter part of the nineteenth century the Armenians constituted a minority even in the six provinces usually referred to as the heartland of Armenia (Erzurum, Bitlis, Van, Harput, Diarbekir, and Sivas). Emigration and conversions in the wake of massacres, the redrawing of boundaries, and an influx of Muslims<sup>1</sup> expelled or fleeing from the Balkans and the Caucasus (especially Laz and Circassians) had helped decrease the number of Armenians in their historic home. Their minority status fatally undermined their claim for an independent or at least autonomous Armenia within the empire—aims that had begun to gather support as a result of the influx of new liberal ideas from the West and the increased burdens weighing upon the Christian peasants of Anatolia.

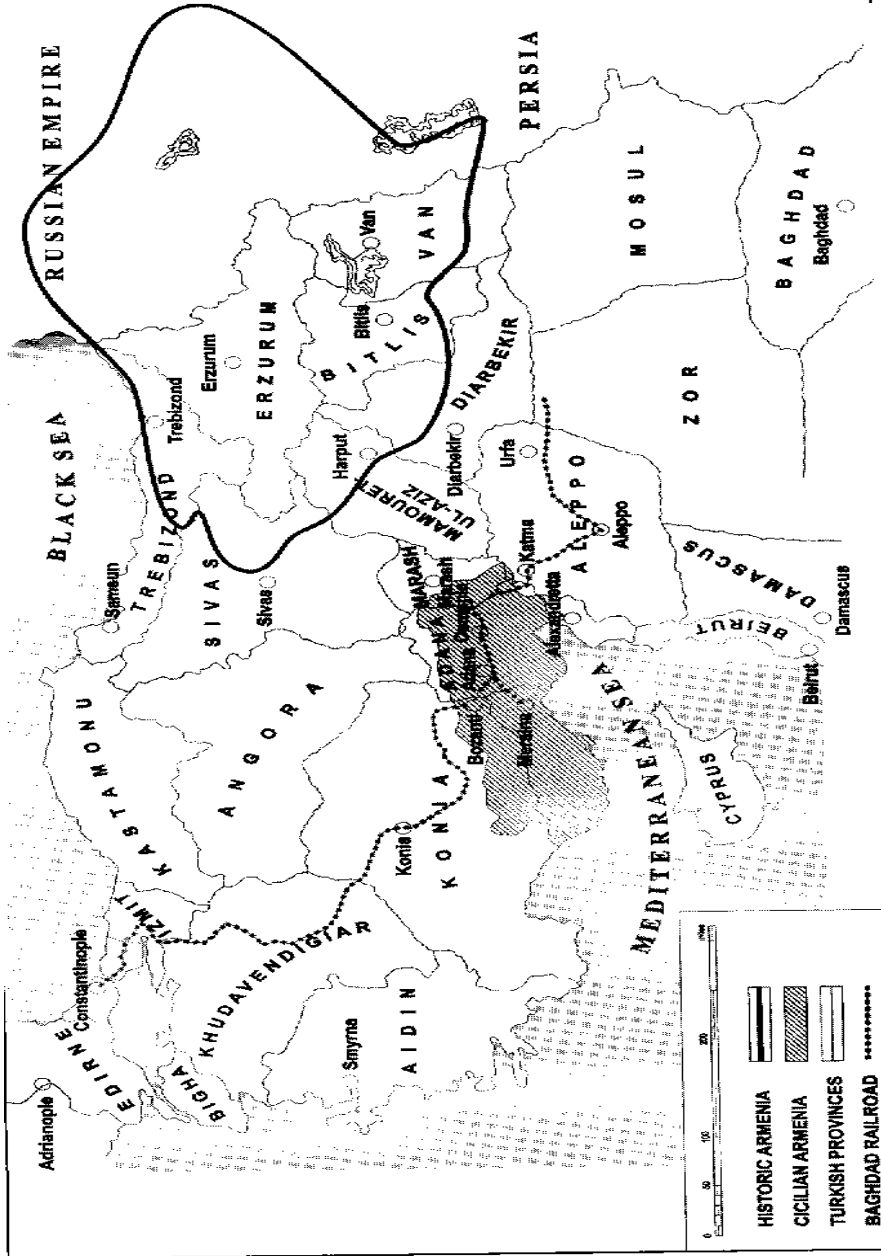
Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Armenians had not suffered from any systematic oppression. They were second-class citizens who had to pay special taxes and wear a distinctive hat, they were not allowed to bear or possess arms, their testimony was often rejected in the courts, and they were barred from the highest administrative or military posts. The terms *gavur* or *kafir* (meaning unbeliever or infidel) used for Christians had definite pejorative overtones and summed up the Muslim outlook.<sup>1</sup> Still, as Ronald Suny has noted, despite all discriminations and abuses, for several centuries the Armenians had derived considerable benefit from the limited autonomy made possible by the *millet* system. "The church remained at the head of the nation; Armenians with commercial and industrial skills were able to climb to the very pinnacle of the Ottoman economic order; and a variety of educational, charitable, and social institutions were permitted to flourish." Living in relative peace with their Muslim neighbors, the Armenians had enjoyed a time of "benign symbiosis."<sup>2</sup>

In the eastern provinces the Armenians lived on a mountainous plateau that they shared with Kurdish tribes. During the second half of the nineteenth century relations with the Kurdish population deteriorated. Large numbers of Armenian peasants existed in a kind of feudal servitude under the rule of Kurdish chieftains. The settled Armenians provided winter quarters to the nomadic Kurds and paid them part of their crop in return for protection. As long as the Ottoman state was strong and prosperous this arrangement worked reasonably well. When the empire began to crumble and its government became increasingly corrupt, however, the situation of the Armenian peasants became difficult—they could not afford to pay

ever more oppressive taxes to the Ottoman tax collectors as well as tribute to their Kurdish overlords. When they reneged on their payments to the Kurds, the tribes—never very benevolent—engaged in savage attacks upon the largely defenseless Armenian villagers that led to deaths, the abduction of girls and women, and the seizure of cattle. Ottoman officials, notoriously venal, were unwilling or unable to provide redress. The reforms introduced in 1839 and 1856 under Sultan Abdul Mejid I, which sought to establish elements of the rule of law and religious liberty and are known in Turkish history as the Tanzimat, did little to change the dismal situation of the common people and of the Armenian minority. In a period of twenty years before 1870 Armenian patriarchs, as heads of the Armenian community, submitted to the Ottoman government more than 500 memoranda in which they detailed the extortions, forcible conversions, robberies, and abductions common in the provinces.<sup>3</sup>

The constitution of 1876 proclaimed the equal treatment of all nationalities, but Sultan Abdul Hamid II suspended it in 1878 and began a period of autocratic rule that was to last thirty years. The situation of the Armenians soon went from bad to worse, accelerating the growth of Armenian national consciousness and the spread of revolutionary ideas. Armenian nationalistic feelings had begun in the diaspora and in the larger towns, from which they gradually permeated the eastern provinces. Protestant missionaries and their schools played an important role in this process of radicalization. Both the government and the Armenian church tried to discourage the influx of these foreigners and their Western ideas, but the number of missionaries, most of them American and German, kept growing. By 1895, according to one count, there were 176 American missionaries, assisted by 878 native assistants, at work in Anatolia. They had established 125 churches with 12,787 members and 423 schools with 20,496 students.<sup>4</sup> Even though the missionaries denied that they instilled Armenian nationalistic, let alone revolutionary, sentiments, the Ottoman government saw it differently. As Charles Eliot, a well-informed British diplomat with extensive experience in Turkey, put it:

The good position of the Armenians in Turkey had largely depended on the fact that they were thoroughly Oriental and devoid of that tincture of European culture common among Greeks and Slavs. But now this character was being destroyed: European education and European books were being introduced among them. The Turks thought that there was clearly an intention to break up what remained of the Ottoman Empire and found an Armenian kingdom—"Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war," in English is a harmless hymn, suggestive of nothing worse than a mildly ritualistic procession; but I confess that the same words literally rendered into Turkish do sound like an appeal to Christians to rise up against their Mohammedan masters, and I cannot be surprised that the Ottoman authorities found the hymn seditious and forbade it to be sung.<sup>5</sup>



ANATOLIA AT THE TIME OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The reports sent home by the missionaries made the outside world aware of the unhappy life of their downtrodden fellow-Christians in Anatolia. The missionaries were hardly impartial observers, but the injustices and indignities suffered by the Christian population were indeed quite real. The Ottoman authorities, for their part, as Suny has written, "interpreted any manifestation of cultural revival or resistance, however individual or local, as an act of national rebellion....Turkish officials and intellectuals began to look upon Armenians as unruly, subversive, alien elements who consorted with foreign powers."<sup>6</sup> The Ottoman government began to protest the growing European interest in the fate of the Armenians, regarding it as interference in Ottoman affairs. They suspected, not without justification, that the European powers were using the Armenian problem as a convenient pretext for further weakening of the Ottoman Empire. It was felt that Russia, in particular, which had seized some of the Armenian lands following the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29, was encouraging the Armenian agitation in order to annex the remaining Armenian provinces in eastern Anatolia.

Matters came to a head in the wake of the Bulgarian revolt against Ottoman rule in 1876. Reports reaching the West about the ferocious manner in which the rebellion had been suppressed helped solidify the image of the "terrible Turk." Russian public opinion clamored for help to the Southern Slavs, and in April 1877 Russia declared war upon Turkey. The commander of the Russian army invading eastern Anatolia was a Russian Armenian, Mikayel Loris-Melikov (his original name was Melikian). The Russian troops included many Russian Armenians; Armenians from Ottoman Anatolia were said to have acted as guides. The spread of pro-Russian sentiments among the Armenians of Anatolia, who hoped that Russia would liberate them from the Turkish yoke, was well known. All this alarmed the Ottoman government and raised doubts about the reliability of the Armenians. The transition from "the most loyal millet" to a people suspected to be in league with foreign enemies was complete. Consequently, when the Russian troops withdrew, Kurds and Circassians pillaged Armenian villages in the border region, and thousands of Armenians took refuge in the Russian Caucasus. The massacres of 1894-96 are unintelligible without taking note of this decisive change in the Turko-Armenian relationship.

After some initial setbacks, the war of 1877-78 ended with a complete victory for Russia. In January 1878 Russian troops approached Constantinople; on the Caucasian front they took Erzurum. At the urging of the Armenian patriarch, the Treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 2, 1878, included a provision aimed at protecting the Armenians. According to article 16, the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman government) agreed "to carry out, without further delay, the ameliorations and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Kurds and Circassians."<sup>7</sup> Russian troops were to remain in the Armenian provinces until satisfactory reforms

had been implemented.

The harsh provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano stripped the Ottoman state of substantial territories in the Balkans and yielded Russia the Armenian districts of Ardahan, Kars, and Bayazid as well as the important Black Sea port of Batum. These gains aroused the fears of the British that Turkey would become a client state of Russia, thus upsetting the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> Hence Russia, under pressure from the European powers, had to agree to the Treaty of Berlin several months later (July 13, 1878), which greatly reduced Russian gains. The creation of a Bulgarian vassal state subservient to Russia was shelved; the Armenian district of Bayazid was returned to Turkey and Batum converted into a free port; the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Rumania was reaffirmed; and BosniaT Ierzegovina was to be occupied and administered by Austria-Hungary. The new treaty also required Russia to withdraw its troops from Ottoman territory and placed the responsibility for enforcing the Armenian reform provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano (article 61 of the new treaty) upon the entire Concert of Europe. As George Douglas Campbell, Duke of Argyll, a former cabinet minister, later observed correctly: "What was everybody's business was nobody's business." In the separate Cyprus Convention of June 4, 1878, which allowed Britain to occupy the island of Cyprus, the Porte made an additional promise to introduce reforms into Armenia; but all these commitments remained mere words.

The overall result was to increase antagonism between Turks and Armenians. The agreements raised the expectations of the Armenians, while they provided no effective security for them. The sultan was angry over the continuing interference of the European powers in Turkey's internal affairs. He became more fearful of the Armenians, whose lands constituted a crucial segment of the reduced empire, and hence was more inclined to use violence. The Armenians had become pawns in the European struggle for power and dominance.

The contribution of the Treaty of Berlin and the Cyprus Convention to the Armenian tragedy was noted by Lord James Bryce, a great friend of the Armenians. Writing in 1896, after a wave of Armenian massacres, he remarked:

If there had been no Treaty of Berlin and no Anglo-Turkish Convention, the Armenians would doubtless have continued to be oppressed, as they had been oppressed for centuries. But they would have been spared the storm of fire, famine, and slaughter which descended upon them in 1895.... Before the Treaty of Berlin the Sultan had no special enmity to the Armenians, nor had the Armenian nation any political aspirations. It was the stipulations then made for their protection that first marked them out for suspicion and hatred, and that first roused in them hope of deliverance whose expression increased the hatred of their rulers. The Anglo-Turkish Convention taught them to look to England, and England's interference embittered the Turks.<sup>10</sup>

The European powers did nothing to enforce the treaty provisions designed to help the Armenians. Having an uneasy conscience, they repeatedly remonstrated with the sultan. Yet these remonstrations only further irritated Abdul I lam id and stiffened his back. He would rather die, he told the German ambassador in November 1894, than yield to unjust pressure and grant the Armenians political autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

In 1891, fearful of Russia's continuing interest in the eastern Anatolian region and of Armenian revolutionaries on both sides of the Russian border, the sultan decreed the formation of Kurdish volunteer cavalry units. Modeled after the Russian Cossacks, the Hamidiye regiments, named after the sultan, were to strengthen the defense of the border provinces. They also had the purpose of bringing the Kurds under some control and using the Hamidiye as a counterweight to the Turkish notables of the towns, who often challenged the sultan's writ.<sup>12</sup> By 1895 the Hamidiye consisted of fifty-seven regiments and probably close to fifty thousand men. Their marauding also affected the settled Muslims, but the Armenian peasants were the hardest hit. For them the new Kurdish armed bands meant more depredations and further pillaging of their villages. The fox, it appeared, had been put in charge of the henhouse. During the disturbances of 1894-96 the Hamidiye participated in punitive expeditions against the Armenian population.

Archbishop Mgrdich Khrimian, who had been one of the spokesmen of the Armenians at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, preached a sermon in the Armenian cathedral of Constantinople upon his return. He had gone to Berlin with a petition for reforms, a piece of paper, he told the large crowd, while the other small nations—Bulgarians, Serbians, and Montenegrins—had come with iron spoons. When the European powers placed on the table of the conference a "Dish of Liberty," the others were able to scoop into the delicious dish and take out a portion for themselves. The Armenians, however, had in their hands only the fragile paper on which their petition was written. Hence when their turn came to dip into the dish of liberty, their paper spoon crumbled, and they were left without any share of the meal. Archbishop Khrim-ian's famous sermon was a not so subtle appeal for the use of arms— "iron spoons."<sup>14</sup> During the following decades a growing number of Armenians were to act upon this call for armed struggle.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Armenian Revolutionary Movement**

Disappointed by the failure of the European powers to enforce the protective provisions of the Treaty of Berlin and encouraged by the successes of other oppressed nationalities in the Ottoman Empire, especially the Greeks and



Bulgarians, young Armenian intellectuals began to organize for armed struggle. The revolutionary movement began in the European diaspora and spread from there into Anatolia. Another important base was the Russian Caucasus, where the large Armenian population embraced the idea of national liberation with growing fervor. The poet Kamar-Katiba called upon the Turkish Armenians across the border to defend themselves and not to rely upon Europe, which was too far, or upon God, who was too high.<sup>1</sup>

During the early 1880s several secret societies sprang up in eastern Anatolia. Its leaders exploited the abuses of Abdul Hamid's autocratic regime and insisted that the national aspirations of the Armenian people could not be realized without the use of force. A group called the Defenders of the Fatherland was arrested in the city of Erzurum in 1883, and forty of its members were condemned to prison terms of five to fifteen years. At the same time, another secret organization, the Patriotic Society, operated in Van. After its detection by the government, this group changed its political aims and became a moderate-liberal organization that took the name Armenakan (after the newspaper Armenia published in Marseilles). This party existed well into the twentieth century, but its influence remained limited.<sup>2</sup>

In 1887 a group of Armenian students in Geneva, Switzerland, organized the Hunchakian Revolutionary Party (after the journal *nunchak*, meaning "Bell"). The Hunchaks, as they became known, were influenced by Russian Marxist revolutionary thought. The immediate objective was the resurrection of historic Armenia, which was to elude the Armenians in Turkey, Russia, and Persia; the ultimate goal was a socialist government. Armenian independence was to be achieved by oral and written propaganda as well as by the armed struggle of guerrilla fighters. Showing the impact of the Russian *Narodnaya Volya* revolutionaries, committed to direct action, the Hunchaks embraced political terror as a means of eliminating opponents, spies, and informers. Article 6 of the program of the Hunchak party stated: "The time for the general revolution [in Armenia] will be when a foreign power attacks Turkey externally. The party shall revolt internally." <sup>3</sup> In due time this program of course became known to the Turkish government, and during World War I the Young Turks used the clause to justify the deportation of the Armenians.

In June 1890 Russian Armenian students convened a meeting in Tiflis, in the Russian Caucasus, to discuss the unification of all revolutionary forces in a new organization. After long and stormy sessions a new party was founded that took the name Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsuthiun*, meaning "Federation," or *Dashnaks* for short). The Hunchaks at first joined but soon withdrew and continued their separate existence. In 1896 the Hunchak party divided into two hostile factions, and this split reduced its effectiveness. The main revolutionary player in the Armenian community became the *Dash-nak* party.

The platform of the Dashnaks was adopted at their first general convention, held in Tiflis in 1892. The central plank read: "It is the aim of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to bring about by rebellion the political and economic emancipation of Turkish Armenia." The majority of the delegates were socialists, but many of them felt that the inclusion of the demand for socialism would harm the national cause. Socialism, writes Anaide Ter Minassian, "was to remain as it were the bad conscience of the Dashnak party."<sup>4</sup> The platform spoke of a popular democratic government to be elected in free elections, freedom of speech and assembly, distribution of land to those who were landless, compulsory education, and other social reforms. In order to achieve these aims "by means of the revolution," revolutionary bands were "to arm the people," wage "an incessant fight against the [Turkish] Government," and "wreck and loot government institutions." They were "to use the weapon of the terror on corrupt government officers, spies, traitors, grafters, and all sorts of oppressors."<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, then, as Louise Nalbandian has noted, "there was no radical difference between the Dashnak Program of 1892 and the aims and activities of the Hunchaks."<sup>6</sup> Both organizations were committed to armed struggle to achieve their goals and accepted the use of terror (i.e. recourse to assassinations). To be sure, the Hunchaks explicitly demanded an independent Armenia, while the Dashnaks embraced the valuer notion of a "free Armenia." In the eyes of the Ottoman government this was not a very important distinction, however, and both ideas were considered anathema. Even when the Fourth General Convention of the Dashnaks held in 1907 revised the party's platform and adopted the goal of Armenian autonomy within a federative system, the general attitude in the country—including that of many Young Turks, before and after their assumption of power in 1908—remained one of sharp distrust. The demand for an autonomous Armenia was seen as simply the opening wedge for complete separation and the breakup of the empire.

Operating from bases in the Russian Caucasus and Persia and taking advantage of eastern Anatolia's mountainous terrain, Armenian guerrilla bands attacked Turkish army units, gendarmerie posts, and Kurdish villages involved in brigandage. There were charges of massacres of Muslim villagers. British consuls regularly mention the killing of Turkish officials. In late November 1892 an Armenian villager tried to assassinate the vali (governor) of Van. Upon interrogation, the British vice-consul reported, the villager stated that his brother and several others, including the village priest, had led him to believe that "the Armenian national cause would thereby be advanced."<sup>7</sup>

The recruitment of fighters from among the Armenian peasantry was not easy, and the revolutionaries therefore carried out an active campaign of propaganda against what they considered the slavish mentality of the Armenian masses. They stressed the valor and heroism of the men known as fedayees, a word

derived from the Arabic, meaning dedicated patriots prepared to lay down their lives for the cause. The exploits of the guerrillas against superior Ottoman forces assumed legendary proportions, and this hero worship continues to the present day. For example, in a book richly illustrated with pictures of ferocious-looking fighters, proudly displaying their weapons, an American author describes his compatriots in Ottoman Turkey in language that recalls legend of Robin Hood. Armenian guerrilla companies, he writes, roamed the hillside and the plains defending the hard-pressed peasants, redressing wrongs, executing revolutionary justice and inflicting punishment on the tormentors of their people.... It might truthfully be said that the Fedayee was the finest and noblest creation of the Armen-<sup>ian</sup> revolution. Dedicated to the cause of his people, fearless in battle, chivalrous toward women, generous to his foes and yet terrible in his vengeance, the Armenian Fedayee renounced the comforts and pleasures of life, gave up his family and loved ones, endured the privation and suffering of a wanderer's life, and became a living Madagh {sacrificial offering} for the liberation of his people.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the picture of the Turk painted in Armenian revolutionary propaganda was one of utter depravity and fiendish cruelty. Hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles, making the most of Turkish oppression, were disseminated in Europe (especially in England) and in the United States. At least some of these reports, as Nal-bandian has pointed out, exaggerated Turkish atrocities.<sup>9</sup> No doubt, the British diplomat Eliot noted, "Turkish prisons present most of the horrors which can be caused by brutality and neglect.... No doubt, too, such rough punishments as the bastinado are freely employed." Yet many of the "hellish" and "unutterable" forms of torture of which the Turks were freely accused were "largely the invention of morbid and somewhat prurient brains. Medical testimony makes it certain that no human being could survive the tortures which some Armenians are said to have suffered without dying."<sup>10</sup>

Despite great efforts to build up mass support, the Armenian revolutionaries often enjoyed no more than a modicum of sympathy among the largely apolitical peasants and the more prosperous urban Armenians, who were fearful of losing their privileged position. There is general agreement, writes Vahakn N. Dadrian, that "the revolutionaries were not only opposed by the bulk of the Armenian population and of its ecclesiastical leadership, but in fact comprised a very small segment of that population." Hence they were often driven to resort to terror against their own people. British consular reports mention several attempts to assassinate Armenian patriarchs and many instances of Armenians killed for failure to contribute to the costs of the revolutionary struggle or accused of being traitors or spies. A report from Marsovan, dated May 27, 1893, noted that the "terrorism they {the revolutionaries} exercised over their more tranquil compatriots was increasing, and some murders which had recently occurred of supposed informers or lukewarm supporters had deepened the fears of the peaceable."<sup>12</sup> The son of a

leading member of the Armenakan party describes in a memoir how "the Dashnak Central Committee in Van resorted to the use of terrorists to put my father away."<sup>13</sup>

Dashnak literature contained long lists of persons liquidated by execution. "Early issues of the Dashnak Droshag [Standard]," writes a historian of the Dashnaks, "frequently carry notices of those against whom the death penalty has been served or about those who had met the penalty."<sup>14</sup> This way of enforcing revolutionary justice was considered fully justified, for, as another more recent defender of this practice put it, "The revolutionary avenger was the Archangel Gabriel whom to oppose was unthinkable. He was sinless and impeccable, the executor of the will on high. He was invisible and invulnerable. His hands were always clean." After all, he added, the revolutionary terror affected only "those baneful elements which jeopardized the safety of the people and the progress of the emancipatory cause."<sup>15</sup>

Well-informed observers on the scene were convinced that despite increased revolutionary activity and frequently voiced bombastic threats the Ottoman regime was in no danger. The number of Armenian militants was small, and they were fighting among each other. The great majority of the Armenians, wrote the American missionary Edwin M. Bliss, strongly opposed any seditious activity, and the idea of a general uprising was considered madness. Yet ill feeling between Christians and Muslims, he noted, was on the increase: "and there were not a few cases during 1893 and in the early part of 1894, when Turkish officials had all they could do to restrain the hostile manifestations of the Moslem communities."<sup>16</sup> The authorities in Constantinople, fed alarmist reports from provincial officials, became edgy. The sultan, in particular, was said to be in a state of increasing paranoia and panic. Interpreting any minor raid or skirmish as a full-scale rebellion, he ordered severe measures of repression that drew widespread condemnation in Europe. In the summer of 1892 the new Liberal government in England, headed by William Gladstone, sent sharp notes of protest to the Porte that further inflamed the situation. In the eyes of many patriotic-Turks the Armenians were, now more than ever, disloyal subjects in league with the European powers that sought to dismantle the Ottoman Empire.

In their attempts to suppress the revolutionary agitation the Ottoman authorities in the eastern provinces made little effort to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. Following the appearance of revolutionary placards in Marsovan in January 1893, the police arrested over seven hundred Armenians. In other towns, too, large-scale arrests and imprisonments on the most frivolous charges were common. The British ambassador reported to London on March 28, 1894: "The inability of the officials to distinguish between harmless criticism and active sedition; their system of making indiscriminate arrests in the hope of finding somewhat [sic] that will justify the arrest; the resort not infrequently to torture in order to obtain testimony; the use made by unprincipled officials of existing

excitement in order to ruin personal enemies or to extort money by means of baseless charges... threaten to make rebels more quickly than the police can catch them."<sup>17</sup> The Armenians, noted another British diplomat, "would be a perfectly contented, hardworking, and profitable part of the subjects of the Sultan, provided that they were protected against the Kurds; given a fair share in the administration of those districts where they form a large proportion of the inhabitants; and, what would follow as a natural consequence, treated, civilly and personally, on an equal footing with their Mahommedan neighbours."<sup>18</sup>

In the summer of 1894 the rugged Armenian villagers of Sassun, under the prodding of Armenian revolutionaries, refused to pay the customary tribute to Kurdish chiefs. Unable to subdue their former underlings, the Kurds appealed for help to the Ottoman government, which sent regular army units. After prolonged and sharp fighting and having been promised amnesty if they laid down their arms, the Armenians surrendered. Yet large numbers of villagers, without distinction of age or sex, were massacred. Christian missionaries and European consuls voiced their revulsion, and the sultan was forced to agree to a commission of inquiry with British, French, and Russian participation as well as to a number of reform measures.<sup>19</sup>

The Turks insisted that Armenian armed bands had provoked the affair, had committed atrocities against the inhabitants of Muslim villages in their way, and thus had forced the government to send in troops to establish order.<sup>20</sup> Some authors have argued that this and other incidents were part of a strategy on the part of Armenian revolutionaries, especially the Hunchaks, to provoke the Turks to commit excesses that would draw the attention of the Christian world and bring about European intervention. Perhaps the best known spokesman for what has become known as the "provocation thesis" is the historian William L. Langer. The revolutionaries, he contends, organized incidents to "bring about inhuman reprisals, and to provoke the intervention of the powers." Yet the Europeans never followed through long enough to achieve lasting reforms. The net result was that "thousands of innocent Armenians lost their lives, and there was no real gain to be shown."<sup>21</sup>

More recently Justin McCarthy and Carolyn McCarthy have put forth the same argument:

Only the intent to spark massacre in retaliation can explain the seeming madness of Armenian attacks on members of Kurdish tribes. Such attacks were a constant feature of small-scale rebel actions. Individual members of powerful Kurdish tribes were assassinated, undoubtedly in expectation of reprisals that would touch the heart of Europe. For example, the 1894 troubles in Sassun were preceded by Armenian attacks on the Bekhran and Zadian tribes, which resulted in armed battles between the Armenian revolutionaries and Kurdish tribesmen.<sup>22</sup>

Most supporters of the Armenian cause have rejected the provocation thesis.

According to Richard Hovannisian, "those who have made it have failed to provide proof." <sup>23</sup> Suny has argued that Langer and "those who have followed him seriously distort the aims and motives of the revolutionaries." The provocation thesis, he suggests, "is based on a misreading of the sources, a disregard for the causes of the Armenian resistance, and inadequate consideration of the reasons for the Turkish perceptions of the Armenian threat."<sup>24</sup> In the eyes of Robert Melson, the provocation thesis "neglects the independent predispositions toward violence, the perceptions, and the actions of the perpetrators." It fails "to inquire into the intentions of the sultan, his view of the Armenians, or the context of Armenian-Ottoman relations which might have exaggerated the Armenian threat."<sup>25</sup> In a foreword to a book by Melson on the Armenian genocide, Leo Kuper maintains that the provocation thesis makes the Armenians "the agents of their own destruction, [and] offers a parallel to the Nazi ideology of Jews engaged in international conspiracy against the Third Reich."<sup>26</sup>

These reactions, I believe, are needlessly defensive. To take note of the tactical designs of the Armenian revolutionaries does not mean to ignore or excuse the malevolent intentions and deeds of the Turkish authorities. Given the weakness of the Armenian side, the need for great power intervention (especially on the part of Britain and Russia) was always an essential part of Armenian thinking. The provocative intentions of at least some of the Armenian revolutionaries to bring about such an intervention are well documented and are mentioned by many contemporary observers of the events in question. For example, an eloquent defender of the revolution" explained to Cyrus Hamlin, the founder of Robert College in Constantinople, how Hunchak bands would use European sympathy for Armenian suffering to bring about European intervention. They would "watch their opportunity to kill Turks and Kurds, set fire to their villages, and then make their escape into the mountains. The enraged Moslems will then rise, and fall upon the defenceless Armenians and slaughter them with such barbarity that Russia will enter in the name of humanity and Christian civilization and take possession." When the horrified missionary denounced this scheme as immoral, he was told: "It appears so to you, no doubt; but we Armenians have determined to be free. Europe listened to the Bulgarian horrors and made Bulgaria free. She will listen to our cry when it goes up in shrieks and blood of millions of women and children.... We are desperate. We shall do it."<sup>27</sup> The program of the Hunchaks, Louise Nalbandian notes, required that the people were to be "incited against their enemies and were to 'profit' from the retaliatory actions of these same enemies."<sup>28</sup>

In a message sent on May 6, 1893, to ambassador Clare Ford, British consul Robert W. Graves in Erzurum reported on the interrogation of an Armenian prisoner that he was allowed to attend. The self-declared revolutionary, "showing the boldest front possible," told his questioners that he was a socialist by conviction and was prepared to use any means to attain his ends. "He was paid for

this work by funds from abroad, and the attention of the movement was, he declared, to cause such disturbances in the country as should attract attention to the oppressed condition of his fellow-countrymen and compel the interference of foreign powers."<sup>29</sup>

In his memoirs published in 1933 Graves elaborated upon the intentions of the revolutionaries:

They counted upon the proneness to panic of the Sultan, and the stupidity, misplaced zeal or deliberate malevolence of the local authorities to order and carry out unnecessarily punitive measures, which would degenerate into massacre as soon as the fanaticism and blood-lust of the ignorant Turk and Kurd populations had been sufficiently aroused. Then would come the moment for an appeal to the signatory Powers of the Treaty of Berlin to intervene and impose upon the Sultan such administrative reforms as would make life at least endurable for his Armenian subjects. They were quite cynical when remonstrated with on the wickedness of deliberately provoking the massacre of their unfortunate fellow-countrymen, with all its attendant horrors, without any assurance that the lot of the survivors would be any happier, saying calmly that the sacrifice was a necessary one and the victims would be "Martyrs to the National Cause."<sup>30</sup>

Other contemporaries report similar statements; it is clear that the actions of the revolutionists did not just consist of self-defense, as most pro-Armenian authors are prone to argue. The American author George Hepworth, a highly regarded observer and friend of the Armenians, noted that "the revolutionists are doing what they can to make fresh outrages possible. That is their avowed purpose. They reason that if they can induce the Turks to kill more of the Armenians, themselves excepted, Europe will be forced to intervene."<sup>31</sup> The veteran British correspondent Edwin Pears noted that Russia had turned against the Armenian revolutionists in the Caucasus, fearful that they would succeed in undermining the tsar's autocratic rule, and that under these circumstances an Armenian revolt against the Ottomans had no chance of success. "Some of the extremists declared that while they recognised that hundreds of innocent persons suffered from each of these attempts, they could provoke a big massacre which would bring in foreign intervention."<sup>32</sup> More recently the British writer Christopher Walker has acknowledged that such a plan "was endorsed by some of the revolutionaries" but goes on to argue that this "was not the cold, vicious calculation that it has some times been represented to be.... In reality, the extreme measures to which they sought to provoke the Porte were only a speeded-up version of what was happening all the time to Armenians. There was little to choose between a thousand dying in a week and a thousand dying in a year."<sup>33</sup>

To prevent misunderstandings it is well to state again that the existence of plans on the part of at least some Armenian revolutionaries to provoke massacres neither excuses the actions of the Turks who acted upon these provocations with

vicious attacks upon innocent people nor amounts to blaming the victim. Given the avowed aims of all of the revolutionists to achieve a "free Armenia," a harsh and hostile reaction on the part of the Ottoman authorities would undoubtedly have been forthcoming even in the absence of the provocative acts. Whether the number of victims would have been as high as it turned out to be will have to remain a matter of speculation. That the attacks greatly increased tension between Muslims and Christians is a matter of record. The observation of Consul Graves in Erzurum, made about two years before the horrible massacres of 1895-96, turned out to be sadly prophetic. A "spirit of hostility and race hatred," he noted on July 1893 has been aroused among the hitherto friendly Turkish population which may some day, if further provoked, find vent in reprisals and atrocities."<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Massacres of 1894-96**

By 1894 tensions between Armenians and Turks in eastern Anatolia had reached a dangerous point. Armenian revolutionaries were active in all of the provinces, while Turkish authorities were displaying increased severity. There were mass arrests and new reports of the use of torture in the prisons. The Kurds felt encouraged in their new role as the irregular soldiers of the sultan; former consul Graves called them "licensed oppressors of their Christian neighbors in the Eastern provinces."<sup>1</sup> Events in the district of Sassun in the vilayet of Bitlis, mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, set off a round of massacres all over Anatolia that were to echo around the world.

#### **CARNAGE IN THE WAKE OF AN ATTEMPTED REFORM**

The report of the Turkish commission of inquiry set up after the bloodshed in the summer of 1894 in the Talori region of the district of Sassun blamed the entire episode on Armenian provocation. Hunchak organizers were said to have incited an uprising on the part of the villagers that required the dispatch of regular troops. Heavy fighting lasted over twenty-three days before the disturbance was put down. Muslim villages were said to have been burned by the Armenian bandits, and their inhabitants slaughtered. No more than 265 Armenians had been killed.<sup>2</sup> European consuls, however, denied that there had been an uprising. The villagers had refused to pay double taxation and had taken up arms to defend themselves against attacking Kurds. Turkish troops and Hamidiye regiments had massacred those who had surrendered and many others, including women and children. The total number of Armenian dead was reported to have reached several



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