

THE ARMENIAN MASSACRE IN ISTANBUL (1896)

Abstract

The Armenian massacre in 1896 and the bloody suppression of a demonstration by Armenians in 1895 were the most significant acts of violence in Istanbul during the modernisation era in the Ottoman Empire. The three major actors of these incidents were the Armenian migrant labourers from the provinces, who, by using their physical existence in the city, intended to penetrate the well-guarded political sphere of the capital city and bring up the problems of their provinces to the attention of the government and the world; the Hamidian government, which uncompromisingly opted for the exclusion of the Armenian labourers from the city, and the isolation of the provincial opposition; and finally the Muslims, but especially Kurdish labourers, who seized this opportunity to monopolise the job market in Istanbul and to enjoy the privileged jobs hitherto occupied by the Armenians.

Introduction

Overshadowed by the tragic events during World War One, the Armenian massacres in 1895 and 1896 remained relatively understudied, although it was largely the legacy of these massacres in particular, and of the policy of the Ottoman government towards the Armenians during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II in general, that ultimately defined the relations between the Committee of Union and Progress and the Armenian political organisations in the aftermath of the constitutionalist revolution in 1908. Whereas the massacres in 1895 and 1896 swept through almost every Eastern Anatolian¹ town and numerous villages inhabited by a significant Armenian population, the two major incidents that roughly marked the beginning and the end of this

1. Throughout this article, the term “Eastern Anatolia” will refer to the Ottoman provinces east of the Anatolian Peninsula. At least after the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman government came to define this region as the “eastern provinces”. In European sources, this region is usually referred to as Armenia and/or Kurdistan.

wave of violence were located outside this region; namely, the bloody suppression of a demonstration by the Armenians in the capital city Istanbul in September 1895, and a massacre, again in Istanbul, in August-September 1896 that led to the perishing of thousands of Armenians at the hands of a largely civilian mob. This spatial deviation from the rest of the massacres was significant. Independent of the agency or sequence of events, all three parties to the conflict – the Armenian nationalists, the Muslims, and the government – had motivations for inciting ethno-religious violence in Eastern Anatolia, considering the demographics and the geography of the region. By elevating the level of violence, the Armenian nationalists could theoretically create an independent or autonomous Armenia in Eastern Anatolia through the activation of the reform plans on the six eastern provinces, as promised by the European states in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. The Muslims, on the other hand, could massacre the Armenians to reduce their numbers and eliminate the basis for this reform plan, or simply to seize their lands. Finally, the government could achieve the same in the relatively isolated Eastern Anatolia with considerable space to manipulate the depiction of events to confuse public opinion in Europe.

The situation in Istanbul was different. Why would the Hamidian government orchestrate or tolerate a massacre of this extent in Istanbul under the watchful eyes of the European embassies and press, especially considering the questionable necessity of demographic engineering in a locality that would definitely be excluded from any project for an independent or autonomous Armenia? The latter part of this question applied to the Armenian nationalists, too. The Muslims also had nothing to win from a massacre in the capital city, where seizing the properties of the victims would be prevented by the relatively well functioning legal system of the capital city. But if the usual motivations did not apply, then which conditions turned the inhabitants of the capital city into victims and perpetrators of these massacres? To answer these questions, a brief review of these incidents, with an emphasis on the social background of its participants, is necessary.

The demonstration in 1895

Serious clashes took place between Armenian demonstrators – most of them migrant labourers – and the Ottoman security forces on 30 September 1895 during an attempted protest march. A public demonstration of Armenians in Istanbul was unprecedented, but anticipated and feared by the government. Organised by the *Hunchakian*, an Armenian social-democratic party with revolutionary and nationalist leanings, the demonstration was a collective petitioning of provincial Armenians on behalf of their brethren in the provinces. Marching from the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate in Kumkapı and Sirkeci

to Bab-ı Ali, where the government quarters were located, over 1,000 Armenians wanted to hand in a petition for reforms in the eastern provinces. Apparently, some of the demonstrators carried guns, which led to a shootout with the security forces who wanted to disperse them before reaching Bab-ı Ali.² There is ample evidence to suggest the predominance of migrant labourers among the demonstrators. “The subversive crowd” consisted of “the Armenians from all over the city and especially of those who had arrived in Istanbul a few days ago from the countryside”, claimed the government commission charged with reporting on the incident. The same source reported that at least part of the crowd was summoned from the inns at Çukurçeşme, where migrant labourers lived.³ Another report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the demonstrators included people from the eastern districts of Bitlis, Van and Muş.⁴ The participation of Armenian labourers in the demonstration was verified by the autopsy reports presented by the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate. The autopsy reports noted that many of the deceased were wearing “*aba's*”, the usual attire for poor Armenian migrant labourers.⁵

As would be the case in the 1896 massacre, civilian Muslims, most notably labourers, took an active part in the clashes, which turned into a small-scale massacre. When the arrested Armenians were transported to the Ministry of Police in the aftermath of the demonstration, “over 5,000 people consisting of students, porters and *esnaf* (small tradesmen or guild members)” attacked them with clubs at Sultanahmet.⁶ As a result, according to government reports, 80 Armenians and four Muslims died, and 81 Muslims and 240 Armenians were wounded.⁷ Furthermore, by connecting individual incidents that happened at different times on the day of the demonstration and the day after, the government – correctly or falsely – reported a broader conspiracy in which the Armenian migrant labourers played the leading role. According to the Minister of Police, Armenians from the port districts of Galata, Tophane and Fındıklı disembarked at Sirkeci, on the opposite side of the Golden Horn, from boats and lighters, while many “drunken” Armenian stevedores

2. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı belgelerinde Ermeni isyanları I, 1878-1895* (Ankara 2008) 130-132; Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 1013-1014.

3. Office of the Prime Minister Ottoman Archives (further BOA) .YA.HUS.340/67 in: Ferhat Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları* (İstanbul 2009) 120-122.

4. BOA.HR.SYS.2831/49 in: Adem Ölmez, *İstanbul Ermeni olayları ve Yahudiler* (İstanbul 2010) 162.

5. Artem Ohandjanian (ed.), *Österreich-Armenien 1872-1936, Faksimilesammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Wien 1995) 1066-1067.

6. BOA.Y.PRK.BŞK.43/39 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 107.

7. BOA.A.MKT.MHM.609/4 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 125. According to the Austrian diplomatic intelligence, 150 Armenians and 47 Turks died during the clashes. (Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 1015-1018.

and pole porters forced their way across the bridge.⁸ An official statement in the newspaper *Tarik* on 1 October 1895 claimed that the participants of the demonstration were “Armenians like porters and *tulumbacı*’s (irregular firemen).”⁹ According to the reports by the Ministry of Police and the Municipality of Istanbul, Armenians shot guns from the inns in Galata, Kasımpaşa and Çukurçeşme; Armenian labourers at an inn in Kasımpaşa threw bricks at Kurdish and Iranian patrons of a coffeehouse across the street, leading to a clash between the two groups and the death of ten to eleven people from both sides; a Muslim labourer was killed by Armenians at the brickworks in Hasköy; an Armenian labourer at the powder factory was murdered by other Armenians for spying for the government; and finally, a customhouse porter named Nişan called upon 500 Armenian porters to attack Muslims.¹⁰ Foreign sources offered a different view in terms of the identities of victims and aggressors, yet they confirmed the involvement of the labourers in the incidents.¹¹ While the initial attacks targeted the participants of the demonstration, later on the violence spread to other localities.¹² According to Austrian diplomatic reports, which were partially based on intelligence provided by the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate, the Armenian labourers at the docks, brickyards and gasworks¹³ were attacked by Kurds and Armenian houses in the working class district of Kasımpaşa were attacked by Muslim labourers from the shipyards, while around 30 Armenian labourers were slaughtered at an inn in Çukurçeşme.¹⁴

The correspondence between the Ministry of Police and the governorships of Beyoğlu and Üsküdar and other security forces during the incidents offered further proof of the socio-economic background of the victims and perpetrators. Interestingly, this was quite a different reconstruction of the incidents about who attacked whom in comparison with the official statements sent to the Palace about a week later. In fact, on 1 October 1895 the Governor of Beyoğlu reported that eight to ten Kurds and Lazes, who had attacked the Armenians in an inn in Kasımpaşa, were arrested and precautions were taken to hinder further attacks by the Muslims gathering at the coffeehouse. On the same day, the Governor of Üsküdar reported the attacking and wounding of

8. Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Hatıralarım* (İstanbul 2007) 21.

9. Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 1049.

10. Osmanlı Arşivi, *Ermeni isyanları I*, 130-135, 148-158.

11. ‘Der Botschafter in Konstantinopel Freiherr von Saurma an das Auswärtige Amt, 30 September 1895’ in: Auswärtige Amt, *Die große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914*, 10. Band (Berlin 1923) 66.

12. ‘Der Botschafter in Konstantinopel Freiherr von Saurma an den Reichskanzler Fürsten von Hohenlohe, 4 Oktober 1895’ in: Auswärtige Amt, *Die große Politik*, 67.

13. The number of Armenian labourers killed at Dolmabahçe gasworks was given as 21. (‘Appeal for Armenians’, *New York Times* (7 October 1895).

14. Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 1078-1080, 1199-1201, 1438, 1440.



1	Ottoman Bank
2	Bab-ı Âli
3	Kumkapı and the Armenian Patriarchate
4	Galata and the customhouse
5	Bahçekapısı and the customhouse
6	Galata Bridge
7	Sirkeci Train Station
8	Shipyards

9	Kasımpaşa
10	Hasköy
11	Tophane
12	Fındıklı
13	Pera
14	Sultanahmet
15	Tahtakale
16	Çukurçeşme
17	Şehzadebaşı
18	Süleymaniye

19	Karagümrük
20	Salmatomruk
21	Eyüp
22	Balat
23	Fener
24	Samatya
25	Dolmabahçe Gasworks

Map by the Ottoman military commission, originally convened in 1909.
Numbering and editing courtesy of Gökçe Erbil.

four Armenian bakery workers at the Balaban quay. Other reports showed that some Armenian houses in Kumkapı were attacked by Muslims, while groups of Kurds, Lazes and Iranians made plans to attack the Armenian inns in Kasımpaşa and an Assyrian church in Beyoğlu.¹⁵ In response, the Ministry of Police ordered that guild stewards be warned that they would be held personally responsible for attacks by their guild members. The managers of inns with “mixed” residents received a similar warning, while the Iranian Embassy was asked to keep the Iranian migrant labourers under control. As the “Iranian riff-raff” (*esafil-i İraniyye*) declined to obey, special measures were taken in places where Kurds, Lazes and Iranians were residing, and a few of them were arrested.¹⁶ These reports, which contained no account of Armenian attacks, not only implied that the official reports were to some extent manipulated, but they also draw –correctly or falsely – a picture in which Muslim migrant labourers, as implied by their identification as Kurds, Lazes and Iranians, had attacked the Armenian labourers spontaneously once the opportunity arose, whereas the security forces had had a hard time keeping them under control.

Some contemporaries interpreted this violent incident as a prelude to the massacre of 1896. According to an American observer, “it [was] generally believed that this first massacre of Armenians [in 1895] here was a bold and carefully devised plan to test the spirit of the European Powers, before entering upon a general slaughter throughout the empire.”¹⁷ His interpretation of the massacre in 1896 in Istanbul also reflected a similar suspicion of conspiracy; namely, that the Ottoman government had known about the raid on the Ottoman Bank in advance and deliberately did not take precautions in order to have an excuse for a large-scale massacre.¹⁸

The massacre in 1896

The massacre in 1896 in Istanbul started on 26 August, when around two dozen militants of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF – *Dashnak-tsutyun*), a nationalist organisation with social-democratic and revolutionary leanings, occupied the Ottoman Bank’s main office in Istanbul, located in the Galata district, while other militants attacked the Ottoman security forces in Samatya and elsewhere with the intention of creating a distraction.¹⁹ A report

15. Hüseyin Nazım Paşa, *Ermeni olayları tarihi* (Ankara 1998) 76-83.

16. Hüseyin Nazım, *Ermeni olayları tarihi*, 76, 77, 80.

17. George Washburn, *Fifty years in Constantinople* (Boston and New York 1909) 239.

18. Washburn, *Fifty years*, 247.

19. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı belgelerinde Ermeni isyanları 11, 1895-1896* (Ankara 2008) 186.

by the British Embassy claimed that among the militants raiding the bank, only the three chiefs were foreign subjects; the rest were Ottoman subjects of the “porter class.”²⁰ The Ottoman records about their professions were more detailed, revealing that craftsmen as well as unskilled labourers were involved in the raid.²¹ Apparently, many of them were inexperienced in fighting and were firing guns for the first time in their lives.²² The motivation of the ARF for this action was a matter of dispute. While some sources claimed that the raid intended to provoke a massacre, leading to the intervention of the Great Powers, the bank’s deputy manager Gustave Wülffing, referring to his interview with a leader of the raid, Armen Garo, argued that the main intention was to create a commercial and financial crisis in the city, so that the “lower classes” would see their livelihood threatened and get involved in an extended and radical uprising.²³ While the occupation ended the same night with the negotiated evacuation of the militants from the bank building and their safe exit from Istanbul through the mediation of foreign embassies,²⁴ a widespread massacre started on the same day and continued on the days that followed. The massacre began in the commercial district of Galata and spread to the other commercial district of Eminönü-Sirkeci across the Golden Horn, to the port districts Tophane and Fındıklı towards Beşiktaş, and to the working class districts Kasımpaşa and Hasköy.

According to the report of the Military Investigation Committee, 624 Armenians were killed on the northern bank of the Golden Horn; the main centres of the massacres were the working class districts Hasköy and Kasımpaşa with 195 and 180 casualties, respectively, and the commercial districts of Galata and Fındıklı with 167 and 50 casualties. The report gave the number of Armenian casualties as 662 on the southern bank of the Golden Horn, without specifying districts, thus a total of 1,286. Other observers estimated higher numbers of casualties, like the estimates of 2-3,000 and 5-6,000 Armenian victims by the captain of the British navy ship H.M.S. Dryad and the British Embassy, respectively.²⁵ The Armenian neighbourhood of Samatya was

20. Foreign Office (further FO) 78/4713, Turkey (Diplomatic) From Mr Herbert No.s. 653-690 13 August to 31 August 1896.

21. Armen Garo, *Osmanlı Bankası – Armen Garo’nun anıları* (İstanbul 2009) 14.

22. Garo, *Osmanlı Bankası*, 125-128.

23. Edhem Eldem, ‘26 Ağustos 1896 “Banka vakası” ve 1896 “Ermeni olayları”’, *Tarih ve Toplum Yeni Yaklaşımlar* 5 (2007) 120.

24. For a detailed account of the occupation of the bank and the evacuation of the militants from the point of view of one of their leaders, see Garo’s memoirs. Another detailed report by the British Embassy about the incident and the plans of the militants to attack other places can be found in FO 78/4713, Turkey (Diplomatic) From Mr Herbert No.s. 653-690 13 August to 31 August 1896.

25. FO 78/4748 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various 14. August to September 1896; FO 78/4714, Turkey (Diplomatic), Various, October to December 1896.

apparently also heavily affected.²⁶ Apart from these places, where most of the violence took place, the incidents spread to Pera, Tahtakale, Balat, Karagüm-rük, Salmatomruk, Eyüp, Fener, Şehzadebaşı, Süleymaniye on both sides of the Golden Horn. Comparatively smaller incidents took place in Bebek, Tarabya, Kandilli and Çengelköy along the Bosphorus.²⁷ Although the Ottoman government claimed that the incidents in Bosphorus had no relation to events in the city, a British journal claimed that Muslim porters guided by an *imam* attacked the Armenian bakery at Bebek.²⁸

Both the perpetrators and the victims of the massacres were predominantly unskilled labourers from the provinces, as numerous accounts of the incidents suggested. The most comprehensive source regarding the social background of the victims of the massacre is a list of hundreds of Armenians who had taken refuge in the churches in Pera, Hasköy, Kumkapı, Üsküdar and Yenimahalle.²⁹ Very few of the victims were women or children, a possible hint that “bachelors”³⁰ were the main targets of the massacre.³¹ The reports by the British Embassy confirmed that “the dead were almost exclusively Armenians of the lower classes, who came to Constantinople in great numbers [...]”³²

The more privileged segments of the Armenian unskilled labourers, such as the stevedores and customhouse porters, were in the forefront, while the Muslim unskilled labourers also played a major role in the incidents. According to the report of the Military Investigation Committee, 27 Armenian stevedores had disembarked from a lighter at Fındıklı and attacked the Muslims with guns. The same report claimed, somewhat ambiguously, that the customhouse porters at Bahçekapısı had attacked Muslim passers-by with crowbars, upon which the Muslim crowd lynched them. Twelve or fifteen Armenian labourers employed at or around the Sirkeci train station were killed by Muslim marketplace porters, basket carriers (*küfeci*), greengrocers (*manav*), etc. as a result of a “spontaneous fight.”³³ The first and last incidents were also reported from a different perspective by the American Minister Plenipotentiary in Istanbul. According to him, fifteen employees of the railroad depot in

26. FO 78/4748 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various 14. August to September 1896; FO 78/4748 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various 14. August to September 1896.

27. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin istanbul ayaklanmaları*, 223.

28. *The Contemporary Review*, 70 (October 1896) 457-65 in: Arman J. Kirakossian (ed.), *The Armenian massacres 1894-1896, British media testimony* (Dearborn 2008) 524.

29. Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 2367-2419.

30. In the context of labour migration, the term bachelor (*bekâr*) referred to men who had left their families back in their homeland to work in the city, independent of the actual marital status of the person.

31. Washburn, *Fifty Years*, 247.

32. FO 78/4714, Turkey (Diplomatic), Various, October to December 1896.

33. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin istanbul ayaklanmaları*, 193, 202, 204.

Sirkeci were arrested by an officer and lynched by the mob, and as three coal boats returned to the quay with 60 Armenian labourers, the Muslim crowd, supported by soldiers, lynched them.³⁴ Again, the most detailed accounts, in which Armenian labourers were accused of attacking Muslims in numerous individual instances throughout the city, can be found in the report by the Mayor Rıdvan Paşa.³⁵

The determination of the Muslim mob to kill the stevedores was so strong that they raided a British merchant vessel (S.S. Carl Rahtkens) and killed an Armenian stevedore on 27 August.³⁶ When a group of arrested Armenians were sent to the Ministry of Police on 14 August, they were attacked and lynched by a mob of 100 people, consisting of “porters, boatmen and workers (*rençber*).” In Fener, “Muslim boatmen and other *esnaf*” joined the massacres. In Kasımpaşa, “Kurds, Persians and Gypsies” attacked Armenians allegedly upon provocation, and bachelors’ rooms were plundered among other things. In Hasköy, “workers from brickworks, porters, boatmen and other *esnaf*, Kurds and Jews” attacked the Armenians.³⁷ On 27 August, the Austrian Ambassador warned the government that the Kurdish and Laz labourers at the brickworks in Büyükdere were preparing for similar massacres.³⁸ Although no lists regarding the identities of the Muslims involved in the massacre exist to my knowledge, a clearer picture of their social background is provided by the lists of the missing and the survivors. According to the list of 74 missing Muslims in the district of Kasımpaşa, 61 were workers from the eastern districts Bitlis, Erzurum, Şirvan, Van, Kiğı, and from the Northern Anatolian districts Cide and Küre. The rest were two boatmen from Karahisar-ı Şarki/Şebinkarahisar and Erzincan, two horsemen, a porter and a donkeyman from Kiğı, six donkeymen from Persia and an employee of the *İdare-i Mahsusa*, the steamship company.³⁹

Reports regarding the Armenians fleeing the massacre in Istanbul on board ships and passing through Marseille in the course of September 1896 also suggest that most of them were labourers from the eastern provinces, although they were followed by some terrorised, well-to-do Armenian families in subsequent weeks.⁴⁰ Plundering was an important feature of the incidents. Various foreign and native merchants from the commercial district of Galata

34. ‘Terrell to Olney, 1 September 1896’ in: Jeremy Salt, *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians 1878-1896* (London 1993) 108-109.

35. Osmanlı Arşivi, *Ermeni isyanları II*, 186-192.

36. FO 78/4749 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various October to December 1896.

37. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 203, 213, 216, 218-219.

38. BOA.HR.SYS.2832/4 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 286.

39. BOA.Y.PRK.ASK.115/32 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 250-251.

40. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı belgelerine göre Ermeni-Fransız ilişkileri I, 1879-1918* (Ankara 2002) 100-114.

reported that their offices in different inns were plundered on the pretext of searching for Armenians by people like “porters, boatmen and stevedores”, armed with clubs and iron bars, who were sometimes joined by individuals in officer uniforms.⁴¹ Apparently, the plunder was most intense in working class districts such as Kasımpaşa and Hasköy. As reported by Ottoman officials, 420 Armenian houses and 55 shops were plundered in Hasköy alone, with the participation of Jews alongside the Kurds.⁴² On the other hand, upon the orders of the cabinet, the Christian neighbourhoods and the “honourable people” (*ehl-i ırz takımı*) there were taken under the protection of the security forces,⁴³ so that the bloodiest incidents took place in commercial districts and working class neighbourhoods with mixed populations, while the Armenian district of Kumkapı, inhabited by the local and wealthy Armenians, “was carefully guarded and remained absolutely intact.”⁴⁴ Whether this was the result of an intentional choice of class on behalf of the government, or simply the mismanagement of security measures, is open to interpretation.

Finally, the security forces were also accused of taking part in the massacre of Armenians. The conflicting reports regarding the attitude of the security forces implied that actual killings of Armenians by the security forces were incidental, while their general attitude was to stand idly by, either because they were outnumbered, or because they took sides with the Muslim mob. In the aftermath of the massacres, a Commission of Military Investigation, which also included five foreign officials in the service of the Ottoman government, was established to investigate the accusations against the security forces. The commission could not conclude its task due to the apparent attempts by the Palace to force the foreign commissioners to sign a report whitewashing the Ottoman security forces.⁴⁵

Labour migration

In summary, the victims and the perpetrators of both incidents were mostly migrant labourers from the Eastern Anatolian provinces, who constituted the majority of the unskilled workforce in Istanbul. The migration of labourers from the provinces to Istanbul was a phenomenon predating the nineteenth century. From the 1840s on, the rapid growth in the volume of trade increased the demand for labourers in Istanbul as well as in other port cities. At the

41. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 185-187; FO 78/4748 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various 14. August to September 1896.

42. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul ayaklanmaları*, 218-219.

43. Osmanlı Arşivi, *Ermeni isyanları II*, 161.

44. FO 78/4714, Turkey (Diplomatic) Various, October to December 1896.

45. FO 78/4761, Diplomatic Dispatches, October 1896, pp. 2-5.

same time, the state's growing ability to levy taxes in money from the provinces forced an ever increasing number of provincial people to migrate to Istanbul as seasonal labourers to earn money, which was scarce in the isolated provincial economies that relied on barter and were accustomed to taxes in kind. Regularly operating steamships facilitated the flow of migrant labourers from Eastern Anatolia through the Black Sea ports. By the 1890s, labour migration was widespread and institutionalised, with labourers coming from diverse places in Eastern Anatolia and employed by family- and locality-based networks in Istanbul. In general, the migration was seasonal and circular; migrants came to Istanbul for work for a given period, usually a few years, and then returned to their villages, only to come back again after a few years. In terms of numbers, the most significant sector employing migrant labourers was portage, a broad category in which the Armenians dominated the branches most closely associated with international trade and therefore the most prestigious. Customhouse porters, dock workers, stevedores and porters at the railway stations were privileged in the sense that their wages were usually higher than the typical neighbourhood porter, and also their jobs were well guarded and closed to competitors through the above-mentioned networks and guilds.

Now that we are able to determine the identities of the victims and perpetrators of the massacres, we can investigate the reasons why the Armenian and Muslim migrant labourers participated as two hostile groups in these bloody events. On the sociological level, the answer is easy. It is very likely that these labourers, who used to live in the protection of their closed communities in their villages, felt vulnerable in Istanbul despite the assistance of the migrant labourers' networks. According to Sarkis Narzakian, who himself was a migrant labourer in Halep/Aleppo, the migrants "laboured unceasingly, in isolation, among strangers, bereft of their loved ones for many years."⁴⁶ The city was probably an insecure place for the migrant labourer, where he was rather defenceless against the state and rival groups. Although the labourers constituted a significant portion of the city's population, they could become marginalised under certain circumstances.⁴⁷ They were not only worried about their lives, but also about their income, which could easily be taken away from them.

On the other hand, despite the solidarity at the level of villages and extended families, village households, which had lost one or more male members to the city, could become vulnerable to violence and extortion, due to the general lack of public order in Eastern Anatolia. The families of the Armenian

46. Garine Narzakian (ed.), *Memoirs of Sarkis Narzakian* (An Arbor, MI 1995) 11.

47. Florian Riedler, 'Wanderarbeiter (bekar) im Istanbul des 19. Jahrhunderts: Zwischen Marginalität und Normalität', in: Anja Pistor-Hatam and Antje Richter (eds.), *Bettler, Prostituierte, Paria Randgruppen in asiatischen Gesellschaften* (Hamburg 2008) 143.



Luxurious apartments of Pera look down on the working class neighbourhood Kasımpaşa.

porters in Istanbul were coerced and beaten to give money, the *Manchester Guardian* reported in July 1889, without specifying a locality or a source.⁴⁸ No matter how widespread these occurrences were, news about violence at home and families in peril probably spread among the migrant labourers in the city. Thus, it was no surprise that they reacted strongly to the news regarding the massacres in the provinces. As much as the Armenian migrants feared attacks by the government and the Muslim population against their families, the Muslim migrants were probably concerned about retaliation against their families by the Armenian revolutionary organisations. Considering the censorship of press and communications in the Hamidian era, it was very likely that the news that reached them largely consisted of exaggerated rumours.

As a result of these vulnerabilities, it is reasonable to assume that both Muslim and Armenian labourers panicked easily and attacked the other side in self-defence. Indeed, in the months preceding the massacre, the city's population, and especially the Armenian migrant labourers, struck foreigners as extremely tense. According to a report by a British newspaper, when a business conflict between two Armenians resulted in the firing of a gun, panic ensued, shops were closed one after the other, and the Armenian porters threw away their loads and fled.⁴⁹ The Ottoman government probably knew and possibly exploited the anxiousness of the migrant labourers. In particular, the zeal of the Muslim migrant labourers was offered as an excuse for the

48. 'Armenians and Turks', *The Manchester Guardian* (19 July 1889).

49. 'The crisis in Turkey', *The Manchester Guardian* (14 December 1895) 8.

ineffectiveness of the authorities during the massacres. A government report after the massacre in 1896 stated, as a justification for the killing of Armenian labourers, that Galata being “a hotbed of bachelors”, it was not possible to prevent attacks against inns, shops and houses where Armenians had taken refuge.⁵⁰ In addition to these factors, the opportunity for plunder probably gave additional motivation for violence.

The motivations of the Armenians for mobilisation

While this sociological analysis might be sufficient to explain the very moment of the massacre, it does not help us to understand the totality of the incidents. Indeed, unlike the massacres in Eastern Anatolia, where the starting point and the purpose of violence was always blurry and open to speculations, both incidents in Istanbul started as reactions to political actions that were readily claimed by Armenian revolutionary organisations. Thus, without intending to overshadow the victim status of Armenians, we can say that in the incidents in Istanbul there were two parties that consciously contributed to the events; even though the raid of the Ottoman Bank could be seen as the work of a marginal group, the demonstration in 1895 revealed that broader Armenian masses were politically active. Thus, at least for one party involved in the incidents, the massacre, or rather the tension surrounding it, was a political confrontation. To make sense of this political confrontation we have to zoom out and investigate the politicisation of the Armenian migrant labourers in the context of the attempts at centralisation by the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century.

The financial bankruptcy of the Ottoman State in 1875⁵¹ and the devastating Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 created a turning point for the centralisation process in Turkey. In a simplified form, from the 1820s on, the logic of centralisation was a cycle involving the strengthening of the central institutions of the Empire, which would help the government to establish control over the provinces. In turn, the well-governed provinces were expected to provide the necessary tax income to finance these new central institutions. Although it looked good on paper and was, in fact, successful at particular times and places, this cycle ceased to function properly, for reasons that have to remain outside the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that one factor, which could be interpreted both as a reason for and a result of this failure, was the resistance of the subjects of centralisation against the centre. As the centralisation efforts of the 1840s spread gradually, province by province, the

50. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı belgelerinde Ermeni isyanları III, 1896-1909* (Ankara 2009) 15.

51. Andreas David Mordtmann, *Stambul und das moderne Türkenthum* (Leipzig 1877) 123.

greatest concrete change was the tax system. Not only were the tax bases restructured through the redistribution of lands, but existing taxes were also increased dramatically. Apparently it was Eastern Anatolia, extending from Trabzon to Musul/Mosul, where the greatest reaction emerged.⁵² The provincial people were either unwilling to pay additional taxes, or they did not want to send their province's tax income to the centre, which had become associated with waste and corruption. Conscription was a whole other subject of complaint for provincial Muslims, who were apparently also discontented about the loss of their political superiority to Christians. When the first Ottoman parliament was introduced in 1877 to refresh the legitimacy of the centralisation process, this provincial opposition emerged as a political camp, humiliating and threatening the central government.

Immediately after the war was over, Sultan Abdülhamid II closed the parliament and exiled some of the provincial deputies. Although the centralisation policy was not abandoned, it was pragmatically altered. While the previous policy had focused on bringing all individuals and groups under the control of direct state power in the provinces, thus establishing order, promoting economic development and creating subjects on equal basis, the Hamidian regime had to compromise. Its policy consisted of an efficient use of carrot and stick, delegating provincial power to certain groups, who owed their privileges to the Sultan. By creating clusters of power loyal to him, he hoped to suppress the opposition from the provinces and to secure the loyalty of potentially rebellious forces. While the recruitment of entire Kurdish tribes to the *Hamidiye* Light Cavalry Regiments – irregular military units inspired by the Russian Cossacks – in the 1890s was the most systematic example of this policy, other groups like Albanians and Arabs were also given privileged positions both in their provinces and in Istanbul. The employment of Albanians, Bosnians, and Arabs as Palace guards, and the creation of Kurdish regiments was not because these ethno-religious groups were trusted, but because it was the basic strategy of the Hamidian regime to “buy” the loyalty of Muslim minorities.⁵³

Of course, the new policy had losers, too. As a result of the general impoverishment in Eastern Anatolia during and after the war, the financial bankruptcy of the state, and also as a result of the delegation of power to some Kurdish tribes, the status of Armenians in the provinces deteriorated. During the war of 1877-1878 the army had requisitioned pack animals for transportation as well as provisions throughout the eastern provinces. The owners, both Muslims and Christians, apparently could not get reparations, since the funds allocated for that by the central government were embezzled by the

52. Musa Çadırcı, ‘Tanzimat’ın uygulanması ve karşılaşılan güçlükler (1840-1856)’, in: *Mustafa Reşid Paşa ve dönemi semineri – Ankara 13-14 Mart 1985* (Ankara 1994) 100.

53. Tahsin Paşa, *Abdülhamit - Yıldız hatıraları* (İstanbul 1931) 25, 97-98.

local governors.⁵⁴ As a result of the replacement of the civilian administration with a military authority, the provincial elites were unable to save their goods from requisitioning. Consequently, the provinces from Erzurum to Muş suffered famine in the years following the war.⁵⁵ Reportedly, irregular Kurdish and Arabic troops, which moved to the front without adequate provisioning, also got involved in widespread plundering.⁵⁶ In some cases, these incidents had long term effects on the impoverishment of Armenians, as the story of an Armenian migrant porter from a war-ravaged village, whose father used to be a landlord and his grandfather a feudal lord (*melik*), revealed.⁵⁷ Other developments, such as the gradual shifting of the Tabriz-Trabzon trade route, in which the Armenians played an important role, to Russia and Basra, probably contributed to the further impoverishment of the region.⁵⁸ In 1898, Abdülhamid II admitted that at least some of the Armenians' complaints were founded.⁵⁹ According to the Armenian revolutionary leader Karekin Pastermadjian (aka. Armen Garo), this rapid deterioration of the material conditions was among the reasons for the birth of the Armenian revolutionary movement.⁶⁰ His own family was a striking example of impoverishment. His grandfather, son of a guild steward in Erzurum, had amassed great wealth during the centralisation period and received ranks of order from the Sultan, whereas his son lost his inherited fortune as a result of the conditions during and after the war.⁶¹

How the creation of *Hamidiye* Regiments altered the socio-economic conditions in the region is a complicated issue. For a long time ethno-religious animosity between Kurds and Armenians was kept at bay by mutual economic benefits and solidarity against the central government. For example, a rich Armenian notable of Erzurum had saved a Kurdish tribe chief from execution before the 1860s, when the central government was persecuting Kurdish tribes in the region. In response, the same Kurdish chief saved the same family from being punished by army officers for resisting requisitioning in 1877.⁶² At least in some places, an economic symbiosis existed between the

54. Henry O. Dwight, *Turkish life in war time* (New York 1881) 71-72, 115.

55. Krikor Arzruni, *Die Hungersnoth in türkisch-Armenien* (Tiflis 1880) 4.

56. Dwight, *Turkish Life*, 116.

57. 'Armenian Patriotism Under Difficulties', *The Times* (28 January 1886) 9.

58. Charles Issawi, 'The Tabriz-Trabzon trade, 1830-1900: Rise and decline of a route', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1:1 (1970) 18, 22, 24; Andreas David Mordtmann, *Stambul und das moderne Türkenthum, Neue Folge* (Leipzig 1878) 35-37.

59. Ali Vehbi (ed.), *Sultan Abdülhamit - Siyasi hatıratım* (İstanbul 1999) 58.

60. Garo, *Osmanlı Bankası*, 67.

61. Garo, *Osmanlı Bankası*, 78.

62. Garo, *Osmanlı Bankası*, 56-57.

two groups.⁶³ At the end of the 1890s, a Russian consul claimed that it was the poor and isolated villages that were affected by attacks, while richer Armenian villages could buy the protection of the Kurds, at least until the massacres in the mid-1890s. Other contemporary sources strengthened this argument.⁶⁴ Economic interests could even create temporary alliances between Armenian revolutionaries and Kurdish chiefs.⁶⁵ The delegation of power to certain Kurdish tribes through the creation of *Hamidiye* Regiments possibly altered the delicate balance of power between different Kurdish tribes and between Kurds and Armenians. This was probably one of the motivations behind the founding of these regiments.

While the regional impoverishment and exclusion from the newly formed power clusters suppressed the opposition of the provincial Armenian notables, a new opposition dynamic was emerging in the capital city. From the mid-nineteenth century on, Istanbul was the place where migrants, hitherto vaguely and loosely associated with the Armenian Apostolic “nation”⁶⁶ (*millet*), came to consider themselves as part of a rather homogeneously constructed Armenian identity. Despite the gradual expansion of the organisation of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the centralisation period, the basis for a uniform Armenian identity was still very weak by the mid-nineteenth century. In some remoter regions, Armenian villages were so isolated from each other that even relatively close villages would speak very different dialects of Armenian, unable to comprehend each other.⁶⁷ On the other hand, many Armenians in Eastern Anatolia apparently spoke the locally dominant languages like Turkish, Kurdish or Arabic, while only the priests could speak Armenian in such places.⁶⁸ For the greater part of the nineteenth century, village schools in most places were non-existent. In Istanbul, learning Turkish or Armenian was not only a necessity to fit in, but there was also the opportunity to do so. As early as the 1860s, poor migrant labourers had a chance to learn read-

63. Ximenez, Ximenez Saturnino, ‘Kurds and Armenians’ in: Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 1593-1604.

64. Bayram Bayraktar (ed.), *Rus general Mayesky'nin Türkiye gözlemleri* (Istanbul 2007) 165-166; Rouben Der Minasian, *Armenian freedom fighters* (Boston 1963) 62.

65. Der Minasian, *Armenian freedom fighters*, 166.

66. The so-called “nations” in the Ottoman Empire were defined as the sum of non-Muslims’ associated with organisations, to which the government had delegated some of its authority, especially in the areas of religious affairs, civil law, education, and taxation. Organised around the central religious offices in Istanbul, some of these “nation” organisations evolved into semi-secular and representative institutions with legislative and executive bodies. Although initially only three such “nations – the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish –, were recognised by the government, Catholic and Protestant fractions also acquired “nation” status overtime.

67. Sedrak Tarajanz, *Das Gewerbe bei den Armeniern* (Leipzig 1897) 12; Narzakian, *Memoirs*, 25.

68. Bayraktar, *Mayesky'nin Türkiye Gözlemleri*, 134.

ing and writing in Armenian at the Altruistic Society in Istanbul (*Andznanner Engerutiun*).⁶⁹ In general, the “national” schools, which the children of the migrant labourers could attend for free or for a small fee, and “national” philanthropic organisations probably contributed to the integration of the Armenian labourers into the “nation”.⁷⁰ Various national secular organisations with the prospect of the improvement of the “nation” emerged with the participation of migrants.⁷¹ The impact of labour migration on the Armenian nation-formation was visible for outsiders as early as 1852, when the *New York Times* reported that “an Armenian of the mountains of Kurdistan [sic], speaking no language but the Kurdish [sic] came to Constantinople to be a public porter, recovered his own language, the Armenian, by associating with those of his own race, and picked up the Turkish as the most common language employed.”⁷² If this observation was correct, labour migration not only strengthened the Armenian identity, but learning Turkish also enhanced the integration into the Ottoman Empire. The effects of the city on the provincial Armenians drew the attention of the Ottoman rulers even before the events of the 1890s. According to Mordtmann, in 1869 or 1870, Prime Minister Âli Paşa visited the “Association (*Verein*) of the Armenian Porters” and realised that these porters were being educated in the evening after the day’s work. Consequently, he decided to open a similar institution for the Muslim labourers; however, the project could not be realised due to a lack of funds.⁷³

Apprehending the Armenian language as a common basis for nationhood, learning the Turkish language to interact with the centre, and meeting fellow Armenian labourers from various provinces went hand in hand with politicisation. While the shortcomings and difficulties in their provinces set the context, it was concrete incidents with symbolic significance in the countryside – with which the migrants could associate themselves, rather than an abstract clash of interests with the Hamidian government –

69. Ohannes Kiliçdağı, ‘The Armenian Community of Constantinople in the Late Ottoman Empire’, in: Richard G. Hovannisian and Simon Payaslian (eds.), *Armenian Constantinople* (Costa Mesa, California 2010) 235.

70. Florian Riedler, ‘Public People. Temporary Labor Migrants in Nineteenth Century Istanbul’, in: Frank Eckardt and Kathrin Wildner (eds.), *Public Istanbul* (Bielefeld 2008) 246.

71. The *Ergrakordzagan Engerutiun* (Agricultural Society), established in Istanbul by migrants from the twin towns of Everek and Fenese (today united as Develi) in Kayseri, not only operated a postal service between these places and Istanbul for swift correspondence between the migrants and their families back home, but it also operated a model farm to produce cotton and silk in Kayseri with the participation of 600-700 shareholders, who had paid five *kuruş* each. (Kiliçdağı, *The Armenian Community*, 236.)

72. ‘The Levant’, *New York Daily Times* (28 December 1852).

73. Mordtmann, *Stambul*, 150. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find out from Mordtmann’s account what this association was, or where and by whom the Armenian porters were educated.

that ignited feelings of national solidarity among the Armenian labourers. A clash between the Armenians and soldiers in Erzurum in 1890, and more importantly the massacre in Sasun/Sason in 1894, had such an effect.⁷⁴ In the statements of an Armenian informant in 1894, it was emphasised that the incident in Erzurum had provoked “the Armenians in the capital city, but especially the poor”.⁷⁵ The collection of alms for the grief-stricken provincials, be they the victims of massacres or individual cases such as Gülizar, possibly also strengthened the solidarity among the Armenian migrants.⁷⁶ A concrete example of solidarity was the dispatch of aid supplies from Istanbul to the Armenian refugees fleeing to Trabzon from massacre-stricken Bayburt and Erzincan in 1895. The supplies were loaded onto the ships by Armenian porters free of charge.⁷⁷ Examples of political altruism, like a poor Armenian migrant labourer donating his meagre income to support Armenian political publications, were propagated and idealised.⁷⁸

Getting organised and operating in the capital city had various advantages for the Armenian organisations. Being a Mecca for migrant labourers, Istanbul was a fertile ground for reaching Armenians from all over the provinces. No other city in the Empire had such a large Armenian community. An example of this phenomenon was offered by Meneshian in his study of a village called Govdun near Sivas. According to this study, “Sebastatsi” Murat (1872-1918), who would become a famous revolutionary hero, went from Govdun to Istanbul to work as a porter, where he joined the demonstration of 1895. After killing an Armenian informant, he fled the country for Athens and Egypt, respectively, where he became a member of the ARF.⁷⁹ Before the Hamidian censorship made it extremely dangerous, migrants occasionally also sent parcels of political newspapers to relatives in their villages.⁸⁰

Organising migrant workers in Istanbul, as well as in other major cities, was made easier by the distance of young migrants from the influence and control of their possibly conservative families and clergymen. Even if the con-

74. Narzakian, *Memoirs*, 24.

75. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermenilerin Sevk ve İskanı, 1878-1920* (Ankara 2007) 32.

76. To cover the costs of the court expenses of Gülizar, who was an Armenian woman allegedly kidnapped and raped by the Kurdish chief Musa Bey in 1889, clergymen sent by the Catholicos (spiritual leader of all Apostolic Armenians) collected donations from the Armenians in various cities. (Narzakian, *Memoirs*, 18.) The case was of symbolic importance for the grievances of the Armenian provincials and later on was used frequently for propaganda purposes by the Armenian nationalists.

77. ‘Woes of the Armenians’, *New York Times* (4 January 1896) 5.

78. ‘Armenian Patriotism Under Difficulties’, *The Times* (28 January 1886) 9.

79. Murad A. Meneshian, ‘Rural Sebastia: The Village of Govdun’ in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Armenian Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia* (Costa Mesa, California 2004) 348-350.

80. Narzakian, *Memoirs*, 30.

servative or “sober-minded” relatives were nearby, they could hardly watch over their young relatives in the urban setting. The future Armenian revolutionary Narzakian’s uncle forbade his nephew from getting involved in revolutionary activities; yet, as soon as the uncle returned from Halep/Aleppo to his home village, Narzakian once again immersed himself in politics.⁸¹ Furthermore, Istanbul was a showcase, from where spectacular actions could be reported immediately to foreign ministries and public opinion in Europe by embassies and journalists. Bringing the discontent of the provinces to Istanbul, the Armenian migrants could use Istanbul to “show their discontent” to the world, and “produce embarrassment in the country”, so that “Europe would be forced to solve the Armenian question at the earliest possible moment”. This strategy was clearly stated in the general assembly of the ARF on 26 October 1896 in London, a handwritten report of which was supposedly seized by the Ottoman authorities in Erzurum, and reproduced by Hepworth from the French translation.⁸² Finally, the Armenian organisations wrongly assumed that the Ottoman government, fearing a naval intervention by the Great Powers, would not dare to suppress the demonstrations of Armenians in Istanbul with large-scale violence.⁸³

What the government wanted

Rather than offer a lengthy analysis of the political actions of the Armenian migrant labourers in Istanbul and the government’s responses in the 1890s, it suffices to say that the tension increased as the Armenian labourers evolved into a vocal and organised political force under the coordination of the Armenian political organisations, while the government could achieve little with ordinary police tactics. According to an early report by the Minister of Police Hüseyin Nazım, it was not possible to fight the Armenian organisations with conventional methods. Arresting all the members of these subversive organisations would cause a great headache and maybe provoke a foreign intervention, the Minister claimed. Furthermore, there were not enough prisons to house them all, and arresting them following a formal investigation based on evidence would take too long and was likely to be inconclusive. Thus, the Minister concluded, these measures would not be enough to stop their actions, and the police had no other options.⁸⁴ Even if we refrain from interpreting this report as an invitation to massacre the Armenian labourers in Istanbul,

81. Narzakian, *Memoirs*, 23.

82. George H. Hepworth, *Through Armenia on Horseback* (London 1898) 112.

83. BOA.Y.PRK.ZB.16/54 in: Küttüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul Ayaklanmaları*, 99.

84. Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-İngiliz İlişkileri I, 1845-1890* (Ankara 2004) 233.

we must recognise that it provided a justification for extraordinary measures that were intended to reduce the number of Armenian labourers in the city. Prior to the massacre in 1896, the government had tried to get rid of them by sending them away with various excuses such as congestion, cholera and political conspiracies. It attempted to keep them away from the city by restricting their travel through refusing to issue domestic passports.⁸⁵

Perhaps even more than the massacre of 1896 itself, the fate of the Armenian migrant labourers who survived the massacre can give us an idea about the significance of these events within the broader spectrum of the government's measures against Armenian migrant labourers in the capital city. Besides the thousands of Armenian labourers killed, many more fled the city on board ships during or in the immediate aftermath of the massacres and disembarked as refugees at various Ottoman and foreign ports.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the judicial process that took place immediately afterwards was used by the Hamidian regime to ban Armenian labourers from the city as the culprits of the massacre. Once again, the Ottoman government's argument was that the unarmed Muslims were engaged in self-defence against the Armenian aggression. The Extraordinary Tribunal summoned in the aftermath of the massacre reflected this argument, with most Muslim suspects accused and convicted of plunder and theft, while the accusations against the Armenians were throwing bombs, firing guns and subversive provocations.⁸⁷ With the responsibility of the massacre pinned on Armenian labourers, any who had not been killed or fled on board ships were systematically expelled from the city and sent back to their homelands by the government.⁸⁸ Using reports accusing Armenians of firing bullets and throwing bombs from the inns,⁸⁹ the Ottoman government asked for the dismissal of Armenian employees such as porters and guards and many of them were arrested.⁹⁰ According to a British journal, "the banks, the Debt Commission, the Régie (the tobacco monopoly), and all public companies had been required to dismiss their Armenian employees; they had taken them from the customhouse, the coal wharves, the *khans* [inns], shops, and offices, and even from private houses."⁹¹

85. Until the reinstatement of the constitutional regime in 1908, all travellers had to obtain a domestic passport to go from one province to another.

86. FO 78/4714, Turkey (Diplomatic), Various, October to December 1896; FO 78/4748 Turkey (Diplomatic) Various 14. August to September 1896; FO 78/4715 Turkey (Diplomatic) From Sir P. Currie No.s. 738-785 17 September to 30 September 1896.

87. Ohandjanian, *Österreich-Armenien*, 2177-2198.; FO 78/4761, Diplomatic Dispatches, October 1896, pp. 8-11.

88. BOA.M.V.93/60 in: Ölmez, *İstanbul Ermeni Olayları*, 201.

89. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul Ayaklanmaları*, 204.

90. FO 78/4761, Diplomatic Dispatches, October 1896, p. 4.

91. *The Contemporary Review* 70 (October 1896) 457-65 in: Kirakossian, *The Armenian Massacres*, 526.

In the words of a British newspaper, “the government was waging war against all who occupied positions of any kind, forcing the dismissal of all Armenian employees”.⁹² The expulsion of Armenian labourers was complemented by stricter travel regime. Unlike previous restrictions on the travel of Armenian labourers, this time orders sent to the provinces totally and permanently forbade the issuing of domestic passports to Armenian labourers, at least for those whose destination was Istanbul.⁹³

By analysing what happened before, during, and after the massacre, we can conclude that this violent incident was a significant milestone in the Hamidian regime’s attempt to suppress Armenian political activism in the capital city by expelling and excluding the Armenian labourers from Istanbul.

The motivations of Muslims for the massacre

There appeared to be no motivation for Muslim migrant labourers in the city, many of whom worked side by side with Armenian labourers, to interfere in the tensions between the government and the Armenian migrant labourers, at least in terms of putting their own lives in danger in street fights. While the anxieties of the migrant labourers in the city, including their concerns about their families back at home, could have caused an outburst of violence in response to the raid on the Ottoman Bank by the revolutionaries, the long duration of the massacre and the systematic singling out of Armenian migrant labourers – even though Armenians of other classes were usually not molested – indicated that the Muslim migrant labourers were motivated by something more than a spontaneous reaction.

After the massacre and subsequent expulsion of Armenian migrant labourers, their places were systematically filled by migrant labourers of other ethno-religious backgrounds. While the Kurds occupied positions like porters and stevedores, the roles of watchmen were filled by Montenegrins.⁹⁴ This dramatic alteration of the city’s workforce has been interpreted as the main intention of the massacre by some contemporaries.⁹⁵ The replacement of Armenian labourers with Kurds was to the dismay of the upper classes, and it offered opportunities for the expression of contempt for the Kurds. According to a British journal, “the wild Kurds who had taken the place of the Armenians at the Custom House could not do the work. It took about five times as long to

92. ‘Special Morning Express’, *The Manchester Guardian* (19 September 1896).

93. BOA.İH.9/7 in: Vahdettin Engin (ed.), *Sultan Abdülhamid ve İstanbul’u* (İstanbul 2001) 60.

94. Ölmez, *İstanbul Ermeni Olayları*, 197.

95. According to British lawyer Pears, this was not only his view, but a belief “amongst all classes of the community.” (Edwin Pears, *Life of Abdul Hamid* (London 1917) 263.)

coal a steamer as formerly.”⁹⁶ Young, who argued that the elimination of the Armenian porters was the “one definite object” of the massacre, recalled that “an incidental result was the disappearance of the sedan chair, until then much used by Pera Society. When the reliable Armenian *hamals* (porters) were no more, the ladies soon found that the Kurdish porters were not to be trusted up and down the steep stony lanes in the dark.”⁹⁷ According to Pears,

a more ruffianly set of savages than the Kurds at the central railway station in Stambul at that time he had never seen. They brought with them from Armenia the worst of reputations. Many of them had taken part in the massacres, the lootings, and the outrages upon women which marked the work of Abdul Hamid. Muslims as well as Christians expressed their horror that such men should have been brought into Constantinople.⁹⁸

Actually, no lasting effects of this change on commerce were observed and it apparently did not significantly affect the monopolised structure of the guilds.⁹⁹ Thus, looking at the outcome, we can assume that taking these privileged positions might have been the motivation for Kurds in particular, and Muslims in general to take part in this massacre. Yet, it is not immediately clear how the places of murdered or exiled Armenian labourers were filled by Kurds so swiftly, considering that there is no evidence for the presence of a significant number of unemployed Muslim labourers in the city prior to the massacre. This question is important, since by answering it we are able to pinpoint the intermediary institutions that encouraged the Muslims to take part in the clashes.

Unlike the role played by the Armenian revolutionary organisations in the mobilisation of the Armenian migrant labourers, there is no obvious mechanism explaining the participation of Muslim migrant labourers in the massacres or the swift replacement of Armenians by them afterwards. Therefore, we must rely on the few available clues that can give us a speculative yet reasonable answer. The presence of the *Hamidiye* Light Cavalry Regiments in Istanbul during the massacres could be an explanation, as some of them may have stayed on in Istanbul to replace the Armenian labourers. According to a report from the British consul in Trabzon, *Hamidiye* Regiments from Eastern Anatolia left Trabzon for Istanbul by ship on 13 August 1896, a few weeks before the massacres. According to him, the troops consisted of 150 men from

96. *The Contemporary Review* 70 (October 1896) 457-65 in: Kirakossian, *The Armenian Massacres*, 526.

97. George Young, *Constantinople* (London 1926) 225.

98. Edwin Pears, *Forty Years in Constantinople* (London 1916) 283.

99. H. Schurtz, ‘Türkische Basare und Zünfte’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*. 6:11 (1903) 701.

Hınıs, 300 from Eleşkirt (both Kurds and Karapapak), 150 from Malazgirt and 150 Arabs from further south, all under the command of İbrahim Paşa of the Kurdish Milli Tribe.¹⁰⁰ In Istanbul, the troops were accommodated at the Rami Barracks near Eyüp, right across Hasköy and Kasımpaşa, where the bloodiest part of the massacre occurred. Yet, it is also important to note that the *Hamidiye* Regiments had visited the capital city in 1891 and 1893 as well, on the occasion of the anniversary of the accession of the Sultan.¹⁰¹ Other than that, there is no evidence that these troops took part in the massacre or replaced the Armenian labourers afterwards, save for an eyewitness account stating that the general-commander of the *Hamidiye* Regiments (probably İbrahim Paşa) was standing and watching as the Muslims killed the Armenians at the Galata end of the bridge on the Golden Horn.¹⁰²

That leaves us with the most significant potential means for an organised action by the Kurds in the city; namely, the guilds and networks of migrant labourers. Unfortunately, it is difficult to figure out the extent to which the tensions among rival networks of Armenian and Muslim labourers played a role in the massacre. The discussion between the European ambassadors and the Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tevfik Paşa, in the aftermath of the massacres also touched upon the organised participation of labourers' corporations in the killings. The collective note sent by the six Great Powers to the Ottoman government on 31 August 1896 claimed the involvement of "a special organisation known by certain agents of the authorities, if not directed by them." The same note claimed that mobs "dressed and armed in the same manner" had arrived at the Ottoman Bank building before the police, and that they had attacked the Armenians in the vicinity without any interference by the security forces. The note further claimed that "several heads of the detective police were seen to distribute cudgels and knives among the *Bashi-Bozüks* [riff-raff] and pointed to them the direction to take in search of victims". The note also provided a clue that at least some of the perpetrators of the massacre belonged to the working class, in the sense that "the Turks employed by Europeans, who disappeared during the two days' massacre, declared on their return that they had been requisitioned and armed with knives and cudgels in order to kill Armenians."¹⁰³ The Ottoman government denied these accusations on numerous occasions.¹⁰⁴ Based on sporadic and usually second-hand accounts, and carefully crafted through negotiations between its signatories,

100. FO 78/4713, Turkey (Diplomatic) From Mr Herbert No.s. 653-690 13 August to 31 August 1896.

101. Hepworth, *Through Armenia*, 227; Rohat Alakom, *Eski İstanbul Kürtleri* (İstanbul 1998) 45.

102. 'The Constantinople Massacres', *The Times* (9 September 1896) 3.

103. 'The Porte and the Armenians', *The Times* (14 September 1896) 3.

104. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, Turkey No.1, 1897, Correspondence Respecting the Disturbances at Constantinople in August 1896.

the collective notes served more to demonstrate the point of view of the European diplomats, rather than giving actual accounts of the massacres.

If we want to pursue the argument about the involvement of the guilds or networks of migrants, then we have to speculate on the link between the agency of the guilds and the intentions of the government. The governmental body most likely to get involved in the mobilisation of Muslim labourers was the Municipality of Istanbul, which not only had absolute power over the guilds and labourers in the city, but was also involved in police work against the Armenian migrant labourers. According to the Minister of Interior, Mehmed Memduh Paşa, the Mayor of Istanbul, by then Rıdvan Paşa was regarded as the “Lock of Istanbul” and had the rare honour of being received on foot by Sultan Abdülhamid II.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the reports of the Municipality on the incidents in 1895 and 1896 were more detailed than those of the Ministry of Police. The same reports remarked that since the Armenian subversion went too far, the employees of the Municipality had started to keep track of the situation.¹⁰⁶ Rumours about the distribution of iron bars and clubs to the Muslim mob stressed that it was the Municipality that had organised this.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, it should be noted that many dock workers and porters were equipped with iron bars with hooked heads (*demir balya kancaları*) – supposedly also used by Armenian porters during the incidents – in order to handle goods.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, it is very likely that the labourers carried clubs with them at all times in order to defend themselves in the eventuality of a fight. A further indication of the central role played by Mayor Rıdvan Paşa in the massacres is a news article published in *Wiener Tagblatt* on 5 September 1896. The Armenophobic article, possibly written upon payment by Rıdvan Paşa, not only glorified the Mayor for the successful suppression of the incidents, but it also cited Rıdvan Paşa’s son Reşat Bey, who argued that they had become aware of the intentions of the Armenians and, consequently, they were able to prevent the Muslims from attacking the Europeans, indicating his father’s control over the actions of the mob. The same article also recommended the dismissal of all Armenians employed by Europeans in order to prevent their recruitment by the *Hunchakian* [sic].¹⁰⁹ In any case, as Riedler correctly asserted, it is not possible to prove the allegation that the guilds were used in the massacre as an intermediary to mobilise Muslims.¹¹⁰

105. Osman Nuri Ergin; *İstanbul Şehreminleri* (Istanbul 1996) 5.

106. Osmanlı Arşivi, *Ermeni İsyanları I*, 148.

107. FO 78/4713, Turkey (Diplomatic) From Mr Herbert No.s. 653-690 13 August to 31 August 1896.

108. BOA.Y.PRK.KOM.9/21 in: Kütüklü, *Ermenilerin İstanbul Ayaklanmaları*, 202.

109. *Wiener Tagblatt*, 46. Jahrgang, Nr. 244 (5 September 1896), in: BOA.SYS.37-42/1896.9.19.

110. Florian Riedler, ‘Armenian Labour Migration to Istanbul and the Migration Crisis of the 1890s’, in: Ulrike Freitag, Malte Fuhrmann, Nora Lafi and Florian Riedler (eds.), *The*

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there were three parties to the incidents in Istanbul in 1895 and 1896: The Armenian migrant labourers from the provinces, who, by using their physical presence in the city, intended to penetrate the well-guarded political sphere of the capital city and raise awareness for the problems of their provinces with the government and the world; the Hamidian government, which – in response to the former – uncompromisingly opted for the exclusion of Armenian labourers from the city and the isolation of the provincial opposition; and finally, the Muslims, but especially Kurdish labourers, who seized this opportunity to monopolise the job market in Istanbul and to enjoy privileged positions like customhouse portorage. Ironically, after the constitutionalist revolution in 1908, the Kurdish nationalists, whose main aims included countering the ideological and political claims of the Armenian nationalists, were ashamed of these “privileged” Kurdish labourers; for them, the occupation of tens of thousands of Kurds as porters in Istanbul represented the poverty and ignorance of the Kurdish nation.¹¹¹ In the case of the Armenians, it was the nationalist revolutionary parties that channelled the discontent of the migrant labourers into these specific actions, leading to a violent confrontation. As for the Muslim migrant labourers, the intermediary institution is not clear, but it is likely that the guilds, guided by the Mayor of Istanbul, were instrumental in the organisation of this reaction into a force working in accordance with the aims of the government.

In the historiography on the ethno-religious violence in the Ottoman Empire, the socio-economic backgrounds of the victims and perpetrators have rarely been analysed. This is perhaps due to the late development of social history in a Middle Eastern context. However this omission is of great significance to nationalist historiography, which, apart from their religious and national affiliation, has intentionally obscured the identities of victims and perpetrators. Especially in the nation-building process, both the Turkish and Armenian nationalists built their rhetoric more or less around victimhood and this victimhood was presented as something encompassing the totality of the nation, with the exception of some elite collaborators who were portrayed as betraying the nation. From this point of view, the socio-economic background of the victims and perpetrators was not only irrelevant, but also a dimension that could endanger the nation-building process.

Such an approach might perhaps be considered adequate for the victims of 1915, since the policies were implemented almost indiscriminately. But in

City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of the Urban Modernity (Oxon 2011) 169.

111. Mehmet Emin Bozarlan (ed.), *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi, 1908-1909* (Uppsala 1998) 91.

case of the incidents in Istanbul in the mid-1890s, the socio-economic background of victims and perpetrators matters, as I hope this article has demonstrated. The purpose here is not to dilute the ethno-religious confrontation in the conflict within a narrative of “class conflict”. After all, it was the ethno-religious identifications that more or less determined the boundaries of the two camps. The socio-economic dimensions of the conflict between these three parties are particularly important because it made the mobilisation of the masses possible and the execution of the massacre purposeful. A critical aspect of the socio-economic backgrounds of the two sides was that they both predominately comprised migrant labourers, originating from roughly the same places. For the Armenians, their experience as migrant labourers was the very reason for their inclusion within the Armenian identity and their subsequent political activism. The Armenian revolutionary organisations, which organised the demonstration in 1895 and the raid of the bank in 1896, became prominent political actors through adapting to the conditions of migrant labourers. Once again, it was this very aspect of the Armenian labourers in Istanbul that prompted the government to organise, or trigger, or watch this massacre. In this process, the government not only singled out Armenian migrant labourers as the source of the problem, but it also correctly recognised that isolating the Armenian Question by eliminating the Armenian migrant labourers from the capital city was doable. For the Muslim migrant labourers this was simply an opportunity to maximise the benefits of labour migration by eliminating their competitors from privileged positions in the job market. In sum, it was the identity-building, politicisation, anxieties and profit maximisation strategies generated by the phenomenon of labour migration that led to these violent incidents in Istanbul in the mid-1890s.

Biography

Sinan Dinçer was born in Istanbul in 1982. He received his BA and MA degrees in Political Science from the Duke University in North Carolina and the Bogazici University in Istanbul, respectively. From 2007 to 2012, he has been working on his PhD. dissertation titled “From Janissaries to Wage Workers: Porters and Lightermen in Istanbul (1800-1930)” at the History Department of the Ruhr University in Bochum. Currently unaffiliated, he continues to work on his dissertation.

sinan.dincer@gmail.com