

THE MISSED OCCASION: SUCSESSES OF THE HAMIDIAN POLICE AGAINST THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARIES, 1905-1908

(KAÇIRILAN FIRSAT: HAMİDİYE POLİSİNİN ERMENİ
DEVİRİMCİLERİNE KARŞI BAŞARILARI, 1905-1908)

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Abstract: *During the last years of Abdülhamit's era, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation faced huge difficulties, both in the Ottoman Empire and Russia. After years of failed attempt to provoke a foreign intervention through terrorism and, above all, rebellions (1896-1904), the ARF tried to obtain similar results through terrorism alone, in İstanbul and İzmir. In 1905, the Dashnaks tried to kill the Sultan, but failed twice, and their main leader was even killed by his own bomb, during the preparation of the first attempt. Partially as a result of the second failure, the Ottoman police discovered a plot to devastate İzmir, as well as the İzmir-Aydın and İzmir-Uşak railways. Most of the plotters were arrested and sentenced. Last but not least, the betrayal of one prominent Dashnak and the denunciations by anonymous Armenians, permitted to the Ottoman security forces to dismember the Dashnak network in Van, the last province where the ARF maintained its capacity as a guerilla force. As a result, it appears that the Young Turk revolution, by naïveté, saved the Dashnaks precisely at the time when they were close to disappearing in the Ottoman Empire as a strong revolutionary party.*

Keywords: *Abdülhamit II, Armenian question, Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Committee Union and Progress, İstanbul, İzmir, terrorism, Van, Young Turks.*

Öz: *Abdülhamit döneminin son yıllarında, Ermeni Devrimci Federasyonu hem Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda hem de Rusya'da büyük zorluklar yaşamaktaydı. Yıllar boyunca süren terörizm ve isyanlar (1896-1904) yoluyla yabancı devletlerin müdahalesini sağlama çabalarının başarısız olmasıyla, ARF İstanbul ve İzmir'de benzer sonuçları tek başına terörizmi*

deneyerek elde etti. 1905'te, Taşnaklar iki kere padişahı öldürmeyi deneyip başarısız oldular hatta kendi liderleri kendi bombasıyla, ilk girişim için hazırlık yaparken öldü. İkinci başarısızlıklarının kısmi sonucu olarak, Osmanlı polisleri İzmir'i özellikle de İzmir-Aydın ve İzmir-Uşak demiryolunu harabeye çevirecek bir komployu keşfettiler. Bütün komplocular yakalandı ve idam edildi. Son olarak da, önde gelen Taşnaklardan birinin ihaneti ve kimliği bilinmeyen Ermenilerin ihbar edilmesiyle, Osmanlı güvenlik güçlerine Taşnakların gerilla kuvveti sağladıkları son il olan Van'daki bağlantılarını yok etme izni vermiştir. Sonuç olarak, Jön Türkler devrimi öyle görünüyor ki, 'naiflikle' Taşnakları, güçlü bir devrimci parti olarak, tam olarak, Osmanlı Devleti içinde yok olmak üzereyken kurtarmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: 2. Abdülhamit, Ermeni Sorunu, Ermeni Devrimci Federasyonu, İstanbul, İzmir, Terörizm, Van, Jön Türkler

The last years of Abdülhamit II's personal reign are the most neglected by the researchers working on the Armenian issue, in spite of at least one spectacular event: the attempt, by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) to kill the sultan, in 1905. There is nothing about this bombing in Kâmuran Gürün's book or in the massive study on *Minorities and the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire* by Salâhi R. Sonyel.¹ In his last book, Yücel Güçlü makes only a short allusion to the attempt to murder Abdülhamit, and does not study the 1905-1908 period.² Similarly, the classic study of Louise Nalbandian ends in 1896 and the more recent one, by Dikran Mersop Kaligian starts in 1908.³ One of the very few scholarly books paying attention to this time is the one of Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran and Ömer Turan, but it focuses on Van.⁴ Even more strikingly, the Dashnak plot in İzmir, in 1905, analyzed below, seems virtually unknown even among the specialists.

Regardless, the 1905-1908 period has a clear specificity. First of all, after the failure of the Dashnak insurrection at Sasun, in 1904, there was a decade without massive Armenian insurrection in the Ottoman Empire—if you consider the inter-communal clashes of 1909 in Adana as a *sui generis*, an aborted project of uprising which led to mutual violence and massacre.⁵ Between 1890 and 1922, the Armenian committees were constantly involved in important military or paramilitary activities, except between 1904/5 and 1914: There were rebellions against the Ottoman government (1890-1904; 1914-1916); volunteers units for the Russian (1914-1917), French (1916-1920) and Greek (1919-1922) armies; Armeno-Turkish wars (1917-1918; 1920); Armeno-Azeri conflict (1918-1920); and rebellion against the Soviets (1921). Second, from 1905 to 1908, unlike the 1908-1914 years, the Armenian revolutionary committees were not allowed to work in the Ottoman Empire openly. The weak and rather desperate situation of the Armenian committees, their failures, does not imply that their actions at that time were irrelevant, or that their situation of weakness is unimportant for the historian. We know, today, that the Armenian committees survived after 1908 and attained their

1 Kâmuran Gürün, *The Armenian File: the Myth of Innocence Exposed*, Nicosia-London: K. Rüstem & Brothers/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985; Salâhi R. Sonyel, *Minorities and the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire*, Ankara: TTK, 1993.

2 Yücel Güçlü, *The Holocaust and the Armenian Case in Comparative Perspective*, Lanham-Boulder-Toronto-Plymouth: University Press of America, 2012.

3 Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1963; Dikran Mersop Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology under the Ottoman Rule, 1908-1914*, New Brunswick (NJ): Transaction Publishers, 2009.

4 Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran and Ömer Turan, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006.

5 On this affair: Kemal Çiçek, (ed.), *1909 Adana Olayları Makaleler/The Adana Incidents of 1909 Revisited*, Ankara: TTK, 2011; and Salâhi Sonyel, "The Turco-Armenian 'Adana Incidents' in the Light of Secret British Documents (July 1908-December 1909)," *Belleten*, LI/201, 1987, pp. 381-449, http://www.ttk.gov.tr/templates/resimler/File/fulltext/Belleten_Makale/bel201-1291_1338.pdf

climax of paramilitary activity in 1915.⁶ The Dashnak and Hunchak leaders or the chiefs of Abdülhamit's police could not know the future in 1906. A satisfactory knowledge of history needs a large study of the events, and if possible a study of the failed alternatives, as well as of the reasons why these alternatives failed.

This paper tries to present the first analysis and interpretation of the 1905-1908 period, from the perspective of the fight between the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian committees. This is also an invitation for further research, based on the archives of the Hamidian police and justice.

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I) A depressed, weakened, beheaded ARF tries in vain to assassinate Abdülhamit

A) Context: the accumulation of failures and the new strategy (1896-1908)

After isolated uprisings (Zeytun 1862 and 1878), the first wave (1890-1896) of important Armenian insurrections were organized by the Hunchak party—who advocated a mix of

Marxism and extreme nationalism—especially in Sasun (1894) and Zeytun (1895-1896), but the crisis and reprisals provoked by these insurrections eventually failed to provoke the so-desired intervention of the UK and/or Russia. There was even a split within the Hunchak party, a faction leaving the organization to create the Reformed Hunchak Party, without references to Socialism. As a result, the ARF, in spite of the failure of its first attempts (1891) took the place of the Hunchak party as the dominant nationalist-revolutionary organization among the Armenians.⁷

The Dashnaks had a more sophisticated organization, from Western Europe to the Caucasus⁸ but they failed, not less than the Hunchaks, to provoke a Russian and/or British military intervention. The attack on the Ottoman Bank killed innocent Turks and provoked the desired reprisals on both guilty and innocent Armenians. Regardless, the major powers did not go beyond some verbal

6 Among other references, see Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians. A Study in Counterinsurgency*, New York-London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, pp. 143-212.

7 William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960, pp. 158-164 and 321; Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005, pp. 11-29; Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary...*, pp. 104-131. Also see: François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: le sultan calife (1876-1909)*, Paris: Fayard, 2003, p. 291-295.

8 Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians...*, pp. 15-26.

protestation, and they had some reasons to do so, since their representatives, especially the British ones, understood the foolish strategy of the ARF. The British ambassador found “admirable” the behavior of part of the Ottoman army during the attack.⁹ Even more disappointing, from the Dashnak perspective, a gang of the ARF attacked a Kurdish tribe close to Van in 1897, butchering women and children, mutilating their victims with the hope to provoke bloody reprisals. However, this time, the new governor of Van prevented any counter massacre by Kurds of Armenians.¹⁰ Similarly, Abdülhamit II appointed a new governor of Erzurum in 1895, Rauf (Réouf) Paşa. As early as 1896, Rauf had reorganized the gendarmerie and obtained successes against the Armenian revolutionaries without damages for the ordinary Armenians, obtaining the congratulations of the Russian consul himself.¹¹

Apparently unimpressed by these failures, the ARF launched guerilla warfare in eastern Anatolia in 1898. However, once again the Dashnaks did not obtain the expected result, and, as early as 1899, two of the most efficient leaders in eastern Anatolia, Aram Aramian and Serop Vartanian of the ARF, were killed by the Ottoman forces. Also in 1899, Mikayel Der Mardirosyan, who tried to create a Dashnak network in Cilicia, was arrested by the Ottoman police. After the failure of the Sasun insurrection, in 1904, the Dashnak leadership decided to stop such actions.¹² The failure of these revolts was expensive and, after 1900, the ARF increasingly used racketeering, death threats and, if needed, exemplary assassinations to raise money. By doing so, the Dashnaks obtained some successes,¹³ but the practice of murder was dangerous. For example, on October 17, 1902, the ARF assassinated Mateos Baliozian, a wealthy merchant of İzmir, because he systematically refused to give any money to the “Armenian cause.” His murderer, a Dashnak apparently arrived from Iran, was arrested the same day. On August 21, 1905, this Dashnak hangman was executed in front of a big crowd.¹⁴ Indeed, not all Armenians supported the ARF. Some of them hated this party:

9 Telegrams and reports of the British embassy at İstanbul, August 26, 27, 29 and 30, September 2 and 3, October 27, 1896, in Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on Armenians (1896-1918)*, Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, 2002, pp. 191-195, 197-208, 214-222 et 254 ; William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of...*, pp. 322-325.

10 Telegrams of Ambassador Curie, August 10 and 12, 1897, in Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on...*, pp. 327-328; William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of...*, pp. 349-350.

11 Sidney Whitman, *Turkish Memories*, New York-London, Charles Scribner's Sons/William Heinemann, 1914, pp. 95-97.

12 Hratch Dasnabedian, *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashaktsutiun, 1890/1924*, Milan, Oemme, 1989, pp. 51-52, 59 and 75-76.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

14 Lettres du consul de France à Smyrne à l'ambassadeur et au ministère des Affaires étrangères, 17 octobre 1902, 21 août 1905, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (AMAE), La Courneuve, microfilm P 16 737; Kapriel Serope Papazian, *Patriotism Perverted*, Boston: Baikar Press, 1934, pp. 16-17 and 68.

*“Father heaped again his scorn and sarcasm on the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. ‘It’s destroying our nation! It has ruined our schools, disunited our people. What do your leaders know about international politics? Wasn’t it all this revolutionary foolishness that caused the Massacre?’”*¹⁵

The situation in Russia was even more concerning for the ARF. Russian passivity in 1894-1896 was not welcomed, but the policy of Russification in the Caucasus was considered a *casus belli*. The policy of General Golitsyne, named commander-in-chief for the Caucasus in 1897, and Bobrikov, who became the civil governor one year later, was an aggressive assimilation of all non-Russians, including Armenians.¹⁶ The Dashnaks eventually decided to fight both Abdülhamit and the Tsar and officially adopted Socialism in 1907, turning to an alliance with the European Socialist parties as well as with the Young Turks. Not surprisingly, the tsarist police attacked the Dashnaks with its radical methods, without being annoyed by any intervention from any European consulate or embassy.¹⁷ It was not until 1912 that the ARF reconciled with the Tsarist regime.¹⁸ In addition, the adherence to Socialism provoked the departure and, in reprisal, the assassination by the ARF, of several Dashnak leaders, mostly Ottoman Armenians; Antranik was not killed because he was too popular, but bitterly left the ARF.¹⁹

The efforts of the Dashnaks in Russia “absorbed ARF resources” and “decreased Dashnak activity inside the Ottoman Empire which, in fact, dropped off in 1906 and 1907,” with only Van remaining an important center of activity.²⁰

B) The first plot to kill Abdülhamit

The interruption, for about ten years (1904/1905-1914) in big insurrections did not mean the renunciation of a radical fight against the Ottoman state. Unable, for some years, to attack the Ottoman army, the Dashnaks tried to kill the sultan

15 Leon Z. Surmelian, *I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1945, p. 63.

16 Antoine Constant, *L’Azerbaïdjan*, Paris : Karthala, 2002, p. 223-225.

17 E. Aknouni, *Political Persecution, Armenian prisoners of the Caucasus*, New York, 1911; İnayetullah Cemal Özkaya, *Le Peuple arménien et les tentatives de réduire le peuple turc en servitude*, İstanbul : Belgelerle Türk Tarih Dergisi, 1971, pp. 175-182.

18 Gaïdz Minassian, *Géopolitique de l’Arménie*, Paris : Ellipses, 2005, p. 15. Also see the dispatch of the British Consul in Erzurum, October 14, 1913, FO 195/2450 and the speech of Mr. Berezovsky-Olghinsky, special envoy of *Birjéviya Viedomosty*, April 7, 1913, AMAE, P 16 744.

19 Kapriel Serope Papazian, *Patriotism Perverted...*, pp. 26-31.

20 Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians...*, p. 27.

himself. This decision was taken in 1904, during the same congress that decided to prepare bombings in İzmir (on this affair, see the next part of this paper). For Christapor Mikaelian, by far the main personality who established the ARF in 1890, this project of assassination was an “*idée fixe*” and he played a determining role during the Athens meeting of 1904 in which it was decided to prioritize the attempt against Abdülhamit’s life.²¹

The first attempt was prepared from Bulgaria, where the Dashnak network experienced a dramatic development during the very first years of 20th Century;²² the ARF even maintained a military academy in this country. Regardless, on March 17, 1905, Christapor Mikaelian and his assistant, Vram Kendirian, were killed by their own bomb, on Vitosha Mountain, close to Sofia.²³ For the Dashnaks, Mikaelian’s death was a terrible loss. Their leader was both an ideologue and a manager. One century after his death, his picture was still in the homes of Dashnaks and one of the main specialists of the ARF still used the word “christaporism” for the ideological basis of the Dashnak party, a “revolutionary syncretism.”²⁴

Added to the failure of the second attempt to assassinate the sultan, this accidental death disorganized the ARF. Indeed, not only Mikaelian did disappear, but Safo, in charge of the second attempt of murder, was expelled in 1907—not merely because of his failure, but also, and above all, because he was, in the words of the half-official historian of the Dashnaks, “considered as the source of doubt and slander about the deaths of Kristapor and Vram.” Hrach Dasnabedian does not give any detail about the nature of these “doubts” and “slanders.”²⁵ Regardless, it is safe to assume that the rather humiliating circumstances of the death (the main leader of the ARF and his assistant were not even able to manipulate a bomb properly) had something to do with this internal trouble.

C) The attempt in İstanbul

The second squad preparing the murder of the sultan followed the basic idea defended by Mikaelian: to kill Abdülhamit, on Friday, after the weekly prayer, with a huge bomb placed in a carriage. Albeit sophisticated and based on a

21 Hrach Dasnabedian, *History of the....*, pp.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

23 Gaidz Minassian, *Guerre et terrorisme arméniens*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2002, p. 2, n. 1.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

25 Hrach Dasnabedian, *History of the....*, p. 77, n. 40.

very precise knowledge of Abdülhamit II's habits, the plot had a fundamental flaw: Any change, even minor, in the timing of the sultan would lead the attack to a complete failure, and that is exactly what happened. On July 21st, the day of the attack, the sultan decided to chat with the Sheikh-ül-Islam for some minutes, and the carriage containing the infernal machine exploded in the middle of the crowd, too far from his target to even wound him. The bomb killed, according to the Dashnaks themselves, about forty people.²⁶ Remarkably, and unlike the Dashnak attack against the Ottoman Bank, nine years before, this bloody act of terrorism did not provoke riots against the

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Armenian population of İstanbul. As a result, the ARF failed to provoked any trouble that could eventually lead to an intervention of any great power. The ARF simply appeared to the West as a terrorist organization, similar to the anarchists who had killed French President Sadi Carnot (1894), Italian King Umberto I (1900), and U.S. President William McKinley (1901). "Neither of these costly operations had aroused sympathy in Europe and were judged to be counterproductive."²⁷

This "anarchist" image was reinforced by the arrest of a Belgian anarchist, Charles-Édouard Jorris, who was used as a hangman by the

ARF. Abdülhamit II pardoned Jorris, who became in exchange an informer of the sultan's police.²⁸

The Ramkavar leader Kapriel Serope Papazian, hardly an admirer of Abdülhamit, wrote: "this was another of the spectacular but futile acts of the Dashnagtzoutune. Its success would not have helped the Armenian cause; its failure probably saved our people from greater misfortunes."²⁹ Indeed, even in France, after the assassination of President Carnot in Lyon, by an Italian anarchist, all the Italian-owned shops of the city were sacked and, in many cases, burned.³⁰ The semi-official historian of the ARF, Hratch Dasnabedian, also observes:

26 Mikael Varandian, *Rapport présenté au congrès socialiste international de Copenhague par le parti arménien « Daschnaktzoutioun »*. Turquie — Caucase — Perse, Genève, 1910, pp. 16-17. This figure (40 persons killed) was also published by *The New York Times*, July 22, 1905. Other sources say 26 killed and 58 wounded: Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres...*, p. 32.

27 Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians...*, p. 27.

28 François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II...*

29 Kapriel Serope Papazian, *Patriotism Perverted...*, p. 24.

30 Pierre Milza, *Voyage en Ritalie*, Paris : Payot, 2004, p. 139.

“Ironically, the second large-scale demonstrative activity planned by the ARF in Constantinople shared the fate of the first. The leaders, the very souls of the operation, died in early stages, and the operations did not achieve the desired result.”³¹

II) The failure of the İzmir efforts and plot

A) The gradual discovery of the plot

According to the Dashnak themselves, the discovery of the İzmir plot was largely due to the failure of attempted murder against the sultan, and more precisely to the discovery of papers, first on Jorris, then in Dashnak caches.³² It is a fact that the Ottoman police received the order to be more active, as a result of the bombing. It is also a fact that the first arrests took place on August 8, in the context of the investigation on the attempted murder in İstanbul,³³ and about ten days after the arrest of Charles-Édouard Jorris. A scholarly study of the findings made in the Ottoman capital city, during the weeks following the bombing, has yet to be carried out.

That having been said, it is safe to argue that the conspirators committed serious errors. First of all, one of the main depositories of explosives was a fake “butcher shop,” settled in “a place where the rents are very expensive.” Worse for the camouflage, the “butcher” paid the rent thanks to checks coming from İstanbul each month, and the amount of the checks was “out of any proportion with the needs of this shop and the apparent expenses.” As a result, as soon as the police of İzmir received the order to reinforce the surveillance of the Armenians, this “butcher” was followed closely. The policemen were in a good position to intervene quickly when an accident revealed the true nature of the “butcher shop:” it contained 80 bombs, 35 grenades and important documents, including a booklet entitled “Armenian Catechism,” with a stamp reading “Armenian Revolutionary Committee — Smyrna Branch”. Similarly, the infernal machine deposited to blow up the Ottoman Bank was located in a fake tailor shop, close to the bank. The “tailor” had no customer and regardless paid an expensive rent for months. He was quickly arrested.³⁴

31 Hrach Dasnabedian, *History of the...*, p. 77.

32 Ibid. ; Mikael Varandian, *Rapport présenté au...*, p. 17.

33 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 14 août 1905, *AMAE*, P 16 737.

34 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 16 août 1905, *ibid.*

Further searches and seized documents proved that a committee of seven persons led the conspiracy; the other participants were divided into groups of five: each member of one group knew the *nom de guerre* of the four others, and ignored the work of the groups completely. The bombs arrived “partly from Marseille, partly from Odessa” and the dynamite was bought a Greek smuggler, “far from suspecting the purpose for which it was intended.” Seized documents also provided the list of the Armenian accomplices in various administrations and public places, all destined to be destroyed by explosives. Remarkably, the vali avoided any massive arrests, dismantling the network progressively, relying on the seized documents and the confessions obtained from the arrested terrorists.³⁵

This tactic was fully efficient. Politically, it was highly appreciated by the French Consul General in İzmir, who opposed any sending of a military ship in front of the city, and was successfully backed in this opposition by the Embassy.³⁶ In terms of police findings, the importance of seized documents is already clear; the confessions led the Ottoman authorities to the discovery of bombs at the bottom of two railroad bridges on the İzmir-Aydın line.³⁷ “Four petroleum tins, filled with dynamite of a total weight of 2 cwt [centum weights, namely a total of about 100 kg]” were found, “placed against piers of the respective bridges in such a way as to destroy the bridges its fuses were set upon.”³⁸

Another important discovery of explosives was also made thanks to testimonies of arrested Armenians—but this time, it is impossible to know their identity without the archives of the Ottoman police. At the end of August, in the Crédit Lyonnais (at that time, the biggest bank of the world), the safe rented by an Armenian who had given a false name was carefully opened by specialists. 62 kilograms of dynamite, divided into three packets, were extracted in the presence of the director of the branch as well as of the director of the police. Only after this discovery and a confrontation with one employee of the Crédit Lyonnais (in charge of the strong room), this Armenian, who was already arrested, confessed he had stored dynamite in this safe.³⁹ The Dashnaks duped

35 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 16 août 1905, *ibid.*

36 “Lettre du chargé d’affaires au président du Conseil, ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 28 août 1905, *ibid.*

37 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires”, 24 août 1905, *ibid.*

38 “Dispatch of the British Consul General in Smyrna”, August 26, 1905, in Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on...*, p. 453.

39 “Télégramme du consul général de France à Smyrne”, 27 août 1905, *AMAE*, P 16 737 ; Dispatch of the British Consul General in Smyrna, September 4, 1905, Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on...*, p. 464.

the employees of the bank as follows: the one who rented the safe went to the bank four times per month with jewelry, explaining he needed to deposit that in the safe; his accomplice pretended to be his domestic servant also went, with a bag actually full of dynamite, and hid with his body what his boss was doing in the strong room.⁴⁰ Using information that was not identified by the French Consul, the authorities found 47 kilograms of dynamite in Manisa, and, some days later, seven other kilograms, this time thanks to “denunciations.”⁴¹

B) The precise goals of the conspirators

There is no doubt about the scope of the Dashnak plans in İzmir. The eighty “large” bombs that were found in one house “have not been seen by anyone outside the Turkish Government service.”⁴² The Dashnak who rented the safe in the Crédit Lyonnais eventually confessed this place was not merely for the storage of bombs: According to the plot, 3.5 kilograms should have been left, with appropriate clockwork, to cause the collapse of the bank itself.⁴³

More generally, the seized documents, the confessions and the discovery of caches for dynamite and other explosives, proved that the ARF wanted to destroy “at the same time” the Konak, the barrack, the main post office, the Ottoman Bank, the Public Debt Administration, the bank of Metelin, the Tobacco Régie, the Société des quais de Smyrne, the main cafés of the docks, the Sporting-Club and the railroad stations of Aydın and Kasaba, as well as all the important stations and bridges “until Ouchak [Uşak].” The grenades had to be used against the crowd; indeed, the Dashnaks decided to carry out their project on the anniversary day of Abdülhamit’s accession to the throne, and more specifically at 10:00 p.m. Indeed, at this day and time, İzmir was very crowded, maybe more than in any other moment; more exactly, the yards of the Konak and the barracks (in front of each other) were open to the crowd for this anniversary day. As a result, both the explosion of the building and the grenades would have butchered a significant number of bystanders. In the area formed by the Konak, the barrack and the docks only, about 30,000 inhabitants were concentrated during such an event. At 10:00, it was dark, and some of

40 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires”, 7 septembre 1905, *AMAE*, P 16 737.

41 “Lettres du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 11 et 19 septembre 1905, *ibid.*

42 “Dispatch of the British Consul General in Smyrna”, August 26, 1905, in Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on...*, p. 454.

43 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires”, 19 septembre 1905, *AMAE*, P 16 737.

the bombs would have destroyed the gas lines, provoking virtually complete obscurity and exacerbating the panic. Last but not least, this panic would have certainly led to the fall of many people in the sea. The ARF wanted to kill—directly by bombs, indirectly by the panic—as many people as possible, both among the Turkish and Greek elements of the population, to provoke reprisals against the Armenian civilians, in İzmir itself and also in the countryside—even more easily since bombs would have exploded “until Uşak.”⁴⁴

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The general destruction of the İzmir-Aydın and İzmir-Uşak railroads was prepared not only to provoke reprisals in the hinterland, but also to prevent the arrival of help in İzmir⁴⁵ and so to increase the number of casualties.

Hratch Dasnabedian is rather laconic on the plot, and, unlike for the İstanbul bombing, he does not refer to any published document from the Dashnak archives, but acknowledges some important facts:

“The Smyrna projects were to blow up banks and bridges, burn the custom house, occupy the consulate and so on; in other words, to attack European interests [my emphasis] so as to oblige the Powers to concentrate on the Armenian question.”⁴⁶

These words confirm the project to destroy the Crédit Lyonnais and more generally the radically anti-European dimension of the plot, the foolish dream to “force” the main powers of the time to do what the ARF expected them to do. Incidentally, it may be noticed that a staunch supporter of the “Armenian cause” wrote that the ARF and the ASALA committed “absurd crimes” with the hope to “blackmail” the major powers in the 1980s. It was born from an “illusion” and a “lack of maturity combined with political weakness.”⁴⁷ An Armenian political scientist, quoting these words with approbation, even uses the term “cretinism.”⁴⁸

44 “Lettre du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires”, 19 août 1905, *AMAE*, P 16 737.

45 “Lettres du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères”, 11 et 19 septembre 1905, *ibid.*

46 Hratch Dasnabedian, *History of the...*, p. 77, n. 39.

47 Jacques Derogy, *Resistance and Revenge: The Armenian Assassination of Turkish Leaders Responsible for the 1915 Massacres and Deportations*, Rutgers (NJ): Transaction Publishers, 1990, p. 201.

48 Gaidz Minassian, *Guerre et terrorisme...*, p. 129.

In July 1906, the trial of the conspirators took place. Three were sentenced to death in absentia, eighteen to hard labor for life, six to three years of hard labor, seven to one year in jail and twenty-three were acquitted by lack of evidence. Only two months after this trial, three Armenians were arrested, in possession of documents proving they were sent to establish a new revolutionary organization in İzmir.⁴⁹ An official report of the ARF says that the operations conducted by the Ottoman police in 1905, within İzmir vilayeti, caused “irreparable losses.” It was, explains the document, one of the two major blows for the Dashnaks, the other one being the discovery of the ARF’s stocks of explosives and weapons in Van in 1908.⁵⁰

III) The dismembering of the Dashnak network in Van

A) Davit the informer

Although there are many primary sources and several studies including developments⁵¹ on the Van affair in 1908, it remains little known, even among the specialists of Ottoman history.

For instance, Donald Quataert, in a development criticizing the “Armenian genocide” label speaks (very shortly) about the “massacres of Armenians” in Van, in 1908.⁵² In his very interesting book on *Ottomans and Armenians*, Edward J. Erickson does not devote a single line to this affair.

The beginning of this entire affair was the betrayal of Davit Dehertzi, one of the most promising members of the ARF in Van, at the beginning of 1908. Davit’s decision to go to the Ottoman side is explained in some sources by “a story worthy of romance novel” (Davit wanted to marry an Armenian girl but the leader of the ARF in Van, Aram Manoukian, had a similar design for the same person)⁵³ and in others by the rape of Davit’s fiancée by Manoukian, who took profit from Davit’s trip in Iran.⁵⁴ Considering the huge number of rapes

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49 Lettres du consul général de France à Smyrne à l’ambassadeur et au ministre des Affaires étrangères, 27 juillet et 15 septembre 1906, AMAE, P 16 737.

50 Mikael Varandian, *Rapport présenté au...*, pp. 16-17.

51 See Justin McCarthy and alii, *The Armenian Rebellion...*, pp. 126-127, n. 172 for a list of British and Ottoman primary sources, as well as bibliographical references.

52 Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922*, New York-Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 186.

53 Justin McCarthy and alii, *The Armenian Rebellion...*, p. 111.

54 Kapriel Serope Papazian, *Patriotism Perverted...*, p. 69.

committed by Armenian revolutionaries during the Van insurrection, and by Armenian volunteers in different places of eastern Anatolia, I am inclined to accept the second explanation. Anyway, the fact is that Davit Dehertzi went, at the beginning of 1908, to the office of the Ottoman governor of Van, Ali Rıza Paşa, seeking his revenge.

On February 4, 1908, Davit led the Ottoman soldiers to the monastery Sourp Krikor, ten kilometers from Van, where “283 boxes of cartridges” were found. On February 5 and 6, Davit’s information caused the discovery of “300 pieces of dynamite and several caches of weapons,” containing, according to the French Consul, “360 rifles and handguns, and 300,000 cartridges.” Also on February 5, Sebouk, one of the Dashnak leaders in Van, was found and killed during a clash with the Ottoman military. On February 6, a new, bigger clash erupted between a gang of sixty Dashnaks and the Ottoman forces; the next day, “the revolutionaries occupied a part of” Van. Six days later, “tranquility was restored in Van” and the clashes had “no consequences,” “thanks to the wisdom and moderation of authorities.” On March 23, the revolutionaries attacked once again, murdering Davit; about sixty Armenians were killed by the infuriated populace in reprisal, but the military governor “stopped the massacre almost at its beginning.”⁵⁵ Davit, who had converted to Islam, had left the house where he was hidden for the first time in almost two months; his Dashnak murderer, Dacat Terlimazian, killed eight Muslims to protect his attempt to flee—successfully.⁵⁶

“Three battalions of regular troops” were sent to restore the tranquility and the vali had “the best intentions.”⁵⁷ Considering the exasperation of the Muslim population and the popularity of Davit among both Turks and Kurds, it is remarkable that the Ottoman authorities were able to block the extent of reprisals against the Armenian civilians, unlike in the same vilayet in 1896 or in several other places of Anatolia in 1895.

B) The second wave of denunciations

The aftermath is even less known than the story of Davit itself. Indeed, “quietly (*dans le calme*),” without any resistance from the Dashnaks, and thanks to “numerous denunciations,” the Ottoman forces seized in May

55 “Lettre de l’ambassadeur de France au ministère des Affaires étrangères”, 2 avril 1908, *AMAE*, P 16742. Also see the report of the British Vice-Consul in Van, February 9, 1908, in Muammer Demirel (ed.), *British Documents on...*, pp. 477-483.

56 Justin McCarthy and alii, *The Armenian Rebellion...*, p. 112.

57 “Lettre de l’ambassadeur de France au ministère des Affaires étrangères”, 2 avril 1908, *AMAE*, P 16742.

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“100 war weapons, 100,000 cartridges, 300 kg of dynamite, a lot of powder, and the archives of the [Dashnak] revolutionary committee; in the villages, about 300 war weapons; few of them were freely given by their owners [hoping for the indulgence of the authorities]. One hundred persons have been arrested. [...] Since March 25, the peaceful inhabitants of the region are unmolested. The complaints received by Your Excellency from the Armenian Committee of Geneva are, for a great part, unjustified; they are based on false allegations and seem motivated by the bitterness of the revolutionaries to see an organization compromised by the searches currently carried out.”⁵⁸

This French document is very important, because it proves the existence of other informers, whose work was equally devastating. It also demonstrates the discouragement of the Dashnaks in Van in May 1908, since they did not oppose resistance this time, unlike in February and March. In the same letter, the chargé d'affaires wrote that if the Ottoman government activities should be “closely followed” by the Powers, it would be unadvised to hinder its actions against the ARF. On June 30, 1908, the same diplomat wrote another letter, praising the “very moderate repression,” that “targets only the revolutionaries” and, on July 19, he wished the Ottoman government “punished both Muslims and Christians,” advocating the destruction of the Dashnak organization and leniency for all the minor actors, whatever their religion or ethnicity. The chargé d'affaires also quoted the Vice-Consul in Van, P. Calvière: “95% of the Christian population was connected, willingly or by force, with the revolutionaries,” who “exerted a true tyranny,” but now, “it is finished” and the gendarmerie has only to look at the caches designated by Armenians themselves.⁵⁹

As a result, it is an error to affirm that “the French, Russian and British consuls in Van and their embassies in İstanbul demanded that a full amnesty be given to all Armenians who had been involved in the concealment of weapons or the murder of Davit and other Muslims. They also demanded that Muslims who killed or threatened Armenians, as well as officials accused of complicity, be tried and punished.”⁶⁰ At least for the French, that is inaccurate and unfair. Similarly, the scope of the discoveries, from February to July 1908, should not be underestimated. The Ottoman government estimated the number of seized bombs to be 5,000⁶¹ and the Dashnaks themselves called these operations a

58 “Lettre du chargé d'affaires au ministère des Affaires étrangères”, 10 juin 1908, *AMAE*, P 16742.

59 *AMAE*, P 16742.

60 Justin McCarthy and alii, *The Armenian Rebellion at...*, p. 114.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

“disaster.”⁶² Had the news from the Young Turk revolution arrived in Van one hour later than they actually arrived, the “disaster” would have been even worse for the ARF. Indeed, Aram Manoukian was finally arrested, sentenced to death and went to the gallows. The news of the Revolution provoked a movement of the mob that saved the boss of the Dashnaks in Van.⁶³

Conclusion

After repeated failures (1896-1904) and as a result of its difficulties in Russia, after 1903, the ARF turned to a mostly terrorist strategy, targeting the sultan himself and the province of İzmir. The remaining guerilla forces and war weapons were mostly concentrated in Van vilayeti. These two goals totally failed, and obtained results absolutely opposed to the wishes of the Dashnaks, who lost several of their leaders, including the most important one, Mikaelian. In addition, the remaining network in Van was virtually destroyed in 1908, on the eve of the Young Turk revolution. The Hamidian police and military were incontrovertibly lucky in all three cases, but their effectiveness cannot be denied, and the most obvious evidence is the absence of reprisals in both in İstanbul and İzmir, and the quasi absence of massacre in Van. Further studies will necessarily refine the findings presented in this paper.

As a result, it is an error to affirm that “the French, Russian and British consuls in Van and their embassies in İstanbul demanded that a full amnesty be given to all Armenians who had been involved in the concealment of weapons or the murder of Davit and other Muslims. They also demanded that Muslims who killed or threatened Armenians, as well as officials accused of complicity, be tried and punished.”

As a result, it appears that the main shortcoming of the Young Turk top leadership was not an excess of violence in 1915, but an excess of self-confidence in 1908: The end of the Hamidian autocracy was supposed to magically make disappear the problems of the Empire. The too-often underestimated extent of the Dashnak despair and weakness in 1908 also incites the re-reading of the 1908-1914 as a period of an extremely intensive reconstruction of the ARF’s network. The ways and methods used during these years are not sufficiently studied.

62 Mikael Varandian, *Rapport présenté au...*, p. 17.

63 «Le nouveau gouverneur de Van», *Le Temps*, 13 août 1915, p. 3, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2422643/f2.zoom.langFR>

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