

## THE 1915 ARMENIAN REVOLT IN VAN: EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

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Van is a city in eastern Anatolia, situated on the shores of the lake bearing its name, where Muslims and Armenians lived together for centuries in peace. Islamic armies first conquered the region in 638 but it is known that the Abbasids acquired the basic hegemony after the last quarter of the 9th century.<sup>1</sup> In the city, in which the Ayyubids, Khwarizmshahs, Seljuks, Karakoyunlus, Mongols, Akkoyunlus, Ottomans, Safavids and again Ottomans held sway, the Armenian population continued to live until the First World War. According to the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, who came to Van in 1653, the only non-Muslims who lived in the city were Armenians.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, not a single document has been uncovered showing Greeks, Jews or other non-Muslims resident in the city.

The Armenians, wherever they were, remained loyal to the Ottoman state up to the last quarter of the 19th century. One of the first signs that Armenian loyalties were beginning to shift occurred in 1878 when, following their defeat of the Ottomans, Russian forces temporarily occupied the İstanbul suburb of Yefilköy (Ayos Stefanos). There the commander of the Russian army was visited by the Armenian Patriarch Nerses Varjabendanyan, who requested that he convey to Grand Duke Nicholas his desire that an Armenian state be established in eastern Anatolia under the patronage of the Russians.

The Province of Van was at the center of the area envisaged by the Patriarch for his proposed independent Armenia state. It and neighbouring Bitlis were the two Ottoman provinces with the largest Armenian populations. According to the 1914 official

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<sup>1</sup> Hakkı Dursun Yıldız, **slâmiyet ve Türkler**, İstanbul, İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, 1980, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Orhan Köç, **XVI. ve XVII. Yüzyıllarda Van**, Van, Van Belediye Başkanlığı, Kültür ve Sosyal İşler Müdürlüğü, 1996, p. 253.

population statistics for the city of Van, it contained 67,792 Armenians and 179,389 Muslims.<sup>3</sup> One has to keep in mind that the administrative district of Adilcevaz, which today is attached to the Province of Bitlis, was at that time a provincial subdivision of Van. According to the aforementioned statistics, the ratio of Muslims to Armenians in the city of Van itself was three to one.

The first rebellion that the Armenians carried out in Van was in 1895. According to the testimony of the Russian General Mayewski, also Tsarist Consul-General in Van and later in Erzurum, the Armenian revolutionary committees who incited the rebellion went so far as to brutally murder those Armenians who opposed their terror and anarchy. Typical of these actions was the murder on 6 January 1895, of the Priest Boghos who was struck down while on his way to church.<sup>4</sup> Most of the incidents that occurred in Van were not perpetrated by local Armenians but rather by outsiders, in particular by Russian Armenians. General Mayewski while at every opportunity describing the losses suffered by the Armenians in the course of the 1895 rebellion, provides one passage in which he acknowledges that the suffering was in no way one sided: "Nevertheless, the losses among the Turks during the course of these events (no one ever even recalls this), added up to a large total. No one could make a move to protect the Muslims against the bombs of the Armenian rebels who were in revolt".<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the Second Constitutional period, the Armenians who were always creating problems at every opportunity used the administration of Sultan Abdülhamid II as an excuse. Neither did the declaration of the Second Constitution satisfy them. Van's British Vice-Consul, Lieutenant Bertram Dickson, provided detailed information about the activities of the Armenians in Van in a report dated 30 September 1908, that he dispatched to the British Ambassador, Sir Gerard Lowther, in İstanbul.<sup>6</sup> According to Dickson, the Armenians had two parties in Van—the Dashnag and the Armenakan. The Dashnags at the same time enjoyed close political relations with yet another Armenian party, that of the

<sup>3</sup> Azmi Süslü, **Ermeniler ve 1915 Tehcir Olayı**, Ankara, Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü Yayınları, 1990, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> General Mayewski, **Van ve Bitlis Vilayetleri Askeri İstatistiği**, tr. Mehmet Sadık, ed. Hamit Pehlivanlı, Van, Van Belediyesi Yayınları, 1997, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Salâhi R. Sonyel, **İngiliz Gizli Belgelerine Göre Adana'da Vuku Bulan Türk-Ermeni Olayları**, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988, pp. 7-10 (Note 371/560/1/37689).

Hinchags. In the first parliamentary elections held in the aftermath of the Second Constitution, it was the Dashnags who had Dr. Varhad Papazyan elected parliamentarian from Van. The Armenakan candidate Terzibaflıyan lost the election. The Dashnags were basically much more a revolutionary organisation than a political party. The leaders of this organisation in Van were Aram, Doctor Papazyan, Sarkis and Kflhan. None of these were natives of Van, rather they had all come to the city from Russia. With the proclamation of the Second Constitution all of the Armenian revolutionaries who had been incarcerated for one or another crime were freed. British Vice-Consul Dickson also states in his report that the Armenians in Van and vicinity had been secretly armed, that these weapons had come from Russia, and many Armenian revolutionaries and volunteers were walking around Van.

The purpose behind the stockpiling of weapons by the Armenian revolutionary committees became clear in the spring of 1915, just one year after the Young Turk government took the decision to enter what became the First World War on the side of Germany. In late March of that year, shortly after the Russian armies had begun driving south into north-west Anatolia, the Armenian revolutionary committees in Van staged an armed uprising with the intent of assisting the Russian advance by seizing control of this key city. It was this successful act of wartime treason that ultimately led the government to adopt the decision to deport Armenians away from the state's frontier zones.

Between the years 1978 and 1981, I conducted interviews in Van with elderly citizens who had witnessed the Armenian revolt in Van in 1915 and the subsequent Russian occupation. I recorded their memories of that era on tape. The interviews with these grandfathers and grandmothers were subsequently published in 1993 as a book entitled: **Görenlerin Gözüyle Van'da Ermeni Mezalimi (The Armenian Uprising in Van Through the Eyes of Witnesses)**. The tapes of all of these eyewitnesses whom I interviewed nearly twenty years ago are preserved in my personal archive and available to any interested scholar. Today, two decades later, all of the twenty people with whom I spoke about their memories of the Armenian issue are deceased. The testimonies which are cited in this study are all those of individuals who actually witnessed the events they describe. In each case their personal identity documents (birth certificates, military

documents, etc.) were examined and photographed for posterity. In most instances, the children and grandchildren of these eyewitnesses are still living in Van today and are among my constituents.

The people whose eyewitness accounts I recorded (and whose testimonies are cited throughout this paper), are the following: Nafia Çabuker, Ahmet Çinkılcı, Zahide Coşkun, İbrahim Sarı, İsmail Perihanoglu, İdiye Talay, Celâl İener, Bekir Yörük, Akif Yurtbay, Hacı Ömer Selçuk, Hacı İevket Çaldağ, Mehmet Delibaşı, Hamit İkinci, Hamit Camuflcu, Cemâl Talay, İsmail Başıbüyük, Refik Özkanlı, Mustafa Boysan, Salih Taflı and Osman Gemicioğlu.

Additionally, in the booklet **Zeve**, published in 1963 by the Van Tanıtma ve Tanıtma Derneği (Association for the Promotion and Recognition of Van), are recorded the testimonies of Hamza Dayı, Güllü Bacı, Esmâ Nine, Menvefle Bacı, Nafia Ana and Kymet Başıbüyük, as well as an interview with Mehmet Reflit Efendi conducted by Dr. Ergünöz Akçora.<sup>7</sup> As these individuals were deceased or unavailable at the time I was conducting my interviews (1978-1981), I have occasionally utilised their testimonies in **Zeve** for comparative purposes.

Collecting the memories of the eyewitnesses under certain rubrics will provide us a better understanding of the topic:

### **The Pre-1915 Status of the Van Armenians & Relations with the Muslims**

All the eyewitnesses with whom I met spoke of the very good relations they had enjoyed with the Armenians. Zahide Coşkun of Köprüköy said: "We had Armenian neighbours both in our village (at the time she was living in the village of Göllü) and in the neighbouring villages. We got on with these neighbours of ours just as we got on with Muslims. Everything was good. Later, the world was suddenly spoiled. Our Armenian neighbours betrayed us".<sup>8</sup> İbrahim Sarı from the village of Zeve said that "from time to time some quarrels had broken out between Armenians and Muslims

<sup>7</sup> Ergünöz Akçora, "Yaflayanların Diliyle Van ve Çevresinde Ermeni Mezalimi", **Yakın Tarihimizde Van Uluslararası Sempozyumu**, Ankara, Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1990, pp. 149-154.

<sup>8</sup> Hüseyin Çelik, **Görenlerin Gözüyle Van'da Ermeni Mezalimi**, Ankara, Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1993, p. 38.

but these had been the same kinds of arguments that happened between two Muslim neighbours”.<sup>9</sup>

According to Celâl fiener, “the Armenians of Van led a very comfortable life. All of the trades and crafts were in their hands. From the shoemaker to the tailor, all of them were Armenian. They were the richest people in the area. They even sent their children to Europe for their education. These youngsters who went to Europe were misled there”.<sup>10</sup> What Bekir Yörük related corroborated the statements of Celâl fiener: “In Van there were nearly a thousand shops. Eighty percent of these belonged to the Armenians. Trade, profits, crafts were in their hands. We got on well with those non-believers. Until the time, the Hinchag and Dashnag committees began interfering; it was at that time that everything was spoiled. The Armenian youngsters were enrolled in these committees”.<sup>11</sup>

In local elections held after the proclamation of the Second Constitution, the people of Van elected an Armenian, Bedros Kapamacıyan as mayor. Bekir Yörük evaluated the election of an Armenian as mayor in a city where the majority of the inhabitants were Muslims, in the following way: “We Muslims also gave our support to him. Our people had confidence that he would be the most successful”.<sup>12</sup> According to Mehmet Delibaşı, Kapamacıyan really carried out an impartial mayoralty. Because he fined an Armenian shopkeeper, that is because he did not support the Armenians outright, the head of the Dashnag committee in Van, Aram Pafla, blacklisted him, and his own son was ordered to kill him. Mayor Kapamacıyan’s son was taken to a tavern and liberally plied with liquor, and then he killed his own father with five bullets as the mayor was passing through the city in his carriage.<sup>13</sup> In Başıbüyük’s statement Kapamacıyan was not just a very rich Armenian, prior to becoming Mayor, he was known as someone who never left an Armenian without work or a trade.<sup>14</sup> Mehmet Reflit Efendi, who was interested in the fact that Kapamacıyan had been killed by his own son, said: “They (the revolutionaries) were also not letting those Armenians who would

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<sup>9</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 86.

not help them live. For example, there was a mayor here. If I'm not mistaken, his name was Kapamaçyan, and they had his son kill him because he wasn't being very supportive of them".<sup>15</sup>

In 1915 it was not just the crafts and trades that were in the hands of the Armenians. Four-hundred ships and sailing vessels, large and small, that handled the transport on Lake Van, also belonged to the Armenians. On this subject Hacı İsvket Çaldağ said: "Almost all the seamen were Armenian. Certainly, most of the craftsmen in Van and the traders were Armenian. There wasn't one in a thousand who would take Muslim children on as apprentices".<sup>16</sup> Another eyewitness, Mehmet Delibaşı, could not continue without describing as follows his exceptional situation of having been a shoemaker's apprentice to an Armenian named Cengüloğlu Agop in Van at the time that World War I started: "The Armenians never easily took us Muslims on as apprentices. But, however, it happened that this man took me to work for him as an apprentice".<sup>17</sup>

There is one particular truth that all of the eyewitnesses agreed upon and that was the fact that shipping on Lake Van was exclusively in Armenian hands. So, the last name of Hacı Osman Gemicioğlu (Ship Owner's Son), with whom I had an interview in 1981, surprised me. How can one be a Muslim from Van and at the same time have the last name Gemicioğlu? I said to Hacı Osman Efendi: "There is a problem here. Either you are not from Van and in fact are from the Black Sea region, or there is something wrong with your last name". When I said this, Gemicioğlu told me that he was originally an Armenian whose family were seamen who lived in the ferry-landing village.

If one were to look at what both written sources and eyewitnesses relate, the Armenians may be seen to have generally lived on the shores of the lake and in villages with productive fields, while the Kurds were more likely to be found in mountain villages. In 1915 the Van Armenians' educational situation in terms of reading and writing was much better than that of the Muslims. Prior to the beginning of their resettlement, the

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<sup>15</sup> Akçora, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Çelik, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Armenians had two newspapers called **Van Kartal** and **Araratl** that were published in Van.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Second Constitution and the Armenians**

According to what Britain's Van Vice-Consul Dickson related, with the proclamation of the Second Constitution the Armenians were granted previously unrecognized legal provisions. With the proclamation of the Second Constitution, all those prisoners and those being held in custody who were Armenians and who claimed the largest contribution for the new regime, were freed. Dickson evaluated the winds of freedom that blew following the Second Constitution in the following manner: "The Armenians in Turkey will possess a freedom unequalled up to now".<sup>19</sup>

Eyewitness Celâl fiener, evaluated the situation following the proclamation of the Second Constitution as follows: "Before the war began the Armenians had a very enjoyable life,"<sup>20</sup> Mehmet Delibafl who worked as an apprentice for an Armenian shoemaker summarized developments following the proclamation of the Second Constitution this way:

"One morning when I opened the shop, the master said to me, 'stay here for I have to go some place. 'After a bit, the master went. When he returned, he said, 'Now there is freedom. Freedom has been announced; we are going to celebrate it', In those days words like 'Freedom, Justice, Equality, Long Live the Nation' were on everybody's lips. Our Muslims and the Armenians celebrated freedom together. In town the drums and flutes began to play. The Armenians were very happy about this. They were much more excited than we were. After there was freedom, strangers began to frequent my master's shop...We also were thinking that everything was over now that there was freedom. Our religious teachers and their priests embraced one another. In short, as events proved later, they deceived us".<sup>21</sup>

As for Mehmet Reflit Efendi, he corroborated fiener and Delibafl, saying, "At the time of the Second Constitution things like Freedom, Equality and Justice only helped to spoil them even

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<sup>18</sup> Kâmuran Gürün, **Ermeni Dosyası**, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983, p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Sonyel, **op. cit.**, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Çelik, **op. cit.**, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 70-71.

more”.<sup>22</sup> The atmosphere that the Second Constitution produced became an occasion in which all kinds of separatist activities could occur more freely. From the beginning it was inescapable that the Armenian revolutionary committees that were in contact with the Young Turks over bringing a constitutional administration to the country, following the overthrow of Sultan Abdülhamid II, would sufficiently benefit from the proclamation of freedom.

### **No Local Armenian Support for Revolt**

All the eyewitnesses were in agreement that initially none of the local Van Armenians, especially those who lived in the city, had any intention of rebelling. However, the eyewitnesses also agreed that once the Russian Armenians, and the revolutionary committees that they directed misled the local Armenians, they got the same idea. One may take a look at what the eyewitnesses had to say on this subject:

Celâl fiener: “When the time came that the committees formed in Van, it was then that the Armenians began to be led astray. Basically, most of the Armenians who were natives of Van were not supporters of rebellion”.<sup>23</sup> Bekir Yörük: “At the time the Hinchag and Dashnag committees laid hands on the matter, everything was spoiled. The Armenian youngsters were enrolled in these committees”.<sup>24</sup> Akif Yurtbay: “We were living together with the Armenians in Van. At first, there was not even the slightest mutual aversion between us. Later, the committees began to appear in Van. Everyday many Armenians who weren't from Van were coming to our town. These foreigners were continually agitating our local Armenians to rebel. They were all coming from Russia. The committees in Van were commanded by an unbeliever named Aram Pafla”.<sup>25</sup> Hacî Ömer Selçuk: “The Armenians lived for years without paying any particular attention to the government. The committees were the reason why we clashed with the Armenians. The committees continually agitated the people. The committee members were constantly running up against our soldiers. Before the committees were agitating they never were injured by us nor we by them. At the time when the committees settled in Van, they agitated the locals, and so the Armenians were diverted and led

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<sup>22</sup> Ergünöz, **op. cit.**, pp. 149-150.

<sup>23</sup> Çelik, **op. cit.**, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 56.



astray. If not, our people would absolutely never have put them in an unjust position. For years they lived with our ancestors. The Russians and the other states promised them autonomy. They gave them weapons and money”.<sup>26</sup> Hacievket aldađ: “If the committees hadn’t agitated, the local Armenians in Van wouldn’t have raised a voice. All the opportunities were in their hands”.<sup>27</sup>

Mehmet Delibafl narrates how in the 1970s he met an Armenian originally from Van named Karapit Nedeniyan selling carpets in İstanbul’s Grand Bazaar and how regretful the latter was. He said: “Ah, they were the reason, may their homes be destroyed! We were living so beautifully. We were enjoying a good life that the Muslims did not have. They deceived our young people and got them to work for their own aspirations. Now, we’re scattered everywhere around the world”.<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, fleyh Mehmet Reflit Efendi, who was one of the most respected people in Van, relates how he met an Armenian tradesman in Mosul who was originally from Van, and when they embraced he spoke of his longing for his homeland: “May God curse that Aram Pafla. He was the one who deceived us saying that he would establish a state for us. Instead, he set fire to us. We have never forgotten the humanity that we saw from the Turks. While those had won the world for us, while they treated us with benevolence, we kicked them. It was because of this that God visited calamity on us. We were scattered everywhere”.<sup>29</sup> That Armenian tradesman was one of the thousands who had reached Mosul from Van unmolested. According to Boghos Nubar, the head of the Armenian Delegation at Versailles (1919), 360,000 of them reached their destinations.

Similar statements fill the testimony of the eyewitnesses: For instance, Hamit avufçu: “There was a time when I was attending the Armenian Central School in order to improve my French. There the Armenian priest and the teachers looking right into our eyes were filling the Armenian youngsters with the seeds of hatred and anger against the Muslims”.<sup>30</sup> Refik Özkanlı: “When the Armenian youths established committees, then the Armenians openly showed their enmity towards us”.<sup>31</sup> Müfltak Boysan: “The

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Ergünöz, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> elik, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Armenians rebelled in Van twenty years prior to the beginning of the war. But before the war began, in general, they seemed good to our faces. What I've said was the attitude of the tradesmen and local Armenians. But those who came from Russia, and the Armenian youths who had gone to Europe and been educated there, tried to belittle the Muslims with condescending words".<sup>32</sup> Salih Taflıç: "The elderly Armenians were not supportive of the rebellion. However, the youngsters who had been educated in Europe forced them to get involved".<sup>33</sup> Osman Gemicioğlu: "If you want the truth, the Armenians in Van who were in their right minds did not support the rebellion. Because why should they revolt? Everything was in the hands of the Armenians; the entire wealth was theirs. As soon as the committees were established, they forced the tradesmen to revolt. They were looking at anyone who did not join in as if he was a traitor".<sup>34</sup>

The reports from the English Consulate fully endorse the tone of what we have given above as extracts from the eyewitnesses. In the aforementioned reports it is stated openly that the Armenian revolutionary committees resorted to violence against those Armenians who did not approve and join them.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Arming of the Armenians**

All the eyewitnesses I interviewed spoke of the very secretive manner that the Armenians were armed in anticipation of a widespread rebellion. The biggest weapons cache in Van was uncovered, thanks to the warning of an Armenian. The story is as follows: An Armenian youth named Davit, himself a member of the revolutionary gang, was in love with an Armenian girl named Vatan. Davit, in order to get married had to obtain permission from Aram Pafla (Aram Manukyan), because he happened to be a Dashnag member. However, Aram Pafla did not give Davit permission to marry in spite of the latter's protestations. At this point Davut broke with Aram Pafla, who immediately put a black cross against Davit's name. He gave the order to kill Davit to his closest friend, Dacat, who, nevertheless, warned Davit to escape and disappear. In response, Davit not only became a Muslim, he went further and provided the authorities all the information he

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> Sonyel, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-10.

possessed about the locations of all the Armenians' weapons caches. Davit was inducted as a lieutenant in the Turkish army, and took the name Mehmet. He was subsequently known as "Mehmet the Informer". One day, in the Quarter of Hamamönü Davit ran into Dacat. He did not deem it likely that his friend would kill him but Dacat shot Davit to death.<sup>36</sup>

Following Davit's warning, in many localities in which the Armenians were located, and in particular at Yedikilise, and in schools and churches, large amounts of weapons and munitions were confiscated. The British Vice-Consul in Van (Dickson), in a report that he wrote on 31 March 1909, drew attention to the arming of the Armenians in Van.<sup>37</sup>

All the eyewitnesses stated that the Armenian weapons smuggled into Van had been hidden in kerosene barrels that were transported by camels to the region. Finally, in April 1915, when the Armenian revolt began in Van it became all too clear just how well the Armenians had been armed. Rafael de Nogales, a Venezuelan, who served as an officer in the Ottoman army against the Armenians during the Van rebellion, wrote, in his memoirs: **Four Years Beneath the Crescent**,<sup>38</sup> (Cuatro Años bajo la Media Luna) of the extent to which the Armenians were well armed. In this work, which is generally supportive of the Armenian position, he says the following concerning the Armenian revolt which began in early 1915: "The difficulties that the Armenians who were fighting to the last breath for Armenia's place and the victory of the pious amid the blackened ruins of their homes gave us were great. But I curse the time I spent working for the disaster of my religious brethren because of bad luck".<sup>39</sup> He frequently speaks of the Armenians' superiority in weapons *vis-à-vis* the Muslims. However, what must not escape the eye is that the weapons in the hands of

<sup>36</sup> For versions of this incident related by different eyewitnesses, see Çelik, **op. cit.**, pp. 63, 71 and 78.

<sup>37</sup> Sonyel, **op. cit.**, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> Nögalis (name so spelled in the Turkish version) was an adventure-seeking officer who applied to the allied powers to be a soldier but he was refused. Later he came to İstanbul, met Enver Paşa and began service as an expert in the Third Army. He was assigned to Governor Cevdet Bey in the province of Van with the permission of Goze, the German officer commanding the Third Army. For details of his position and Nögalis' lack of consistency, see Rafael de Nögalis, **Hilâl Alt nda Dört Y 1 ve Buna Ait Bir Cevap**, tr. and criticized by District Officer Hakkı, İstanbul, Büyük Erkan- Harbiye Reisliği Onuncu fiubesi Yayın, 1971, pp. 58-76.

<sup>39</sup> Rafael de Nögalis, **Hilâl Alt nda Dört Y 1**, çeviren ve tenkit eden Kaymakam Hakkı, İstanbul, Büyük Erkan- Harbiye Reisliği Onuncu fiubesi Yayın, 1931, p. 20.

the Muslims belonged to the Ottoman state, while the weapons in Armenian hands belonged to the separatist Armenian revolutionary committees in a province that was a sovereign part of the Ottoman state. Nogales describes how:

“The Armenians were well armed with Mauser pistols. They obtained good results with these pistols at short range. They were really like machine guns. They fired four or six pistols mostly at the same time at the same target. Apart from this, they had invented a type of bore screw. With this they quickly penetrated the brick walls of houses. After the Armenians fired from one place, pistols would begin to appear from many of the holes in another; until we understood what form our duty had to take, these handed out death with their fire”.<sup>40</sup>

Nogales reported that the Armenians had been through a long period of preparation for the rebellion and had prepared resistance places in eighty commanding positions. He adds: “The Bağlar district [the place where today’s Van has been established. H.Ç.] consists of separate summer residences surrounded on the sides by brick walls. The Armenians skilfully bound each one of these residences to each other and strengthened the places by this means. Other Armenians from this installation that could resist our artillery, had made 80 support positions around Van; the firepower from these commanded the surrounding areas”.<sup>41</sup>

What linked the Armenian houses together, as mentioned by Nogales, were skilfully constructed subterranean tunnels. The overwhelming majority of the eyewitnesses I interviewed mentioned these tunnels, and describe how the Armenians communicated with one another by this means and supported each other with weapons and men. Again, by means of the same tunnels they could reach Muslim houses or military positions and blow them up. In his day-by-day description of the Van rebellion, Nogales’ entry for 28 April 1915, describes how the Armenians blew up half of the Refladiye district by these means. The note he provides on this incident reads as follows: “Today the Armenians with the help of a sewer blew up half of the Refladiye district; in this district Captain Reflit Bey and the Bargiri District Officer had been in

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

control of the large part of Bağlar District through their firepower".<sup>42</sup>

Nogales speaks not only about the weapons that the Armenians had stockpiled in anticipation of revolt, but also about the artillery pieces they had manufactured. He says:

"The artillery in the hands of the besieged [Armenians - H.Ç.] were shells that they themselves had personally manufactured. They would keep this artillery inside brick houses; they could easily dispatch these everywhere from among the houses to corners, entrances and streets that could be defended from barricades. The Armenians had in their houses in addition to thousands of Mauser pistols, many carbines and rifles; they had purchased and stored these for years. Among the Armenians there were also ample hand grenades that could cause us great damage".<sup>43</sup>

Almost all the eyewitnesses recalled with bitterness the troubles they experienced due to the superior state of the weapons in the hands of the Armenians, and complained about those distributed by the government, as being basic old-fashioned rifles. Hamza Day› from fieyhine village even related with great chagrin how during the clash with the Armenians at the village of Zeve, the primitive rifles' barrels exploded after just a few shots.<sup>44</sup> On the one side there were rifles that were cooled down by rubbing them with onions to prevent the barrels from exploding, and on the other modern weapons brought from Russia.

Nogales, in spite of all his pro-Armenian sympathy, could not refrain from making the following comment: "For the Armenians every house had become a fortress".<sup>45</sup> The Armenians did not just open fire from each one of the houses that had become fortresses; they also converted the churches into sites from which to launch offensives. One of the most important of these churches, both from a functional point of view and in terms of architectural style, is the Church of Peter and Paul in the center of Van. The Armenians fired on Muslims from the dome of this church.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the superiority of the Armenians' weapons, the local Muslims who

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Zeve, ‹stanbul, Van› Tan›ma ve Tan›tma Cemiyet Yay›nlar›, 1963, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Nögalis, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

were resisting them had basic weapons and very limited ammunition. Nogales describes this situation in the following sentence: “The Kurds in order to economize on cartridges were using hand weapons (like knives and bayonets)”.<sup>47</sup>

### **Armenian Revolutionaries versus the Muslim Militia**

In 1915 when the Eastern Front was split, all the military units in Van were sent north in an attempt to block the invading Russian forces. Left to defend the city were a miniscule number of combat units and gendarmes, so few in fact that they could be considered to be almost non-existent. They were faced with close to 30,000-armed Armenians who were planning to take control of the city in conjunction with the advancing Russian forces.<sup>48</sup>

In the face of the growing Armenian revolt, the Governor of Van Cevdet Bey distributed weapons to the local Muslims for purposes of self-defence. He also organised the formation of voluntary militia units. The eyewitnesses I interviewed were clear in stating that all of the men who could actually fight were put under arms in various areas of the city, and the remaining old men and youngsters, who could be described as newly weaned, were enrolled in the militia.

One of the eyewitnesses Ahmet Çinkölcü said: “In Van there weren’t any real Ottoman soldiers; the Armenians took advantage of this and put Van’s population to the torch”.<sup>49</sup> İbrahim Sargın, another eyewitness gave voice to the same sentiment when he stated: “In Van there was no one who could be called a soldier; the Russians and Armenians made common cause to take advantage of this situation”.<sup>50</sup> In those days, Celâl Fiener was a student at the city’s military academy and he described the combatants in the following terms: “There were only very few gendarmes in Van, and they were used to ensure public security. The governor distributed arms to those among the people who were capable of holding weapons. They comprised the reserve forces. But to what purpose? The weapons were basic, there was no ammunition, and no trained soldiers”.<sup>51</sup> In connection with the same situation, Bekir Yörük said: “Our soldiers here had gone to the relief of Erzurum. There

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<sup>47</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> Çelik, **op. cit.**, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 49.

were a few gendarmes and militia forces rounded up from the people. The militia forces were made up of old people and youngsters like us".<sup>52</sup> Akif Yurtbay corroborated this assessment, when he said: "In Van there weren't any people who could be termed soldiers with the exception of a few gendarmes. Later, a four hundred man Circassian gang came to the aid of Van. Forty of these Circassians were killed in front of the Hamutağa Winter Barracks. The weapons of the Muslims were slight when compared with the Armenian weapons".<sup>53</sup>

These and similar expressions were used by almost all the eyewitnesses. In point of fact, all the Hamidiye Regiments in Van had already been mobilized into the regular army and dispatched to the Kotur Valley in the face of the Russian invasion. Consequently, there was no possibility of utilizing the Hamidiye Regiments in the defence of Van against the Armenian revolutionaries.

The Armenians frequently exaggerate the role played by the Kurds, with claims that their ancestors were hung or cut to pieces by them. It is well known that a feudal structure existed in eastern Anatolia at the time, vestiges of which are still discernable today. The Kurdish tribes in the region have carried out blood feuds with one another for generations. Likewise, between the Armenians and the Kurdish tribes, from time to time, similar unpleasant incidents occurred. However, it is impossible to claim that such events were regular and systematic. So, it is rather interesting that Russian General Mayewski heard the following from a prominent Armenian whose guest he was in the Norduz region of Van: "There is no doubt that the Kurds are an uncivilized nation. In their nature there is some savagery, violence and no concept of submission. But there never has been blame attributed to them unjustly. Naturally, among them there are highwaymen and brigands. But in general, they prize and possess honor, pride, friendship and rectitude".<sup>54</sup>

Though Nogales also complains of a barbarianism that the Kurds showed from time to time and characterizes them as "a nation that had not been contaminated by the corruption of

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Mayewski, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

previous civilizations”, he also states: “I consider them a suitable element for a proud generation in the Near East”.<sup>55</sup>

The Armenian uprising in Van that began in early April 1915 lasted for nearly a month. Many people on both sides died during the clashes. When the Russians began to advance on Van from the Muradiye and Saray areas, and the Russian Armenians who were in advance of these joined the thousands of Armenians in Van, they left no chance to the Muslims to organise resistance. The Governor of Van Cevdet Bey in a telegram, dated 24 April 1915, that he sent to the Interior Ministry, stated that it was impossible to protect the Muslim population of Van from the Armenians and that he had no option but to send the Muslim civilian population to provinces further west and requested authorization to do so.<sup>56</sup> Coincidentally, on the same date the Interior Ministry had issued orders for the arrest of the Hinchag and Dashnag committee leaders; however, there had been no preparations for a general relocation of the Armenians as yet.

### **The ‘Great Flight’ of the Van Muslims**

When Governor Cevdet Bey received authorization for the evacuation, he announced it throughout the Province, and the people of Van set out on the road (*‘Büyük Kaçın’*, the Great Flight) at the beginning of an early spring when it was still cold. According to the statements of the eyewitnesses, the Muslims left everything behind and only those who had mounted their riding animals started west. One group took the land route west from Tatvan to Bitlis and from there to Diyarbakır, Urfa, Antep, Aleppo, Adana and Konya; others preferred to sail across Lake Van on the Armenian-owned boats which ran between Van and Tatvan. A large number of those who chose this second route were handed over by the Armenian sailors to Armenian volunteers who were especially waiting for them at Adilcevaz. Most of these people, (women, elderly, children and wounded) were killed by the Armenians.

Because Van is a region with a temperate climate and cold water, people who migrated to the hotter southern provinces never got used to the air and water there, and many lost their lives to cholera and typhus outbreaks in Diyarbakır. The first four lines of

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<sup>55</sup> Nögalis, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Erich Feigl, *Bir Terör Efsanesi*, İstanbul, Milliyet Yayınları, 1987, p. 112 .



the famous Ali Pafla folk song, which was composed at that time, describe what the people of Van experienced during the 'Great Flight', and preserve a sense of the drama and trauma experienced by the evacuees:

I sowed the barley and couldn't reap it  
I had a nightmare and couldn't interpret it.  
As I had grown used to cold water  
I couldn't drink the warm.

Truly, the Muslim citizens of Van had to leave without reaping the grain they had sowed and had to abandon their homes without interpreting the nightmares they saw. He could never find the ice-cold waters of Van's Kehriz and Zernebat in the hot climate of Diyarbakır or Adana.

The testimonies of the eyewitnesses were punctuated with their tears as they recalled and talked about the 'Great Flight'. The drama of the women who gave birth and died, the hunger of the elderly who couldn't stand the rigours of the road, the cries of the babies dying of hunger and illness, and, in brief the whole migration tragedy. As if all these things were not enough, their journey was punctuated from time to time by Armenian attacks, and other unpleasant incidents, in the course of their flight from place to place. These were the underlying reasons that completed the tragedy of the people of Van who fled their homes in the face of the Armenian uprising.

A large portion of those who were unable to flee for various reasons were killed by the Armenians, and women especially were subjected to being used very badly. Female eyewitness testimony that was related by Nafia Çabuker, Zahide Coflkun, fiadiye Talay, Esmâ Nine and Güllü Bacı, contained elements that made my hair stand on end. The women who were collected from the villages in the Tımar Township were taken together to Van and many of them threw themselves into the Mermit River because they were afraid that their honor would be besmirched. The people from the seven villages of the Tımar district came to Van in order to join the migration. However, Armenians subjected them to crossfire in the villages by the pier and the fortress. And those who hoped to go by way of the lake took refuge in the village of Zeve, where they were surrounded and massacred by both Armenians from Van and by the Russian Armenians who were in advance of the Russian army. Of the eyewitnesses, Hacı Osman Gemicioğlu (himself an Armenian

who converted to Islam), related how during the Zeve massacre he had been at the nearby ferryboat landing. On the following morning he set out with a group of other children to collect an empty bee hive and stumbled upon the scene of the massacre. He described the carnage as follows:

“When we arrived at Zeve, the village couldn’t be passed through because of the stench. It was as if the bones in our noses would fall off...There were bodies everywhere. We saw a weird scene on the threshold of one house: they had filled the house with Muslims and burned it, and so many people had been burnt that the fat that had oozed from under the threshold had turned back into the trench in front of the door. That is, it was as if the river of fat had risen and later receded. The fat was still fresh. The entire village had been destroyed and was in this situation. I saw this with my own eyes, and I’ll never forget it. We heard that they did the same thing to the Muslims on Çarpanak Island. The Armenians told me about the latter; I did not see it for myself”.<sup>57</sup>

This is but one of many similar stories I listened to from the surviving eyewitnesses. It is enough. Nogales offers the following comment on learning of the Armenian perpetrated massacres of the Muslim women, children, and elderly who remained behind in Van, from Governor Cevdet Bey who had just left Van and was on the Baflkale road:

“Such an abominable scene wasn’t even to be found among the Kurds. The Kurds only killed men and behaved more temperately towards women and children; nothing was done to them openly. This story reminded me of an incident that we experienced during the siege of Van.

“In order to observe our artillery fire, I was in a garret with a number of policemen. On the roof of a house in the vicinity, an old Muslim woman was hanging clothes out on a line. As soon as the Armenians saw this, they opened deadly fire and finally riddled the old woman’s body. Then, they fired on us. When they had killed half the policemen, the Armenians felt excessive pleasure at having killed such unfortunate people”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Çelik, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Nögalis, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

When Van passed into the hands of the Armenians the historical Muslim city that was located to the south of the fortress was burned to the ground. When the Russian occupation was completed, the commander of the Armenian revolutionary committee in Van, Aram Manukyan was appointed the governor of the city.

The Muslims who were fortunate enough to have fled the city, and succeeded thereby in remaining alive, began to very slowly return to their homes after the liberation on 2 April 1918. In order to give an idea of what they found we should listen again to some of the eyewitnesses who migrated with a large number of their family members, and returned home three years later. For example, Cemâl Talay said that he and twenty family members had abandoned Van and when they left Suruç in 1921 and came to Van only he himself and a brother were still alive.<sup>59</sup> Mehmet Reflit Efendi had emigrated from Van with a family of twenty-three people and when they returned he stated that only three were still alive.<sup>60</sup> As for Refik Özkanlı, after the liberation of Van he was inducted into the army and on his return, he said: "I had no one left but God".<sup>61</sup>

I believe that the above examples are sufficient to explain the tragic fate of the Muslims at the hands of the Armenian revolutionaries of Van. Nor must we forget that these events transpired prior to the decision of the Ottoman Government to remove the Armenians.

### **Is the Relocation the Reason for the Revolt?**

In the propaganda activities that the Armenians carry out worldwide, it is argued that the Armenians rebelled only when they were being forcibly deported. This is a classic case of putting the cart before the horse. As the present study has repeatedly stressed, the Armenian uprising in Van began in the first week of April 1915 and continued until the arrival of the Russian army (and the flight of the Muslims) one month later. However, the Relocation Law that ordered the relocation of Armenians away from the war zones, was promulgated on 27 May 1915.<sup>62</sup> The decision of relocation was not the cause of Armenian revolts; it was

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<sup>59</sup> Çelik, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>60</sup> Ergünöz, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>61</sup> Çelik, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>62</sup> Süslü, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

the treasonous activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Committees (who collaborated with the invading Russian enemy and took up arms against their own state in wartime), which directly led to the decision to relocate the Armenians.

### **Were the Armenians in Van the Victims of Genocide?**

When I enquired of the eyewitnesses as to whether or not the Muslims had killed Armenians, I received many interesting answers. Many of those eyewitnesses who had resided in villages said that they had taken salt and bread, symbols of welcoming guests, to the Armenians, but the Armenians killed those people who brought them salt and bread. Among their answers to my queries in this regard were the following:

Celâl fiener: “Of course they were also killed. Were we to look in their mouths while they were killing us? But this happened after they revolted”.<sup>63</sup> Bekir Yörük: “Our consciences kept us from acting unjustly. Not a single Muslim would insult helpless people in their own situation. But if someone were to come and trample on your honor, what would you do? So, the Armenians who were killed in Van were those who were led astray by the agitation of their committees and engaged in butchering the Muslims. Our religion commanded us to engage in self-defence, that is, were we to kiss their hands when an Armenian weapon was being stuck in our eyes?”<sup>64</sup> Akif Yurtbay: “Can one even touch a man who sits without doing any mischief? Of course, when they revolted, our people went after them willy-nilly”.<sup>65</sup> Hacı Ömer Selçuk: “They did not sit still. God too visited trouble on them. Think about it my brother: our state accepted them as citizens, as soldiers, and then they began to strike our soldiers from behind”.<sup>66</sup> Mehmet Delibaflı: “They did not revolt saying that they had been treated unjustly; they revolted saying ‘we will set up an independent state.’ So, after we returned from our migration, we sent to Russia as many as 600,000 completely healthy Armenians who had escaped to the mountains”.<sup>67</sup> Hacı İevket Çaldağ: “Muslims also killed them as well, but they did so in self-defence. While the man sat peacefully at home, the Armenian would forcibly attack his house. What was

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<sup>63</sup> Çelik, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54 .

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

this man to do if he did not kill the Armenian? Our religion never accepts bowing one's head".<sup>68</sup> Hamit Ekinçi: "God gives everybody what they deserve. Now they have all been scattered somewhere. They brought disaster on our heads. God visited it on them".<sup>69</sup> fiadiye Talay: "It was like this my brother: While they were sitting on our laps they also pulled on our beards".<sup>70</sup> Salih Taflç: "In the times when they began to assault our people, our people reacted against them. Otherwise, we would never have assaulted them if they hadn't assaulted us".<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion

According to what I could discern from these eyewitness accounts the following scenario occurred: Influenced by the revolutionaries, the Armenians gave way to their ambitions, that is, they were overtaken by a desire to establish an independent state in the East. To achieve this aim they were willing to use any and all means, including terror. The local Muslims met the Armenians who were engaged in these activities and 'offered them salt and bread'. But this did not suffice to stop them. Some Armenians were killed either by Muslim citizens or by government security forces not because they were Armenians, but because they had been engaged in rebellion and assault. Nowhere in the world are people engaged in armed assault met with bouquets of flowers, and this is particularly true when they revolt during wartime. If the Ottomans had wished to commit genocide against the Armenians, they would have done it in the 16th century, during the time of Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver. People carry out the annihilation of their enemies when they are at their strongest, not their weakest. One must remember that in 1915 the Ottomans were engaged in fighting a World War on many fronts stretching from Galicia in the West to Yemen in the East. How could they plan and carry out a genocide against Armenians to whom just three years earlier they had entrusted important governmental ministries? This is not only untrue, but defies logic as well.

Faced with an armed Armenian revolt in wartime, the Young Turk government did what any state would do. They ordered their own Muslim population to evacuate the area in the face of the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Armenian-aided Russian advance. Subsequently, confronted with the fact that the Armenians of Van had taken this important eastern Anatolian city by force of arms and turned it over to the invading Russian army, they decided that they could no longer trust the loyalty of Anatolia's Armenian population and ordered their deportation away from potential war zones. Under the special circumstances of the province of Van in the year 1915 one should not speak of genocide but of legitimate resistance on the part of the Turks. It is a depressing truth that bloodshed creates bloodshed.

There are few nations that have not fought with each other. At Çanakkale the Turkish nation lost 250,000 of its sons. It buried its fallen soldiers and has continued to maintain normal relations with England. Likewise, it has not attempted to keep alive the memory of past wars with Russia with whom it has fought throughout recent history. History is the science of admonition. To learn lessons from the past provides a way of building for today and providing a healthy path to the future. If opening the wounds of history serves peace and friendship, let us do it. The Armenian diasporas in Europe and the United States must come to the realization that their striving in the name of justice for alleged past wrongs, neither helps themselves nor their compatriots in the Republic of Armenia. The latter, faced with numerous problems of their own, need the support that healthy relations with neighbouring Turkey can ensure. What neither they nor Turkey need is the rubbing of salt in historical wounds.