

2 Troubles in Anatolia: imperial insecurities and the transformation of borderland politics

Empires know no necessary or obvious limits to their borders. This boundlessness offers pliability but also breeds insecurity. This held especially true for the Ottoman and Russian empires, whose vast territories were contiguous and whose populations overlapped. Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Greeks, Tatars, Caucasian Turks, Assyrians, and Cossacks among others inhabited both empires and moved back and forth between them. The imperial states were interpenetrating. They could, and did, project their influence and power beyond formal borders to challenge the authority of the other inside its own territory. The identities, loyalties, and aspirations of their heterogeneous subjects pointed in multiple directions, offering rich opportunities to exploit and creating vulnerabilities to shield. In unstable borderlands, such conditions invite fierce contestation.

It should therefore be no surprise that the Ottoman and Russian empires pursued their competition through channels beyond those of formal diplomacy, channels that included espionage and subversion. No less than formal diplomacy, the hidden pursuit of power was sensitive and responsive to the changing nature of the global order in the early twentieth century. The national idea's effect upon the conduct of interstate competition was profound. It altered not merely the rules of interstate interaction, but also the perceptions of bureaucrats and policymakers, changing the very categories that defined their visions of the political world inside as well as outside the boundaries of their states.

Ottoman and Russian imperial rivalry and insecurities interacted in a particularly complex form in Eastern Anatolia, which constituted a double borderland where the two empires blurred into each other in a zone distinct from the centers of both. The dynamics of global interstate competition spurred the two centers to extend their power into the region. In order to stave off great power – especially Russian – encroachment, the Unionists were determined to assert central control over and extract revenue and resources from the region. Vastly complicating this ambition, however, was the fact that the region's primary communities, nomadic

Kurds and sedentary Armenians, were ambivalent toward Istanbul and locked in conflict with each other over land and the sharply diverging trajectories of their communities. The great powers held the Ottoman government responsible for resolving that conflict, yet Istanbul could barely contain it. External pressure pushed it to support the Armenians, but domestic political calculation dictated that it appease the Kurds.

Ottoman weakness presented a dilemma for Russia. While Russia benefited from its relative superiority and ability to project influence deep into Ottoman Anatolia, Russian policymakers feared that in the event of an Ottoman collapse, a “failed state” might emerge on Russia’s southern border and expose its turbulent Caucasus to Kurdish marauders and Armenian subversives freed to operate at will. Still more worrisome was the possibility that another European power might fill the vacuum to Russia’s south and use the Kurds and Armenians against Russia. To block such a contingency, the Russians began cultivating allies among Ottoman Kurds resistant to Istanbul’s centralizing ambitions, counterproductively sabotaging the establishment of the very stability they desired.

The inhabitants of the Anatolian and Caucasian borderlands were by no means passive bystanders in this imperial contest. They adapted and mobilized in response to the penetration of state power and to the maneuvers of local rivals. In this multifaceted competition, states and non-state actors alike adopted the national idea to legitimize and frame their politics. The ultimate consequences would prove devastating.

Ottoman Eastern Anatolia

The core of the Eastern Anatolian plateau consisted of the Ottomans’ so-called Six Provinces (*Vilayât-ı Sitte*) of Van, Erzurum, Bitlis, Diyar-ı Bekir, Mamuret ül-Aziz and Sivas. It extended southward to the province of Musul (Mosul) and eastward beyond Ottoman borders to Lake Urmia in Iran and Yerevan in Russian Armenia in the north. The settlement pattern of the population resembled a mosaic, with the most significant groups – Kurds, Armenians, Turks, Circassians, and Assyrians – intermixed. For reasons ranging from the inherent difficulties of counting nomads through shifting boundaries to deliberate manipulation, population figures for the six Ottoman provinces are inexact and unreliable.¹ The Ottoman state had traditionally surveyed populations for financial

¹ For a discussion of some of the difficulties involved, see Fuat Dündar, *Modern Türkiye’nin Şifresi: İttihat ve Terakki’nin Etnisite Mühendisliği, 1913–1918* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2008), 85–106; Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road*, 34–37; Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1983).

and tax purposes. It did not endeavor to conduct comprehensive counts of whole populations. In line with its traditional understanding of itself as an Islamic state, it categorized its subjects by religion, not ethnicity. The emergence of the Armenian Question in 1878 politicized identity, motivating Ottoman officials and Armenian representatives to manipulate population numbers. Using official Ottoman figures, Kemal Karpat estimates that in 1906–07 the total population of the eastern provinces was 3,147,880. Of these 2,483,135 or 78.89%, were Muslim, and only 664,745 or 21.11% non-Muslim. The Armenian Patriarchate in 1912 counted 1,018,000 Armenians, claiming nearly 40% of the total population in the six provinces.² Armenians likely constituted somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of Ottoman Eastern Anatolia's population, i.e., somewhere around one million. In Russia's Caucasus, somewhere between 1,118,094 and 1,500,000 Armenians lived.³

Most Armenians in the Ottoman and Russian empires were members of the Apostolic Armenian Church, although small numbers belonged to the Catholic and Protestant churches, and missionaries were active trying to convert more. Another significant Christian group in Anatolia was the Assyrians, who were concentrated in Hakkâri and around Lake Urmia in Iran. The fact that they were divided among multiple churches complicates estimates of their numbers, but 150,000 is probably a fair estimate.⁴

Because the Ottoman census distinguished not on the basis of ethnicity but on religious confession, data on the ethnic composition of Muslims is still less precise. Russian analysts did attempt to distinguish ethnicities. Thus the military ethnographer Petr Aver'ianov in 1912 estimated the number of Kurds in Anatolia at 1,740,000, of whom 1,475,000 were Sunni, 200,000 Alevi, 40,000 Yezidi, and 25,000 Shi'î.⁵ The Russian Kurdologist Mikhail Lazarev suggests that before World War I overall there were 5 to 5.5 million Kurds, of whom more than 3.5 million lived in the Ottoman empire, up to 1.5 million in Iran, and approximately

² Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road*, 35–37.

³ Bakshi Ishkhanian, *Narodnosti Kavkaza: Soslav naseleniia, professional'naia gruppirovka i obshchestvennoe razsloenie Kavkazskikh narodnostei* (Petrograd: M. V. Popov, 1916), 16; Ronald Suny, "Eastern Armenians Under Tsarist Rule," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 121, 133.

⁴ Dündar, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi*, 112–13; cf. David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 28.

⁵ P. I. Aver'ianov, *Etograficheskie i voenno-politicheskie obzory aziatskikh vladanii Ottomanskoi imperii* (S. Peterburg: Voennaia tipografiia, 1912), 12–13.

150,000 in the Russian empire.⁶ Aver'ianov's assessment that the Kurds constituted about one-half of the total population of Eastern Anatolia is reasonable.

From backwater border to frontline frontier

Sultan Selim I incorporated Eastern Anatolia into the Ottoman empire following his victory over Safavid Iran in 1514. Istanbul considered the region as a backwater and remained content to rule indirectly through tribal emirates. The deterioration in the empire's position in the interstate system, however, compelled Istanbul in the nineteenth century to revise its relationship with its eastern marches. With the empire's territory shrinking and Russia approaching, Eastern Anatolia's value as a resource base and significance as a strategic arena increased accordingly. Thus at mid century Istanbul conducted a "second conquest" of Eastern Anatolia to break up the emirates and impose its writ over the region.⁷ Istanbul's attempts to assert state authority over the eastern provinces, however, created a dilemma. Centralization pitted Istanbul against the tribes, but it had few resources to spare for a struggle. The Ottoman economy was small, had virtually no industry, and offered a tiny tax base. Meanwhile, the state was already deep in debt. Along with demands for reforms, external and internal challenges to Istanbul's rule in the Balkans, Africa, and the Arabian peninsula all pressed for attention.

In 1876 a new sultan, Abdülhamid II, ascended to the sultanate and oversaw the introduction of a constitution and the election of a parliament. The ambition was to modernize the state's institutions while simultaneously generating greater popular attachment to them. It was a bold experiment, the first attempt at representative democracy in the Muslim world, but it was short-lived. The outbreak of war with Russia moved the sultan to suspend the constitution and parliament. For the next three decades Abdülhamid II would rule as a pious autocrat, selectively modernizing state institutions and cultivating popular legitimacy among Sunni Muslims through religion while ruthlessly suppressing criticism and any form of opposition.⁸

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 illustrated the east's new salience. The Russians advanced into Anatolia as far as Erzurum and concluded the war by annexing the three Ottoman provinces of

⁶ M. S. Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros (1891–1917)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 26–27.

⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 133–82.

⁸ François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: le sultan calife, 1876–1909* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi. Demographic upheaval accompanied the war, as tens of thousands of Armenians and Muslims migrated from and to the Ottoman empire respectively. But religion was no guaranty of loyalty. The fact that during the war the Russian army had employed some Kurdish units underscored the mercurial character of loyalty in imperial marches.⁹ Istanbul's hold on the region was under challenge.

Abdülhamid II opted to overcome the gap between imperial resources and demands by coopting rather than combating the tribes of Eastern Anatolia. In 1891 he established the eponymous Hamidiye regiments. Composed of Kurdish tribesmen officered by their chiefs, these units were intended to serve as irregular auxiliary forces attached to the Ottoman army in wartime and as an internal security force of sorts in peacetime. In exchange for their allegiance, Abdülhamid II plied the Hamidiye leaders with ranks, titles, money, and land, often expropriated from the Armenians. Although the experiment succeeded in buying the loyalty of a large portion of the tribal leadership, the undisciplined nature of the regiments rendered them unreliable in time of war and downright dangerous in time of peace. The Hamidiye officers, far from being restrained by official ties to the center, felt emboldened to use their new authority and weapons to rob, pillage, and grab still more land, often but not exclusively from Armenians.¹⁰

For the Unionists, continuing the Hamidian policy of indirect rule was not an option. If the Ottoman state was to survive in the face of the unceasing challenges of the great powers, it would have to marshal and extract more efficiently all potential resources, including those in Eastern Anatolia. They understood their program would encounter resistance from some sectors of society. Their initial hope was that the popular appeal of the Constitutional Revolution's promise of the rule of law and equality for all Ottoman subjects would enable them to overcome the opposition of "reactionary" elements seeking to maintain the privileges they held under the Hamidian regime. Ziya Gökalp, a native of Diyar-ı Bekir and an ethnic Kurd who would later be labeled as the Unionists' chief ideologue of Turkism, as late as 1910 cited the United

⁹ See P. I. Aver'ianov, *Kurdy v voynakh Rossii s Persiei i Turtsiei v techenie XIX stoletia. Sovremennoe politicheskoe polozhenie turetskikh, persidskikh i russkikh kurdiv. Istoricheskii ocherk* (Tiflis: Izdatel'stvo otdela General'nago shtaba pri Shtabe Kavkazskago voennago okruga, 1900).

¹⁰ On the Hamidiye, see Janet Klein, "Power in the Periphery," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2003; and Bayram Kodaman, *Sultan II. Abdülhamid Devri Doğu Anadolu Politikası* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1987).

States of America and its civic creed of equality and legality as a model for inspiration.¹¹

In Eastern Anatolia, however, the seemingly benign promises of the 1908 Revolution acquired a provocative tincture. Global processes were interacting with local social structures to undermine traditional patterns of coexistence and exacerbate conflict especially, but by no means exclusively, between Muslim Kurds and Christian Armenians. Land-holding Kurdish tribal chieftains at the turn of the century continued to occupy a dominant position over most of the Kurdish and Armenian peasantry, who like serfs were bought and sold along with the land on which they lived.¹² Yet whereas the majority of Kurds, nomadic and sedentary alike, remained brutally poor, toward the end of the nineteenth century some Armenians were becoming ascendant in Eastern Anatolia's expanding petty merchant, banking, and quasi-industrial classes.¹³ The penetration of the global market had opened economic opportunities that the Armenians were, by virtue of their own openness to education and by the privileged ties they held to Christian European merchants, diplomats, and missionaries, better able to exploit.

The mass of Kurds, by contrast, lacked the basic education and skills that the globalizing economy demanded and so could not compete. Whereas on the eve of World War I most Armenian children in the countryside as well as in towns attended schools (often run by Christian missionaries) and literacy was becoming universal for Armenian boys,¹⁴ not a single Kurd was attending high school as late as 1912.¹⁵ Indeed, as one Russian consul reported, the Kurds' knowledge of medicine and hygiene was so primitive that in Kurdish villages children were few and blindness common. Up to 50 percent of Kurdish newborns perished due to the absence of obstetric help, and by the age of three another 30 percent would fall to smallpox, scarlet fever, typhoid, and snake and insect bites. Trachoma was so widespread that it was rare to meet adult Kurds with healthy eyes.¹⁶ Thus, although Eastern Anatolia overall was growing more prosperous, the social and economic conditions of most

¹¹ Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Vorkämpfer der "Neuen Türkei": revolutionäre Bildungseliten am Genfersee (1870–1939)* (Zurich: Chronos, 2005), 57.

¹² Lazarev, *Kurdskiĭ vopros*, 40; R. Bekguliants, *Po Turetskoi Armenii* (Rostov on Don: Tipografia Ia. M. Iskidarova, 1914), 74–75.

¹³ Lazarev, *Kurdskiĭ vopros*, 41–48; Aver'ianov, *Etnograficheskii*, 18–19.

¹⁴ Richard G. Hovannisian, "Armenian Tsopk/Kharpert," in *Armenian Tsopk/Kharpert*, ed. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 3.

¹⁵ Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Der verpasste Friede: Mission, Ethnie und Staat in den Ostprovinzen der Türkei, 1838–1938* (Zurich: Chronos, 2000), 430.

¹⁶ AVPRI, Chirkov to the Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 14.2.1913 [27.2.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 25.

Kurds were deteriorating with little prospect of change.¹⁷ The Kurds were acutely aware that these trends were working against them and only accelerating.¹⁸

The fundamental rifts between the Christian Armenians and the Muslim Kurds stemmed not so much from religion or ethnicity as from clashing ways of life and modes of existence. Most Kurds were nomads, while the Christians generally were peasants. Their relationship was often symbiotic, with both sides benefiting from the specialization of the other, but it was always unequal. The more numerous and powerful Kurds routinely commandeered winter quarters from the Armenians and demanded taxes. Less routinely they plundered Armenian villages.

Islamic norms that prescribed the subordination of non-Muslims to Muslims reinforced the status quo and embedded it in identities, but the religious dimension should not be overemphasized. Sedentary Kurds, too, paid material tribute to tribal overlords. Like non-Kurds they were exploited by the landowning class and subject to depredations of their nomadic co-ethnics and Circassians, too.¹⁹ Christian Assyrians living in the mountains provide an interesting contrast. As observers noted, they resembled the nomadic Kurds in their way of life and martial bearing and demeanor. As a Kurdish proverb put it, "Between us [Kurds and Assyrians], there is but a hair's breadth, but between us and the Armenians a mountain."²⁰ Finally, Kurdish tribes fought among themselves and with their co-religionists, the Ottoman authorities, as much as they clashed with others.²¹

Shifting patterns of power

At the same time that the global market in the nineteenth century was undermining established socioeconomic relations, the emerging global discourse of the nation was imbuing ethnicity with a heightened significance. It offered to Eastern Anatolia's inhabitants an alternative to the imperial model of politics, one that tied sovereignty and control of

¹⁷ Arshak Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Harvill Press, 1948), 72; Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War*, tr. Ali Masher Ibrahim (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 60.

¹⁸ Dzhalile Dzhalil, *Iz istorii obshchestvenno-politicheskoi zhizni Kurdiv v kouise XIX nachale XX vv.* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1997), 38.

¹⁹ V. A. Gordlevskii, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1962), vol. III, 119; Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros*, 11, 39.

²⁰ F. N. Heazell and Mrs. Margoliouth, eds., *Kurds and Christians* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton and Co., 1913), 121; Gaunt, *Massacres*, 29–30.

²¹ AVPRI, Chirkov to the Imperial Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 14.2.1913 [27.2.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 25.

land to ethnicity. News of the Treaty of Berlin and its call for internationally supervised reforms to protect Armenians from Kurds and Circassians sparked fears among Kurds that the ascendant Armenians would, with outside help, assume control of Muslim lands, just as Christians in the Balkans had done. Such anxieties provoked the Kurdish Sheikh Ubeydullah to bring together a multitude of Ottoman and Iranian Kurdish tribes in a transborder revolt in 1880. Reflecting the penetration of great power influence and the shift in norms of global order, Ubeydullah appealed to Britain for sympathy and justified his revolt as a bid to form an independent state for the Kurds, who were, he explained, a “nation” unto themselves and ethnically distinct from the Turks and Iranians. Ubeydullah’s revolt was significant not, as some have claimed, because it represented an upswelling Kurdish national consciousness – the revolt quickly fell apart as Ubeydullah’s followers fell out along tribal lines – but because it demonstrated the dual penetration of European power and of the national idea into Anatolian politics. Ubeydullah did not have a nation, but he understood the utility of speaking as if he did.²²

The same shifts in global power and politics likewise influenced Armenian imaginations. The Armenians’ position was a difficult one. Even as economic opportunities beckoned, the deteriorating political situation was making their existence more, not less, precarious. The example of the Bulgarians, who had with Russian assistance achieved liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, suggested an alternative was possible and inspired them to dream, while the Treaty of Berlin emboldened them politically.²³ Seven years later Ottoman Armenians in Van formed a political party, but Russia’s Armenians soon took the lead in mobilization. Through participation in Russia’s underground socialist movement they acquired superior organizational skills and developed more ambitious programs. They founded the two most important Armenian political parties, the Hnchakian Revolutionary Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, often known as the Dashnaktsutun for short, in 1887 and 1890 respectively. The example of the Bulgarians inspired the Hnchaks and Dashnaks to reject continued the subservience of Ottoman Armenians. Unlike the Bulgarians, however, Armenians were a minority in their own lands. Thus, the Hnchaks and Dashnaks left their ultimate aims – an

²² Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 74–77; Kieser, *Der verpasste Friede*, 127–32; McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 53–59.

²³ Sarkis Atamian, *The Armenian Community: The Historical Development of a Social and Ideological Conflict* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 66–67.

independent state in a socialist world order or some undefined autonomy respectively – vague and undefined.²⁴

Whereas the Hnchaks tended to prefer mass protests, the Dashnaks formed armed units to conduct guerrilla warfare in the countryside and terrorism in cities.²⁵ Vengeance attacks against abusive Kurds and government officials were favorite methods. As gratifying as these tactics might be, they could never overturn the imperial order. Outside intervention, however, could. Some revolutionaries mounted attacks to provoke Ottoman reprisals and thereby win European sympathy and, ultimately, trigger intervention. The cycle of violence peaked in the mid 1890s when, in massacres abetted if not directed by Sultan Abdülhamid II, Muslims in Anatolia slew tens of thousands of Armenians.²⁶ The great powers reminded the “Bloody Sultan,” as European papers now referred to Abdülhamid II, of the Treaty of Berlin and their prerogative to intervene on behalf of the Armenians. When still worse massacres followed, however, Russia squelched any plans for intervention for fear that a rival might exploit the moment to its own benefit, and the great powers stood aside.

The massacres of 1894–96 revealed the desperate isolation of Ottoman Armenians, but they failed to crush the revolutionaries. At the turn of the century the Dashnaksutium emerged as the most powerful of the revolutionary organizations, a force to be reckoned with in Russian and Ottoman politics alike. In 1907 it joined the Second International of socialist and labor parties. The Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul had served for centuries as the preeminent political institution of the Ottoman Armenian community, but the Dashnaksutium eclipsed it following the introduction of electoral and party politics in 1908.²⁷ Despite ample cooperation between the Dashnaks and the Unionists and other Muslim

²⁴ Anahide Ter Minassian, *Nationalism and Socialism in the Armenian Revolutionary Movement (1887–1912)*, tr. A. M. Barratt (Cambridge, MA: Zoryan Institute, 1984), 9–20; Gerard Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 73–102; Atamian, *Armenian Community*, 97–104.

²⁵ Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006), 216.

²⁶ Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties Through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 120–28. Christopher Walker puts the number of dead at 100,000: Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1990), 165. A commission of representatives of the six great powers estimated deaths at about 25,000, while the American consul put the number at 37,085. See Fuat Dündar, *Crime of Numbers: Statistics and the Armenian Question, 1878–1918* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 144–45.

²⁷ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 314–15.

organizations against the Hamidian regime, a fundamental distrust lingered in the Dashnaks' relations with Muslims, Kurds and Turks alike. The clashing priorities of the Dashnaksutun and the CUP – one prioritized autonomy and the other the preservation of the empire – could not but generate friction. The fact that the Dashnaksutun was not a wholly “Ottoman” organization but a transimperial one that answered to a leadership outside the Ottoman empire irritated the Unionists. The lands the Dashnaks identified as “Armenia” overlapped with lands inhabited heavily by Kurds, or “Kurdistan.” Yet they called Kurds “foreigners,” portrayed them as backward savages, and targeted them in vengeance attacks.²⁸ The slogans, methods, and tactics of the Armenian revolutionaries alarmed the Kurds, who by the early 1890s had begun to suspect that the revolutionaries ultimately sought not mere autonomy but the unification of the historically Armenian lands in Anatolia, Iran, and the Caucasus followed by the gradual displacement of non-Armenians. Fears that the Armenians would follow in the Bulgarians' footsteps and establish a state in Eastern Anatolia motivated much of the killing in 1894–96.²⁹ As one Kurdish poet lamented, “It is heartbreaking to see the land of Jazira and Butan, I mean the fatherland of the Kurds, being turned into a home for the Armenians,” and “Should there be an Armenistan, no Kurds would be left.”³⁰ The one-time CUP member and Kurd Abdullah Cevdet posed the problem directly in the title of his famous response to claims advanced by the Armenian newspaper *Şamanak*, “Kurdistan or Armenia?”³¹

Collision course

In 1908, Milli İbrahim Pasha was the most powerful of the Kurdish chieftains. As a favored Hamidiye commander, he ruled the territory between Urfa and Diyar-ı Bekir as his private fief. As soon as he received word of the Constitutional Revolution, he rebelled, understanding that the rise of the CUP meant his demise. The Ottoman army battled his forces and cut him down in the field a month later. Despite his death,

²⁸ J. Michael Hagopian, “Hyphenated Nationalism: The Spirit of the Revolutionary Movement in Asia Minor and the Caucasus, 1896–1910,” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1942, 343–55; Ali Emiri, *Osmanlı Vilâyet-i Şarkiyesi* (Istanbul: Evkaf-ı İslâmiye Matbaası, 1334 [1918]), 28, 87, 90.

²⁹ Selim Deringil, “‘The Armenian Question Is Finally Closed’: Mass Conversions of Armenians in Anatolia During the Hamidian Massacres of 1895–1897,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51, 2 (2009), 344–71.

³⁰ Kader Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan*, 159.

³¹ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Bir Siyasal Düşünür Olarak Doktor Abdullah Cevdet ve Dönemi* (Istanbul: Üçdal Neşriyatı, 1981), 318, 321.

local rebellions of Kurds rippled through Eastern Anatolia that fall. Many more were to follow.³²

The new government cracked down severely on outlaws and brigands in Eastern Anatolia as part of its program to assert central authority and ensure security, particularly for Armenians. The improvement in security was substantial, as European observers and Armenians attested at the time.³³ Detailing the decrease in banditry and lawlessness, the Russian consul in Bitlis concluded in March 1909, "due to the new government's policy the Kurds have become unrecognizable."³⁴ For the next two and a half years Eastern Anatolia, including its Armenians, would enjoy markedly improved security.

Resistance to the new regime, however, was building. Alongside the tribal elite who resented the government's effort to displace their authority with its own, many Kurds (and other Muslims) regarded the Unionists' recognition of equal rights for Christians as tantamount to betrayal. Central rule had comparatively little to offer either Kurdish notables or the mass of Kurds other than conscription and taxes. Istanbul's treasury was chronically depleted, and its policies promised in the short term to strip the tribal leadership of its power and in the long term to asphyxiate the rest of the Kurds economically, seemingly to the advantage of the *gâvur*, the unbeliever. Russia's consuls took notice of the dissatisfaction brewing among Ottoman Kurds and began to wonder how they might exploit it in the interests of their empire.

Russia and the Kurds

St. Petersburg's interest in the Kurds dates to at least as far back as 1787, when Catherine the Great commissioned the publication of a Kurdish grammar. The nomadic, armed Kurdish tribes presented a significant security concern on Russia's south Caucasian borders, but also a potential military resource that Russian officials sought to manage. During its series of wars with the Ottoman and Iranian empires throughout the nineteenth century, Russia entered into local and temporary alliances with the

³² Kader Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan*, 59; van Bruinessen, *Agha*, 187–89; Gordlevskii, *Izbramnye sochineniia*, vol. III, 116; Hanioglu, *Preparation*, 106–07; Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 37, 115–16, 148–49; E. B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (London: J. Murray, 1912), 43, 66.

³³ Dikran Mesrob Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology Under Ottoman Rule, 1908–1914* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 96; Manoug Joseph Somakian, *Empires in Conflict: Armenia and the Great Powers, 1895–1920* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 38; Heazell and Margoliouth, eds., *Kurds and Christians*, 204.

³⁴ Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 38.

Kurdish tribes, and even included Kurdish units in its army.³⁵ Spurred by the demand for knowledge of the Kurds, Russian scholars by the middle of the nineteenth century were conducting multiple studies on them.³⁶ Similarly, Russian military ethnographers began systematically gathering and analyzing information on the numbers and characteristics of the Kurds of Eastern Anatolia and Iran. Russia's interest in ethnography was not *sui generis*, but was part of a pan-European trend of categorizing and classifying whole population groups according to ethnicity to better predict and manipulate their behavior during wartime. Ethnicity became a prism through which officers and policymakers perceived the political world and categorized actors.³⁷

The rebuff encountered at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 coupled with the lure of expansion into Manchuria and the Far East led St. Petersburg to direct its attention away from the Ottoman Near East. Russia's might had long ago eclipsed that of its Ottoman and Iranian rivals, and it had little to fear from them. Indeed, some Russian decisionmakers saw Ottoman weakness as an opportunity to exploit, as the foreign minister and chief of the General Staff had thought in 1908 when they pushed for war with the Ottoman empire as an easy way to restore luster to the tsar's regime.

But if St. Petersburg no longer needed to fret about the Ottoman state as a power, it did worry about the expanding presence of the other European powers along its southern borders. British, German, and French diplomats, spies, businessmen, and missionaries in Anatolia and Iran were opening consulates, laying railroads, building schools, trading, and proselytizing among other activities. An American traveler described the region as "honey combed" with European consulates.³⁸ In an effort to manage its rivalry with Britain, Russia in 1907 had agreed with Britain to divide Iran into three zones and occupy the northern third. Russian and British officials carefully avoided nomenclature that would suggest partition, but the ease with which the Europeans imposed their will on Iran was not lost on Istanbul. Nor were the facts that Russia had added 400 more kilometers to its 450-km Caucasian border with the Ottoman empire and had even begun settling Slavs in northern Iran. Istanbul's

³⁵ Aver'ianov, *Kurdy*.

³⁶ For an overview of imperial Russian Kurdology, see A. A. Vigin, A. N. Khokhlov, and P. M. Shastitko, eds., *Istoriia otechestvennogo vostokovedeniia s serediny XIX veka do 1917 goda* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 1997), 215–25.

³⁷ Peter Holquist, "To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Terry Martin and Ronald Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–44.

³⁸ Sidney Whitman, *Turkish Memories* (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1914), 121.

anxiety was not baseless. Russian strategists looking to the longer term concluded that control of the Anatolian plateau would be a vital asset in their competition with the other powers. It would give Russia the ability to dominate Iran, exert influence on the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, and threaten Britain's lines of communication to India and its other eastern colonies.³⁹ As one Russian colonel wrote in an analysis, "Asia Minor, especially in the regions that lie on the Black Sea, and Armeno-Kurdistan, which borders on the Transcaucasus, represents for us a first-class political interest."⁴⁰ Russian officials scanned Eastern Anatolia for opportunities to expand their own influence. Given the growing dissatisfaction of the Ottoman Kurds with the Unionist regime, they did not have to look very hard.

Abdürrezzak Bedirhan and the lure of imperial Russia

The new regime's imprisonment of Hamidiye commanders, its appointment of pro-Armenian administrators such as Celâl Bey, the *vali* (governor) of Erzurum, and the sudden change in the status of Armenians from *reaya*, non-Muslim subjects with limited rights, to "citizens with full rights" bewildered the Kurds. As one Russian military analysis observed, "Feeling their strength, they [the Armenians], in alliance with the Young Turks, began to avenge themselves on the Kurds for the former, old offenses. The Kurds, who are not used to this kind of treatment, await further developments in a state of incomprehension."⁴¹ The Kurds, however, did have options. Fed up with the new regime, the chief of the Heyderanli tribe and influential Hamidiye commander Kôr Hüseyin Pasha and several others crossed into Iran in early 1910. They took with them several Hamidiye regiments, dealing Unionist plans to restructure the Hamidiye a crippling blow.⁴² Inside Iran, increasing numbers of Ottoman Kurds began applying for Russian subject status, embarrassing and distressing Istanbul. Kôr Hüseyin went still further

³⁹ M. S. Anderson, *Eastern Question*, 208; "Armeniiia – Voenno-geograficheskii ocherk Gen. Liet. Khofmeistera, Geidlberg", *Voennyi sbornik* 11 (November 1914), 143–44; Roderic Davison, "The Armenian Crisis, 1912–1914," *American Historical Review*, 53, 3 (April 1948), 487–88.

⁴⁰ AVPRI, Report on Asian Turkey and Its Study, 1.5.1913 [14.5.1913], f. 129, o. 502b, d. 7600, l. 1.

⁴¹ AVPRI, Caucasus Military District to Quartermaster General of the General Staff, 5 January 1910 [18 January 1910], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, ll. 15–17. See also Noel Buxton and the Rev. Harold Buxton, *Travel and Politics in Armenia* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 18. For an Armenian taunt of the Kurds' reversed fortunes, see S. V. Bedickian, *The Red Sultan's Soliloquy*, tr. Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston: Sherman, French, and Co., 1912), 114–18.

⁴² Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 150–53; Gordlevskii, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, vol. II, 128.

and made an offer to the Russian viceroy of the Caucasus to hand over all Kurdistan to Russia.⁴³

The Russians, however, preferred to concentrate their attention on a Kurd named Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. A grandson of the last independent emir of Botan in the vicinity of Van, Abdürrezzak came from an unusually prestigious clan. He resented the Ottoman state for destroying his grandfather's emirate in 1847 and depriving him of his patrimony. Abdürrezzak had been raised and educated in Istanbul, but he retained an attachment to his native land. When in 1906 he was implicated in the murder of the prefect of Istanbul, he was imprisoned in Tripoli of Barbary along with his extended family. Right after his release under a Unionist-sponsored amnesty in 1910, Abdürrezzak announced to his associates in Istanbul that he was leaving for Kurdistan to "civilise his people."⁴⁴

What made Abdürrezzak particularly attractive to the Russians was his Russophilia. As a young man, he had entered the Ottoman Foreign Ministry and had been posted to St. Petersburg in the early 1890s. What he saw in Russia must have had a powerful effect on him, for Abdürrezzak became a staunch advocate not only of Kurdish political union with Russia, but also of the spread of Russian culture, language, and literature among the Kurds. Through Russia and its culture, Abdürrezzak believed, the Kurds could access the forms of knowledge they required to prosper in the modern world. By cooperating with Russia, the tribal scion hoped, he could solve the predicament of the Kurds and regain his patrimonial lands.

Among the first things Abdürrezzak did was to contact the Russian consul at Van, Sergei Oifer'ev, and ask how an autonomous Kurdistan might be established.⁴⁵ By August 1910, he was already distributing pamphlets in the eastern provinces pushing the idea of an ethnically defined Kurdish "beylik," or principality, and praising the "blessedness of Russian rule."⁴⁶ In September he applied to the Russian authorities for Russian subject status and requested permission to take up residence in Yerevan. The embassy in Istanbul and the authorities in the Caucasus responded positively, objecting initially only to his desire to settle in Yerevan, which they considered too close to the border. But six months later the Ministry of Internal Affairs approved both Abdürrezzak's requests.⁴⁷

⁴³ Lazarev, *Kurdsii vopros*, 157.

⁴⁴ Telford Waugh, *Turkey: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1930), 97.

⁴⁵ Abdurrezak Bedirhan, *Otobiografya (1910-1916)*, tr. Hasan Cuni (Ankara: Peri Yayınları, 2000), 26.

⁴⁶ Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 51.

⁴⁷ AVPRI, Letter to K. E. Argirapulo, [no day or month] 1910, Letter of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 3.3.1911 [16.3.1911], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, ll. 61, 67.

Abdürrezzak and Kör Hüseyin were not the only Kurdish chieftains making overtures to Russia. Ismail Agha Simko, the head of the second-largest tribal confederation in Iran, and another tribal chief named Sheikh Seyid Ali also availed themselves of Russian support. Seeking to take advantage of Italy's declaration of war on the Ottoman empire in 1911, they led rebellions in the regions of Siirt, Van, and Bitlis. They, too, employed ethnicity to legitimize secession, and distributed leaflets declaring "This land is our land" and claiming Bitlis and the neighboring territories as Kurdish.⁴⁸

Although widespread and destabilizing, these revolts were uncoordinated and never posed a fundamental challenge to Ottoman rule. Abdürrezzak recognized the need to unify the rebels and so in May 1912 organized an assembly of prominent Kurdish tribal chiefs in southeast Anatolia. The participants set up a body called "İrşad," meaning "Correct Guidance," to coordinate their actions. İrşad set as its goal the liberation of Kurdistan, and toward that end aspired to establish an armed force of 70,000 men. It formed cells in Van, Diyar-ı Bekir, Urfa, and elsewhere.⁴⁹ Russian consular officials had been apprised of the meeting beforehand, and one of the assembly's first acts was to send Abdüsselam Barzani to Tiflis to secure Russian support. Abdüsselam succeeded, and was soon thereafter carrying out attacks along the Ottoman border with Russian weapons and money.⁵⁰ In August, another of İrşad's founders, a captain in the Ottoman gendarmerie named Hayreddin Berazi, approached the Russian consulate in Erzurum. Identifying himself on his calling card as "Chef des Kurd," Berazi presented the consulate with a plan to give Kurdistan a status in the Russian empire akin to that of the German principalities in Germany.⁵¹ Berazi's proposal was not unusual. Schemes to join a Kurdish beylik to the Russian empire with a status similar to that of Bukhara or Khiva, where Muslims enjoyed a wide degree of self-rule under the tsar, were also circulating among the Kurds.⁵²

Opinion about how vigorously to support the Kurdish rebels varied among Russian officials. The under secretary of war, Aleksei

⁴⁸ Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros*, 201–02.

⁴⁹ Dzhaliile Dzhaliil, "Pervye kurdskie obshchestvennye politicheskie organizatsii," *Tiurkologicheskii sbornik*, 1973 (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), 183.

⁵⁰ Suat Akgül, "Rusya'nın Yürüttüğü Doğu Anadolu Politikası İçinde İrşad ve Cihandani Cemiyetlerinin Rolü," in *Prof. Abdurrahman Çaycı'ya Armağan*, ed. Abdurrahman Çaycı (Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılâp Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1995), 29.

⁵¹ AVPRI, Calling Card of Hayreddin Berazi, Chirkov to Girs, 16.8.1912 [29.8.1912], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, ll. 96, 99; AVPRI, General Consul in Erzurum to the Ambassador in Constantinople, 19.6.1914 [2.7.1914], f. 129, o. 502b, d. 5350, l. 8.

⁵² AVPRI, General Consul in Baghdad to the Embassy in Constantinople, 25.6.1913 [8.7.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 186–87.

Polivanov, the future foreign minister, Sazonov, and the Caucasus General Staff advocated an aggressive stance. Charykov and the viceroy of the Caucasus Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov were wary of lending too much support lest it harm relations or incite disorders that might spread northward, while the finance minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov, objected to the costs involved. Russia's officials found a compromise wherein they agreed to provide Kurdish leaders with money, sanctuary inside Russia and Iran, and support such as advance warning of assassination and arrest attempts, but not to back talk of a Kurdish protectorate or to provide sanctuary inside Ottoman territory. Russia's priority at this point was to prevent Kurdish territory from being used as a platform for attacks on Russian possessions in Iran and the Caucasus. Courtship of the Kurds paid dividends during the Iranian Revolution of 1911 when Kurds followed the direction of Russia's consular officials to attack revolutionaries.⁵³

The Kurds' renewed uprisings presented a dual danger to Istanbul. In addition to challenging the state directly, they raised the possibility of provoking a great power to intervene by generating chaos and putting Armenians at risk. The Ottomans recognized that if they could not somehow resolve the tensions between the Kurds and the Armenians they could lose Eastern Anatolia to outside intervention.

A major source of that tension lay in the dispute over land. Land was the essential resource, and one that was becoming more valuable with the growth of population and the advent of commercial agriculture. The majority of Armenian peasants were landless, and Abdülhamid II's policy of facilitating the seizure of Armenian-owned lands, including Church lands, by the aghas had exacerbated the problem.⁵⁴ The 1908 Revolution raised hopes among Armenians that they might recover the lands they had recently lost, and the Dashnaksutiun made the return of those lands a priority.⁵⁵ Some Kurdish landowners had in the meantime invested in their new holdings, and the prospect of losing their investments along with the land galled them. Fear that state authorities would confiscate and redistribute the land to the Armenians was a powerful motive behind Kurdish tribal leaders' cooperation with the Russians.⁵⁶

⁵³ Lazarev, *Kurdkii vopros*, 158–59, 163, 170, 223; Chairman of the Council of Ministers to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18.4.1912 [1.5.1912], *Mosvi*, ser. 2, vol. 19, part 2, 493.

⁵⁴ Lazarev, *Kurdkii vopros*, 40–43.

⁵⁵ Kaligian, *Armenian Organization*, 53.

⁵⁶ AVPRI, Vorontsov-Dashkov to Izvol'skii, 9.3.1910 [22.3.1910], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, l. 12; General Consul in Erzurum to Girs, 19.6.1914 [2.7.1914], f. 129, o. 502b, d. 5350, l. 5; Lazarev, *Kurdkii vopros*, 153, 202.

The CUP in 1908 in fact had contemplated the distribution of land to peasants throughout the empire, but hesitated to implement it. This failure cannot be explained as the product of a conservative predisposition against land reform. Among the Unionists were exponents of social engineering, and many saw a sociological utility in using land reform to break the power of the landed classes and emancipate the peasantry.⁵⁷ Nor is it the case that the Unionists were unwilling in principle to challenge the tribal elite. From the very beginning they had taken on the tribal elites forcefully, disbanding the Hamidiye, imprisoning renegade commanders, appointing unpopular administrators, and extending equal rights and duties, including the bearing of arms and conscription, to Armenians. The granting of permission to Armenians to bear arms and the inclusion of Christians in the ranks of the Ottoman army in 1909 further scandalized the Kurds.⁵⁸ In 1910 the state authorities underscored their commitment to the new order by deploying Christian conscripts from the Balkans to Van to acclimate the Kurds to the idea of Christians serving in the Ottoman army.⁵⁹ These measures were all provocative, but the Unionists initially did not blench before Kurdish discontent and protest.

The Unionists, however, could not ignore Muslim resentment indefinitely. Muslims were their base constituency, and it was not only in Eastern Anatolia where Muslims suspected the government of favoring Christians. The so-called counterrevolution of 31 March 1909 and the accompanying massacre of thousands of Armenians around Adana had indicated the depth of hostility among Muslims at large toward Christians. In Aleppo, the Unionists' opponents openly derided the CUP as defenders of Christian and Jewish interests.⁶⁰ Moreover, many Unionists themselves nursed resentment against Christians, whose interests did not align clearly with the goals of strengthening central rule and preserving the empire. To the contrary, many Christians had benefited from the growing influence of the European powers inside and around the empire,

⁵⁷ Feroz Ahmad, "The Agrarian Policy of the Young Turks, 1908–1918," in *Économie et sociétés dans l'Empire ottoman (fin du XVIIIe–début du XXe siècle)*, ed. Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Paul Dumont (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1983), 276.

⁵⁸ Vice-Consulate in Van to Lowther, 24.3.1913, in Anita L. P. Burdett, ed., *Armenia: Political and Ethnic Boundaries* (Slough, UK: Archive Editions, 1998), 282.

⁵⁹ Molyneux-Seel to Lowther, 7.9.1910, as cited in Klein, "Power," 227–28, n. 102.

⁶⁰ Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 112.

and few supported the CUP. Balkan Jews, by contrast, feared the collapse of the imperial order and so tended to favor the CUP.⁶¹

Reshaping Eastern Anatolia's administrative and social structures was an enormous, long-term, and inherently unpopular task. The ability of rebels to obtain backing from Russia severely undercut Istanbul's ability to counter them and enact reforms. As one British official wrote in 1910 regarding Russian support for Kurdish rebels, "The mere possibility of this certainly makes it most difficult for the Turkish Government to alienate these Kurdish chiefs by redressing the Armenian grievances about their lands."⁶² Moreover, as important as it was, the reform of Eastern Anatolia was just one of multiple urgent issues facing a government with limited resources. The Unionists had to choose their battles, and picking a battle that would demand time, consume significant resources, and put them at odds with a large Muslim constituency made little sense.

The government of Said Pasha did take up the issue of land redistribution. It allocated 100,000 lira to settle Armenian–Kurdish land disputes, and in September 1912 the Council of Ministers resolved to purchase the contested land and return it to its former Armenian owners and distribute the rest to landless Armenians. Despite the plan's provision for compensation, Kurdish landowners saw this plan as yet another state encroachment.⁶³ In any event, a lack of funds, made still worse by the Balkan Wars, gave the Porte no choice but to abandon the land reform program at the end of the year. Indeed, the Balkan Wars and related economic dislocations constricted further the government's already limited room for maneuver in Anatolia by forcing it to raise taxes and impose new levies on cattle and construction in the region. The result was yet another wave of disturbances led by disgruntled Kurds throughout the region.⁶⁴

The Ottomans' efforts to maintain control over their eastern provinces were undercut by Russia's program to expand its influence. By 1912, the Russians were funneling significant amounts of arms and money to Kurdish tribes.⁶⁵ The covert support network extended from local Russian officials in the region all the way up to St. Petersburg, and included army officers, diplomats, academics, and commercial agents.

⁶¹ GARF, To the Head of the Special Department of Police Eremin, 23.1.1913 [6.2.1913], f. 529, o. 1, d. 13, l. 4; Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims, and Jews, 1430–1950* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), 282–85.

⁶² Cited in Klein, "Power," 322. ⁶³ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 203–04.

⁶⁴ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 214.

⁶⁵ Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 52; Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 223. The sums were large enough that the chairman of Russia's Council of Ministers complained to the foreign minister about them: Kokovtsov to Sazonov, 18.4.1912 [1.5.1912], *Minei*, series 2, vol. 19, part 2, 493.

The Russians used their consulates in Istanbul and the Anatolian and Iranian towns of Bayezid, Bitlis, Erzurum, Khoy, Maku, and Van as safe houses to conduct meetings with Kurdish leaders. They infiltrated saboteurs through Georgia.⁶⁶ That October, at least four Russian army officers dressed and disguised as Kurds crossed into Ottoman lands in order to incite the Kurds.⁶⁷ Trade missions sent by the Russian governor general of the Caucasus had among their goals establishing contact with Kurdish leaders and the conduct of espionage.⁶⁸ The Russian Commerce Bank was used in part to run Russian intelligence operations in Anatolia.⁶⁹ A correspondent for the St. Petersburg newspaper *Birzhevyya Vedomosti* traveling through Anatolia in the spring of 1913 was spreading rumors that the Kurds in the vicinity of Diyar-ı Bekir and Bitlis had “declared independence” and were asking for great power protection.⁷⁰

The Ottomans recognized that the Kurdish chiefs’ collaboration amounted to “a victory for the Russian government” and a “disaster” and “great danger” for “our state.”⁷¹ But Istanbul’s inability to undertake structural reform left only a range of tactical measures to keep Eastern Anatolia under control. The most obvious was to suppress the revolts outright, which the Ottoman armed forces did repeatedly. On occasion, the Ottoman forces would, in a reversal of Abdülhamid II’s tactic, join with Armenians to fight the Kurds, as in June 1913 when a 500-man force of Dashnaks led by Aram Pasha, i.e., Aram Manukian, fought alongside Ottoman regulars against the Kurds of the Gravi tribe between Van and Başkale.⁷² Suppression sometimes achieved notable results, such as when the Ottoman authorities killed Berazi and took several İrşad members prisoner in a firefight in 1913, thereby effectively shutting down that organization.⁷³ A related tactic was to send undercover agents to capture or assassinate figures such as Abdürrezzak and

⁶⁶ BOA, Grand Vizier to the Minister of the Interior, 5 Mayıs 1329 [18.5.1913], DH.MUİ, D. 23, S. 10.

⁶⁷ BOA, Vilayet of Van to the Interior Ministry, 5 Teşrinievvel 1329 [18.10.1913], DH.SYS, D. 23, S. 16.

⁶⁸ BOA, Directorate of Security to the Vilayet of Van, 14 Cemaziyevvel 1332 [10.4.1914], DH.ŞFR, D. 40, S. 174.

⁶⁹ Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya*, 200–01.

⁷⁰ BOA, Interior Ministry to the Foreign Minister, 28 Mart 1329 [10.4.1913], DH. SYS, D. 118, S. 13.

⁷¹ BOA, Interior Ministry to Van, 23 Nisan 1330 [6.5.1914], DH. ŞFR, D. 40, S. 151; BOA, Erzurum to Interior Ministry, 10 Kanunuevvel 1327 [23.12.1911], DH. SYS, D. 90, S. 1–6 B. 5.

⁷² AVPRI, Telegram from Chirkov, 30.5.1913 [12.4.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2 d. 3573, 1. 158.

⁷³ Dzhaliil, *Iz istorii*, 125.

Simko, or to put a bounty on their heads.⁷⁴ Yet such measures could secure only momentary victories. Diplomatic pressure on Russia and Iran to keep Abdürrezzak, Simko, Sheikh Taha, and others away from the Ottoman border was similarly, at best, only temporarily effective.

Istanbul adopted other tactics besides suppression to pacify the Kurds. One was to exploit the splits and feuds among them. One such rift was the rivalry between the prominent Shemdinan and Bedirhan clans. The head of the Shemdinan clan, Sheikh Abdülkadir, was a CUP member and Ottoman senator who used his influence to try to undercut Abdürrezzak's appeal and reconcile the Kurds to the CUP.⁷⁵ Another tactic was to offer amnesty to Abdürrezzak, Sheikh Taha, and other Kurdish rebels working with the Russians.⁷⁶ Offers of amnesty, however, ran the risk of diminishing the government's prestige.⁷⁷ And there was no certainty that a chief's acceptance of amnesty guaranteed he had forsworn anti-government activity. Despite having availed himself of an amnesty, one Sheikh Mahmud Süleyman, resentful at his post-1908 decline, came to the Russians with a proposal to create disturbances and support a Russian invasion, on the understanding that afterwards they would restore his prior privileges and position.⁷⁸

Ottoman officials pursued secret negotiations with Kurds in Iran and managed occasionally to turn Iranian Kurds against the Russians.⁷⁹ They also succeeded at times in winning back some Ottoman Kurds. In some instances this backfired, such as when the Ottomans delegated their sometime opponent Sheikh Taha to catch draft dodgers along the border. The unwelcome nature of conscription plus Taha's pillaging and burning of homes in the area caused a score of Ottoman Kurds to flee

⁷⁴ AVPRI, Telegram of the Vice-Consul in Khoy, 7.11.1913 [20.11.1913], Vice-Consul in Khoy to the First Department, December 1913 [day not specified], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 232; AVPRI, Vice-Consul in Urmia to Tehran, 31.5.1913 [13.6.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3562, l. 160; AVPRI, Telegram from Orlov to Sazonov, 24.6.1914 [7.7.1914], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 354; Bedirhan, *Otobiyografiya*, 40–42.

⁷⁵ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, 392–93; Derk Kinnane, *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 25; V. Nikitin, *Kurdy*, translated from the French (Moscow: Progress, 1964), 290; Naci Kutlay, *İttihat-Terakki ve Kürtler* (Istanbul: Fırat Yayınları, 1991), 34.

⁷⁶ AVPRI, Telegram from the Ambassador in Constantinople, 14.12.1912 [27.12.1912], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, l. 115; AVPRI, Vice-Consul in Khoy to the Imperial Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 30.10.1913 [12.11.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 207; Lazarev, *Kurdskaa vopros*, 205.

⁷⁷ Erdal Aydoğan, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Doğu Politikası* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2005), 185–86.

⁷⁸ AVPRI, Orlov to Sazonov, 28.2.1913 [13.3.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 16.

⁷⁹ AVPRI, Report of the Court Councilor in Van, 18.3.1913 [31.3.1913], Report of the Vice-Consul in Van, 25.3.1913 [7.4.1913], f. 180, o. 512b, d. 3573, ll. 60–61, 79; Lazarev, *Kurdskaa vopros*, 158.

to Iran and plead to the Russian consul in Rumiye for aid, resulting in a deep sense of embarrassment among Ottoman officials.⁸⁰ Finally, the Ottoman government at times addressed Kurdish concerns more directly by removing governors that the Kurds resented and appointing Kurds to important positions in Kurdistan. This, however, inevitably alienated the Armenians, to say nothing of when some Unionists, such as Abdülkadir, sought to attract Kurdish support by engaging in rhetorical declamations against Armenians.⁸¹ While the Armenians themselves could be ignored, Istanbul took the threat of great power intervention on their behalf seriously.

This tactic, moreover, led not only to strained relations with the Armenians, but at times also set the Ottoman government against itself. For example, yielding to the lobbying of Abdülkadir, Istanbul appointed a Kurd named İzzet Bey governor to the province of Van for the specific purpose of improving relations with Van's Kurdish notables. But this mission rendered İzzet Bey's relationship with the local army corps commander Cabir Pasha a contentious and embittered one. Cabir Pasha derided the new governor as a "dirty Kurd" who dreamed of a "Kurmanji Beylik."⁸² He complained of İzzet Bey's inability to work with the Armenians and at times openly wished that the Dashnaks would kill him. For his part, İzzet, an ardent Muslim and opponent of Russia, accused the army commander of being in league with the Dashnaks and expressed bewilderment as to how such a person could get appointed to a high position. Armenians unsurprisingly favored Cabir and reviled İzzet Bey.⁸³ Meanwhile, Van's deputy governor despaired that this internal feuding left the province defenseless against Russia's intrigues with Simko and other Kurds.⁸⁴

Inchoate nation

In an analysis of the Kurds' military potential, the Russian army's leading ethnographer of the Kurds, Aver'ianov, wrote in 1912, "the Kurds have neither a clear national self-consciousness nor a sense of patriotism in the Kurdish-national sense, and therefore all of their uprisings against

⁸⁰ BOA, Interior Ministry Directorate of Public Communications to Van Province, 25 Kanunuevvel 1326 [7.1.1911], Deputy Governor to the Interior Ministry, 21 Nisan 1327 [4.5.1911], DH.SYS, D. 8-1, S. 1-7.

⁸¹ British Consul in Erzurum to Chargé d'affaires, 9.06.1913, cited in Burdett, *Armenia*, 269.

⁸² Kurmanji is one of the three major Kurdish dialects.

⁸³ AVPRI, Report of Olfer'ev, 18.3.1913 [31.3.1913], Report of Olfer'ev, 25.3.1913 [7.4.1913] f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 51, 79; British Vice-Consulate in Van to Lowther, 24.03.1914, in Burdett, *Armenia*, 285.

⁸⁴ Aydoğan, *Doğu Politikası*, 177.

Turkish domination were put down, were accompanied by fratricidal conflict, never simultaneously took place throughout all of Kurdistan, and never led to the formation of a Kurdish state.”⁸⁵ This vision of the tribes as an inchoate nation with an inherent but unrealized claim to statehood would have been inconceivable to earlier imperial administrators. But by the end of the nineteenth century the national idea had permeated the Russian bureaucracy, affecting the way Russian officials understood the world inside their empire and outside. No longer did Russians see the tribes as a gaggle of independent entities to be dealt with individually as they existed. Instead they imagined them as a single collective entity defined by what it did not possess – a unifying consciousness and a state of its own.

Aver’ianov’s analysis pointed to the military payoff for Russia of such a consciousness. As an aggregate of tribes, the Kurds presented merely an irritant to the Ottomans, but if united they would constitute a formidable military force. This was the argument of the vice-consul in Khoy, Chirkov, for backing Abdürrezzak and his project to bring the Kurds together. Other officials, however, noted two problems with such a policy. The first was the possibility that a union of Kurds could be turned against Russia. The second was that the great masses of Kurds, being illiterate, nomadic, and tied to their tribes, could not be expected to develop a genuinely unifying national consciousness. The idea of a coherent Kurdish entity was illusory, and to pursue it would amount to basing Russian policy on “Turkish emigrants and renegades [*begletsı*].”⁸⁶

Chirkov’s viewpoint won out, and Abdürrezzak obtained Russian support at the highest levels in St. Petersburg for his effort to cultivate a Kurdish elite that would transform Kurdish society. Right after the crushing of İrşad, Abdürrezzak together with other former members of that organization founded the Jihandani, or “Upbringing,” Society. The Russian consulate in Khoy put the society under its protection, and Chirkov even served as the society’s chairman. Among the society’s goals were setting up a Kurdish-language press, publishing a weekly newspaper, and opening schools for Kurds.⁸⁷

Exposure to Russian culture formed an integral part of Abdürrezzak’s vision of fostering a Kurdish national consciousness. He believed that steeping young Kurds in Russian culture would allow them to raise their people’s standards of education, culture, and living.⁸⁸ The Kurds,

⁸⁵ Aver’ianov, *Etnograficheskii*, 15. ⁸⁶ Lazarev, *Kurdskiı vopros*, 275–76.

⁸⁷ AVPRI, Chirkov to the Chargé d’affaires in Tehran, 14.2.1913 [27.2.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 23.

⁸⁸ AVPRI, Secret Report to the First Department, 1913 [month and day not specified], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 233; Bedirhan, *Otobiyografiya*, 37.

Abdürrezzak explained to Russian officials, were part of the “Indo-European race,” but Turkish and Iranian tyranny had blocked them from contact with European civilization. Association with Russia offered an opportunity to remedy this unfortunate legacy. Abdürrezzak wanted a Cyrillic alphabet to replace the Arabic alphabet for Kurdish, and while in St. Petersburg he enlisted Russia’s leading orientalists in this project.⁸⁹ He envisioned further arrangements to provide for medical assistance and loans and credit for agricultural and educational development.⁹⁰ In the meantime, with the Foreign Ministry’s blessing, Russia’s Khoy consulate began working with Abdürrezzak to create a school for Kurdish children. Simko, too, was brought into the project. Like Abdürrezzak, Simko also looked on Russia’s involvement in Kurdish affairs with favor. A visit to Tiflis, the administrative capital of Russia’s Caucasus, had made a positive impression upon him regarding imperial Russian culture. Chirkov returned the respect, describing Simko as a man with “a sharp mind and a strong character.”⁹¹

Other Russians who worked with Abdürrezzak and Simko, however, expressed skepticism regarding the characters and true motives of these two figures. Vladimir Minorskii, one of Russia’s leading experts on the Kurds, described Abdürrezzak as a “political adventurer.”⁹² Another assessment belittled him as obsessed with a hatred of Turks, and explained how a proposal of his to divert a hefty portion of the funds earmarked for schools to financing guerrilla bands in the provinces of Erzurum and Van “owed more to a personal desire to get revenge against the Turks than to his worries for his fellow tribesmen.” Simko himself objected to Abdürrezzak’s proposal. He argued that only a full-scale, united Kurdish uprising to take maximum advantage of the Porte’s difficulties in North Africa and the Balkans made sense, and that funds for anything less would be better spent on schools and on protecting Kurdish refugees in Iran.⁹³ This disagreement cooled relations between the two. Soon thereafter a destructive rivalry developed from which the Bedirhani’s prestige and authority never entirely recovered. Some actions of Abdürrezzak cast doubt upon the purity of his passion to exalt his “people.” Even as he lambasted the Ottomans, he negotiated with them.

⁸⁹ AVPRI, Chirkov to the Chargé d’affaires in Tehran, 14.2.1913 [27.2.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 23–25; Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros*, 225; K. N. Iuzbashian, *Akademik Iosif Abgarovich Orbeli (1887–1961)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 34–36.

⁹⁰ Klemm to the Office of the Viceroy of the Caucasus, 26.3.1914 [8.4.1914], in *Movei*, seri. 3, vol. 2, 249.

⁹¹ AVPRI, Vice-Consul in Khoy to the Chargé d’affaires in Tehran, 30.10.1913 [12.11.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 204.

⁹² Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros*, 276.

⁹³ AVPRI, Khoy to the First Department, 1913, f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 234–35.

Alongside points such as funding for schools, he also made the provision of special posts and jobs for his relatives a precondition to any agreement. A desire to regain his family's formerly privileged status, and not simply a deep attachment to Kurdishness, motivated his efforts to rally and unify the Kurdish tribes.

Evaluations of Simko were similarly mixed. Simko's tribe, the Shakak, had a reputation for being among the worst robbers and plunderers, and were known for their preference for raiding the settled Christian Assyrians and Shi'i Azeri Turks of the plains and valleys.⁹⁴ Although the governor general of the Caucasus Vorontsov-Dashkov decorated Simko in Tiflis for services to Russia and appointed him governor of Somay, Girs cautioned in internal correspondence that most of Simko's "exploits were little more than poorly disguised banditry" and "boil down to cattle rustling etc."⁹⁵ Ottoman officials would have agreed emphatically with this interpretation.⁹⁶ They compiled inventoried estimates of the damage that Simko had caused to Ottoman villages and protested Vorontsov-Dashkov's decoration of Simko all the way up to Sazonov. The protests were to no avail since, as the Russian consul in Van bluntly remarked, "[Simko] is someone that we need and we should support him, since his hatred toward the Turks is without limit. And that benefits us."⁹⁷

The first Russian-Kurdish school opened in Khoy in November 1913. Russian military officers and diplomats and Kurdish notables and merchants were among those who attended the opening, and Foreign Minister Sazonov passed on the tsar's gratitude to "the participants in the Kurdish school."⁹⁸ The school's mullah commenced the ceremony with a prayer asking God to grant a long life to the tsar and to strengthen the power and greatness of the tsar's state. The Russians' goals for the school aligned with Abdürrezzak's and Simko's. One was to foster a unifying Kurdish identity among the students and to tie this future elite to Russia. Thus, in addition to newly developed courses in Kurdish language and Kurdish literature, the students were also to study the Russian language,

⁹⁴ Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, ed. Richard Tapper (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 380.

⁹⁵ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 277-78.

⁹⁶ ATASE, Foreign Minister to the General Staff, 4 Şubat 1328 [17.2.1913], BHK, K. 175, D. 72, F. 1-21.

⁹⁷ AVPRI, Report of Olfer'ev in Van, 18.3.1913 [31.3.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 64. One official ascribed Simko's hatred of the Turks to the fact that his father, who had lived in Constantinople and had known Abdürrezzak, died in an Ottoman prison: AVPRI, Telegram of Kokhanovskii, Tiflis, 15.5.1911 [28.5.1911], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, l. 71.

⁹⁸ Dzhaliil, *Iz istorii*, 113.

Russian society, Russia's borders, natural resources, governmental structure, legal system, and "wide tolerance for Muslims." Russian literature was to be translated into Kurdish, and Kurdish literature into Russian. The best students were expected to continue their higher education in Russia. Another aim was to bolster Russia's control over northern Iran by winning Kurdish sympathy for the short-term. A longer-term goal was to pacify the Kurds by teaching them the peaceful – and sedentary – pursuits of agriculture, horticulture, metalworking, and carpentry.⁹⁹ These three goals would serve the greater objective of facilitating Russian domination of the region by transforming the Kurds from a collection of disparate, often feuding, nomadic tribes inclined to disorder and rebellion into a cohesive, settled society that could become, ideally, a pillar of Russian rule. The Foreign Ministry now sought to improve Russia's capacity to deal with Kurds over the long term by ensuring that St. Petersburg University taught Kurdish language and ethnography on a permanent basis.¹⁰⁰

A related avenue of enlightenment through which the Russians sought to boost their influence among the Kurds was medical expertise. The Kurds suffered grievously from a lack of basic medical knowledge, the cause of their extraordinarily high rates of child mortality and disease-incurred blindness. Not surprisingly, Russian military doctors proved popular among Kurdish villagers.¹⁰¹

The Ottomans and the Germans did not let the opening of the school in Khoy go unnoticed, and responded in kind. The Ottomans managed to scrounge some funds from their depleted coffers to open a school for Kurds outside Van and planned to open more. The Germans decided to bring an annual cohort of Kurds to Germany and to open their schools in Anatolia to Kurds.¹⁰²

The perplexity of imperial security

At the same time that they were winning over the sympathies of Ottoman Kurds, the Russians were destabilizing Eastern Anatolia and eroding their own confidence in the security of the Caucasus. The prospect of Kurdish raiders or especially Armenian revolutionaries from Eastern Anatolia

⁹⁹ AVPRI, Vice-Consul in Khoy to the Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 30.10.1913 [12.11.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 206–07.

¹⁰⁰ Iuzbashian, *Orbeli*, 34–35.

¹⁰¹ AVPRI, Chirkov to the Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 14.2.1913 [27.2.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 25.

¹⁰² AVPRI, Vice-Consul in Khoy to the Chargé d'affaires in Tehran, 30.10.1913 [12.11.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 204–09; Lazarev, *Kurdskaa vopros*, 225–26.

spreading disorder in the Caucasus worried Russian officials. The issue of Ottoman Armenians was sensitive because Russia had its own Armenian problem. Exposed through their schooling in Russia and Europe to German Romantic ideals of nation and Russian revolutionary currents, the educated members of Russia's Armenian community had begun to chafe under tsarist rule in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰³ They began to entertain visions of an Armenia that was united, socialist, and autonomous or even independent. Their vision of the future, although vague and undefined, was secular and anti-clerical and did not square with that of the Armenian clergy, heretofore the most influential institution in Armenian life. Consequently, the revolutionaries' popular appeal and support were limited.

In order to head off the development of separatist tendencies, the tsarist regime in 1903 initiated a program to Russify the tsar's Armenian subjects. Among other measures, the regime wrested control of Armenian schools from the Armenian Church, expropriated Church properties, and imposed Russian-style curricula. The effort backfired badly. It drove anti-clerical Armenian socialist groups to rally in defense of the Armenian Church and launch a campaign of violent resistance that with "bullets, bombs, and knives" took the lives of tens, if not hundreds, of Russian state servants. The resistance succeeded. Two years later St. Petersburg backed down.¹⁰⁴

The liberalization of Russian politics in 1905 allowed Russia's Armenians and others to press their concerns in public. Among the Armenians those concerns included their desire for Russian intervention on behalf of their Ottoman brethren. The tsarist regime could neither wholly ignore the desire for intervention nor indulge it thoughtlessly. Tsarist officials recognized that the occupation or annexation of Eastern Anatolia would bring together the great bulk of Armenians under Russian aegis and thereby enable the Armenian revolutionary movement to concentrate all of its energy on its struggle against Russia.

Indeed, in 1908 the Russian empire, not the Ottoman, came to loom as the greater oppressor for the Armenian revolutionary movement. That year Stolypin ordered a general crackdown on potential subversives, including Armenian activists. In 1909 up to 4,000 Armenians were languishing in tsarist prisons on political charges, and some 3,000 more were in exile.¹⁰⁵ Mass trials of Armenians produced a docket some 20,000

¹⁰³ Suny, "Eastern Armenians," 118-19.

¹⁰⁴ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road*, 18-19; Panossian, *The Armenians*, 220; Suny, "Eastern Armenians," 134.

¹⁰⁵ Bayur, *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi*, vol. II, pt. 3, 21.

pages in length.¹⁰⁶ Armenian revolutionaries fled Russia and shifted their movement's center of gravity to the Ottoman empire, especially Istanbul and Van, and to Iran.¹⁰⁷ Armenian activists appealing to outside audiences for sympathy and aid hailed the freedom and constitutional order of the Ottomans and contrasted it to the tyranny, torture, and persecution of Russia.¹⁰⁸

It therefore should be no surprise that the activities of Armenian revolutionaries constituted a major concern for Russian intelligence agents and police personnel posted in the Ottoman empire.¹⁰⁹ Russia's consular officers inside the Ottoman empire were also highly attuned to the activities and often virulently anti-Russian sentiments of the Dashnaks.¹¹⁰ The view of Armenian revolutionaries as the stalking horse for Russia's imperial ambitions is, therefore, wide of the mark. Although Russia would seek to turn Armenian dissatisfaction with Ottoman rule to its advantage in 1913–14, mutual suspicion and distrust plagued relations between the tsarist state and Armenian revolutionaries.

Balkan shock and Russia's response

The rapidity and extent of the Ottomans' defeats in the Balkan Wars stunned the Russians. They concluded that the empire's demise might well be imminent, and that imminence spurred them to act. St. Petersburg feared that in the event of an Ottoman collapse anarchy in Eastern Anatolia might draw in the populations on Russia's side of the border and that another power might exploit the chance to establish a presence right on Russia's uneasy southern frontier.¹¹¹ To forestall these possibilities, the Russians took two courses of action. The first was to expand Russia's support for Kurdish rebels. In a missive dated 28 November 1912, Sazonov instructed Russia's consuls in Anatolia and Iran to seize this moment of Ottoman disarray to strengthen Russia's prestige among the Kurds and draw them away from Istanbul. He ordered his consuls

¹⁰⁶ Ter Minassian, *Nationalism*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ter Minassian, *Nationalism*, 53; Hratch Dasnabedian, *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutium 1890/1924* (Milan: Oemme edizioni, 1990), 93–95.

¹⁰⁸ E. Aknouni, *Political Persecution: Armenian Prisoners of the Caucasus* (New York: n.p., 1911).

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, the files of the police running agents in Istanbul between 1911 and 1914: GARF, Büro zaveduiushchego zagranichnoi agenturoi Departamenta politicii v Konstantinopole, f. 529, o. 1.

¹¹⁰ AVPRI, General Consul in Erzurum to Girs, 10.5.1912 [23.5.1912], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3708, l. 150; Report of Unnamed General Staff Colonel, 7.1.1913 [20.1.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 7; Ter Minassian, *Nationalism*, 52–53.

¹¹¹ Sazonov, *Vospominaniia*, 168–69.

to study the question of how to unite the Kurds "since only en masse can the Kurds constitute a serious force."¹¹² Noting Anatolia's strategic importance to Russia and the vulnerabilities stemming from its ethnic heterogeneity, Minoriskii advised opening more consulates specifically near non-Turkish populations so as to facilitate subversive work.¹¹³ Overriding Finance Ministry objections to the costs, Sazonov ordered more consulates opened.¹¹⁴

Second, Russia suddenly resurrected the dormant Armenian Question in the interstate arena. Whereas during the massacres of 1895–96 Russia had steadfastly blocked the possibility of intervention on behalf of Ottoman Armenians, Sazonov now brandished the issue of the Armenians' security to demand that Istanbul permit Russia to oversee the reform and administration of the six eastern provinces. If conditions for Armenians did not improve, Sazonov threatened, military intervention would follow. Armenians in Russia and in European capitals, urged on by Russian officials, initiated public campaigns for reform.¹¹⁵

Opinions of Ottoman Armenians regarding Russia's initiative were mixed. Whereas the patriarch in Istanbul and some members of the Dashnaksutiun favored the establishment of a Russian protectorate, seeing it as at least a guaranty of desperately needed order, other Dashnaks opposed it. Russia, they believed, was using the Armenians to annex the territory, after which it would impose a regime worse than the Ottoman.¹¹⁶ The deterioration in security in the east, however, was a real and immediate concern. The Balkan defeats further destabilized matters as refugees bearing tales of atrocities stirred Muslims from Istanbul to Van to threaten vengeance attacks against Christians. Thus throughout 1913 and into 1914, the Dashnaks accelerated preparations for "self-defense" by smuggling weapons and bombs from the Caucasus back into Anatolia and Istanbul and forming "flying battalions" for defense in the event of anti-Christian pogroms.¹¹⁷

Russia's demands alarmed an Istanbul already shaken by the disasters unfolding in the Balkans. Following their return to power in January,

¹¹² AVPRI, Sazonov to Girs, copied to consulates in Van, Urmia, Bayezid, and Savujbulak, 15.11.1912 [28.11.1912], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3572, l. 109.

¹¹³ AVPRI, "Asian Turkey and Its Study," f. 129, o. 502/b, d. 7600, ll. 2, 4–5.

¹¹⁴ Lazarev, *Kurdskaia vopros*, 224.

¹¹⁵ Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 489–90; Hovannisian, "Armenian Question," 22.

¹¹⁶ GARF, Secret Report to the Head of Agents in Turkey, 23.1.1913 [5.2.1913], To Police Special Department Head Eremin, 1.3.1913 [14.3.1913], To Police Special Department Head Broetskii, September 1913, f. 529, o. 1, d. 11, ll.7, 11, 39.

¹¹⁷ GARF, To Police Special Department Head Eremin, 7.1.1913 [20.1.1913], f. 529, o. 1, d. 11, l. 3; To Police Special Department Head Eremin, 22.3.1913 [4.4.1913], f. 529, o. 1, d. 12, l. 14; Kaligian, *Armenian Organization*, 181.

the Unionists met several times with Dashnak leaders in 1913 to discuss reforms, despite the latter's public break with them the previous May. At one meeting held in the home of a former Unionist Armenian, Talât offered to fulfill Dashnaks' demands for twenty-two seats in parliament, enforcement of equal rights for Armenians throughout the empire, appointment of Armenians to administrative and judicial posts in the east, and the disarming of the Kurds in exchange for an Armenian refusal to accept European control of the reforms. Aram Vramian answered that the Dashnaks, unlike the Catholicos and Armenian merchants, had never sought European control, since that would involve Russia's participation, and Russian control would destroy their party.¹¹⁸ Such doubts notwithstanding, some Dashnaks were approaching foreign powers, and the party, albeit divided, ultimately assented to the Armenian National Assembly's preparation of a draft reform project.¹¹⁹

Skepticism toward the Russian effort existed among the great powers as well. France, wary that Russian action might precipitate partition and jeopardize its own financial and railway interests in the region, and Germany, suspecting that Russia desired annexation and intended to provoke an intervention, signaled their opposition to any unilateral action by Russia. Russia remained insistent, and so through the summer of 1913 representatives of the great powers met in Istanbul to discuss reform of Ottoman administration of Eastern Anatolia. The Russians put forth a proposal that required, among other things, that the six provinces be combined in a single administrative district over which a Christian, preferably European, governor general appointed by the great powers would preside with extraordinary authority. Istanbul frantically resisted the scheme. It pitched the idea of deploying British officials, whose competence could be expected to achieve results and whose presence would deter Russian encroachment, to oversee reforms and supervise the gendarmerie, the justice system, agriculture, public works, and related government functions.¹²⁰

St. Petersburg, however, made clear to London its determination to control the project, noting that it shared a border with Eastern Anatolia and that it faced pressure from its own Armenian population to impose reforms. London concluded that intimate involvement in the

¹¹⁸ GARF, To Police Special Department Head Broetskii, 27.11.1913 [9.12.1913], f. 529, o. 1, d. 11, l. 69; To Police Special Department Head Broetskii, September 1913, f. 529, o. 1, d. 11, l. 39.

¹¹⁹ Hovannisian, "Armenian Question," 23–24.

¹²⁰ Zekeriya Türkmen, *Vilayât-ı Şarkîye (Doğu Anadolu Vilayetleri) İslahat Müfettişliği 1913–1914* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2006), 33, 35; Cemal Paşa, *Hatıralar ve Vesikalar*, vol. II, *Harp Kabinelerinin İsticvabı* (Istanbul: Vakit, 1933), 292.

project was not worth risking its relationship with Russia and declined the Porte's invitation.¹²¹ The Germans were almost as anxious as the Ottomans to thwart the Russian proposal, and attempted to do so by various stratagems. Not unlike the British with the Laz in 1878, they discovered a utility in invoking the ethnolnational rights of indigenous populations. Thus they attempted to counter their Russian interlocutors with the argument that, if it is proper to raise the rights of the Armenians, then it must follow that it is necessary to discuss the interests of the Kurds.¹²² In May the Porte put forth its own ten-point reform program, which obtained the approval of the German, British, Austrian, and Italian ambassadors. Girs, however, rejected it, compelling extended negotiations among the powers.¹²³

To the Ottomans, the process uncannily resembled those that had preceded the losses of Bosnia and Macedonia. Outside powers were holding Istanbul accountable for its inability to maintain internal order in border provinces while actively fomenting that disorder through the sponsorship of insurgents and rebels. Now Russia was eroding Ottoman sovereignty in Eastern Anatolia from within and simultaneously attacking that sovereignty from without by calling attention to Istanbul's inability to govern the region. The Ottomans were not alone in perceiving a clever link between Russian complaints about the lack of order and threats of "humanitarian" intervention, and their support for Kurdish rebels who were subverting that order. European and American observers noted it as well.¹²⁴ Nor were they alone in the belief that the reform project was a last preparatory step before formal Russian annexation of the region and the end of the empire.¹²⁵

German policymakers were among those who suspected Russian cunning, but they had to weigh this against the likelihood that the Ottoman empire was doomed in any event. In a post-Ottoman Anatolia, German ambassador Hans von Wangenheim wrote, "it will be a great asset to have the native Armenian population on our side when we are asserting

¹²¹ Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 493-95.

¹²² Sverbeev to Sazonov, 29.05.1913 [11.06.1913], in Institut des langues orientales (Russia), *Sbornik diplomaticheskikh dokumentov: reformy v Armenii 26 noiabria 1912 goda - 10 maia 1914 goda* (Petrograd: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1915), 45; B. A. Bor'ian, *Armenia, mezhdunarodnaia diplomatiia i SSSR*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928), vol. I, 281-82.

¹²³ Türkmen, *Vilayât-ı Şarkiye*, 39-41.

¹²⁴ Walter Guinness, "Impressions of Armenia and Kurdistan," *National Review* (September 1913-February 1914), vol. 62, 800; W. A. Wigram and Edgar T. A. Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind: Life in Eastern Kurdistan* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1914), 36-37; Buxton and Buxton, *Travels*, 153.

¹²⁵ Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 59; Bayur, *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi*, vol. II, 114, 117; Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 491.

our rights in Asia Minor."¹²⁶ The Armenians' plight was real enough, Russian policies notwithstanding, and by participating in a reform effort Germany would win favor among Armenians. Thus, when the powers proved unable collectively to arrive at a solution, Wangenheim agreed with Girs to resolve the matter through bilateral talks. Wangenheim at the same time hedged his bets and advised his superiors that Germany must redouble efforts to build its influence in Eastern Anatolia by placing in the region more consulates, experts, merchants, missions, and schools.¹²⁷

St. Petersburg throughout the negotiations kept pressure on Istanbul with threats of military action, including invasion. Sazonov warned more than once that, if another massacre of Armenians occurred, Russia would not stand by as it had in 1895.¹²⁸ The Liman von Sanders crisis ratcheted the tension up further, leading Sazonov to consider occupying Bayezid or Erzurum. To underscore that possibility, Russian troops massed on the border. Barring the intervention of a third party, of the sort feared by Russia's naval planners, it seems unlikely the Russians would have mounted a military operation into Ottoman territory. But the deterrent to such a move was the fear of igniting a wider European conflagration, not Ottoman strength nor any notion that such an attack would be illegitimate.¹²⁹ As internal Russian correspondence makes abundantly clear, many Russian statesmen regarded the eventual occupation of Eastern Anatolia and Istanbul as all but inevitable.¹³⁰ Indeed, some were already suggesting that Russia's sponsorship of the reform plan would win the sympathies of Armenians whose support Russia would find useful against Ottoman Greeks after Russia fulfilled its destiny of occupying "Tsargrad" with its large Greek population.¹³¹

Germany's success in emerging from the Liman von Sanders crisis without having to make a major concession inclined it to relent and compromise with Russia. Wangenheim urged Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha to come to an agreement with Russia. Isolated and with its options exhausted, the Porte on 8 February 1914 acceded to Russia's demands.

¹²⁶ Wangenheim to Bethman-Hollweg, 24.2.1913, in E. T. S. Dugdale, ed., *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914*, vol. IV, *The Descent to the Abyss, 1911-1914* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), 198.

¹²⁷ Dugdale, *Descent*, 196-98; Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 492; Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 60.

¹²⁸ BOA, To the Ambassador in St. Petersburg Turhan Pasha, 2 Kanunusani 1329 [15.1.1914], DH. SYS, D. 23, S. 2; Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 50-51.

¹²⁹ A. M. Zaionchkovskii, *Podgotovka Rossii k imperialisticheskoi voine: ocherki voennoi podgotovki i pervonachal'nykh planov. Po arkhivnym dokumentam* (Leningrad: Voennaia tipografiia, 1926), 324; Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 502.

¹³⁰ Girs to Sazonov, 26.11.1912 [9.12.1912], in Institut des langues orientales, *Reformy v Armenii*, 3; Kalmykov, *Memoirs*, 250; Davison, "Armenian Crisis," 490-91.

¹³¹ Gul'kevich to Sazonov, 27.1.1914 [9.2.1914], *Movei*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 259.

The Ottomans did manage to blunt somewhat the Russian proposal with amendments. The six "Armenian" provinces plus the province of Trabzon were to be reorganized in two parts, not one. The inclusion of Trabzon, which had only a small Armenian population, diluted the Armenian presence overall. The final draft dropped the issue of restitution to Armenians, the exclusion of *muhacirs* from resettlement, and the terms "Armenian" and "Christian." These alterations all aimed at undermining any claims that these territories should or could be regarded as innately "Armenian." Nonetheless, Ottoman sovereignty over Eastern Anatolia had been severely compromised; if recent history was any guide, mortally so.

Although the resolution of the reform question smoothed diplomatic relations between the Ottoman and Russian empires, it did nothing to relieve tensions in the region itself. One reason was that the looming possibility of an end to Ottoman rule maintained all inhabitants in a state of anxiety. Another was that, despite their public protestations of concern for stability in Ottoman Anatolia and their desire to insulate their own border populations from possible unrest in Eastern Anatolia, the Russians continued to cultivate ties with rebellious Ottoman Kurds and thereby were eroding that stability. This contradiction – on the one hand attempting to secure order in Eastern Anatolia by imposing a reform plan while on the other facilitating the disruption of order – was the result primarily of Russia's inability to develop and implement a consistent policy toward the Kurds. This inability in turn stemmed from St. Petersburg's clashing strategic objectives. It preferred to put off the partition of the Ottoman empire until such time as it could ensure it would be able to exert control over that partition. Yet in the meantime it felt compelled to build influence inside the Ottoman lands, and by doing so it was undermining the Ottoman state's ability to administer and control those regions.

The dangers that the Kurdish rebellions might pose to Ottoman Armenians did not escape Russian officials. When Armenians from St. Petersburg expressed such worries to Sazonov, the foreign minister explained that Russia had to pursue relations with the Kurds because they constituted a "potential force" that could further Russian interests in the region.¹³² Russian officials introduced Abdürrezzak to Armenian representatives in St. Petersburg in a bid to encourage cooperation between Kurds and Armenians.¹³³

¹³² Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, 50.

¹³³ Klemm to the Office of the Viceroy of the Caucasus, 26.3.1914 [8.4.1914], *Movet*, series 3, vol. 2, 249–50.

Kurdish and Armenian leaders at various times attempted to establish conciliatory relations and even a common front against the Ottoman government.¹³⁴ But none of these efforts led to substantive results. The fundamental aspirations of the two were too far apart, indeed were fundamentally opposed. The conflict between these two groups was the basic driver of instability in the region. Indeed, Abdürrezzak himself in 1913 had been exhorting his co-ethnics to mobilize and arm themselves lest they find themselves the subjects of the “rich but immoral Armenians.”¹³⁵ “The Armenian Question,” as one Russian consul wrote, “was always the Kurdish–Armenian [Question], since the Armenians suffered and suffer precisely from the Kurds under the weakness and incapacity (intended or not intended – that is also a large question) of the Turkish authorities.”¹³⁶ In justifying their support for the reform project Russian officials made use of the duality. To European audiences, they pointed to the threat posed to Armenians by Kurds, whereas among themselves they concentrated on the Armenian threat to Russia.¹³⁷ But in their execution of policy they could not help but muddle the duality.

The Bitlis uprising

Exactly one month after Ottoman and Russian officials signed the Armenian reform project, a Kurd known as Mullah Selim Efendi al-Hizani declared a general uprising in the area of Bitlis. Mullah Selim called for the imposition of şeriat and the removal of the Ottoman administration, which he accused of disarming the Kurds and selling out the country to foreigners. The demand for Islamic law had become an increasingly popular rallying cry among the Kurds following the restoration of the constitution in 1908 and the rise of the CUP. The governor of Van, Tahsin Bey, described Mullah Selim as an ignorant zealot “famous for pronouncing as blasphemers those who declare the Earth is round” and labeled the uprising “reactionary.”¹³⁸ The calls for Islamic law,

¹³⁴ For two interpretations that attempt to argue that such cooperation was possible, see Tessa Hoffman and Gerayer Koutcharian, “The History of Armenian–Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire,” *Armenian Review*, 30, 4 (Winter 1986), 1–44; and Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve 15. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Ermeni–Kürt İlişkileri* (Istanbul: Med Yayınevi, 1992).

¹³⁵ See the “Manifesto of Abdürrezzak,” reprinted in Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran, and Ömer Turan, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), 282–85.

¹³⁶ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 245; AVPRI, f. 180, d. 3573, ll. 231–32.

¹³⁷ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 243.

¹³⁸ BOA, Cipher from Van Governor Tahsin, 5 Mart 1330 [18.3.1914], DH. KMS, D. 16, 30, S.B. 4.

however, reflected not so much a pious attachment to the legal requirements of Islam as distress at the economic ascendance of Christians and the upending of their traditional legal subordination. As Mullah Selim's appeal gathered support, panic seized the local Christians. Given past experience, few of Bitlis's Armenians or Assyrians trusted Selim's assurances that they would not be harmed.¹³⁹ Tahsin Bey alerted Istanbul to the incompetence of Bitlis's governor and the absence of forces in the province, and warned that, if the government failed to act quickly, "we will create a Kurdish problem."¹⁴⁰

Within days some 300 chiefs had pledged their support, and up to 8,000 Kurds had come to Mullah Selim's side. The government meanwhile rushed reinforcements to back up the Bitlis gendarmerie and distributed arms to the Armenians of Bitlis "to defend the city against reactionaries."¹⁴¹ The rebels succeeded in seizing half of the town of Bitlis, but before they could go further government forces counterattacked and put down the uprising on 2 April 1914. Immediately upon the revolt's collapse, Selim and three other Kurds took refuge in the Russian consulate in Bitlis. At first, Girs ordered the consulate to get the Kurds to leave, explaining, "we cannot indulge banditry."¹⁴² When the consulate, now under tight surveillance,¹⁴³ replied that expelling the Kurds would lead to their immediate capture and likely death, the ambassador relented. He then rejected the grand vizier's repeated appeals, which included a report on Selim's looting and killing of Armenians,¹⁴⁴ to hand over the insurgents with the disingenuous argument that the rebellion had constituted a political, not a criminal, act.¹⁴⁵ The consulate harbored Mullah Selim and his compatriots until the formal declaration of war between the Russian and Ottoman empires in November.

Meanwhile, Ottoman authorities had caught several other leading rebels as they were attempting to cross the border into Russia. They exiled to the Black Sea towns of Sinop and Trabzon forty-five Kurds, including a number known for seizing lands from the Armenians, in the hopes that their removal would reduce tensions around

¹³⁹ AVPRI, Shirkov to Gul'kevich, 12.2.1914 [25.2.1914], Dispatch of S. Tukholki, 20.3.1914 [2.4.1914], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, ll. 241, 291.

¹⁴⁰ BOA, Cipher from Van, 6 Mart 1330 [19.3.1914], DH. KMS, D. 16, S. 30, B. 3.

¹⁴¹ Account from the Armenian newspaper *Panper*, as cited in the English-language Istanbul newspaper, *The Orient*, 5, 14 (8 April 1914).

¹⁴² AVPRI, Telegram from the Ambassador in Constantinople, 22.3.1914 [4.4.1914], f. 151, o. 482, d. 3312, l. 17.

¹⁴³ BOA, Talât to Bitlis, 3 Nisan 1330 [3.4.1914], DH. ŞFR, D. 40, S. 24.

¹⁴⁴ BOA, Cipher to Bitlis, 3 Nisan 1330 [3.4.1914], DH. ŞFR D. 40, S.18.

¹⁴⁵ AVPRI, Telegram of Girs, 24.3.1914 [6.4.1914], f. 151, o. 482, d. 3312, l. 19.

Bitlis.¹⁴⁶ The court deported several sheikhs to Medina.¹⁴⁷ The Ottomans also publicly hanged eleven of the rebels. One of those hanged, Mullah Resul, defiantly announced to his executioners, "Thank God that Muslims are hanging me. I have not seen the Russians, but I hope that you will soon and that they will take vengeance on you for me."¹⁴⁸

The Bitlis uprising failed in large measure because Mullah Selim started it prematurely by several weeks. As a result, major Kurdish figures such as Abdürrezzak and Sheikh Taha were in Russia when it erupted and were unable to do much apart from scrambling to send notes promising support and arms from Russia.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Mullah Selim was not supposed to have led it. Acting on a tip, the Ottoman gendarmerie arrested him on 8 March for rebellious agitation. Several hours later, however, a raiding party of Kurds attacked the gendarmes transporting Mullah Selim to Bitlis and freed him. He then took it upon himself to declare a rebellion. The intended leader had been a relative of Abdürrezzak's, Bedirhan Paşazade Yusuf Kâmil. Unlike those rebels who fled north to Russia, Yusuf Kâmil fled south, making use of his contacts in the Russian consulates in Aleppo and Beirut. He expressed regret to the Russians for Selim's precipitate behavior and bemoaned the way the Armenians of Bitlis had betrayed the Kurds. Although they had assured the Kurdish plotters of their support prior to the uprising, they failed to act once it began and bore, Yusuf Kâmil alleged, much of the responsibility for the collapse of the uprising. He concluded that it was foolish ever to seek coordination with the Armenians. Yusuf Kâmil received permission to settle in Russia, and from Beirut he set sail via Istanbul to Odessa with guaranties for his safety and security. He was taken to Tiflis, from where the Russians planned to return him to Ottoman Anatolia via Iran. Upon the momentary improvement in Russian-Ottoman relations following Talât Bey's meeting with Sazonov that May in Crimea, however, the Russians instructed Yusuf Kâmil to "sit quietly" in Tiflis for the time being.¹⁵⁰

Although the Ottoman government forces in the end had suppressed the rebellion, the episode spooked the Unionists. On 4 April they met to

¹⁴⁶ AVPRI, Bitlis Consulate to Girs, 12.5.1914 [25.5.1914], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 327.

¹⁴⁷ BOA, Cipher to the Commandant of Medina, 9 Haziran 1330 [22.6.1914], DH. ŞFR, D. 42, S. 102.

¹⁴⁸ Lazarev, *Kurdskii vopros*, 216.

¹⁴⁹ Abdürrezzak was in St. Petersburg when the revolt erupted: AVPRI, Sazonov to Girs, 4.3.1914 [17.3.1914], f. 151, o. 462, d. 3312, l. 8; Saat Akgül, "Rusya'nın Doğu Anadolu Politikası," Ph. D. dissertation, Hacettepe University, 1995," 106.

¹⁵⁰ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (RGVIA), Report of Kniaz Shakhovskoi, 31.1.1917 [13.2.1917], f. 2168, o. 1, d. 264, l. 4.

review their regional policy. They resolved to win over the Kurds with a combination of methods, including financial subsidies, making leading Kurds senators, and pressing the Kurds of Istanbul to use their influence over their brethren in Anatolia. The Unionists were relieved that the insurrection had been directed at the government and not at the Armenians, since if the latter had been targets relations with the great powers would have suffered. Thus, in addition to granting the local governors wider latitude to declare martial law and request military reinforcements, Minister of the Interior Talât ordered that special attention be paid to protecting Christians from future attacks.¹⁵¹ The meeting concluded with a call for less centralization and greater flexibility in the state administration in order to allow for policies to be tailored to regional peculiarities.¹⁵²

Russia's policies, whether by design or not, were eroding Ottoman control of Eastern Anatolia. Repeating the opinion of the local Christians and Muslims, the vice-consul in Bitlis Shirkov wrote, "Turkish rule in Kurdistan is without soldiers and without money, and lacks all prestige and influence, and now with the developing Kurdish movement calls forth disgust and tears." He noted with satisfaction that even the Muslims at the bazaar were openly calling for Russian rule as a way to end the ongoing disorder and chaos, and cited the locals' belief that Russia could take the whole region with just 5,000 soldiers.¹⁵³ The Ottoman army would not have contested this judgment. As the inspector general of the Third Army in Erzincan wrote about the military balance in Eastern Anatolia, "Russia will be able to operate as it wants and invade as deep as it wants . . . If there is a war on this front resistance will not be possible."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ AVPRI, Dispatch of the Ambassador in Constantinople, 31.3.1914 [13.4.1914], Addendum from the Ambassador in Constantinople, 31.3.1914 [13.4.1914], f. Politarkhiv, o. 482, d. 3312, ll. 25, 26.

¹⁵² AVPRI, Dispatch of the Ambassador in Constantinople, 12.4.1914 [25.4.1914], f. Politarkhiv, o. 482, d. 3312, l. 31.

¹⁵³ AVPRI, Dispatch to Girs, 29.3.1913 [11.4.1913], f. 180, o. 517/2, d. 3573, l. 86.

¹⁵⁴ ATASE, Telegram from the Inspector General of the Third Army in Erzincan, 14 Kanunusani 1328 [27.1.1913], BHK, K. 131, D. 41, F. 4-1.