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The Disintegration of Ottoman-Armenian Relations in the Tanzimat and Hamidian Periods, 1839-1896

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**The Disintegration of Ottoman-Armenian
Relations in the Tanzimat and Hamidian
Periods, 1839-1896**

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Abstract

This thesis is a discussion of the political and social circumstances surrounding the Ottoman-Armenian relationship during the nineteenth-century. Starting in 1839 with the introduction of the Tanzimat reforms, the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane promised all subjects of the Ottoman Empire equality, rights, and opportunities that many modern nations now view as inalienable human rights. Throughout the Tanzimat, however, the Armenian people came to realize that the Ottoman statesmen were unable to deliver these rights to the extent they had promised, leading to disillusionment with the state. These tensions only heightened under Sultan Abdülhamid II's autocratic regime, which began in 1876. Abdülhamid's decision to revert the empire away from European influence and acceptance of pan-Islamic ideologies intensified the feeling of Christian alienation from the Ottoman government. The empire began dissolving from all sides due to new nationalist sentiments, such as with the continuing losses in the Christian Balkans and Slavic regions.

Although the Armenian population was largely loyal to the Ottoman state during this time, the suspicion against Christian minorities increased within the Ottoman government. The constant denial of their rights led small Armenian revolutionary groups to become sporadically aggressive against the state, resulting in disproportionate state-sanctioned violence against the greater Armenian population. These tensions culminated in what is now known as the 1894-1896 Armenian massacres, where over 100,000 Armenians were violently killed by Abdülhamid's military forces. This thesis is an attempt to discover why the Armenian pleas for reform resulted in so much resistance from the Ottoman government, how both parties were affected by outside influences, particularly Europe, and why Abdülhamid believed the Ottoman-Armenian conflict had to be resolved in such a violent matter.

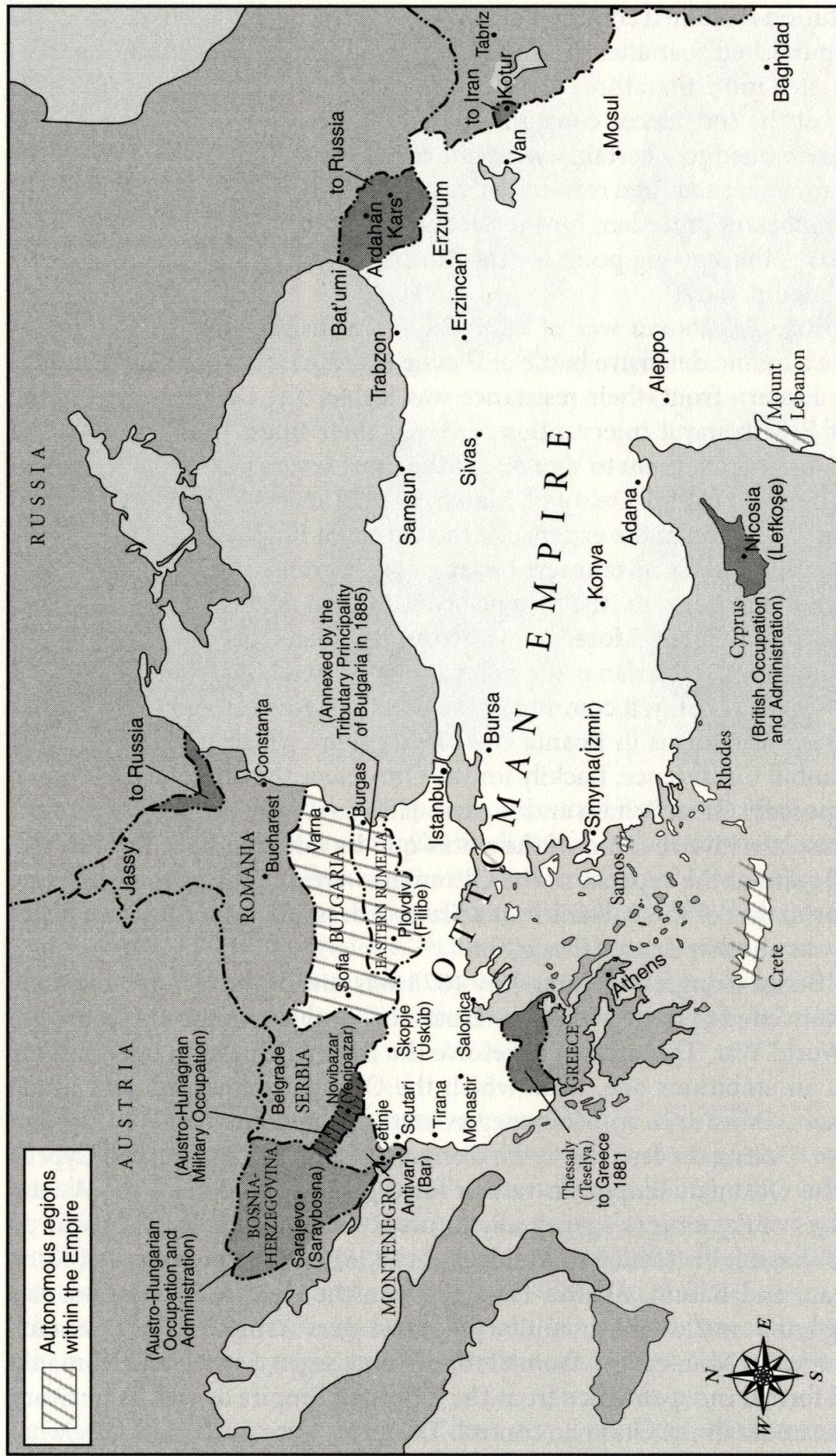
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Map of the Ottoman Empire After the Treaty of Berlin, 1878



Introduction

The rulers of the Ottoman Empire endured a tremulous nineteenth-century due to their immense responsibility to curb the impending decline of the ancient empire. This duty led the government to first attempt to “westernize” the empire according to European standards, and then ultimately reject direct influence by the European powers and find strength from within the empire instead. The first phase of reform constitutes the Tanzimat period, which lasted from 1839 to 1876. The Tanzimat culminated in the First Constitutional Period in 1876, but this interlude was quickly ended by Sultan Abdülhamid II, whose absolutist reign lasted until 1908. Abdülhamid did not reverse any of the Tanzimat reforms—but rather retained all of the Tanzimat reforms and built upon them. However, he did attempt to reverse the ‘culture’ of the Tanzimat and return the Ottoman Empire to a nation that could rebuild its legitimacy through Islamic ideologies and the reassertion of sultanic authority.¹ The massive reforms and changes that occurred in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire have been studied extensively in the academic world, yet there are some facets of this century that have not been examined to the extent they deserve.

This period was not only important because of the great ideological changes—namely the change from an empire composed of isolated ethnic and religious communities to a nation in which every individual was accepted as an ‘Ottoman’ citizen—but also because of the changes in Ottoman state structure. An even more important element was the statesmen’s expectation that the people of the empire were to seamlessly integrate into this new system. Due to the attempts to create a new Ottoman identity that would yield a more nationalistic and patriotic empire, many minority ethnic groups in the empire began to feel alienated from the state. Minority groups had formerly enjoyed relative freedom from the central Ottoman government through the *millet*

¹ Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15.

system, an arrangement allowing each religious community to retain their religion, cultural traditions, and systems of local government in a form of limited legal autonomy. This system of separation between the people and the state caused relatively few problems for the majority of Ottoman rule.² Under the Tanzimat movement, however, the Ottoman government tried to force these previously autonomous sects to integrate under an “Ottoman” mold, but this effort ultimately did not prove successful. The Tanzimat reformers inadvertently destroyed the last traditional form of organization within the empire, forcing the individual to seek a new identity in a national or political context.³ Although some minority groups did welcome these changes, they found that their government was unable to fulfill the promises made for reform.

This thesis will focus on the Armenians—a group of Christian peoples whose story was greatly affected by the growing tensions between the Tanzimat and Hamidian periods. Two and a half million Armenians resided in the Ottoman Empire, comprising seventeen-percent of the non-Muslim population.⁴ The Armenians were present in every province in the empire and felt a particularly strong backlash during these two stages of reform due to the Armenian population’s relatively quick acceptance of the Tanzimat reforms and subsequent reactions to the perceived denial of the rights they were promised.⁵ Although other ethnic groups felt the ramifications of the Ottoman government’s decisions, I believe that the Armenian situation was quite different. First of all, although some scholars often discuss the Armenians as a people with a long history of a national consciousness, that is far from the truth. There were deep class divisions between the Armenians of the empire, such as the bourgeoisie who resided in urban centers such as

² James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

³ Kemal Karpat, *An Inquiry into the Social Foundations of Nationalism in the Ottoman State: From Social Estates to Classes, From Millets to Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 91.

⁴ Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire: 1856-1876* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963), 61. The total Ottoman population in the 1800s was around 36 million people; 21 million of them were Muslim.

⁵ Richard G. Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire 1876 to 1914,” *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 204.

Istanbul, merchants and guild members, and then the peasants in rural Western Armenia. For the majority of this period, there were no links among these groups of people; the wealthy and influential Armenians did not see themselves as responsible for the well-being of other Armenians. Rather, the accomplished Armenians were more concerned with attaching themselves to the Ottoman government and their own fortunes.⁶

This is not to say that there were no advocates for the provincial Armenian people. Many intellectuals and commoners welcomed the Tanzimat reforms, but soon became disappointed when they realized these reforms were not effectively implemented. During a period in which the Ottoman Empire was losing a great deal of land—particularly the Christian Balkans—the Armenians were seen as the “loyal *millet*” who did not cause problems for the government. Therefore, when Armenian groups began to pressure the main body of the Ottoman Empire (the Sublime Porte) for the rights promised in the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane and the Islahat Fermani, the Ottoman government was extremely taken aback.⁷ The Balkan regions could, in theory, be lost because it lay on the outer peripheries of the empire; the historic Armenian homeland, on the other hand, was also a traditional Turkish homeland, and not something the Ottomans were as willing to part with.⁸ The path to sectarianism—or in the early stages of Armenian unrest, pleas for reform—was a new occurrence that arose from the political challenges and social

⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 20.

⁷ These were the two main edicts of the Tanzimat period. Both promised equality within the empire between Muslim and non-Muslim groups and outlined other reform measures, such as the abolition of tax farming and the creation of greater infrastructure and public schools. They will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis.

⁸ Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 105.

opportunities of the Tanzimat declarations, not something the Sublime Porte had ever seen before.⁹

The Tanzimat period heightened long-standing problems between the Armenian and Muslim populations of this region. Abdülhamid's period of reform then took the next step in exacerbating the growing tensions between these two ethnic groups. During the second period of reform, Abdülhamid initiated a policy of pan-Islamism, along with other changes, in an attempt to prevent the dissolution of the empire. This, along with opposition to the Tanzimat culture heightened ethnic tensions and made religion a larger issue, rather than a concern that was to be overcome by the Ottoman identity. Furthermore, during Abdülhamid's reign there were increasingly violent attacks in the peripheral regions on the Armenian people. These tensions culminated in the widespread 1894-1896 massacres perpetrated by Abdülhamid's regular and irregular military forces. Ottoman historians often cite the increased violence and 'rebellion' among the Armenians as a rationale for Abdülhamid's actions, but this argument does not examine the much more important factors that arose earlier in the 1880s. Although there a strong national consciousness did not initially exist among the Armenian people, this consciousness did begin to emerge among small Armenian groups. As the rural Armenians became more and more oppressed by Abdülhamid's government, the newly educated youth and Armenians under Russian Tsarist rule began to cultivate the idea of Armenian resistance against these injustices. These small political groups resisted against the government and created a backlash that few could have predicted.

⁹ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 52.

I believe that this transition from subdued tensions to outright massacres perpetrated by the Ottoman government is a historical evolution worthy of study. The greatest difficulty that must be overcome with this study is the fact that many historians do not analyze how the Ottoman reforms affected particular classes of Armenian people. Furthermore, this period is often examined by two separate groups of historians—Ottoman scholars and Armenian scholars. The Ottoman scholars mainly focus on the reasons for internal reform and how the actions taken affected the empire as a whole.¹⁰ In contrast, Armenian scholars often focus on the Armenian people in isolation from Ottoman society. Although this latter group of historians offer great insight concerning the problems that the Armenians faced, these studies rarely compare the Armenian situation to other groups' plights nor to the broader problems of the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, some of these scholars do not seek to understand the *causes* of the violence against the Armenians as I am trying to understand, but rather, "seek culpability" for these events, thereby turning themselves into advocates for the ideological Armenian cause.¹¹ Any study of the Ottoman Armenian situation has to take into account the Ottoman context, and cannot be examined in a separate framework.

Fortunately, Ottoman scholars have successfully documented both the Tanzimat period and Sultan Abdülhamid II's rule. Two prominent scholars, Ussama Makdisi and Selim Deringil, have undertaken this meticulous work. Makdisi's article, "Ottoman Orientalism" discusses the significant changes that the Ottoman government underwent through the Tanzimat period. Additionally, this article discusses the shift between the Ottoman attempts to please and ally with

¹⁰ I am *not*, however, asserting that these scholars ignored the effects on Ottoman millets, but not enough attention has been paid to the peculiarities of the minority people's struggles.

¹¹ Janet Klein, "Conflict and Collaboration: Rethinking Kurdish-Armenian Relations in the Hamidian Period, 1876-1909," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 13 (July 2007): 154. I am not the only person who feels this way, clearly other scholars, like Klein, have run into this problem as well. By the 'ideological Armenian cause,' I am of course referring to seeking recognition of the genocide carried out by the Committee of Union and Progress in 1915.

the European superpowers and the Ottomans' ultimate break with these powers and attempt to create a unique state supported by Islamic ideals. Makdisi makes a very valid point concerning the way the Ottoman Turkish elite viewed the people they ruled: "they regarded these subjects as backward and as not-yet-Ottoman, as hindrances to as well as objects of imperial reform".¹² This mindset is very similar to the "Orientalism" ideology perpetrated by the Europeans; the statesmen saw their own constituents as the "Other"—a backwards, degraded society overrun by religion and incapable of competing with the modernized world.¹³ Indeed, throughout this period, we will see that minority groups, especially the Armenians, were seen as hindrances to the "master plan" meant to revitalize the dying empire.

Deringil's article supports many of the claims made in Makdisi's "Ottoman Orientalism".¹⁴ His article, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909)," discusses the major problems Abdülhamid faced at the close of the Tanzimat period, and how these problems affected his decisions regarding the empire. Deringil claims that "the legitimating ideologies of the Hamidian era and of its elite were based on a set of clearly perceived policy aims, but especially on the preservation of the state".¹⁵ It is important to note that the government focused on preserving the state as a whole, rather than preserving the rights of its people. This idea proved very important when the Armenian people attempted to push through reforms. The Armenians were a prime example of an Ottoman sect who had become disillusioned with the state because they had been "increasingly being asked to perform as citizens even while they were still called and treated as subjects".¹⁶ This is an extremely vital

¹² Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 770.

¹³ This is a loose interpretation of Edward Said's definition in *Orientalism*.

¹⁴ In fact, Deringil's arguments are a prominent source in a great deal of Makdisi's work.

¹⁵ Selim Deringil, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 345.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.

point to keep in mind. In my thesis, I will discuss the history of the Armenians as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, rather than an independent entity.

Although many Ottoman scholars assert that these reform periods created positive changes for the empire, they also realize these reforms hurt a large number of Ottoman subjects. Unfortunately, as previously stated, many scholars who work from the Ottoman perspective do not delve into the effects of the reforms on different minority populations. Therefore, I hope that my research will study this particular period from the perspectives of both types of scholars. I plan to examine the reforms from the viewpoint of an Ottoman scholar, so that I may understand the reasons and difficulties pertaining to particular government decisions. More importantly, however, I want to integrate these ideas with a study of how the Armenian population was affected by the Ottoman government and the events spurred by outside influences in each period, and *why* this specific group's history differed so greatly from other populations in the empire.

Part I of my thesis will discuss the 1839-1876 Tanzimat period of reforms. This period was characterized by a weak Ottoman state that was desperate to create alliances with Europe. The leaders of this movement, who consisted of European-educated sultans and bureaucrats, understood the importance of western-style military and tax reforms in supporting a modern nation. Furthermore, they expected alliances with Europe to curb the capitulations—or demand for extralegal treatment of European citizens—that had given the West an unfair advantage over Muslim subjects in the economy of the empire. This desire is displayed by the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane, a decree declared in 1839, and the subsequent decree, the Islahat Fermani of 1856. The Gülhane decree offered the security of all subjects, “without distinction of classes or of

religion”.¹⁷ The 1856 announcement reiterated the promises laid out in the Gülhane, along with new rights, the freedom of religion in particular. Edicts such as these were both praised and criticized by minority groups, because many promises were broken and the minorities tried to pick-and-choose which clauses to accept.

The Tanzimat also marked the rise of ‘Ottomanism’, an ideology that greatly influenced the Young Ottomans. Ottomanism has been described by scholar Fatma Muge Gocek as a “new vision of Ottoman society”.¹⁸ This was certainly the case, as Ottomanism was completely constructed by the Tanzimat statesmen; they hoped to create an identity that would envelop all the subjects of the empire, regardless of their religious, ethnic, or national identities while ensuring loyalty to the central government. Through my research, I plan to show that the Armenian people were not considered an important facet of this new society by the Ottoman elite. Instead, these people were viewed as a hindrance to the Ottoman reforms. Because the Ottoman elite had become frustrated with Europe’s attempt to increase the opportunities of Christian minorities during this time, the Armenians were also seen as abandoning the empire in favor of identifying with the West.

Part II of my thesis discusses Sultan Abdülhamid II, who reigned over the Ottoman Empire from 1876-1908. The year 1878 is a very important breaking point because it symbolizes three things: the Ottoman Empire’s return to “backwardness” through the return of an unchecked monarch, legitimization in Islamic law, and the empire’s pull away from European influence. The state supported a pan-Islamic ideology during Abdülhamid’s reign, and religious law affected a great deal of the Hamidian state reform. The element of outside influences is vital

¹⁷ “Islahat Fermani,” in *The Modern Middle East: A History*, ed. James L. Gelvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151.

¹⁸ Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” 779.

to this section since international political parties were created to help the Turkish Armenians, and their actions greatly intensified the conflicts between the Armenian people and the Ottoman state. I will study both Armenian attempts at reform and the increasing violence between Armenian and Muslim Ottoman subjects.

My discussion of this second period will culminate in the 1894-1896 Armenian massacres, the first prominent state-organized attack against this ethnic group in the Ottoman Empire. I hope that my previous arguments will explain to the reader how the actions of the Ottoman government led to an irreconcilable stratification between the government and its Armenian citizens. In this section, I also plan to discuss the role of violence and state-sanctioned persecution in the empire. Some scholars argue that Abdülhamid's massacres were a form of "pseudo-reform," a way to fix the problem of the unruly Armenian people who were not in line with the core ideologies of the Ottoman state. While I think this concept has some merit, the massacres were more than just a form of punishment for the Armenians' lack of support; these massacres had a purpose and a solution that was supposed to arise from these events.

Part I: The Tanzimat Period, 1839-1876

The Position of the Ottoman Empire in 1839

By the first third of the nineteenth-century, Ottoman leaders had come to understand that the empire was truly facing its decline, and power was continuously shifting to the Concert of Europe in the West. Reaction to this realization began under the rule of Sultan Mahmud II with military reforms, which enabled him and his advisors to seek further development in education and to create a more European-style government, complete with the beginnings of representative councils throughout the provinces.¹⁹ It was clear to this new class of the bureaucracy, however, that much more had to be done to manage both the people and the resources of this empire. In fact, the group that truly benefited from Mahmud II's reforms were the statesmen of the Sublime Porte; they used their new power to begin curbing the influence of the sultan to form a more modern state.²⁰ These men effectively ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1839 to 1871 with very little interference from the sultan and religious personnel.²¹ This form of "defensive developmentalism" undertaken by the Tanzimat reformists included attempts to expand the sources of revenue for the empire, improve education for the masses, and create more uniform legal codes.²² The main objective was not to regain all of the empire's past power, but rather to become a "partner of the West".²³ This goal is embodied in the two main edicts of the Tanzimat era, the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane and the Islahat Fermani, which created a new form of social contract between the Ottoman state and its citizens in an attempt to generate a central government that could direct both the general policies of the state and stay involved in day-to-

¹⁹ Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 80.

²⁰ Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 29.

²¹ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 73.

²² Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 73.

²³ Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," 770.

day activities as well. This was a direct change for the daily life of many subjects who had never felt Istanbul's influence in their lives before.

As detailed in Makdisi's "Ottoman Orientalism," the bureaucrats in charge of reform accepted that the empire was in a steep decline, but believed the nation was capable of a renaissance. The imperial subjects, however, posed a difficulty to achieving this goal. The statesmen saw themselves as the only ones accomplished enough to responsibly and effectively undertake the large task of reviving the empire; their Western education and new ideas for the empire can easily be contrasted with the stagnant, agriculturally-based peasants of the empire.²⁴ Additionally, the *millet* system that the Ottomans had relied upon for centuries needed to be changed if the nation—as a whole—was going to emerge from this decline. This system had begun in the mid-fifteenth century as a way to loosely link conquered peoples to the central Ottoman government by grouping individuals by ethnic or religious class. The *millet* system had enabled the statesmen to avoid interfering with the day-to-day activities of the non-Muslim population while simultaneously keeping some semblance of control by channeling their power through religious notables of these minority groups.²⁵ Although equality was not necessarily the biggest question facing the statesmen at this time, it continued to arise in discussions concerning reform. Islam could no longer be used as a legitimate foundation for the empire's legal codes since the decline proved Islamic law alone could not rule this diverse empire, so the statesmen adopted a concept of "Ottomanism" in an attempt to strengthen the unity of the empire's subjects. Ottomanism was a unifying identity that the statesmen hoped would encompass all ethnic, religious, and regional groups and ensure allegiance to the government. Fuad Paşa—a statesman who was becoming more prominent during this period, and would become Grand

²⁴ Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," 772.

²⁵ Karpat, *Inquiry Into the Social Foundations*, 39.

Vizier by 1861—believed that if reforms granting more equal liberties to non-Muslim subjects could be constructed with this ideology in mind, “nationalist and separatist enthusiasms” would be subdued.²⁶ These men who chose to lead the Ottoman Empire in this new direction did not assume this responsibility to watch the periphery regions crumble away under their watch: maintaining the territorial integrity of the empire was one of their most important goals. As a result of this mindset, the *millet* system was substantially undermined by these reforms, thereby leading to resistance from the clergy who did not want to lose their power within their *millet*. The Armenian Patriarchate—the ruling body of the Armenian *millet*—had been established in 1461, so for Armenian population in particular, the Tanzimat was characterized as a massive step away from how life had been handled within the empire for centuries.²⁷ Additionally, many Muslims were horrified at the idea of the Muslim *millet* no longer being dominant, since this had been a traditional Islamic value.

The Position of the Armenian Millet in 1839

It is essential to detail the composition of the Armenian people at the start of the Tanzimat to understand why particular reforms affected the Armenians as they did. Although many scholars who focus on Armenian history describe the Armenians as a unified group with a strong sense of national consciousness, this was certainly not true for the Ottoman Armenians at the start of the Tanzimat. A prominent Armenian scholar, Ronald Grigor Suny, describes the Armenians as “a peculiar people; first, they form a nation (or at least a nationality) that lives within another nation; and second, they are a people often proud of their heritage about which

²⁶ Roderic H. Davison, “Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth-Century,” in *The Modern Middle East*, ed. Albert Hourani (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 67.

²⁷ Karpat, *Inquiry Into the Social Foundations*, 33.

they have not got the foggiest notion.”²⁸ This description could actually characterize other groups in the empire that were building a national consciousness, such as the Christians in the Balkan regions; these groups, however, had advanced much further in their self discovery and had either already separated—or soon would—from the Ottoman Empire by the Tanzimat period.

While Armenians populated every province of the Ottoman Empire, the two largest concentrations were found in Istanbul and the mountainous Turkish Armenia. The Armenians in Istanbul controlled the Patriarchate, a religious body which in turn governed the Armenian *millet*, yet these Istanbul Armenians did not see themselves as responsible for the welfare of the Armenian masses, and would continue to feel this way for the greater part of the century.²⁹ The wealthy Armenians of Istanbul—the *amiras*—constituted the dominant but extremely small class of fewer than 200 people.³⁰ The majority of Armenians in Istanbul belonged to the merchant, guild, and laborer classes, but had a disproportionate lack of power concerning matters of the *millet*. It was not until the 1840s when the European-educated children of the *amiras* gained their voice that an Armenian group with the desire to create change—and possessed the power to do so—emerged in the Ottoman Empire.

In contrast to the Istanbul Armenians, the peasant Armenians in Eastern Anatolia were by far the worst-off of the sects. They lived in the ancestral Armenian homeland, an area which during the nineteenth-century, straddled the western regions of the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Russia. The Armenians shared this land with Muslim Turks and various Kurdish tribes, as this

²⁸ Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 15.

²⁹ Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 19. They not only felt as if they were not responsible for the rest of the population, but they often sided with the Ottoman government against the Armenian population in efforts to protect their own interests. See Karpas, *An Inquiry Into the Social Foundations of Nationalism in the Ottoman State*, p. 89.

³⁰ Hagop Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question and the Tanzimat Era,” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 189.

was a Turkish and Kurdish traditional homeland as well. For the Armenian people, the Kurds were far worse neighbors because the Kurdish chieftains imposed additional, illegal taxes on the peasant population.³¹ The Kurds had been present in Turkish Armenia for centuries, but scholars often give more attention to their activities after the 1820s in contrast to the supposed reforms of the Tanzimat. In fact, the Armenians in peripheral regions were largely unaware of the central Ottoman government until the later years of the Tanzimat.

Effects of the Tanzimat Reforms

It is very important to remember how large and diverse—demographically and topographically—the Ottoman Empire was during the period of reform, because the people underwent very different experiences depending on what region they resided in. This period created a greater divide between the center of the empire, which was the only region enjoying the changes promised for the majority of the Tanzimat, and the periphery, which experienced a great deal of “politics without progress”.³² The Tanzimat was not just an ideological movement started by the statesmen; they were interested in truly reviving the state through modern, secular education, the building of railroads and more effective tax systems to connect the peripheries to Istanbul, and to expand Mahmud II’s attempts to create provincial governments to assist the Sublime Porte in these efforts. From the onset of the Tanzimat, one could understand that there would be numerous difficulties in carrying out the changes in this period.³³ Furthermore, it could be argued that the statesmen believed there was more value in working on the ‘big picture’ of improving the empire’s central government than trying to promote the social contract laid out in

³¹ These taxes were imposed on both the Christian and Muslim populations, and even Kurdish peasants in some situations.

³² Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” 777.

³³ Ariel Salzman, “Citizens in Search of a State: The Limits of Political Participation in the Late Ottoman Empire,” in *Extending Citizenship, Reconfiguring States*, ed. Michael Hanagan and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 39.

the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane and the Islahat Fermani; however, the willingness (or lack thereof) of the populace to accept the Tanzimat reforms proved essential to the development of this new Ottoman government. These new reforms influenced everyday life in a way the central government had never done before, which provoked resistance from many different groups of people: local notables, religious and *millet* leaders, as well as individuals were shocked by the change in policies.

The Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane of 1839 is often heralded as the beginning of the Tanzimat era. This decree marks a shift from Mahmud II's focus on reforming the military to a strong emphasis on considering the modernization of both the Ottoman government and its people. The proclamation promised the securities of life, honor, and property, a regular system of taxes, and the abolition of tax farming. It stipulated that all *millets* would be subject to conscription in the army (conscription was previously reserved only for Muslims) and promised equality among all Ottoman people. The decree marked an official "change in the ideology of the state" to Ottomanism.³⁴ This was celebrated by European countries as the first step in Ottoman modernization and the acceptance of citizenship rather than subjecthood, but it was not as celebrated within the empire. Under the *millet* system, direct loyalty to the Ottoman government had not been expected of the people, but with this new, secular concept, every citizen was expected to be loyal and connected to the Sublime Porte.³⁵ Some non-Muslims were taken aback because they did not want to be subject to conscription: backlash against this clause was so great that the previous exemption tax later reappeared under a different name.

³⁴ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 74.

³⁵ Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995), 7.

One of the most important clauses of the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane forbade tax farming. The practice of tax farming was particularly detrimental to the people of the provincial regions, and the banning of tax farming was welcome and long awaited. Previously, farmers had had to pay ‘tithes’ that ranged from one-tenth to one-half of their crop, but after the decree, this dropped to a universal rate of one-tenth of their crop. Although this may at face value appear fair, it was not because the statesmen did not consider the different productivity rates of particular regions. Furthermore, resistance from large landowners led the government to actually collect fewer taxes in 1839 than in previous years. Although the statesmen thought they could efficiently centralize the empire, the region lacked the infrastructure and sufficient personnel necessary to carry out this task. Due to these unforeseen problems, tax farming—in a situation similar to that of the conscription tax—reappeared under another name by 1841.³⁶ Notables in the peripheral provinces continued to treat peasants like personal slaves after the Gülhane; the Armenian people viewed the Porte’s inability to reverse this practice as a significant blow to their newly-gained rights.³⁷

All of this opposition should not lead one to conclude that the entire empire recoiled from the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane; the proclamation and quick implementation of these measures overwhelmed a great amount of the population, which led to resistance. Had these policies been introduced slowly and quietly into the Ottoman system, there would probably not have been as much opposition, but this option seemed impossible to the Ottoman statesmen. This decree was announced at the time it was because Muhammad Ali was threatening the empire’s power in Egypt. In addition, statesmen such as Reshid Paşa, a foreign ambassador for the Ottomans at the time, but who would rise to the position of Grand Vizier within the next decade, understood that

³⁶ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 89.

³⁷ Halil İnalçik, “Application of the Tanzimat and its Social Effects,” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 5 (1973): 111.

an announcement such as this would secure necessary European support for the empire.³⁸ Furthermore, the Ottoman statesmen wanted to safeguard against the possibility that Sultan Abdülmecid (1839-1861) would recant on his promises to abide by the Tanzimat reforms by stipulating that Europe had the ability to interfere in Ottoman affairs if the reforms were not being effectively implemented. This allowance was extremely important because there was no political or social force within the empire that could pressure Sultan Abdülmecid if he did experience a change of heart; the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane did not have this power since it was not a piece of legislation, but rather only a statement of the Sublime Porte's intentions.³⁹

In 1856, at the end of the Crimean War, the Islahat Fermani, a successor document to the Gülhane, was issued to avoid European supervision of Ottoman reforms.⁴⁰ Throughout the middle of the century, a new class of people arose who were well-educated through European-style schooling, but they did not hold effective power within the state structure, which led to cynicism against the Ottoman government. Christians and other minorities petitioned for a more legally-binding declaration of their rights, which is exactly what was delivered through the Islahat Fermani.⁴¹ The Islahat Fermani reinforced the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane by explicitly declaring equality and freedom of religion for all Ottoman citizens. The main purpose of the Islahat Fermani was to “establish the basis for the eventual creation of an Ottoman nation in which subjects would benefit from identical civil rights, automatically conferred with citizenship and not dependent of religious affiliation.”⁴² However, Reshid Paşa and his contemporaries did not expect that specific demands to enforce this decree and create true equality between

³⁸ Davison, “Turkish Attitudes,” 66.

³⁹ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 34; Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 72.

⁴⁰ Davison, “Turkish Attitudes,” 66.

⁴¹ Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 75.

⁴² Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 14.

Christians and Muslims would emerge as quickly as they did. The statesmen were committed to creating a revived, unified empire, but they did not foresee the extent of their actions; minority groups expected more concrete results from these edicts than the government could immediately provide. There was a strong attempt to modernize education to promote unity within the empire, but most state-organized attempts failed. Instead, religious colleges were established in various parts of the empire, but these institutions furthered the growth of national sentiments, rather than one of Ottomanism.⁴³

Furthermore, although the effects of the Islahat Fermani were felt quite strongly in the central regions of the empire, local notables continued to illegally tax and discriminate against peasants in the peripheral regions.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, resistance once again arose from *millet* leaders, who insisted that “new privileges. . . be conferred on them as a distinct community, not as Ottomans.”⁴⁵ Demands such as these subsequently led Ottoman Turks to become disheartened with the direction of the Tanzimat, particularly because they believed these reforms weakened the Muslim position in the empire. This sentiment was strengthened by the fact that there was no ‘national church’ for Muslims to identify with or gain additional rights from their status, since Islam was a “universal religion.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, Muslims within the empire viewed the Islahat as a European document; although the *Gülhane* had been influenced by Europe, the

⁴³ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 35.

⁴⁴ Salzmänn, “Citizens in Search of a State,” 45. It is important to note that this was not just due to officials’ unwillingness to enforce these reforms, there was no solid system of transportation/communication across the empire due to a lack of railroads and ‘modern’ innovation, making the government unable to enforce these reforms to the extent necessary to make them effective.

⁴⁵ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 75.

⁴⁶ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 36.

decree was distinctly Ottoman.⁴⁷ Unlike the Gülhane, the Islahat made no mention of Islamic law, which dealt a tremendous blow to the legal tradition of the empire.

The Porte's aim to assert more power over the provinces was fulfilled by the Ottoman Land Code of 1858. This decree was a second attempt to create a direct link between the Istanbul government and the cultivator so taxes could be more efficiently collected. Previously, little effort had been spared in attempting to unite the provinces to the center of the empire. This exact aim, however, led many people to try to avoid registering their land fearing they would be subject to more taxes, not to mention conscription. The general sentiment of the provincial people was that Ottomanism and centralization were predecessors to Turkish exclusionism within the empire, and a great deal of distrust was directed towards the Istanbul government.⁴⁸ This was not quite the case, however, since the statesmen were instead trying to create a new class of people loyal to the new state being created.⁴⁹ However, a local notable often registered many people's land under his name, and thus gained ownership of the land.⁵⁰ Although there were some leaders who were trustworthy, others were not, resulting in the continuation of a quasi-serfdom system in the provinces. Therefore, the new middle class that the Sublime Porte hoped to create did not emerge at this time.⁵¹

Naturally, discontent among particular factions continued to intensify, resulting in the Kuleli Revolt of 1859. Since many Muslims believed their position in the empire had been weakened, they abandoned traditional jobs and searched for employment within the state structure to regain some semblance of power. However, the state bureaucracy could no longer

⁴⁷ Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire*, 54.

⁴⁸ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 107.

⁴⁹ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 32.

⁵⁰ Salzmänn, "Citizens in Search of a State," 47.

⁵¹ In fact, the new middle class didn't arise until 1908.

continue to receive many new employees, and even those currently in the system realized it had become stagnant and it was almost impossible to find a promotion within this structure. This particularly affected the newly-educated youth, who in turn placed blame upon the statesmen for the concessions made to the Christians within the empire.⁵² In this revolt, army officers and Muslim religious figures, the *ulema*, rose up in an attempt to kill Sultan Abdülmeçid in Istanbul because they believed that the direction Fuad Paşa and Ali Paşa were taking the empire—towards greater cooperation with Europe—would lead to its ultimate demise.⁵³ Ultimately, the assassination attempt was thwarted, but it was clear that a prominent class of Ottoman Muslims were becoming disillusioned with the Tanzimat.

Regardless of sentiments such as these, both Ali Paşa and Fuad Paşa believed in the Tanzimat ideals and started planting the seeds to prepare the population for self-government.⁵⁴ The Law of the Organization of Provinces was introduced in 1864 to create an elected provincial council in each province. Each council was to consist of two Muslim and two non-Muslim representatives along with state bureaucrats. This law certainly benefited non-Muslims, because they were the minority population in many districts.⁵⁵ Although this was certainly progressive for the empire, the local leaders did not hold much power in these councils; while the bureaucrats may have solicited advice and information from these leaders, the local leaders were often not allowed to participate in decision making.⁵⁶

⁵² Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 36.

⁵³ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 18.

⁵⁴ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 20. However, Ali and Fuad did not believe that this time was anytime soon.

⁵⁵ Therefore, some Muslims became incited over this law, because non-Muslims were being disproportionately represented in the provincial councils.

⁵⁶ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 76.

Ultimately, the Tanzimat reforms proved ineffective in the peripheries, and by the 1870s a quasi-serfdom system called the *khafir* system arose in the provinces.⁵⁷ The Kurdish chiefs began to sell villages that they “owned,” including the Armenians (and other peasants) who lived in them. In an 1867 report to Lord Lyons, British Vice-Consul Rassam reported on the conditions of Christians—which included Armenians—in the mountains of Zebar and Zakko (in what is now modern-day Iraq):

The Chiefs of the Kurds, before the Reform, were accustomed to treat[ing] the Christians as their own slaves, and were in the habit of taking from them the tithes of their cultivation, and treated them in every respect as slaves. However, since the reform, the Mountain Christians of these two places were ordered to pay their taxes and tithes to the Government, which they now do; but they have never to this day become entirely free from the molestation of the Kurdish Chiefs. The Pashas of Moossul could with ease protect the Christians from the assaults of the Kurds, but rapacity may perhaps be the cause of allowing such conduct to go on for their own interests that they may obtain a share of the profit.⁵⁸

Rassam’s letter reflects the (prevalent) opinion that the local Ottoman government was aware of the injustices the provincial Christians suffered at the hands of the Kurds, but actively chose to do nothing. These peasants cannot be characterized as rebellious towards the government as Sultan Abdülhamid II would later assert; they fulfilled their duties to the empire by paying their taxes and tithes, but without receiving the rights and protection that they had been promised. In fact, this constituted blatant disregard for one of the key components of the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane—the security of property. The edict explains that if one is secure in ownership of his

⁵⁷ Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question,” 199.

⁵⁸ “Reports Received from her Majesty’s Ambassador and Consuls Relating to the Condition of Christians in Turkey: 1867,” *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* (London: Harrison and Sons), Enclosure N1, Vice-Consul Rassam to Lord Lyons (April 20, 1867), 1-2.

property, he will grow to love his country; so what could one expect of one who was deprived of this right?⁵⁹

Armenian Pleas for Reform and the 1863 Constitution

As previously noted, opposition to the Tanzimat reforms arose for many different reasons and from many different groups. Yet the main Armenian groups who spoke up during this period were *not* opposing the reforms; these young Armenian intellectuals embraced the messages within these new policies and edicts, but believed that the government was not enforcing these reforms to the extent that they should have been. The Armenians did not seek to break away from the empire; the more liberal groups of the time simply asked for reform of the more oppressive rules, such as not being able to build or repair churches and tax farming, and enforcing equality. A few hoped for eventual autonomy in the provinces, but this was still not as radical as the hopes of other Christian groups (such as the Greeks).⁶⁰ The Ottomans viewed the Armenians as the regime's "loyal *millet*," and the Armenians lived up to this image throughout most of the century.⁶¹ The Armenians' decision to seek reform was not a unique situation during this period; many other minorities were doing the same. In fact, the different interpretations of the Tanzimat by the Ottoman Lebanese led to heightened tensions and eventually to violence in 1860. The commoners in Lebanon understood the *Gülhane* as a document that promised the "full restoration of their right to rule the land," while local notables and the Ottoman authorities obviously saw the decree in a very different light.⁶² At a time when other Christian minorities,

⁵⁹ "Hatt-I Sharif of *Gülhane*," in *The Modern Middle East: A History*, ed. James L. Gelvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149.

⁶⁰ Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶² Ussama Makdisi, "Corrupting the Sublime Sultanate: The Revolt of Tanyus Shahin in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (Jan. 2000): 196.

such as those in Lebanon and the Balkans, were quickly breaking away from the empire, the Armenians were asking for very insignificant changes.

It is clear that liberal Armenians genuinely believed that the Tanzimat provided an opportunity to petition for change, and a set of regulations for the Armenian *millet* was drafted by Armenian intellectuals in Istanbul in 1855. This document was a fairly moderate one, not demanding a great deal from the Sublime Porte, but was simply attempting to create a written code of rules for the administration of the *millet*. Although the first draft was rejected by the Armenian assembly, the revised version, submitted in 1857, was accepted. This second version, however, was then promptly rejected by the Sublime Porte. The Armenian constitutionalists realized that in both situations, the *amiras* had used their influence to halt the ratification of the code of regulations.⁶³ This was most likely done because the *amiras* were afraid of losing their political power in the Patriarchate. It is significant to note that the Ottoman government was not stopping the Armenians' progress; it was their very own people.

Finally, in 1863, the Armenian National Constitution was accepted by both the assembly and the Sublime Porte. Although this constitution was, as mentioned before, administratively-based, there were some major successes for the constitutionalists. Some provincial courts and tax systems were to be run by Armenian officials, and most importantly, an Armenian National Assembly was created. This was possibly considered a success for some in the Ottoman bureaucracy as well because the constitution decreased the power of Armenian religious figures, directly reflecting the Tanzimat value of "blurring" the line between a secular and religious state.⁶⁴ Limiting the power of the clergy ultimately caused problems for the Ottoman state,

⁶³ Barsoumian, "The Eastern Question," 197.

⁶⁴ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 76.

however, because the clergy was an important channel through which the Porte retained its power over the Christian population. Throughout the remainder of the century, neither the Armenian people nor the Ottoman bureaucracy created a comparable substitution for this missing link.⁶⁵ Section VIII, Article 57 of the constitution states that this 140-member assembly was to consist of one-seventh religious figures, elected by the religious authorities, two-sevenths deputies from the provinces, and four-sevenths deputies from the quarters of Istanbul.⁶⁶ Even though those who presented the constitution supported the presence of deputies from the provinces by explaining that “Armenians living in the interior of the country rightly complain that they are altogether deprived of participation in the deliberations and decisions of the Patriarchate,” it is very important to note that the provincial Armenians were not included in the creation of the constitution, nor did they try to become involved.⁶⁷ Additionally, it is clear simply by looking at the uneven proportion of deputies that those who were active in creating the constitution planned to keep themselves prominent by disproportionately representing themselves in this newly-structured system.

These changes within the *millet* seemed like a lot to the Ottoman statesmen in charge, such as Ali Paşa. He believed that the creation of a national assembly—either for the whole of the empire or for smaller groups—would aid groups that had been forming national self-consciousnesses in an attempt to break away from the empire.⁶⁸ Additional petitions for change, such as the 1870 Memorandum of Grievances, which was sent to the Sublime Porte by an eight-member Special Commission of Inquiry formed by the Armenian *millet* certainly did not help

⁶⁵ Karpas, *Inquiry Into the Social Foundations*, 91.

⁶⁶ “National Constitution of the Armenians in the Turkish Empire,” in *Armenian: Travel and Studies* v2, ed. H.F.B. Lynch (Beirut: Khayats, 1965), 461.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 447; Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question,” 198.

⁶⁸ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 19.

change this sentiment.⁶⁹ This document outlined the tax abuses suffered by the Armenian people, the corruption of government officials in the provinces, and the lack of fairness in courts, but was chiefly disregarded by the Ottoman government. It became clear to some of the Armenian people that although they were granted new rights on paper, this did not translate into rights in everyday life.

The Position of the Ottoman Empire at the End of the Tanzimat

By the 1870s, the Tanzimat was coming to an end. Although the statesmen may not have realized it yet, only some aspects of this period were to be carried into the next era. Unlike the concrete reforms enacted during this period, the actual *culture* of the Tanzimat was not accepted by the general population as much as the statesmen would have hoped.⁷⁰ The technique of modernizing the center of the empire and then moving to the provinces proved ineffective, since the gap between the elite members of Ottoman society and the masses only grew larger; Ottomanism was unable to be realized. Through the *Gülhane* and other administrative measures, the bureaucracy had managed to undermine a very important and long-standing principle of the empire that had prevailed for the last five hundred years: “the relative autonomy enjoyed by various religious and ethnic groups”.⁷¹ Although these reforms were intended to unite the empire, they instead drew sharper lines between the different sects of Ottoman society. This was not only due to ideological aspects, however, since the poor taxation system led the empire to constantly lack the capital necessary to connect the empire and implement the material reforms that were promised, such as better schools, infrastructure, and public works.

⁶⁹ Vahakn N. Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 39.

⁷⁰ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 105.

⁷¹ Karpat, *Inquiry Into the Social Foundations*, 84.

The bitterness that had arisen between different sects of Ottoman people had only heightened by the end of the Tanzimat. On one hand, there were Muslim elements who resented these reforms because they disturbed the “natural order” of Ottoman life: Muslims being the highest member of society. On the other hand, Christian minorities in the empire began to turn to Europe, rather than the Ottoman government, to sustain these newly promised rights. This led to increased resentment from factions of the empire, because it appeared that these minorities had protection from two (or more) governments.⁷² Rather than promoting the idea of Ottomanism, the Tanzimat broke down the localism that prevented communication between religious communities, leading to non-Muslim sects’ development of nationalism.⁷³ Furthermore, both Muslims and non-Muslims were frustrated with not just each other, but with the government as well, because not much had changed within the Porte structure. Because the statesmen aimed to implement the Tanzimat reforms immediately after announcing them, they had to rely upon traditional members of the state system, such as the *ulema* and the army; the common man (and the educated man) resented that they could not gain entrance into these new official positions, and felt as if the statesmen were pushing them out of the new political structure.⁷⁴

Furthermore, it appeared that Europe was beginning to lose patience with the empire by the 1870s. Previously, the Ottomans had had an informal alliance with the British because of a shared enemy, Russia. The Ottomans had feared Russian expansion into their empire, and protecting the Ottoman’s territorial integrity had been beneficial to the British for trade and naval reasons. After the Crimean War, however, Russia appeared to be less of a threat, which

⁷² Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 25.

⁷³ Karpal, *Inquiry Into the Social Foundations*, 91.

⁷⁴ Salzmann, “Citizens in Search of a State,” 43.

diminished British concern in the region. Therefore, European states began resolving social and ethnic conflicts within the empire at the *expense* of the empire; this precedent had been set by the French establishing a quasi-autonomous Lebanon in 1860.⁷⁵ A large reason for this loss of patience is that Europe viewed the Ottoman pace of change as too slow. Europe was unable to understand the unique dilemma faced by the Ottoman government; these statesmen were “caught between liberal public opinion abroad and stubborn resistance by the Muslim masses at home”.⁷⁶

Groups looking to change the direction of the empire stemmed from these splits, such as the New Ottoman Committee (also called the Young Ottomans). This group had a strong desire to preserve the empire while defending equality among all people, but they deeply opposed the special allowances that had been made for Christians during the Tanzimat.⁷⁷ These Young Ottomans came from the over-saturated bureaucracy and believed that the empire could not be reformed under an absolutist power, and therefore supported a constitutionally-based regime. This may sound like a positive concept, but the New Ottoman Committee did not have a very strong social base; rather, their “education and culture alienated them from the peasantry and the urban classes of artisans and merchants of the bazaar”.⁷⁸ Therefore, this group needed to find a ruler who would support their ideas instead.

⁷⁵ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 16.

⁷⁶ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 84.

⁷⁷ Davison, “Turkish Attitudes,” 76. The New Ottoman Committee supported the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane, but they believed that almost everything beyond that had been a concession to the Christians of the empire, pushed upon them by Europe.

⁷⁸ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 38.

Part II: The Constitutional Era and Sultan Abdülhamid II's Reign, 1876-1896

The Constitutional Era and Abdülhamid II's Rise to Power

By 1875, the Sublime Porte had to declare bankruptcy due to defaulting on loans from the Crimean War, resulting in European supervision of Ottoman finances. Therefore, money that had previously been invested in the empire's infrastructure, government salaries, and other vital services was now directed towards repaying debts to Europe. Unsurprisingly, this led to a great deal of resentment among the Ottoman people.⁷⁹ For some, this discontent led to support of constitutionalism, because many believed that a change in power—the citizens now believed they had a right to participate in government—would fix the many problems of the empire.

The support of constitutionalism became more prominent during this period because those looking to be involved in politics understood this involvement to be synonymous with controlling the state “apparatus”.⁸⁰ The constitutionalist movement was led by Muslims (both the statesmen and New Ottomans), but this sentiment was shared by non-Muslims, in particular the elites. For many Muslims, constitutionalism was a way to get rid of the bureaucratic rule that allowed non-Muslims to gain so many rights and privileges. For non-Muslims, this was a way to gain some semblance of real political power; although non-Muslims had gained some power during the Tanzimat, this influence was often used by the Porte statesmen as a tool to reduce the power of the clergy.⁸¹

Abdülhamid II used this public sentiment to his advantage in 1876, when he agreed to accept Grand Vizier Midhat Paşa's constitution in return for the military's aid in deposing the current sultan, his brother Midhat V, and transferring that power to him. This quick transition to

⁷⁹ Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 142.

⁸⁰ Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 145.

⁸¹ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 112.

constitutionalism was a significant triumph for the Ottoman reformers; it appeared that they accomplished this impressive shift from autocracy to constitutionalism in less than a decade.⁸² It is important to note that although the constitution was meant to control the powers of the sultan, the laws created by the parliament had to be ratified by the Grand Vizier (who was always the right-hand man of the sultan), and could only be formally proclaimed and enacted by the sultan himself.⁸³ It soon became clear, that Abdülhamid recognized this problem; thereby many of his promises went unfulfilled. In fact, Abdülhamid suspended the constitution two years later in 1878, claiming that the empire was in a ‘state of emergency’ due to the war with Russia.⁸⁴ It is generally accepted that this was not the true reason for dissolving the constitution and parliament; some argue that Abdülhamid did this because he realized that many of the regions that had gained autonomy within the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century previously had representative or constitutional bodies.⁸⁵ This decision should not be seen as the act of an ‘evil dictator,’ however, as Abdülhamid had good reason to be suspicious of his statesmen: he was the only sultan whose authority was challenged before he had even gained power.⁸⁶ Abdülhamid recognized the connection between increased political activity and the disintegration of the empire, and looked to prevent further cleavages. Although he is often remembered by his decision to revoke the constitution, Abdülhamid’s actions enabled the empire to adjust to the major changes occurring during this period; these decisions were crucial to staving off the

⁸² Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 42.

⁸³ Said Amir Arjomand, “Constitutions and the Struggle for Political Order: A Study in the Modernization of Political Tradition,” in *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East*, ed. Şerif Mardin (Leiden, NY: E.J. Brill, 1994), 16.

⁸⁴ It is clear that this was not the true reason for suspending the constitution, as parliament did not reconvene until 1908.

⁸⁵ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 113.

⁸⁶ Karpat, *Politicization of Islam*, 157. Abdülhamid’s paranoia became so great that he did not even leave Istanbul after becoming sultan.

impending collapse of the empire.⁸⁷ However, the effort to save the empire as a whole led to disproportionate burdens and difficulties on the shoulders of the non-Muslim population.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878

The Russo-Turkish War was sparked when the Ottomans entered into a war against their own territories of Montenegro and Serbia in 1876. These territories had rebelled against the government due to pan-Slavic sentiments; pan-Slavism was an ideology that had become popular in Russia by the 1860s and although it was not officially supported by the Tsarist government, prominent foreign diplomats (including those stationed within the Ottoman Empire) adhered to this ideology, thereby increasing tensions between the Ottoman government and its Slavic subjects. Pan-Slavism initially emphasized the common ethnic background among the Baltic peoples, but it soon transformed into a political movement with the goal of liberating Slavic populations from the Ottoman and Austrian Empires and creating a confederation that would ally itself with the Russian state.⁸⁸ Russia was heralded as the leader and protector of these groups, seemingly similar to the nation's 'protector of all Christians' title.

There is a popular assumption that during this war, the Armenian provincial population defected from the empire and allied with the Russians, but this is not entirely true. Rather, the majority of Armenians were extremely loyal during this period. At the start of the war, Patriarch Varjabedian sent a circular out to the Armenian churches demanding that "we shall continue to remain loyal with much sincerity and dedication. . . .Let us assist the Empire materially and morally".⁸⁹ One can assume that this affected the subsequent decision made by the Armenian

⁸⁷ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 135.

⁸⁸ "Pan-Slavism," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2001).

⁸⁹ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 47.

General Assembly on December, 7th, 1877 to proceed with the creation of Armenian military units. This decision was not totally isolated to Armenian sentiments, however, since an Imperial Decree was passed the previous month requiring all non-Muslim subjects to serve in the Civil Guard; yet it is clear that Ottoman decrees were not the most effective documents, so the Armenian *millet*'s active support of the decree was a positive step forward. Therefore, everyone was quite surprised when the assembly reversed their decision on December 17th, especially the patriarch, since he had already told the Porte about the previous decision. There are suggestions that a German ambassador, Prince Heinrich Reuss, influenced the General Assembly's position because a Russian victory was in Germany's interest, but there is no definitive consensus concerning why the Armenian assembly changed their mind on this matter.⁹⁰

Since the Armenian *millet* no longer officially endorsed the creation of Armenian units, it was primarily up to individuals or local communities to decide whether or not to aid the empire. Many Armenians—especially those who were not particularly wealthy—preferred to fight in the army rather than pay the exemption tax. Others refused, however, citing little incentive for them to fight for the Ottomans. Furthermore, some volunteer groups did fight alongside the Russians, but this was a very small portion of the Ottoman Armenians.⁹¹ Conversely, there were many Armenians who willingly chose to fight for the Ottomans, such as the provincial Armenians of Erzurum; even when the Russians demanded that the city be surrendered, these people were “prepared to fight to the last drop of their blood for the defense of the rights of the Ottoman State with which the destiny of the Armenian people is inextricably woven”.⁹² Clearly, the impact of

⁹⁰ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 48.

⁹¹ There are many scholars who exaggerate how many Ottoman Armenians were actively assisting the Russians during the war, perhaps because the Ottoman government did as well.

⁹² Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 55.

the Armenian regiments captured the attention of Sultan Abdülhamid II, who explained to the Armenian Patriarch:

They will reap all the benefits due to them for their loyalty; good fortunes are in store for them. I am fond of all my subjects but especially the Armenian people who in these grave times have demonstrated the fruits of their centuries-old fidelity.⁹³

Although Abdülhamid promised that the Armenian people would be rewarded for their loyalty, the Kurds continued to massacre Christians in the provinces. A large part of the Armenian population was exposed to this violence, but there was no consensus among the general population—or the Armenian leaders—as to what should be done about it.

As noted above, some Armenian groups—mainly those found in the provinces—were no longer interested in reconciling with the Ottoman state and instead hoped that Tsarist Russia would annex their land. Ottoman officials became concerned about this sentiment after the 1829 Russo-Turkish War because the Russian acquisition of land resulted in a consolidated majority population of Armenians within their native homeland. The creation of an Armenian national consciousness—or simply an Armenian alliance with Russia—was something the Porte had feared for a while. Soon after the 1829 acquisition, Russian Armenians and other liberal Armenians abroad began to contemplate the possibility of an autonomous Armenian land.⁹⁴ Again, however, this sentiment only penetrated into a small sect of the Armenian society. In general, the ruling circles of the Armenians believed—like the Ottoman government—that the Russian government would try to assimilate the Armenians into the greater Russian culture, rather than allowing them to retain their identity as they had for centuries in the *millet* system.⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid., 56; Dadrian cites: Mikayel Varantian, *Haigagan Sharzhman Nakhbadmouiunu* (The history of the origins of the Armenian revolutionary movement) vol.2 (Geneva: 1914).

⁹⁴ Ronald Grigor Suny, “Eastern Armenians Under Tsarist Rule,” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 113.

⁹⁵ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 207.

Often, assimilation into Russian culture was carried out using force, which offered a strict contrast to what many of the Armenians in Istanbul and other regions outside the provinces were accustomed to. Armenian deputies in the Ottoman parliament reflected this sentiment by announcing that their provinces were loyal to the Ottomans and did not view the Russians as the protectors of all Christians.⁹⁶

During this period, Armenian deputies in parliament recognized their new rights of petition and free speech granted by the constitution, so they introduced the ‘Turko-Armenian Problem’ in parliament in an attempt to stop the injustices against the Armenian population.⁹⁷ This problem consisted of the Armenian’s perceived lack of rights within the Ottoman system and the Porte’s inaction in changing the situation, along with the fact that Ottoman authorities were not doing everything possible to stop the Kurdish attacks on provincial Armenians, and that in some situations, the Ottoman authorities were even complicit in these crimes.⁹⁸ Although some Porte members had previously become aware of this situation, this was the first time that the problem was introduced as an “urgent national issue requiring public debate, parliamentary deliberation and solution”.⁹⁹ The opening of this discussion on the Turko-Armenian Problem showed that the Armenian people were firm in their decision to remain citizens rather than subjects of the empire; although their rights were not fully enforced, they were real rights, and the Armenians believed they just had to push harder to grasp these rights.¹⁰⁰ In one sense, this constituted a success for the Armenian subjects, since this was the first time they publicly and

⁹⁶ Tsarist Russia awarded themselves the title of “protector of all Christians,” but it was mainly Christians in the Balkan region who accepted this view of the Russians.

⁹⁷ “The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7th Zilbridje, 1293 (11/23 December, 1876),” *The American Journal of International Law* 2 (October 1908), 369-374. Articles 14 and 47.

⁹⁸ Depending on what province they were representing, the Armenian deputies argued that the local authorities were either directly involved in the planning and implementation of the attacks or actively ignored the situation.

⁹⁹ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Salzmann, “Citizens in Search of a State,” 57.

officially protested against their unfair social standing; but in another, this generated great fear among some of the Ottoman statesmen. Rather than viewing this dialogue as an assertion of rights, the Ottoman authorities saw this as the beginning of disloyalty among the previously-named ‘loyal *millet*’.¹⁰¹ The last time the statesmen had heard announcements like this—specifically in the form of the ‘Eastern Question’—serious problems had arisen among the Macedonians, Cretans, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs.¹⁰²

Abdülhamid did not condone the direction the parliament was heading—particularly the criticisms that his interference in military strategy led to the defeats in the war as well as the Armenian Question—leading him to dissolve the body a mere two years after its creation in 1878.¹⁰³ The parliament should have reconvened later that year, given that Article 73 of the Constitution stipulates that “in case of the dissolution of the Chamber by an Imperial Irade. . . [it is] necessary for the Chamber to meet again at latest six months after the date of dissolution.”¹⁰⁴ However, this did not occur, apparently because there no large delegation was willing to urge Abdülhamid to allow it.

The war initially ended with the San Stefano Treaty in March 1878, which constituted a huge humiliation for the Ottomans because Russia claimed a great deal of territory and established autonomy for many periphery regions such as Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. Europe, however, did not accept this treaty because they feared it would tip the balance of power in Russia’s favor, and thereby responded with the Berlin Congress, held in June and July of that same year. The Ottomans were still subjected to a loss of territory and independence to the

¹⁰¹ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 60.

¹⁰² Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 49.

¹⁰³ Karpat, *Politicization of Islam*, 166.

¹⁰⁴ “The Ottoman Constitution,” 379.

smaller regions mentioned above, and ceded Bosnia-Herzegovina to Austria-Hungary.¹⁰⁵ In short, the empire had to forfeit about one-third of its land at once. Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty, however, could have been useful for the Armenians, because the clause stipulated that the Sublime Porte would “carry out, without further delay, the ameliorations and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and the Kurds,” and these actions were to be watched closely by the European powers.¹⁰⁶ It would become clear in the succeeding decades, however, that although the Armenian Question had been internationalized by this document, the world had not come any closer to knowing how best to respond.¹⁰⁷

Sultan Abdülhamid II’s Reign

After the Russo-Turkish War had ended, Muslims flooded into the empire from newly-independent regions, altering the population so it was almost seventy-five percent Muslim. These new immigrants often associated their religion with a national identity, setting the stage for Sultan Abdülhamid II’s pan-Islamism ideology.¹⁰⁸ Rather than continuing to support the Ottomanism identity promulgated throughout the Tanzimat, Abdülhamid sympathized with the opinion that the Ottomans were becoming alienated from Europe and should instead turn inwards towards tradition. Abdülhamid was partly right in his assessment, as the strategic benefits of allying with the Ottomans (for Europe) had disintegrated first after the Crimean War, then again after the 1878 Russo-Turkish War. The Great Powers became much less interested in protecting the empire’s territorial integrity. Abdülhamid did not create the pan-Islamic ideology; rather, he

¹⁰⁵ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 123.

¹⁰⁶ “Treaty Between Great Britain, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Russia, and Turkey for the Settlement of Affairs in the East: Signed at Berlin, July 13, 1878,” *The American Journal of International Law* vol. 2 (October 1908), 422.

¹⁰⁷ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 212.

¹⁰⁸ Gelvin, *Modern Middle East*, 134.

adopted the concept and gave it a political facet that would work in reinvigorating the Ottoman state.¹⁰⁹

Muslim people throughout the world saw the Ottoman Empire as the last legitimate Islamic power, transforming Abdülhamid into a “universal caliph” who could lead the Islamic world in a resistance against the encroaching West.¹¹⁰ As such, Abdülhamid tried to connect to Muslim colonies ruled by European powers to create a sort of ‘bargaining chip’ that the no-longer-powerful Ottoman military could no longer serve as. Abdülhamid’s purpose, however, was not to use this pan-Islamist ideology in an aggressive way; rather, he was interested in defending the empire against European pressure.¹¹¹ And although the empire had lost the battle in retaining the majority of the Christian population, Abdülhamid hoped to quell any burgeoning nationalist sentiments among the Muslim population. Abdülhamid saw that his empire was crumbling beneath him, and planned to do whatever was necessary to keep the remainder of the empire intact.¹¹² The Ottoman Empire could survive the loss of the Christian regions (although they did not want to lose these), but if Muslim groups began breaking away, the empire would completely collapse.

Other ideologies, such as Turkism, also emerged as a response to Ottomanism, but pan-Islamism was by far the dominant reaction. Turkism was unable to achieve more than a marginal following during this period because it could not replace a strong concept—such as Ottomanism or Islam—while the empire continued to incorporate multiple ethnicities and religions in its ranks.¹¹³ Although this was the case, Europe—and some minorities who attached

¹⁰⁹ Karpat, *Politicization of Islam*, 155.

¹¹⁰ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 43.

¹¹¹ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 130.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹³ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 44.

themselves to Europe—believed the Ottoman state was becoming more ‘Turkified’ because the Turks were the largest ethnic group. However, this did not become a reality until the start of the twentieth century when the Committee of Union and Progress gained power.

Armenians in the Hamidian Period

The Armenians were well outside this sphere of pan-Islamism, and were instead experiencing a renaissance of their own due to missionary activity in the region. European interest in the Ottoman Christians was not a new development, but the Armenians had become more receptive to the missionaries’ efforts whenever they felt they were being repressed (a growing sentiment during the Hamidian period), such as in regions where they were forced to give up their distinct Armenian identity and use the Turkish language or began to once again become subservient to Islamic laws.¹¹⁴ Missionaries set up European-style schools—starting as early as the 1840s since the Ottoman government often did not have sufficient funds to keep schools running—thereby introducing Armenians to more liberal concepts that they were not privy to before.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the teachings of the missionaries heightened religion as a form of identity for the Armenian people; they were being pushed back into a Christian character by both Western missionaries and the fumbling of the Tanzimat statesmen.

A small group of Armenian intelligentsia began to push for a more representative body within the *millet*, and reopened the discussion concerning protection from the Kurdish attacks in the provinces. This movement did not become too powerful during most of the 1880s, however, because the Armenians with the loudest voices—the notables, merchants, and professionals—did not want to challenge the Porte, since they benefited from being part of a large empire (opposed

¹¹⁴ Edwin Munsell Bliss, *A Concise History of Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1897), 134.

¹¹⁵ *The Missionary Herald* 38 (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1842), 454-455.

to a small autonomous region or nation-state).¹¹⁶ Many Ottoman authorities saw this situation in the same way, since other Christian sects—particularly those in the Balkans—underwent cultural renaissances that turned to armed rebellion. These statesmen, including Abdülhamid, believed the struggle of these groups would influence others nationalities to do the same. This fear was realized through the continuing resistance of the Macedonians, which strengthened the sentiment that the Armenians would soon follow suit.¹¹⁷ Unfortunately for the Armenian people, the Porte was incapable—or unwilling—to acknowledge the deep divides between the revolutionary groups and the larger, docile population. Another reason for this lack of differentiation between the Armenian sects could be attributed to some notable Armenians who were actually breaking away from their traditional loyalty to the Ottoman government, such as the new Armenian Patriarch Nerses, who started vocally pushing for the protections laid out in Article 61 to be implemented after the 1877 war.¹¹⁸

The first Russo-Turkish War (1829) had created a consolidated population of Armenians in a peripheral region of Russia, bordered by Turkish Armenia. Although this consolidation led some Armenian sects within Russia to consider the possibility of reuniting the historic Armenian homeland, the Tsarist Russian government had declared itself uninterested in the Armenian Question by the 1880s.¹¹⁹ Some would have expected the Russians to be interested in aiding the Armenians in their quest for independence or autonomy, similar to their support of the Balkan regions. However, the Armenians lacked a major factor necessary for Russian aid; the problems that arose in Bulgaria and Montenegro were intensified by the ideology of pan-Slavism, proliferated by the Russians. In other words, Russia and the Slavic regions had the bond of

¹¹⁶ Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 45.

¹¹⁷ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 55.

¹¹⁸ Karpat, *Politicization of Islam*, 210.

¹¹⁹ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 70.

Orthodox Christianity, and the fact that the Armenians resided under the umbrella of Christianity but not Orthodoxy (they practiced Evangelical Christianity, Gregorian Christianity, or Catholicism) was not enough to merit a great deal of Russian support.

Furthermore, the nationalism that arose in Bulgaria and Montenegro was more powerful than the Russian government had expected. Russia hoped these new regions could be treated as colonies, subservient to the great empire that had freed them, but that was not the case. Therefore, these newly-independent states were viewed as ungrateful. Baron von Brunnow, Russia's Ambassador to Great Britain expressed this sentiment in a letter in which he argued, "the Ottoman empire may be transformed into independent states, which for us will only become either burdensome clients or hostile neighbours".¹²⁰ Furthermore, the Russian government came to realize that if they actively aided in averting the reform process, rather than aiding the Armenians, the Turko-Armenian conflict would intensify "enfeebling not only the Armenians but Turkey also".¹²¹ The creation of new states was not in the interest of the Russian government, but they hoped the Ottoman Empire could be weakened to the point where the Russians could expand their own empire further into the Middle East. Conversely, if Russia decided to help the Armenians in the creation of an independent state, it would "entail the danger for Russia that the Russian Armenians will aspire to become a part of it".¹²²

Due to this withdrawal in Russian support, the Armenian revolutionary groups that finally rose up during the 1880s were very small, isolated groups who lacked the guaranteed support of any outside nation. The Armenians could be coined a 'lonely people', since they did not have the religious or ethnic bonds necessary to create a meaningful bond with a powerful

¹²⁰ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 72.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 72, quoted from Nikolaus Giers, the Foreign Minister of Russia.

state. Because of this, a few different groups emerged in various regions expressing very different opinions concerning what should be done for the Armenian population. Early non-political groups, such as the Defense of the Fatherland Society, appeared within the empire as early as 1881 calling for Armenian self-defense against the Kurdish attacks.¹²³ This particular group, centered in Erzurum, displayed a distinct difference in ideology between the youth and their parents. Although the elders were somewhat willing to accept their burdens, the youth were not nearly as patient and willing to wait for help—which was probably not coming—from the Ottoman government.

The first Armenian political party, the Armenakans, was created in Van (another provincial region) in 1885. This party was interested in Armenian self-determination—in the sense of autonomy, as this party never supported the creation of an independent Armenian state—that would be achieved through a revolution. However, the Armenakans did not think the time for this revolution had come just yet.¹²⁴ Armenakan members believed that this revolutionary movement had to wait until Europe became interested in the Armenian Question, since they realized they would not be successful without outside help. Clearly, although this party was slightly more radical than the Society, they could still be considered quite moderate by traditional standards. The next prominent party to emerge, however, was the radical group the Hnchak Party, which originated in Geneva in 1887. The creation of the Hnchaks marked a lot of firsts for the Armenian cause: the first party with an international structure, a detailed political platform, and the first to advocate for complete separation from the Ottoman Empire in the form of an independent Armenian state.¹²⁵ Up until the 1880s, the idea of an independent Armenian

¹²³ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 213.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 214.

state had been basically non-existent. Although the main committee resided in Geneva, Hnchak branches spread into both the Ottoman Empire and Russia. The last important party to discuss is the Dashnak Party, which was created in 1890. Some may see this party as less radical than the Hnchaks because they only advocated for autonomy under Ottoman rule, yet Ottoman leaders viewed this goal as a “stepping-stone toward eventual independence”.¹²⁶ The formation of parties like these is a concrete example of how the Tanzimat project failed; these Armenians saw the Ottoman government as actively depriving Christians of their freedoms and believed they could no longer seek reforms within this system. I believe the Porte was correct in seeing the Dashnaks in this light, since subsequent acts perpetrated by the party separated them more and more from the possibility of reconciliation with the Ottoman state.

While branches of these parties had been present in both Russia and the Ottoman Empire, it was generally the Russian Armenians who were most committed to revolutionary causes. There were some socialist sentiments within these groups, causing some revolutionary leaders to see themselves as the “head of an all-class, all-nation movement based on individual terrorism and self-sacrifice”.¹²⁷ Therefore, the Russian Armenians chose to focus their efforts on fighting the Ottoman state rather than the Russian autocracy, since they believed the Ottoman Armenians faced a more dire situation than they. These Russian Armenians started many of the revolutionary actions in the empire, and transformed the view of a “condition of simple administrative ineptness into one of racial persecution”.¹²⁸ They believed that once the Ottoman Armenians were liberated, the needs of the greater Armenian population could be catered to. Conversely, within the Ottoman Empire, there was general opposition to these revolutionary

¹²⁶ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 69.

¹²⁷ Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 24.

¹²⁸ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 35.

groups not only by wealthy Armenians and clergy closely connected to the Porte, but also by ordinary Armenians who had something to lose by struggling against the Ottoman authorities—be it their homes, rights, belongings, or even their lives.¹²⁹ Those Armenians who were attracted to these parties mainly comprised of the youth, who, like those who joined the Defense of the Fatherland Society, had given up hope of obtaining recourse through the parliament and other traditional methods. Although the Ottoman government did not appear to see this as the case, other nations were very aware of the overt Russian influence in revolutionary activities. The London-based newspaper, *The Times*, printed many articles entitled “The Armenian Question” during this period, and reported in 1890:

The agitation among the Russian Armenians is assuming rather disquieting dimensions. Young Armenians are leaving Russia, even with arms, in large numbers, money is being collected secretly, and it is proposed to solicit the permission of the authorities to form committees and open public subscriptions for the benefit of their oppressed co-religionists in Turkey.¹³⁰

It is interesting to note that although the Ottomans generally appeared to not notice this distinction between revolutionary Armenians and the general population, Abdülhamid was aware this was the case. In a conversation with British Ambassador White concerning the Armenian Question, Abdülhamid observed the Ottoman Armenians as divided into three categories: the “independence seekers,” the “annexation seekers,” and those completely loyal to the empire.¹³¹ He followed up this categorical distinction by explaining that the majority of the Armenians constituted the third category, with very few in the first two categories (“independence seekers” being the smallest group).

¹²⁹ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 69.

¹³⁰ “The Armenian Question,” *The Times*, Sept. 10, 1890.

¹³¹ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 161. Dadrian cites Ambassador White’s April 30, 1888 report to Lord Salisbury.

Although some parties, such as the Armenakan Party, recognized that Europe was not interested in mediating the Turko-Armenian conflict—apart from occasionally reminding the Porte of their duties to protect the Armenian people as laid out in Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty—others, particularly the Hnchaks, planned resistance in an attempt to ‘force’ Europe to intervene. They believed the Christian Maronite uprising and resulting attack by Muslim Turks and Druzes after the announcement of the Islahat Fermani proved to be a precedent for this type of action; although Fuad Paşa tried to avoid European involvement by quickly sending the Ottoman army to Beirut and Damascus to cease the fighting and created special courts to sentence the perpetrators of the attacks, the French still intervened, granting Lebanon autonomy in the 1860 Protocol of Paris.¹³² One of the earliest examples of Armenian political resistance was a march organized by the Hnchaks in the summer of 1890. A group of revolutionaries interrupted an Armenian mass in Istanbul and read a manifesto that denounced Patriarch Ashegian and the Armenian National Assembly for their lack of progress in improving the quality of life for the Armenian population. They then forced the Patriarch to participate in a march to deliver the manifesto to Sultan Abdülhamid II and demand the implementation of Article 61.¹³³ This demonstration led to a few deaths, but failed to motivate the European Powers to intervene on behalf of the Armenians.

The Massacres of 1894-1896

The continuing conflict between the revolutionaries and the Ottoman authorities during Abdülhamid’s regime culminated in the 1894-1896 massacres that enveloped all of the eastern provincial regions of the empire that contained Armenian homes. There had been previous

¹³² Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 23.

¹³³ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 218.

instances of violence between Muslims and Christians (including and not including the Ottoman state), but those events had been much more isolated and lacked the political context present in the 1894-1896 massacres. In this section, I do not plan to go into great detail concerning the atrocities as I do not want to stray away from the focus of this thesis, but one can accept that many of the attacks listed below involved the burning and destruction of buildings, rape, brutal killings, and other activities characteristic of mass murder. Although accounts of the death toll greatly vary, 100,000 deaths is often cited as a reliable number.¹³⁴ The most-asked question concerning these massacres is *what changed?* The Armenians had been dealing with the Kurdish injustices for a long time, but in the 1890s, the Armenians finally began to resist these unfair predations. Due to the rights laid out by the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane and the Islahat Fermani—seen as some by privileges for Christians—a competition broke out between the Armenians, Muslim Ottomans, and Kurdish tribes in the provinces for both land and political power.¹³⁵ The Armenians were particularly disturbed by the fact that nothing had been done to alleviate the Kurdish element from their lives, and resistance to these chieftains resulted in reprisal from the Ottoman authorities.

This new response of the Armenians is not the only factor that should be considered in this period; the Ottoman-Kurdish and Armenian-Kurdish dynamics are also very important factors. Some Kurdish chiefs became frustrated with the Armenian people during this period, particularly because they saw Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty as a tool to make allowances for the Christians who lived in *their* traditional homeland.¹³⁶ Furthermore, some chieftains—such as Sheikh Ubeydullah, who led a rebellion against both the Ottoman and Persian Qajar empires in

¹³⁴ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 222.

¹³⁵ Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat*, 28.

¹³⁶ Hakan Özoğlu, “‘Nationalism’ and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman—Early Republican Era,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (August 2001): 390.

1880—feared that the Armenians were not only taking over their homeland, but shared the growing sentiment that the Armenians would try to break away from the empire, taking Kurdish land with them.¹³⁷ Additionally, as previously stated, the effects of the Ottoman Land Code (1858) did not take effect in the eastern provinces until the 1870s. During the latter part of the century, the Ottoman authorities were not only enforcing the Land Code, but they were also trying to curb the nomadic tendencies of the Kurdish population in favor of settling down on land in the provinces. This shift in policy led to disputes in the area, since the Kurdish chiefs interpreted holding land as analogous to holding power, but the majority of the land had already been settled by the Armenian and Muslim populations. Therefore, these chiefs engaged in a grab for land, which often ended violently, especially during the 1890s.

Although the Kurdish tribes had not been treated well by the Ottoman government in the past, an unsteady alliance was nevertheless created between Abdülhamid and some Kurdish chieftains during the latter part of the century. As his fears concerning the Armenian revolutionary movements grew, Abdülhamid created the Hamidiye Corps, a series of irregular military units led by Kurdish horsemen.¹³⁸ These units were initially intended to serve as a border patrol in the provinces, but they did not prove to be very useful in this sense.¹³⁹ Instead, these units were used to prevent the separatist tendencies of ruling Kurdish chieftains along with crushing any perceived Armenian resistance. In return, the Kurdish chiefs were able to take over peasants' land, thereby increasing their land holdings in the region. This system is another

¹³⁷ Klein, "Conflict and Collaboration," 158.

¹³⁸ Tessa Hofmann and Gerayer Koutcharian, "The History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire," *Armenian Review* 39 (Winter 1986): 17.

¹³⁹ Klein, "Conflict and Collaboration," 159.

example of how the Ottoman authorities relied on an alliance of bribery as they were unable to create legitimate methods to oversee or regulate the actions of the greater Kurdish population.¹⁴⁰

This was certainly the case in Sassoun, as the Armenians were responsible for paying taxes to both Ottoman officials and the Kurds, resulting in “double taxation” that they deeply resented.¹⁴¹ Therefore, the people of Sassoun stopped paying their taxes to the Kurdish chiefs. It is important to note that although some Hnchak elements tried to create an armed insurrection, this resistance was very far from constituting an open revolt. However, regular Ottoman troops entered the area with the Kurdish tribes and attacked the Armenians people. European consuls were present in Sassoun, such as British Vice Consul Hallward, who reported back to Great Britain that “there was no insurrection, as was reported in Constantinople; the villagers simply took up arms to defend themselves against the Kurds”.¹⁴² Other reports, such as those in *The Times*, corroborate this story, adding that the Kurds reported that the Armenians had attacked them first, leading to the Turkish army’s brutal suppression of the ‘rebellion’ without first investigating the matter.¹⁴³

This led some European nations to question what had occurred in Sassoun, and in response to these criticisms Abdülhamid created the Anatolian Investigation Commission. This commission’s main purpose was to investigate what had happened in Sassoun, yet its final report placed blame primarily on the Armenians. In general, the Ottoman authorities reported that the Armenians had been acting against the local Muslims, and in some cases, the Ottoman officials even denied the attacks altogether. Even though the Great Powers recognized that their own consuls reported very different events than Ottoman authorities, some European nations, such as

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, *Death and Exile*, 40.

¹⁴¹ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 114.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴³ “The Reported Atrocities in Armenia,” *The Times*, Nov. 19, 1894.

Germany, Austria, and Italy did not want to re-involve themselves in the Armenian Question. Conversely, Great Britain and France supported a reform project that was presented to Abdülhamid in May 1895. This proposal once again reminded Abdülhamid of the duties laid out in Article 61 and suggested some changes that would be in-line with these responsibilities, such as provincial governors being approved by European powers, the disarmament of the Hamidiye corps in peacetime (and keeping a close eye on the Kurds in general), and retribution for those who were attacked.¹⁴⁴ However, these reforms were rejected by Abdülhamid, and the empire went unpunished due to lack of European action.

The response from Armenians within the empire was much more pronounced, as displayed by the Bab-I ‘Ali Demonstration in Istanbul. In September 1895, leaders of the Hnchak and Armenakan parties led a few thousand Armenians on a peaceful march to the Sublime Porte. These demonstrators intended to deliver a petition regarding the complicity of Ottoman authorities in the Sassoun Massacre, but the march was halted by the police before they reached their destination. A disagreement between a police commander and a protestor became violent, leading to bloodshed throughout the city.¹⁴⁵ There are suggestions that the police covertly encouraged the violence, such as German Ambassador Saurma’s letter to Chancellor Hohnlohe:

. . . the Turkish authorities are responsible for the bloody excesses of Istanbul’s Muslim population. Instead of simply preventing through troops the intended Armenian demonstration, about which they were apprised, these authorities [deliberately] allowed it to take place while the police equipped the mob with secret weapons, especially thick cudgels.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 221.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁴⁶ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 120. The letter was written a month later on October 4th, 1895.

Many officials were shocked at the Armenian's bold actions, since this was the first time in Ottoman history that a non-Muslim minority had protested the Sublime Porte in the empire's capital; it appeared the Armenians had shed their 'loyal *millet*' image. This protest was initially viewed as a success because Abdülhamid agreed to implement reforms in the provinces after this very public event, but as soon as he agreed to this, another major outbreak of violence occurred in the province of Trebizond.

A mob of Ottoman Muslims citizens and regular Ottoman troops looted Armenian shops, killed merchants, and ransacked homes across the region. Throughout the month of October, massacres occurred in many other cities of Turkish Armenia; these were the same regions that were supposed to benefit from the reforms promised by Abdülhamid after the Bab-I 'Ali Demonstration. In each of these cities, the attacks were preceded by false rumors of an impending violent Armenian uprising. Some scholars assert that these rumors were introduced by Ottoman aides sent to check the process of reforms, but who instead spent their time planning attacks with the Kurdish tribes and local authorities.¹⁴⁷ In fact, many of the local Ottoman officials either ignored the situation or were directly involved in the attacks, and allowed up to a week to pass before halting the violence.¹⁴⁸

The next major event in the series of massacres was the Zeitoun Uprising that began in the winter of 1895. The population of Zeitoun was almost one-hundred percent Armenian, and had enjoyed semi-autonomy due to their location in a mountainous region of the empire.¹⁴⁹ This was the only Armenian group to practice "forceful deterrence", in that they were able to organize

¹⁴⁷ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 135.

¹⁴⁸ Hovannisian, "The Armenian Question," 223.

¹⁴⁹ Zeitoun is an interesting case because this region is much more centrally-located than other major Armenian regions, such as Sassoun (which rested near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea) and Erzurum (very far east, by the Ottoman-Russia border). Zeitoun is located in the center of modern-day Turkey.

effective armed resistances time and time again.¹⁵⁰ There had been a previous prominent rebellion in the summer of 1862, which had been sparked by an attack on the Zeitounlis by the Ottoman military under the pretext of “alleged nonpayment of taxes”.¹⁵¹ The Zeitounlis had been able to defeat the Ottoman forces and peace had to be mediated by Napoleon III, inspiring deep pride among the people. Between 1862 and 1895 there had been numerous other insurgencies, such as one reported in the 1879 issue of the *Missionary Herald*:

. . .every road leading out of Zeitoon had for many months been blockaded by bands of Moslem robbers who have cut off trade with the neighboring cities. The whole population is reduced to such straits that a famine seems inevitable. . .¹⁵²

In this situation, the local missionaries were offered the opportunity to try and reduce the tensions in Zeitoun, and although the Ottoman army was “impatient to advance at once,” they were able to meditate the situation and prevent a large outbreak of violence.

In 1895, however, the Ottoman military began to burn down Armenian villages surrounding Zeitoun, and when they reached the town, the Zeitounlis retaliated yet again with the support of some local Hnchaks. This was deemed a rebellion by the Ottoman authorities, which was therefore used to justify additional retaliatory attacks. Similar to previous events in Zeitoun, peace was negotiated under European supervision in February of 1896, resulting in a tax relief, the filling of local government positions with Zeitounlis, and the appointment of a Christian governor.¹⁵³ Although Europe did assist with the peace agreement between the two parties, this insurrection could have been stopped much earlier if there had been greater European intervention; some Zeitounlis expected French assistance, but because the Armenians refused to

¹⁵⁰ Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide*, 77.

¹⁵¹ Barsoumian, “The Eastern Question,” 200.

¹⁵² *Missionary Herald* 75 (1879), 341-342.

¹⁵³ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 128-129.

give up the Gregorian Christian faith and convert to Catholicism, a “traditional French policy for the Orient,” France did not offer the aid that was deeply hoped for.¹⁵⁴

One of the few regions spared from massacres between 1894 and 1895 was the city of Van, which held one of the largest concentrations of Armenians in the empire. Van was spared because the region’s governor opposed violence. Additionally, due to the close proximity to Russia and modern-day Iran, the Armenians of Van were able to stockpile weapons. Therefore, Van was not a weak target like the other provincial regions. Abdülhamid had settled Kurds in the outskirts of the city in 1879 to help balance out the population disparity, but this did not cause a predicament for over a decade. By 1896, however, the Kurds began looting villages around Van more often, leading Armenian revolutionary groups to retaliate with raids against the Kurds and any Ottomans who supported them. These trysts culminated in June of 1896 with the Great Event of Van; the Hnchaks, Dashnaks, and even some normally-peaceable Armenakans in the region established a Joint Directorate of Defense, which deployed about 500 men at 33 positions around the city to protect against attacks. Instead of preventing violence, this prompted attacks from the Kurds, who were aided by the Ottoman army. An agreement was eventually produced that promised a cease of Ottoman violence against the people of Van in return for allowing the party leaders to travel safely to exile, but these deportees were murdered along the way.¹⁵⁵

Members of the Dashnak Party became increasingly frustrated with the inaction of Europe, leading them to take over the European-financed Ottoman Bank in August of 1896. They brought a large supply of weapons and explosives, and threatened to blow up the bank if

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁵ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 137.

their demands were not met.¹⁵⁶ These demands were laid out in three sets of printed flyers, with one directed to Abdülhamid and the Sublime Porte, one to the European Powers, and one to their fellow Armenian people. The flyer sent to the Porte demanded that massacres against the Armenians cease and not resume, while the European flyer berated the powers for not punishing the Ottoman government for the attacks in the provinces. Clearly, the revolutionaries were not interested in the contents of the bank; they instead hoped to coerce Europe into forcing reforms within the Ottoman Empire. A settlement was eventually negotiated through Russian authorities allowing for the revolutionaries to leave the empire safely in return for the Armenian grievances to be given “due consideration”.¹⁵⁷ This negotiation did not constitute an iron-clad promise, however, made clear by the fact that the grievances were not revisited after this event. The Armenian revolutionaries had made the mistake of thinking that they were able to coerce European intervention; they saw that in the past, Ottoman-Christian violence often led to European involvement. Such outcomes had inspired hope that the same aid would come to the Armenians, but the Great Powers’ patience with the region had expired. Instead, there was a great backlash directed at the rest of the Armenian population residing in Istanbul; ordinary citizens who were not members of a revolutionary party were brutally attacked by a government-organized mob for two days. The fact that the mob was aided by the government indicates that once again, the Ottoman authorities did not bother to distinguish the revolutionaries from the greater Armenian population. This bloody affair did, however, coincide with the end of violence against Armenians under Abdülhamid’s reign.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵⁷ Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question,” 225.

Conclusion

Foreign nations received word of these various massacres; these events were not kept quiet. An American author, George Hepworth, and James G. Bennett, the publisher of the *New York Herald*, travelled together to the site of the massacres because they did not believe the official reports from the Ottoman government. In 1898, Hepworth concluded in his book:

. . .the presence of the revolutionists gave occasion and excuse for the massacres. That the Turks were looking for an occasion and an excuse, no one can doubt who had traversed that country. . . .If the Turk could have his own way, unhampered by the public opinion of Europe, there would neither be an Armenian nor a missionary in Anatolia at the end of twenty years, for both are equally obnoxious.¹⁵⁸

Unsurprisingly, the Ottoman authorities reacted strongly to criticisms such as this, and justified their actions through a discussion of a ‘contract’ with ruled nationalities. The Ottoman authorities asserted that there had been an implicit agreement between the empire and its non-Muslim subjects, stipulating that once a group had been conquered by the Ottomans, they were to remain submissive to the government in return for protection.¹⁵⁹ This policy had prevailed in the Ottoman Empire for centuries, since its creation, but had never been explicitly written down. However, Ottoman authorities could have been referring to the 1876 constitution, as Article 9 cites, “All the Ottomans enjoy individual liberty on condition of not attacking the liberty of other people.”¹⁶⁰ It could be argued, therefore, that the revolutionary Armenians broke this contract by no longer submitting to the will of the Porte, thereby giving up their right to protection. However, one would be hard-pressed today to argue that this breach of contract justified the indiscriminate killing of Armenians throughout the whole of the empire.

¹⁵⁸ George H. Hepworth, *Through Armenia on Horseback* (New York: Dutton, 1898), 339-340.

¹⁵⁹ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 147.

¹⁶⁰ “The Ottoman Constitution,” 368. However, there are two problems if they were referring to the Constitution: 1) Since Abdülhamid dissolved the Constitution in 1878 it no longer held authority as a legal document, and 2) The conquest of the Armenian people (and other minorities) occurred centuries before the creation of the Constitution.

There were probably many Ottomans—such as those who supported Turkism—who championed the extermination of all non-Muslim Turk elements, but Abdülhamid was not one of them. Therefore, while Hepworth’s thesis may characterize some members of the Ottoman government, he certainly overreaches Abdülhamid’s aims. These massacres were intended to substantially reduce the Armenian population, but they were aimed loosely at the so-called revolutionary forces in the hopes that the greater population would once again become submissive and the “issue of Armenian reforms would erode”.¹⁶¹ This plan was indeed quite vicious, but differed significantly from trying to exterminate a group of people entirely. In fact, a British Memorandum printed in 1896 notes that “after the [Armenian] massacres the Moslems were generally ready to fraternise with the surviving Christians, whom they treated good-humouredly as people who had had a severe lesson and might be expected to behave better in [the] future”.¹⁶² Furthermore, Abdülhamid did not resume the massacres after 1896; if he had been truly interested in eliminating the entire Armenian population, he would have no legitimate reason to stop the attacks. Therefore, these massacres “must be seen as deliberate acts of policy.”¹⁶³ Abdülhamid was not interested in moving the Ottoman Empire into a new phase in which there was no place for Armenians; rather, he was trying to retain the old order. Abdülhamid, believing he was successful in this respect, deemed the Armenian Question “finally closed” in the end of 1897.¹⁶⁴

The question of the Armenian population’s position in the Ottoman state is one that had only emerged in the latter part of this century. Before the Tanzimat, the Armenian *millet* had

¹⁶¹ Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, 161.

¹⁶² Roy Douglas, “Britain and the Armenian Question, 1894-7,” *The Historical Journal* 19 (March 1976), 132.

¹⁶³ Ibid. However, some scholars, such as Janet Klein, would argue that parts of the massacres—such as the creation of the Hamidiye—were not formulated as a sort of ‘plot’, but they did work out well for the Ottoman government in terms of the goals they were looking to achieve in respect to the Armenian population. See her book, *Conflict and Collaboration*, 163.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 132.

accepted its position as a second-tier class within the Ottoman state structure, and the rule of the *millet* by the clergy had not been seriously contested. However, with the newly promised rights and obligations of citizenship introduced with the start of the Tanzimat, both the Armenian people and the Ottoman government suddenly found themselves in the midst of a modern debate of citizen-rights that other nations—such as those in Europe—had discussed for decades, and in some cases centuries. The common people of the Ottoman Empire did not understand that the Sublime Porte was incapable of implementing the reforms immediately after announcing them, and intellectuals capitalized on this disillusionment in their attempts to pressure the Ottoman government into change. However, unlike other budding nationalistic groups, such as the Christians in the Balkans or Slavs, the Ottomans were not ready to release the Armenian homeland from their grasp. This proved to be an insurmountable problem for the Armenian revolutionary groups, because they did not enjoy the European support available to other minorities. For Abdülhamid, however, the lack of European interest created an ideal situation, because the Armenians could easily be denounced as traitors to the empire, justifying violent actions against the population.¹⁶⁵

Although some leading Ottoman statesmen believed in the message of the Tanzimat reforms, the new Ottoman culture outlined in the Hatt-I Sharif of Gülhane and the Islahat Fermani remained a fiction throughout the nineteenth-century.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps problems arose because too few of the Armenian people were able to accept the slow pace of the Ottoman reforms, or that the more noticeable revolutionary groups refused to accept the slow progress. Nevertheless, the 1890s closing of the ‘Armenian Question’ by Abdülhamid marks an unanticipated result of the historical conjuncture between Ottoman hopes for modernization and

¹⁶⁵ Klein, “Conflict and Collaboration,” 166.

¹⁶⁶ Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, 61.

Christian notions of nationalism. The Armenians' continued attempts to create a home for themselves in this new Ottoman state proved to be unattainable due to suspicions by Muslim citizens and the government and the counter-productive revolts committed by Armenian revolutionary parties. If the Ottoman state had attempted the Tanzimat reforms earlier, before it had fallen into such a sharp decline in which the only option had been an immediate revival of the empire, perhaps a slow introduction of citizen-rights and equality with time to attend to the Armenians' needs would have yielded a very different result.

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