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Armenian Resistance to the Hamidian Massacres

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Introduction

Krikor Haitaian survived the Hamidian massacres hiding in a chicken coop.¹ He was just four years old in 1895 when the violence swept through his village of Göydün in Ottoman Turkey. Ninety years later, he recalled how the Turkish perpetrators were allowed three hours in which to pillage and plunder, seizing Armenian goods and livestock with impunity. The men of his village fled to the fields and hid. Haitaian recounts: "When the Turks rushed into our village my mother took the axe and sent us to the henhouse. She was standing behind the door to protect us, to kill any Turk that might approach us. Then the Turk saw the axe...he left and ran away. He couldn't rob anything."² In this extraordinary act of bravery, Haitaian's mother may very well have saved his life. Her fierce determination to resist the massacres was clear. "If any Turk came in to hurt us," Haitaian recalled, "she was going to knock him, and chop him up."³ Haitaian's incredible tale highlights the determination of one Armenian family to survive, despite the desperate circumstances that prevailed. Such tenacity was widespread. In villages, towns, and cities through Anatolia, Armenians did whatever they could to resist the onslaught.

The Hamidian massacres, also known as the Armenian massacres, were a series of massacres that swept through Ottoman Turkey between 1894 and 1896. In many respects, they were the culmination of longstanding discrimination and persecution experienced by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.⁴ The Armenians were considered *giaours*, or infidels, of inferior status and subject to official discrimination. As the empire declined in the nineteenth century, tensions grew between the Armenian population, and the Turkish and Kurdish populations with whom they were closely intermingled. By the early 1890s, many Armenians were experiencing increasing persecution and hardship. In Sassoun, local events led to an outbreak of massacres in 1894, which claimed approximately six thousand lives.⁵ British, French, and Russian outrage at the atrocities led to a Scheme of Armenian Reforms being agreed upon between the Great Powers and the Ottoman government.⁶ Yet, a year after the Sassoun massacres, the reforms—which included such major changes as proportional representation for Armenians amongst administrators, police, and gendarmerie in six provinces—were still awaiting Ottoman government signature.⁷ In the capital Constantinople, an Armenian protest at the delay was set upon by the gendarmerie, leading to riots.⁸ The violence escalated into massacres throughout much of the empire between October and December 1895. With the

¹ Interview with Krikor Haitaian, July 15, 1985, Interview Code 53195, Shoah Visual History Archive.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Deborah Mayersen, *On the Path to Genocide: Armenia and Rwanda Reexamined* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 23–41.

⁵ Vatche Ghazarian, ed., *Armenians in the Ottoman Empire: An Anthology of Transformation 13th–19th Centuries* (Waltham, MA: Mayreni Publishing, 1998); William Spry, *Life on the Bosphorus-Doings in the City of the Sultan: Turkey Past and Present, Including Chronicles of the Caliphs from Mahomet to Abdul Hamid II* (London: H.S. Nichols, 1895), 281–282. The version consulted has been reprinted. Both citations have been included due to the importance of both publications; Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 25.

⁶ "Scheme of Armenian Reforms," as reprinted in Spry, *Life on the Bosphorus*, 325–326. First mentioned in note 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sadik Shahid Bey, *Islam, Turkey, and Armenia, and How They Happened* (St. Louis: C. B. Woodward, 1898), 200–201.

coming of the new year, they largely abated; but the situation remained extremely tense, and there were sporadic outbursts of violence. In August 1896, the seizure of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Constantinople by the Dashnaksutiun Armenian revolutionary party sparked a further massacre, claiming approximately 6,000 lives.⁹ This, and a massacre shortly thereafter in Egin, were the final large-scale massacres in what became known as the Hamidian massacres; however, Armenians continued to experience persecution and violence. Altogether, the Hamidian massacres claimed between 100,000 and 200,000 lives.¹⁰ Hundreds of thousands more were left destitute.

The Hamidian massacres have received quite limited attention in the literature. As terrible as they were, they were quickly overshadowed by the subsequent Armenian genocide. More than one million Armenians were killed in the Young Turks' attempt to annihilate the Armenian population in Turkey from 1915 onwards. Scholarly attention has focused predominantly on this genocide, not least because of the Turkish government's ongoing campaign of denial. Within the scholarship on the massacres, the topic of Armenian resistance has attracted little attention. Although some key incidents have been detailed, as far as is known, there has been no study dedicated to examining the occurrence, prevalence, and types of resistance employed during the massacres overall. The present study seeks to address this gap through an exploratory analysis of resistance. After conceptualizing resistance and outlining the research design, the study examines the Armenian capacity for resistance, and the contours of that resistance—including scope, organization, and strategies employed. It then examines the boundaries of Armenian resistance, before reflecting on its outcomes. Finally, the article concludes by considering how an analysis of resistance can contribute to our understanding of the massacres more broadly, and particularly the vexed question of the role of the Ottoman government in their perpetration.

Conceptualizing Resistance to Mass Violence

The concept of resistance to mass violence gained considerable scholarly attention in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Raul Hilberg, in *The Destruction of the European Jews*—widely regarded as the first comprehensive historical account of the Holocaust—considered the issue of resistance as part of his analysis. Hilberg defined resistance as “opposition to the perpetrator,” which in practice, he conceptualized narrowly, as armed, group resistance.¹¹ Taking issue with Hilberg's definition, a number of scholars subsequently proposed a more inclusive understanding. Yehuda Bauer defined Jewish resistance to the Holocaust as “any group action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions or intentions directed against the Jews by the Germans and their supporters.”¹² Bauer's definition of resistance included forms of unarmed resistance, such as smuggling food into ghettos to avoid starvation, and activities taken to improve morale and maintain cultural practices. Spiritual resistance became accepted as a component of resistance to the Holocaust.¹³ Later, Bauer reflected that perhaps individual acts of resistance also merited inclusion, although he perceived this as a “slippery and awkward topic,” as “what to include

⁹ Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 46.

¹⁰ The estimates of numbers killed in the Armenian massacres vary widely. Cited here are the estimates of Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 28; Melson, *Revolution and Genocide*, 47. Other estimates include 88,243, compiled by Johannes Lepsius prior to the 1896 massacre in Istanbul. See Johannes Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe: An Indictment* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1897), 320–331; and Louise Nalbandian's estimate of 50,000–300,000, Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 206.

¹¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 662.

¹² Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 119.

¹³ Michael R. Marrus, “Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (1995), 89, 94–95.

and what to exclude is difficult to determine.”¹⁴ Roger Gottlieb further explored the concept of resistance, highlighting the importance of intention. He defined resistance as “the attempt by the oppressed to limit, thwart, or end that oppression.”¹⁵ Gottlieb also highlighted the importance of identity within both the processes of oppression and resistance. Importantly, he questioned whether there is “a distinction between resistance and simply trying to stay alive?”¹⁶ An act to transfer oppression away from oneself to another member of the oppressed group may not be resistance, as “the goal of resistance must be to lessen the total quantity of oppression.”¹⁷ Yet, in circumstances in which the perpetrators seek the total annihilation of the oppressed, this distinction may not be valid. In these circumstances, simply choosing life becomes an act of resistance.¹⁸

This scholarship provides important insights into conceptualizing resistance. Its utility is somewhat limited, however, by its heavy contextualization within discussions of the Holocaust. The very different circumstances of the Holocaust and the Hamidian massacres meant that possibilities and strategies for resistance within each were quite different. Many examples used to define the boundaries of resistance during the Holocaust do not have ready parallels in the massacres. Turning to scholarship on resistance to the Armenian genocide, there is a similar evolution from narrow conceptions of resistance as armed resistance, to more inclusive definitions that include civilian and nonviolent resistance. While earlier authors on the genocide, such as Vahakn Dadrian, concentrated heavily on armed resistance, recent contributions have recognized a wider range of activities as constituting resistance. Raymond Kévorkian, for example, has discussed Armenians burning their harvests prior to deportation as an act of resistance.¹⁹ Khatchig Mouradian has defined resistance as “actions carried out illegally, or against the sanction and will of the authorities, to save Armenian deportees from annihilation.”²⁰ This includes nonviolent acts of humanitarian resistance. Importantly, such a more inclusive definition also allows for greater recognition of the contributions of women to resistance.²¹ To incorporate the insights offered by the scholarship on resistance to the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide, while recognizing the unique circumstances of the Hamidian massacres, the current study avoids a rigid definition of resistance. Resistance is broadly defined in accordance with Gottlieb’s definition, as an “attempt by the oppressed [individual or group] to limit, thwart or end that oppression,” where such an attempt seeks to “lessen the total quantity of oppression.”²² A certain leniency has been accorded to consider specific actions as potential acts of resistance on a case-by-case basis, and to facilitate analysis of grey zone activities that may or may not be considered as resistance.

¹⁴ Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 119.

¹⁵ Roger S. Gottlieb, “The Concept of Resistance: Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust,” *Social Theory and Practice* 9, no. 1 (1983), 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹ Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 561.

²⁰ Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915–1918* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021), xx.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²² Gottlieb, *The Concept of Resistance*, 34, 40.

Resistance during the Armenian Genocide

Armenian resistance to the 1915 genocide has been well-documented, with many important scholarly contributions in recent years.²³ Major sites of resistance are well-known. Perhaps the most famous—later becoming the subject of a novel and film—occurred at Musa Dagh, in the province of Aleppo.²⁴ There, more than four thousand villagers, after being given the order to prepare for deportation in July 1915, chose instead to retreat up a nearby mountain and attempt self-defense. After battling Turkish attacks for several weeks, they were rescued by French forces and evacuated to Egypt. In Van, thirty thousand Armenians sought to defend themselves from the genocidal campaign. They survived constant attacks and a siege, to ultimately be saved by the advance of the Russian army into the city. Other attempts at armed resistance were unsuccessful, such as those in Ourfa, Sassoun, and Zeitoun. Scholars have also examined cases of rescue. Several thousand Armenian refugees who reached Sinjar, for example, were taken in and protected by the local Yezidi population.²⁵ Many other cases of smaller-scale rescue in a range of circumstances have been documented, although undoubtedly others will never be known.²⁶ Historians have recognized, however, that a combination of Turkish planning, the powerlessness of the Armenians, and a hostile Turkish population made resistance impossible in most circumstances during the genocide.²⁷ Whereas there is good knowledge of the contours of resistance during the genocide, much less is known about that during the Hamidian massacres, to which the article now turns.

Methodology

In order to elucidate key facets of resistance to the massacres, this research adopts an exploratory research design. This design was chosen due to the very limited amount of previous research on the topic. An exploratory approach enables the researcher to investigate a phenomenon not yet well understood. It allows for a certain fluidity in definitions and boundaries that can accommodate unexpected discoveries. A dynamic and dialectic inferential process can be utilized to progress the research, developing insight into the phenomenon under study without preset hypotheses limiting scope. Nonetheless, a clear structure guides the research. A four-tiered framework provides the analytic lens through which resistance is examined, incorporating the following:

²³ See, for example, Mouradian, *The Resistance Network*; Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Conversion and Rescue: Survival Strategies in the Armenian Genocide,” in *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, ed. Jacques Semelin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Carlos Bedrossian, “Urfa’s Last Stand, 1915,” in *Armenian Tigranakert/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 467–507; Simon Payaslian, “The Armenian Resistance in Shabin Karahisar, 1915,” in *Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2004), 399–426; Anahide Ter Minassian, “Van 1915,” in *Armenian Van/Vasurakan*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2000), 209–244; Khatchig Mouradian, “The Very Limit of our Endurance: Unarmed Resistance in Ottoman Syria during World War I,” in *End of the Ottomans: The Genocide of 1915 and the Politics of Turkish Nationalism* eds. Hans-Lukas Kieser et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 247–261; Hilmar Kaiser et al., *At the Crossroad of Der Zor: Death, Survival, and Humanitarian Resistance in Aleppo, 1915–1917* (Princeton: Gomidas Institute, 2002).

²⁴ Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh: From Obscurity to Genocide Resistance and Fame 1840–1915* (Fresno: The Press at California State University, Fresno: 2020).

²⁵ Yves Ternon, “The Impossible Rescue of the Armenians of Mardin: The Sinjar Safe Haven,” in *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, ed. Jacques Semelin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 391–393.

²⁶ For examples, see Hasmik Tevosyan, “Rescue Practices during the Armenian Genocide,” in *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, ed. Jacques Semelin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 163–182; Fatma Müge Göçek, “In Search of ‘The Righteous People’: The Case of the Armenian Massacres of 1915,” in *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, ed. Jacques Semelin et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 33–49; Gerard J. Libaridian, “The Ultimate Repression: The Genocide of the Armenians, 1915–1917,” in *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death*, ed. Isidor Wallimann and Michael N. Dobkowski (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 205.

²⁷ Mayersen, *On the Path*, 83.

1. Consideration of the circumstances in which resistance was possible.
2. Exploration of the contours of resistance, including the strategies employed, scope, and organization of resistance efforts.
3. Examination of the boundaries of resistance, and grey-zone activities.
4. Analysis of the outcomes of the resistance, and the resulting impact on the Armenian people.

Additionally, the research findings with respect to resistance will be discussed in light of their implications for our understanding of the massacres overall.

Careful selection of appropriate sources is critical for research on the Hamidian massacres. There is widespread evidence of a “pattern of official misrepresentation” within official Turkish sources concerning them.²⁸ Death tolls, and estimates of those wounded, for example, appear to vastly and systematically underrepresent true figures.²⁹ Furthermore, Turkish officials have “sanitized the archives so that researchers today will find almost no documentation incriminating Ottoman Turkish leaders in the ethnic cleansings between 1894 and 1924.”³⁰ By contrast, European diplomatic and consular records are widely regarded as offering more impartial accounts.³¹ Written for internal consumption, rather than publicity or propaganda purposes, their accounts also align with those of other witnesses to the massacres, including travelers, Western journalists, and missionaries. Protestant missionaries left extensive records, written at the time for internal communication purposes, that provide an invaluable source of information regarding the massacres. This research utilizes a wide selection of these archival and contemporary sources. Additionally, it incorporates relevant testimony from victims of the massacres, from the Shoah Visual History archives. Collectively, these sources allow for the construction of a representative depiction of Armenian resistance to the Hamidian massacres.

There are a number of limitations to the methodology that must be acknowledged. First, the research did not include material from Ottoman archives, although a wide range of representative sources were used. Second, most of the information available about resistance to the massacres comes from witness accounts. Only rarely do we hear directly from resisters themselves. While a diversity of witness testimonies provide for triangulation and verification of reports, the immediacy and directness of first-hand accounts is lost. Finally, the exploratory approach portrays a representative depiction of resistance, rather than a comprehensive one. Further research is required to delve more deeply into the many aspects of Armenian resistance to the Hamidian massacres.

It is also important to acknowledge the position of the author with respect to the research. I approach this study as a genocide studies scholar and historian. I have long been interested in how vulnerable populations respond to mass atrocities. While targeted groups are often presented as passive victims in scholarship, my research has found—across multiple case studies—that such groups often display incredible agency in the pursuit of self-protection.

Armenian Capacity for Resistance

Any examination of resistance must occur within the context of an understanding of the capacity for such resistance. In the case of the Hamidian massacres, such capacity was very

²⁸ Vahagn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 153–157.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 6.

³¹ Dadrian, *The History*, 154–155; Morris and Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, 8–10.

limited. Evidence indicates that in many—if not most—circumstances, resistance was exceedingly difficult or impossible. Armenians were typically a minority in any given town or village, surrounded by a largely hostile local population. In addition, Ottoman authorities made concerted efforts to forestall the possibility of resistance. Several specific strategies were employed to this end. Perhaps the most common, and effective, was that of confiscating all firearms from Armenians in anticipation of the violence. As tensions rose, local officials would demand that Armenians surrender their weapons, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. In October 1895, for example, the authorities at Birejik ordered the Armenians to surrender their arms, because “the Moslems were afraid of them.”³² Soldiers ostensibly sent to protect the disarmed Armenians then instigated a massacre in early January, which completely destroyed the Christian population there.³³ In Kesserik, when a massacre threatened, the Armenians “defended themselves energetically,” believing the attack was the “sole initiative” of the local population.³⁴ The Turks, however, informed provincial authorities, who sent soldiers and an Armenian delegate to the village in response. The Armenians were persuaded to surrender their weapons as a “sign of their submission to the government.”³⁵ Once they had done so, however, the soldiers withdrew, and the Turks attacked. Some of those trying to flee were killed by the soldiers in the area.³⁶ Similar records of Armenians being required to surrender their weapons, from months to even just hours in advance of a massacre, are widespread.³⁷

A second strategy commonly employed to prevent resistance was that of surprise. While the situation in a given area might be tense for weeks or months, often it was unclear that a massacre was imminent until its eruption. The massacre in Trezibond provides a case in point. As one contemporary account put it:

For a week prior to the outbreak on October 8, there was great excitement in Trebizond, and the consuls called in a body upon the Vali, and urged him to arrest those who were exciting the populace to deeds of violence. Matters apparently quieted down for a few days, when, suddenly, like a clap of thunder in a clear sky, the assault began. Unsuspecting people walking along the streets were shot ruthlessly down.³⁸

In Sivas, the violence was similarly unexpected. There, “suddenly at noon, as if at a given signal” the massacre commenced.³⁹ An eyewitness account noted: “No resistance was made by the Armenians, who seemed overpowered in the suddenness of the onslaught, the number of their armed assailants and the relentless ferocity with which they were pursued to their death.”⁴⁰ These examples highlight that in many cases, Armenians had nothing with which

³² Rev. Edwin M. Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities* (Boston: H.L. Hastings, 1896), 471.

³³ *Ibid.*, 471–472.

³⁴ [Archag Tchobanian], *Les massacres d’Arménie: Témoignages des victimes* (Paris: Édition de Mercure de France, 1896), 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁷ See for example, Interview with Hagop Najarian, March 8, 1984, Interview Code 53440, Shoah Visual History Archive; Interview with Levon Giridlian, March 22, 1984, Interview Code 53327, Shoah Visual History Archive; Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 319; [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d’Arménie*, 132.

³⁸ Augustus Warner Williams and Mgrditch Simbad Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia: Its History and Horrors Under the Curse of Islam* (New York: Publishers’ Union, 1896), 341–342; a similar account of events in Trebizond can be found in “Tabular Statement of Occurrences in Asia Minor in 1895, prepared by the Committee of Delegates from the Six Embassies,” reprinted in Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 281.

³⁹ Bliss, *Turkey*, 465.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

they could defend themselves, and no opportunity to prepare in advance of a massacre. In such circumstances, resistance was simply not an option.

The Contours of Armenian Resistance

In circumstances in which Armenians were able to resist the massacres, they employed a diverse range of strategies and approaches to doing so. Armed resistance varied from large-scale, coordinated attempts to defend a city or region, to small-scale and individual efforts to protect homes and lives. Armenians also widely employed a range of non-violent resistance measures. These included attempting to purchase their safety or protection, seeking sanctuary in places perceived as safe, and hiding from perpetrators. In some cases, communities worked together in pursuit of such strategies, while in other cases, families or even individuals attempted to resist on their own. The following section explores a representative cross-section of the strategies, scope, and organizational characteristics of Armenian resistance.

Armed Resistance

During the course of the massacres, there were three large-scale, organized attempts at armed resistance by the Armenians, in Zeitoun, Van, and Ourfa. The variable circumstances in which each occurred, and their contrasting outcomes, offer substantial insight into the contexts of resistance, and the factors that rendered successful resistance so difficult. The failure of most smaller-scale attempts at armed resistance reinforce these findings.

In Zeitoun, a remote town located in a deep valley surrounded by mountains, the Armenians decided to resist by launching a pre-emptive attack. Zeitounlis had a fierce reputation as a mountainous people with a history of attempting to defend themselves from Ottoman encroachment.⁴¹ In October 1895, as reports reached Zeitoun of massacres in the surrounding areas, and of a planned massacre for the town itself, the Zeitounlis decided to take the offensive.⁴² They commenced an insurrection, besieging, and then seizing a Turkish garrison on the outskirts of the town, along with establishing a defensive perimeter.⁴³ In response, government forces repeatedly attacked Zeitoun, leading to a series of ferocious battles. Tens of thousands of Turkish soldiers and Kurkish and Circassian irregulars fought 1,500 or so Zeitounli resisters but were unable to penetrate their defenses.⁴⁴ In one battle to the east of the city:

The Zeitounlis made a stand at a stone bridge which there spans a rushing torrent. But after holding it bravely for awhile they slowly retreated up a steep hill until almost the entire Turkish army had crossed the bridge, when suddenly the bridge was blown up and the Zeitounlis turning, hurled down from the hills above great rocks and poured upon them a most destructive fire. Hemmed in as they were the loss was very great.⁴⁵

⁴¹ James Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat: Being Notes of a Vacation Tour in the Autumn of 1876*, 4th ed. revised (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1896), 501.

⁴² Dadrian, *The History*, 128.

⁴³ Arman Kirakossian, ed., *The Armenian Massacres 1894–1896: British Media Testimony* (Dearborn MI: University of Michigan Dearborn, 2008), 416–434; Avetis Nazarbek, “Zeitun,” *Contemporary Review* 69 (April 1896), 513–528. The version consulted has been reprinted. Both citations have been included due to the importance of both publications.

⁴⁴ Dadrian, *The History*, 128–130.

⁴⁵ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 395.

The Ottoman advantage of numbers was outweighed by the Zeitounlis' topographical advantage, local knowledge of the terrain, excellent marksmanship, and desperate determination to succeed.⁴⁶

As news of the insurrection spread, the Zeitounlis had to contend with thousands of refugees from massacres in the surrounding areas seeking safe haven in the town, along with multiple requests for assistance from nearby villages under attack.⁴⁷ While the Zeitounlis had been well prepared, conditions began to deteriorate, with growing shortages of food and ammunition.⁴⁸ The Armenian death toll, from the fighting and the privations, reached several thousand.⁴⁹ At the same time, Turkish forces also took heavy losses. British Consul Barnham estimated that by early January at least 5,000 soldiers had been killed, and possibly up to 10,000.⁵⁰ In late December, the Armenian, Gregorian, and Catholic Patriarchs, recognizing the potential for wholesale slaughter in Zeitoun should the insurrection fail, requested the assistance of the Ambassadors of the Great Powers to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the violence.⁵¹ The Sultan initially rejected the Ambassadors' offer, hoping for outright victory. Continued attempts to defeat the Zeitounlis were unsuccessful, however. As January progressed, thousands more troops perished in battle, as well as due to the freezing winter conditions. Both the Sultan and the Zeitounlis agreed to negotiations, and by the end of January an agreement was reached. Christian and Moslem inhabitants in the region would surrender their weapons; there would be a general amnesty and the expulsion from the empire of leaders of the insurrection; a Christian governor would be appointed for the region; and there would be relief for the Zeitounlis from excessive taxes.⁵² The agreement represented a major victory for the Armenians of Zeitoun. Indeed, this became the most successful example of resistance to the massacres.

In Van, too, Armenian resistance had some success. Armenians in the city there formed the majority of the population, and there was some organized Armenian political activity, led by three groups of revolutionaries. The proximity of Van to the Russian border, moreover, meant that Armenians had easier access to arms in this region than elsewhere. For these reasons, it was clear that Van would not be an easy target for massacre. Due to this, and the opposition of local authorities to violence, it largely escaped the wave of massacres that swept through the empire in late 1895.⁵³ By June 1896, however, ongoing tensions—fermented by the government—reached boiling point, and a massacre erupted. The three Armenian parties formed a Joint Directorate of Defense, deploying 500 men in strategic positions around parts of the city.⁵⁴ A fierce battle took place for control of the streets. Armenians in mixed areas were early targets, and those unable to get to the Armenian quarters were massacred.⁵⁵ Within the defended areas, however, Armenian positions stood firm. They were aided by British Vice Consul Williams, who

⁴⁶ Dadrian, *The History*, 127–131.

⁴⁷ Nazarbek, *Zeitun*, 513–528; Dadrian, *The History*, 127–131.

⁴⁸ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 395; France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques: Affaires arméniennes: Projets de réformes dans l'empire ottoman, 1893-1897. Supplément, 1895-1896* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), Doc. No. 81, January 12, 1896, 66.

⁴⁹ Report of British Consul Barnham, quoted in Dadrian, *The History*, 129.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques: Affaires arméniennes: Projets de réformes dans l'empire ottoman, 1893-1897* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), Doc. No. 169, December 24, 1895, 192.

⁵² France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 185, February 17, 1896, 215.

⁵³ Dadrian, *The History*, 133.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁵ American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives (ABCFM), 1871–1909, 16.9.7, vol. 10. The following notes apply to all material herein used from these archives: Used with permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University; and Wider Church Ministries (a Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ), Cleveland, Ohio.

worked to protect the Armenians and negotiate a peaceful end to the violence.⁵⁶ After nine days of battle, agreement was reached whereby the revolutionaries would be allowed to leave the country, and all weapons would be surrendered in exchange for a promise of protection. As the revolutionaries were on route to Iran, however, the Turkish authorities abrogated the deal, and most of those escaping were slaughtered.⁵⁷ In the city itself, the promise of protection was honored, with the many thousands of Armenians who had survived the battle thereby escaping massacre. In the outlying regions of Van, largely unable to resist, it is estimated that around 20,000 Armenians were killed.⁵⁸ Thus, the resistance in Van can be regarded as having significant, albeit partial, success. The numerical strength of the Armenians, their ability to access arms, and the mediation of British Vice Consul Williams all played a critical role in this success.

In Ourfa, too, the Armenians attempted to defend themselves from the massacres. The first massacre there began in earnest on October 28, after a period of raised tensions. Expecting the violence, many Armenians had remained at home. A “determined resistance” was made at the entrances of the Armenian quarter.⁵⁹ Armenian shops were looted, and Armenians found outside the quarter attacked, but attempts to penetrate the quarter itself were unsuccessful. Thereafter, the quarter was placed under siege, and several weeks of great tension ensued.⁶⁰ The government demanded the Armenians surrender all their weapons, promising protection if they did so and threatening to attack the quarter with cannons if they did not.⁶¹ In November, the Armenians reluctantly surrendered their weapons, and soldiers conducted extensive searches of the quarter. Tensions did not ease. In December, rumors swirled of an imminent attack. When the Armenians approached the government for the promised protection, several thousand soldiers were dispatched to the Armenian quarter.⁶² Rather than offering protection, however, they instigated renewed violence. A brutal massacre ensued against the now defenseless Armenians.⁶³ Men, women, and children were slaughtered, with entire families being killed in some cases. Rape and torture were widespread. Thousands fled to the Gregorian Cathedral seeking refuge. A Turkish mob attacked and began killing those inside before setting it alight.⁶⁴ Those trying to flee were murdered by the crowd, while most perished in the flames. “The air of the city was unendurable” from the stench of burning bodies, according to the lone American missionary in the city.⁶⁵ Altogether, several thousand Armenians perished in the massacre, which many observers regarded as one of the most severe in the series. Armenian attempts at resistance, successful at first, ultimately led to terrible retribution and mass killing.

There were numerous other places where the Armenians took up arms to resist the onslaught, albeit on a smaller scale. In the large Armenian village of Guermuch, near Ourfa, the villagers took an extraordinary approach to try and prevent a massacre. As Kurds and Arabs approached to attack, the Armenians pitched tents in front of the village, fired off as many guns as they could, and sent word that the tents were those of soldiers, sent by the government to protect the village.⁶⁶ Confused and deceived, the attackers withdrew. Later, the authorities in Ourfa demanded the Armenians surrender their arms. Instead of doing so, they came in a group to Ourfa, declaring that if the “government wished them to be massacred, they had better do so

⁵⁶ Ibid; France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 215, June 20, 1896, 240.

⁵⁷ Dadrian, *The History*, 137.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 324.

⁵⁹ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 161.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 162; [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 248.

⁶¹ [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 247.

⁶² Ibid., 250.

⁶³ Ibid., 250–258.

⁶⁴ Bliss, *Turkey*, 461.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 176.

at once and on the spot in Ourfa, as they (the Armenians) were completely at their mercy, but that they would never surrender their weapons, which were their only protection against the surrounding armed and hostile Kurdish and Arab tribes."⁶⁷ After paying a ransom to keep their weapons, they survived unmolested. In places like Aintab, Chemchem de Lidjé, Gurun, Boussou, and elsewhere, Armenians mounted armed resistance for as long as they could, but were overcome in a matter of days.⁶⁸ In Diarbekier province, Armenians from three villages close to the Magapavetzvotz monastery sought refuge there and resisted for six days, but were ultimately overrun.⁶⁹ In Andakh, Armenians resisted for six days with little more than stones and daggers.⁷⁰ When it became clear that further defense was hopeless, many threw themselves into a ravine.⁷¹ These many accounts highlight the determination of the Armenians to resist wherever and however possible, even in almost hopeless circumstances.

There are also recorded incidents of individual Armenians violently resisting the massacres, like that of Krikor Haitaian's mother, as described in the introduction. In Gumush-Hane, the wealthy Armenian notable Nichan Israelian was threatened by a horde of seven to eight hundred Turks, attracted by the prospect of plunder as the massacre got underway there.⁷² He managed to defend his property for three hours, before the Turks used petrol to set his house alight.⁷³ He then attempted to flee to the government buildings for protection, but was shot dead on the way. Despite Israelian's resistance being unsuccessful, a witness noted that it prevented greater atrocities in the Armenian quarter of Gumush-Hane, as it occupied many perpetrators for much of the period of the massacre.⁷⁴ Such individual attempts at violent resistance were even more likely to fail than coordinated attempts, and it is likely that most of such attempts went unrecorded. Indeed, many Armenians, recognizing the likely futility of violent resistance, utilized a range of non-violent strategies in attempting to survive the massacres. The following section turns to examine these approaches.

Non-Violent Resistance

A major non-violent strategy employed by Armenians was that of attempting to purchase immunity from the massacres. The most significant, and perhaps telling, example of this occurred in the town of Egin, in the province of Harput (also referred to as Mamuret-Ul-Aziz), in Eastern Turkey. Egin was described by missionary Emma Barnum—passing through in 1892—as “a wonderful city.”⁷⁵ Situated on a steep mountainside, with the Euphrates flowing at its base, it was green and picturesque. Barnum described the people as “aristocratic and formal,” “refined and neat.”⁷⁶ “The houses are built of stone, are large and airy, and most of those I visited were beautifully furnished. Egin was a wealthy city, but the people there as well as in other places, are growing poor.”⁷⁷ Estimates as to the number of Armenians, and Armenian households, in Egin are variable. There were perhaps 1,100 households, and around 6,000

⁶⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 309; [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 86, 127.

⁶⁹ [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 86–87.

⁷⁰ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 333.

⁷¹ Ibid., 333–334.

⁷² [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 36.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol. 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Armenians in total.⁷⁸ The city was intermingled, with approximately equal numbers of Moslems and Christians. In 1895, as massacres threatened, the Armenians of Egin collectively decided on a non-violent resistance strategy—that of purchasing immunity from the violence. They paid a Kurdish chief 1,500 Turkish pounds to secure protection.⁷⁹ At something like \$200,000 US dollars today, this equates to a payment of around \$2,000 from every household. At the same time, they also surrendered all their arms to the Turkish government.⁸⁰ Their strategy proved successful, and they were able to avoid being targeted in 1895, even as the violence spread with great severity throughout the remainder of Harput.⁸¹

The reprieve proved not to last, however. In August 1896, when a massacre erupted in Constantinople, the situation in Egin rapidly deteriorated. Local officials seemed to perceive the renewed unrest as an opportunity to target one of the very few places in Harput that had escaped the violence and looting of the previous year.⁸² On September 15 at noon, a single gunshot was fired—the signal for the massacre to commence.⁸³ For three days, the Armenians were targeted in a massacre of particular severity. Estimates suggest that close to 2,000 Armenians were killed, including the majority of adult males.⁸⁴ Women and children were also targeted. Many women and girls committed suicide by throwing themselves into the Euphrates river, to avoid being raped or killed.⁸⁵ According to one report, “not one house was left unplundered.”⁸⁶ The vast majority of Armenian houses were then set alight, as were the Armenian churches in the city.⁸⁷ The evidence indicates that the massacre was officially sanctioned, and perpetrated by soldiers and local Turks rather than Kurds.⁸⁸ In its aftermath, the survivors in Egin were left destitute and homeless.

Attempts to purchase immunity from the massacres also occurred in numerous smaller villages, with mixed results. In the Vilayet of Erzeroum, the village of Kamazor paid a ransom in grain from the harvest and ten Turkish pounds; Dodoveran paid a ransom in grain; and Ishgon paid a ransom of thirty Turkish pounds.⁸⁹ Souk Chermak escaped attack by a payment of 120 Turkish pounds.⁹⁰ In this area, it seems likely that news of this strategy spread from one village to another as a possible means of resistance. Abu-Sheikh, in the Egin district in Harput province, paid 200 Turkish pounds in ransom.⁹¹ In the province of Diyarbekir, the inhabitants of Tel-Arman also attempted to purchase their safety. Here, a Kurdish leader demanded payment of 90 Turkish pounds for protection.⁹² After the Armenians paid, however, he increased his demand to 400 pounds. This further payment did not protect the Armenians. The Kurds

⁷⁸ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, v. 12. There are multiple estimates given by missionaries here. One suggests 2,700 Armenian households, and around 15,000 Armenians. Possibly, the difference may reflect the inclusion/exclusion of surrounding suburbs and villages; it must also be noted population estimates throughout Ottoman Turkey in this period are notoriously unreliable. Additionally, Charles Wilson suggests around 10,000 inhabitants in Charles Wilson, *Handbook for Travellers in Asia Minor, Transcaucasia, Persia, Etc.* (London: John Murray, 1895), 251–252.

⁷⁹ Bliss, *Turkey*, 439; *Tabular Statement*, 297, first mentioned in note 38.

⁸⁰ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, vol. 12.

⁸¹ Deborah Mayersen, “The 1895–1896 Armenian Massacres in Harput: Eyewitness Accounts,” *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 10, no. 2 (2018), 161–183.

⁸² ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, vol. 12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 273, October 18, 1896, 296.

⁸⁵ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, vol. 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 273, October 18, 1896, 296.

⁸⁹ *Tabular Statement*, 287, first mentioned in note 38.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁹² David Gaunt, “Two Documents on the 1895 Massacres of Syriacs in the Province of Diyarbekir: A Discussion,” *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 10, no. 2 (2018), 194.

attacked and plundered Tel-Arman, and many Armenians were massacred.⁹³ Occasionally, individuals also sought to purchase their safety. In the village of Tevnik, in Erzeroum province, an Armenian priest was attacked, and his house looted.⁹⁴ To save his life, he promised his attackers a payment of 100 liras. As soon as he escaped, he traveled to Erzeroum to lodge a complaint about the matter but was shot dead in the violence there. This story highlights the precarious position of the Armenians during the massacres. Attempts to purchase safety were a high-risk strategy that often failed.

A second common non-violent strategy employed by the Armenians was to seek sanctuary in places perceived as safe. The most effective of these proved to be consulates or mission compounds. In Trezibond, for example, 150 Armenians took refuge at the Russian consulate when massacres erupted in the town.⁹⁵ All the consulates there “gave refuge to the fugitives pursued by the assassins.”⁹⁶ When the massacres reached Diarbekir in November 1895, more than 700 Christians took refuge at the French consulate.⁹⁷ Kurdish desires to attack the Consular building were repeatedly thwarted.⁹⁸ In Trezibond, the Christian Brothers establishment provided refuge for more than 2,000 Armenians during the massacres there, while in Cesarea, missionaries managed to protect over 100 Armenians on their premises.⁹⁹ During the massacres in the city of Harput, hundreds of Armenians sought refuge in the missionary complex. As the attack progressed, however, the complex itself became a target. Homes and buildings that were part of it were plundered and set alight. Eventually, the missionaries and Armenians sought refuge in the college building. “At one time it looked as if we should all go up in a fiery chariot together” wrote missionary Susan Wheeler, “We shall never forget this day the 12th and the night with the flames and clouds of smoke so dense about us.”¹⁰⁰ Some 450 Armenians and missionaries survived several extremely tense days in the building, before the danger eased.¹⁰¹

In Van, the missionary station and the British Vice Consul worked together to protect Armenians from the massacre there. Up to 15,000 Armenians sought shelter as the British Vice Consul raised the Union Jack at the American mission, along with making “herculean efforts” to save Armenians in the small Armenian quarter of the city.¹⁰² Not all those who sought refuge survived the massacre—while the Mayor, Ghalib Pasha, initially received several hundreds of Armenians, he later turned them out, and more than one hundred men and boys from the group were then killed.¹⁰³ In Erzeroum, attempts were made to prevent Armenians seeking refuge in the consulates. In the street where the American Mission House and several consulates were located, a patrol hid behind a woodpile in front of the French consulate and kept the area under fire to prevent Armenian access.¹⁰⁴ The English consul stopped this by threatening to fire on the patrol if they continued.¹⁰⁵ For those Armenians able to reach consulates or missionary

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Bliss, *Turkey*, 425.

⁹⁵ *Tabular Statement*, 281–283.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 283.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 299; France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 118 (Annex 1), November 4, 1895, 166–168.

⁹⁸ *Tabular Statement*, 299.

⁹⁹ Bliss, *Turkey*, 469; *Tabular Statement*, 283.

¹⁰⁰ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol. 8.

¹⁰¹ For a more detailed account, see Mayersen, *The 1895–1896 Armenian Massacres*, 161–183.

¹⁰² For account of missionary Dr. Grace Kimball, see Arman Kirakossian, ed., *The Armenian Massacres 1894–1896: US Media Testimony* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 185–187; Grace Kimball, “The Massacres at Van,” *Review of Reviews* 14 (October 1896), 468–469. The version consulted has been reprinted. Both citations have been included due to the importance of both publications; ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.7, vol. 10.

¹⁰³ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.7, vol. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Bliss, *Turkey*, 423.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 423–424.

complexes, this often—but not always—proved an effective way in which to survive the massacres. However, the vast majority of Armenians, scattered in hundreds of towns and villages throughout the empire, were unable to access these places of refuge.

Many Armenians attempted to survive the massacres through seeking refuge in churches and cathedrals. This strategy often proved fatal. There are multiple accounts of churches in which Armenians were sheltering being set alight, as in Ourfa. In Boussou, in Harput province, for example, the Armenians successfully defended themselves from attack for three days, before the attackers were reinforced with soldiers.¹⁰⁶ The Armenians then took refuge in their church. The attackers formed a cordon around the church to prevent escape, and then set the church on fire.¹⁰⁷ In Edessa/Urhoy, west of Diyarbekir, Armenians also sought refuge in their church. There they were attacked, and according to a Catholic priest from the region, “blood flowed in streams, covered the church and ran between the walls.”¹⁰⁸ The church was then set alight.¹⁰⁹ In Shabin-Kara-Hissar-Sharki district in Sivas province, more than 2,000 persons took refuge in the Gregorian-Armenian church.¹¹⁰ After being forced to surrender, they were massacred.¹¹¹ In Malatia, in Harput province, the Armenians gathered in two churches and attempted to defend themselves, until they had no choice but to surrender. In one of the churches, the Armenians gave up their arms in exchange for protection, but were then surrounded, with many of them killed.¹¹² In some places, by contrast, churches were not attacked. In Aintab, for example, they provided a place of refuge for an extended period.¹¹³ In Constantinople, the Ambassadors of the Great Powers were disturbed to learn that Armenians taking refuge in the churches there had been surrounded by police, who were preventing supplies of food from reaching the refugees.¹¹⁴ More than 2,000 Armenians sought refuge in this way, but ultimately, the Ambassadors negotiated their peaceful departure from the churches.¹¹⁵ In most cases, Moslem attackers demonstrated no respect for the sanctity of churches, and they did not prove a safe haven.

When the massacres erupted, many Armenians tried to hide in order to save their lives. Vahram Eretzian survived the massacres as a young child in Aghen, in Harput province, when a local Turk hid 13 Armenians in a dark, secret room at his home.¹¹⁶ But his survival came at a terrible cost. Just as an armed mob was approaching the home, a two-year-old boy hiding with them began to cry, but then suddenly fell silent. After the danger passed, someone lit a match, and it became clear that the boy had been strangled. Vahram recalled: “Nobody asked anything, but that child saved 12 Armenians with his death.”¹¹⁷ Eflatoon Elmajian also survived the massacres by hiding, aged just five years old.¹¹⁸ Eflatoon’s parents wanted to escape and hide from an impending massacre, but with two other young children, they could not take him with them as well. Before fleeing their home, they put him in a bread box, a large round box about 90 centimeters in diameter, which was usually used to store the family’s bread supply. Told to pray, he repeated the Lord’s Prayer in his hiding place even as the house was plundered.

¹⁰⁶ [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d’Arménie*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Gaunt, *Two Documents*, 194.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Tabular Statement*, 303.

¹¹¹ Ibid.; See also Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 267, for a further example from Sivas.

¹¹² Bliss, *Turkey*, 436.

¹¹³ Ümit Kurt, “Reform and Violence in the Hamidian Era: The Political Context of the 1895 Armenian Massacres in Aintab,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2018), 412, 414.

¹¹⁴ France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques*, Doc. No. 102, October 8, 1895, 145.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., see also Doc. No. 104, October 8, 1895, 146 and Doc. No. 109, October 12, 1895, 150.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Vahram Eretzian, October 3, 1985, Interview Code 53410, Shoah Visual History Archive.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Eflatoon Elmajian, March 8, 1984, Interview Code 53409, Shoah Visual History Archive.

Miraculously, his hiding place was not discovered. In the evening, his parents were overjoyed to find him still alive.¹¹⁹

Armenians hid anywhere they could to survive. This included in garrets under straw, under manure heaps, under piles of charcoal, and in wells.¹²⁰ For some, “their shelters proved to be a living grave.”¹²¹ Armenians in rural areas were sometimes able to take advantage of their surroundings in order to hide. Five Armenians escaped the massacre at Schepik, near Arabkir, by hiding in a cave for twelve days.¹²² Another survivor, writing of his experiences escaping the massacres, commented that “for eight days, the brambles of the desert were our bed and the stones our pillow.”¹²³ Many such hiding places were highly precarious. In one case, three brothers hiding amongst some trees were caught by soldiers and brutally murdered, while their mother, hiding nearby, could do nothing but watch.¹²⁴ Others survived by hiding amongst rocks and thickets, moving about as they could, lacking even the most basic necessities.¹²⁵ While many were caught and murdered, the relatively short duration of the massacres in most places meant that for some, these strategies enabled them to survive.

Some Armenians sought assistance from local Turks or Kurds to survive the massacres. While the evidence suggests that most of the Moslem population was hostile to the Armenians, in a small minority of cases, Armenians were hidden or protected from the violence by their neighbors or friends. In Erzeroum, for example, many Turks hid Armenians in their homes or shops while the massacre raged.¹²⁶ In one case, a Turk saved an Armenian by telling the soldiers that wanted to kill him that he would march him off to the Government House to be hanged. Once out of the soldiers’ sight, he then took the Armenian to a safe place, before later enabling him to return home.¹²⁷ In Aintab, British Consul Barnham reported that “some of the Moslem inhabitants behaved with great humanity in protecting Christians, and it is said that nearly 2,000 Armenians took refuge in their houses.”¹²⁸ Many of those who sought assistance from Turks or Kurds, however, found themselves cruelly betrayed. In Sassoun province, a group of one hundred or so refugees who had fled the massacres appealed to the local Hinatsee tribe of Kurds for protection. The Kurds seemed to promise protection, but after luring the group to a ravine, proceeded to rape, plunder, and murder them.¹²⁹ In another case, an Armenian woman was discovered hiding in a straw bin as her house was plundered. The Kurd who discovered her demanded her shoes; after surrendering them, she begged he take her and her small son to a place of refuge. Somewhat surprisingly, he did so. When she exclaimed “Glory to thee, Jesus!” however, the Kurd remarked that her misfortunes were because of such beliefs.¹³⁰ As soon as the opportunity presented itself, the woman fled, fearing again for her safety.¹³¹ As is the case with other episodes of mass violence against specifically targeted groups, only a tiny minority of the wider population offered assistance to the victims.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol. 6.

¹²¹ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 392.

¹²² Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 182–183.

¹²³ [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d’Arménie*, 167.

¹²⁴ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 334–335.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 335–339.

¹²⁶ Bliss, *Turkey*, 421.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Consul Barnham to Sir P. Currie, Aleppo, November 24, 1895, FO 424/184. Foreign Office, Confidential Print Turkey, Asiatic Turkey, Further Correspondence, United Kingdom National Archives, London.

¹²⁹ Williams and Gabriel, *Bleeding Armenia*, 336–338.

¹³⁰ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol. 4.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Resistance to Forced Conversion

During the massacres, thousands of Armenians were confronted with the terrible choice of converting to Islam or being killed. A remarkable number chose to resist by refusing to convert.¹³² The clergy were a specific target of the perpetrators for forced conversion. For example, the preacher Hanna Sedha was caught by Kurds while trying to flee but refused to accept Islam to save his life. According to the missionary records: “The last seen of him by one of his church members as he looked back in his flight, he was extending his arms to ward off the sword blows which hewed him down after which a gun was discharged into his body.”¹³³ In a seven-page tribute to the “noble army of martyrs,” Protestant missionary Carrie Bush outlined the stories of many preachers and pastors similarly killed for refusing to convert.¹³⁴ Often the clergy were tortured, prior to being killed, for refusing to accept Islam. In Zileh, in Sivas province, the priests Der Arisdakes and Der Megherditsch were killed for refusing to convert: “the former was previously blinded, the latter was skinned.”¹³⁵ At Tadem, the Archimandrite (monastic priest) Ohannes Papizian had his hands cut off for refusing to convert, and then his arms at the elbow. When he still refused, he was beheaded.¹³⁶

Entire communities faced similarly stark choices. In Harput, many Armenians sought refuge from the massacres in a church. Induced to come out, they were allowed to pass through the door only one at a time. “Each one, as he came out of the church, was invited to embrace Mohammedanism. All who refused were killed on the spot. Fifty-two thus accepted martyrdom, among them the venerable Protestant Pastor Krikor.”¹³⁷ At Schepik, near Arabkir, almost all the young men of the village—along with two priests—were killed for refusing to convert.¹³⁸ In Birejik, soldiers appeared to systematically search for men, killing all those they found who refused to accept Islam.¹³⁹ One “old man” was tortured with hot coals, “and as he was writhing in torture they held a Bible before him and mockingly asked him to read them some of the promises in which he had trusted.”¹⁴⁰ In another case, a survivor reported his “old Aunt Eva” as having been “cut to pieces before our eyes” for refusing to embrace Islam.¹⁴¹ Resistance through refusing to convert, even in the face of certain death, was a significant and widespread form of resistance during the massacres.

Questioning the Boundaries of Resistance: Forced Conversion and Suicide

Armenians during the Hamidian massacres took two further courses of action to attempt to alter their fate, which may arguably be considered forms of resistance. The first was to convert to Islam in order to save their lives. Tens of thousands of Armenians converted during the course of the massacres. Evidence indicates that in a great number of cases such conversion was insincere and undertaken purely to avoid being killed. There is no doubt that huge pressure was placed on Armenians to convert.¹⁴² In places like Birejik, about half the adult Christian men were killed, while “the other half have become Mussulmans to save their lives, so that there is not a single Christian left in Birejik today.”¹⁴³ In Harput, “two hundred families had to profess

¹³² Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat*, 499.

¹³³ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, vols. 5–6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.9.8, vol 4.

¹³⁵ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 269.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹³⁷ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol 6.

¹³⁸ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 182–184.

¹³⁹ Bliss, *Turkey*, 471.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹⁴¹ [Tchobanian], *Les massacres d'Arménie*, 168.

¹⁴² ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol. 6.

¹⁴³ Bliss, *Turkey*, 472.

Islam under threats of death.”¹⁴⁴ Forcible conversion was extensive throughout the regions impacted by the massacres, with innumerable similar accounts. Arguably, as an “attempt by the oppressed [individual or group] to limit, thwart or end that oppression,” forced conversion may be considered as a form of resistance.¹⁴⁵ Yet, there are also persuasive arguments against this position. To convert to Islam was to effectively surrender Armenian identity, meeting a key goal of the perpetrators.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, Armenians were likely aware that this was potentially an irrevocable decision, with the punishment for apostasy in Islam being death. Thus, while it is clear that many Armenians converted to Islam to save their lives, it is less clear the extent to which these actions should be regarded as resistance.

Suicide was perhaps the most desperate strategy utilized by Armenians during the massacres. In many cases, suicide was undertaken as a group. Predominantly women and children appear to have committed suicide, often to escape sexual violence and slavery. In the village of Ozoonovah/Ozunonah in Harput province, for example, 55 Armenian women and girls were “carried off” by Moslems.¹⁴⁷ While being transported along the Euphrates river, “by a swift decision, they all jumped into the river and drowned themselves to escape a life of Mohammedan slavery and bestiality.”¹⁴⁸ As the massacre in Egin was underway, many women and girls similarly threw themselves in the Euphrates and drowned.¹⁴⁹ In the villages around the town of Baiburt, “about fifty young women threw themselves into the wells, and thus met death, to escape dishonor.”¹⁵⁰ Reports of women and girls committing suicide to escape rape and forced marriage come from a wide range of regions.¹⁵¹ Considering whether such suicides constitute a form of resistance, however, raises complex issues. While suicide may indeed thwart or limit the oppression that would otherwise be experienced by the victim, it also effectively meets the murderous goals of the perpetrators. Yet, some have argued that suicide amidst mass violence should be considered an act of resistance. This perspective sees suicide as an act of defiance—one “made to rob a perpetrator of an opportunity to kill and allow a victim to meet death on her own terms.”¹⁵² In Nazi concentration camps, suicides “often had an extremely important function as a dramatic protest against the idea and ideology of the camp.”¹⁵³ In the Hamidian massacres, they allowed Armenian women to preserve their dignity, even when faced with death.¹⁵⁴ In many cases, perhaps suicide was the only way in which Armenians could resist the massacres, and therefore should be considered as such.

Resistance and Survival

Several findings can be made with respect to Armenian resistance to the Hamidian massacres. First, the sheer prevalence of resistance is a notable feature. In many cases, resistance was not possible; but when it was possible, it appears to have been widespread. Armenians demonstrated tremendous agency in seeking to ameliorate their circumstances however they could. Agency, that is “the choices individuals have, take or don’t take, the decisions and actions of individuals, and the consequence of these actions,” has been widely recognized as playing an

¹⁴⁴ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 269.

¹⁴⁵ Gottlieb, *The Concept of Resistance*, 40.

¹⁴⁶ Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat*, 498.

¹⁴⁷ Frederick Davis Greene, *Armenian Massacres or The Sword of Mohammed* (n.p.: American Oxford Pub. Co., 1896), 36–37.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Bliss, *Turkey*, 440. The account of these events differs slightly in each source.

¹⁴⁹ ABCFM, 1871–1909, 16.10.1, v.12.

¹⁵⁰ Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, 255.

¹⁵¹ Bliss, *Turkey*, 444; ABCFM 1871–1909, 16.9.8, vol 6.

¹⁵² Alexis Herr, “Is Suicide a Form of Resistance to Genocide? Suicide during the Armenian Genocide and in Syria,” *Assessing Atrocity* (blog), December 13, 2016, accessed February 19, 2022, <https://assessingatrocity.com/assessing-atrocity/is-suicide-a-form-of-resistance-to-genocide-suicide-during-the-armenian-genocide-and-in-syria>.

¹⁵³ Zdzislaw Ryn, “Suicides in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 16, no. 4 (1986), 433.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

important role in the dynamics of survival during mass atrocities.¹⁵⁵ As Frédéric Mégret has noted, “of all those who escaped atrocities while atrocities were being committed, a very large proportion owed their rescue to themselves, the courage of ordinary strangers or resistance movements.”¹⁵⁶ For the Armenians, agency involved deploying any potential asset that might prove helpful for survival. This included everything from utilizing advantageous topography to the assistance of foreign diplomats. Intracommunal cooperation was critical to large-scale attempts at resistance, including armed resistance in Zeitoun, Van, and Ourfa, and the non-violent resistance in Egin. Evidence indicates that intracommunal cooperation and resistance are strategies that can facilitate communal self-protection during mass violence.¹⁵⁷ Also clear, however, is the hostile environment that surrounded the Armenians. There are only a small number of cases of Turks or Kurds offering genuine assistance to save or protect Armenians from the violence. It appears that the Armenians tried everything possible to resist the Hamidian massacres, within the confines of the dire circumstances in which they found themselves.

Despite these extensive efforts, the vast majority of resistance attempts had poor outcomes. This is a consistent finding across multiple parameters. With the exception of Zeitoun (and the partial exception of Van), attempts at armed resistance were largely unsuccessful. In many cases, the perpetrators exacted terrible vengeance once the resistance had been overcome. Successful armed resistance appears to have required an exceptional circumstance: in Zeitoun, where the Turkish army simply could not defeat the Zeitounlis; in Van, where the external intervention of British Consul Williams tempered the outcome; and in Guermuch, where incredibly, the Armenians bluffed their way to survival. Most other attempts at armed resistance, whether large-scale or small, were crushed. Unarmed resistance was similarly unlikely to succeed, with the exception of exceptional circumstances. Here too, external involvement, either from diplomatic officials or missionaries, often tempered the outcome, as in the city of Harput. Communal attempts at non-violent resistance, such as purchasing immunity or seeking sanctuary in churches, often proved ineffective. Some individuals and small groups were able to successfully evade the massacres through hiding wherever they could, but many more, it seems, could not. Despite the agency of the Armenians in attempting to protect themselves, and despite the diversity of strategies and approaches, resistance proved largely futile.

This study of resistance enables broader reflection on a key issue long debated in studies of the Hamidian massacres—that of the role of the Abdul Hamid II regime in their perpetration. As Boris Adjemian and Mikael Nichanian have noted, “interpretations deeply diverge on this matter.”¹⁵⁸ Taner Akçam, for example, has asserted: “it is clear that the massacres of 1894–96 were centrally planned.”¹⁵⁹ Ronald Suny similarly adopts this position, declaring “blame for the mass killing of Armenians in the mid-1890s must fall on the highest levels of the state.”¹⁶⁰ By contrast, Robert Melson did not come to a firm conclusion on the matter, suggesting only that the sultan “initiated or tolerated” the massacres.¹⁶¹ Abdul Hamid’s biographer, François Georgeon, contends that to ascribe the massacres to the Sultan would be to ignore “the

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Kühne and Mary Jane Rein, eds., *Agency and the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Deborah Dwork* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.

¹⁵⁶ Frédéric Mégret, “Beyond the ‘Salvation’ Paradigm: Responsibility To Protect (Others) vs the Power of Protecting Oneself,” *Security Dialogue*, 40, no. 6 (December 2009), 583.

¹⁵⁷ Deborah Mayersen, “‘Is Help Coming?’ Communal Self-Protection during Genocide,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020), 8.

¹⁵⁸ Boris Adjemian and Mikael Nichanian, “Rethinking the ‘Hamidian Massacres’: The Issue of the Precedent,” *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 10 (2018), 19–29.

¹⁵⁹ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Constable, 2007), 33.

¹⁶⁰ Ronald Grigor Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 98.

¹⁶¹ Melson, *Revolution and Genocide*, 43–69.

extreme prudence in foreign and domestic policy that he manifested during his long reign," emphasizing the responsibility of local authorities for the massacres.¹⁶² A multitude of Turkish sources also deny any official sanction of the atrocities.

The present study provides strong evidence in favor of the central organization, and orders, for the massacres. The overall failure of Armenian resistance, despite all efforts, is telling. Armenians were repeatedly disarmed by Turkish soldiers prior to the onset of massacres, such as in Birejik and in Ourfa (as they were under siege). Those that attempted armed resistance often found themselves fighting against government forces.¹⁶³ In Zeitoun, literally thousands of Turkish soldiers were brought into the region to try and defeat the Zeitounlis. In Ourfa, the government promised protection to Armenians even as it demanded their disarmament. When the Armenians sought such protection, however, soldiers instigated a massacre that killed several thousand. These events indicate a pattern in which Armenian resistance was repeatedly crushed by government forces. Similar inferences regarding government involvement can be made with respect to the complete failure of government forces to curb the violence or protect Armenians from it. While accounts abound of the role of officials in instigating massacres and tolerating the violence, there is a conspicuous absence of accounts in which officials acted to forestall or curb massacres. Foreign diplomats and missionaries, despite their small number and very limited capacity, were able to save literally thousands of lives, but there is no record of Ottoman government intervention similarly providing protection. Collectively, the evidence demonstrates a high degree of culpability of the Ottoman government in the perpetration of the massacres.

Conclusion

This study provides strong evidence that Armenian resistance to the Hamidian massacres was widespread. Everywhere they could, Armenians sought to survive and resist the violence, using a wide range of strategies. In places in which they had a numerical or topographical advantage, such as Zeitoun and Van, armed group resistance was the preferred strategy. In other locations, Armenians chose to violently resist even when prospects of survival seemed bleak. In many communities, non-violent strategies such as attempts to purchase immunity, to seek sanctuary, or to hide seemed to offer the best prospects of success. Armenians used their local knowledge, ingenuity, and determination to survive in whatever ways they could. It is difficult to assess the impact of Armenian resistance to the violence. In Zeitoun and Van, it unquestionably saved the lives of thousands of Armenians. In other places, like Egin, it appears to have only delayed the violence. Moreover, in many places in which resistance was defeated, the perpetrators appear to have sought retribution through more extreme acts of violence, that entirely destroyed the communities involved. Ultimately, the ferocity of the massacres, and the powerlessness of the Armenians, overwhelmed attempts to ameliorate the impact of the violence. While some individuals, such as Krikor Haitaian, survived due to acts of resistance, more than 100,000 Armenians perished in the massacres.

The impact of Armenian resistance to the Hamidian massacres goes well beyond a reckoning of lives saved, however. The many acts of resistance—those successful and those defeated—stand as a testament to a proud people. Armenians were determined to maintain their identity in spite of the oppression they experienced, a determination that continues today. There is every reason to suggest some of the courageous acts of resistance during the massacres may have inspired Armenian resistance during the subsequent genocide. The Armenians of Musa Dagh were undoubtedly aware of the resistance of the Zeitounlis in the massacres when they chose to resist during the genocide. Van, which had some success in resisting the massacres, also mounted a resistance to the genocide that saved many thousands of lives. Perhaps this legacy of resistance continues to inspire the Armenian people today, as they now battle against genocide denial.

¹⁶² François Georgeon, *Abdulhamid II: Le Sultan Calife* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 293.

¹⁶³ Avedis Nakashian, *A Man Who Found a Country* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1940), 160–161.

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