

**ARMENIANS OF VAN PROVINCE DURING THE REIGN OF THE VICEROYS
MAHMUD- KHAIRI, FERIT AND YAVER IN 1908-1909**

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Abstract

In 1908 the Young Turk coup, the restoration of the constitution and the measures taken by the government raised certain hopes and great enthusiasm among the Armenians of Van, because from the point of view of the security of personal and national interests, the Armenians preferred the new constitutional rather than the old Abdul Hamid II dictatorial order. A period of rallies, meetings, fraternization of the Armenian and Turkish peoples began among the Armenian and Turkish population, which was a novelty in the social and political life of Ottoman Turkey. The Armenian political prisoners of Van were released, the activities of national parties were declared legal, and many figures of the Armenian liberation struggle were universally honored. However, the Young Turk revolution not only did not introduce revolutionary changes, but also caused deep despair among the Armenians of Van province.

Keywords: *Van province, Ali Riza, Mahmud-Khairi, Ferit, Yaver, Armenian-Kurdish relations, Nshan Kaljian, Hovsep Khlgatyan*

The Armenians of Van province during the tenure of governors Mahmud Khairi, Mahmud Ferit and Yaver

After the Young Turk coup, former governor Ali Riza continued to serve in Van province for some time. On August 23, 1908, the Armenian and Turkish “fraternal” people of Van, under the influence of revolutionary ideas and motivated by anger, deposed and expelled from the city Ali Riza, the governor of Van, who was a supporter of the Sultanate order and caused distrust of the military.¹ The latter, by telegram, appoints Bashkale muthasarif as his deputy, Province Governor A. H., who had been kicked out of Sarai before that. However, to manage the city instead of him, a council consisting of 7 people² from Armenians and Turks was elected, which was soon replaced by Mikael Hekimyan, an Armenian translator of Karin’s governorship. It was planned that, from now on, the position of the governorship of Van would be given only to Armenians.³ However, contrary to expectations, in August 1908, Mahmud-Khairi

¹ Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, Embassy in Constantinople, 1908, c.1595, sheet 88.

² "Arev", 1908, October 9, N 130.

³ "Asparez" 1908, September 18, N 6.

Pasha of Albanian descent took over the position of governor of Van, which was approved by the new central government and the military command.⁴ Before that, Mahmud-Khairi held the position of military commander of the province and saved hundreds of Armenians in January-February 1908, during the tense days of the treachery of the ARF member Davo and the discovery of the Van armories. This is how Vahan Papazyan, a member of the coalition, describes him: "One with a two-branched long beard, aged, good-natured, weak and unprincipled, although kind and open-minded towards us. In the first constitutional days, the poor man lost his head. He was informed about the events that shocked each other. He asked us for advice on what to do and what position to take. But he felt that his days were muted, he always confided his grievances and complaints to us - grievances against the center's unstable and indecisive policy and the narrow-minded and intolerant attitude towards the country's minorities. Although he was a Turkish official, he was an Albanian patriot and would not hide that he would like to see his homeland separated from the Turks: "Those will in no case become human", he would say..."⁵

After the short tenure of Mahmud-Khairi, in October 1908, Ferit Pasha, who was a member of the first Ottoman parliament, but had been exiled to Fiza (Africa) for 20 years, was appointed as the new viceroy in October 1908.⁶

On March 20, 1909, an unsuccessful assassination attempt was made on M. Ferit. There were people who even tried to blame the Armenians in this matter. However, the newly appointed governor categorically denied such fabrications and presented a certain Kyamil Bey to the investigative bodies.⁷

After Ferit, the acting governor of Van was his deputy, Yaver Pasha,⁸ during which the relations between him and the military commander of the province worsened. One of viceroy's telegrams reveals that he was angry with the military commander because the latter was a "reactionary" in his views and considered himself an opponent of viceroy.⁹

After the July 1908 coup, the situation in Van province seemed bearable for the next 9 months. On that occasion G. Zohrap writes: "Van, Karin, Baghesh, Kharberd, Mush are in normal situation now. The politics of exile of Armenians is not so active. However, individual incidents still happen. But in which part of the country have such incidents never happened? In those provinces and in all the cities of Turkey, Armenians are free to do their work, earn money, enjoy protection, and see respect from the government. Even Sultan Mahmud, Abdul Hamid and Abdul Aziz had not ever provided

⁴ Yeramean 1929: 92.

⁵ Papazian 1952: 27.

⁶ "Ashkhatanq", 1908, October 25, N 38.

⁷ Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, Political Archive, inv.482, list 717, sheet 12.

⁸ During the Turkish-Persian conflict of 1905-1908, Yaver held the post of general commander of the Turkish military. He was the one who bombarded and besieged Aghtamar with 12 ships in 1907 to capture seven Armenian revolutionaries. "Horizon", 1909, August 8, N 6.

⁹ "Mshak", 1909, May 2, N 91.

such a level of prosperity".¹⁰

The only disturbing circumstance was that for the fourth year, famine was regularly repeated in the province. We learn about this from R. Zardaryan's message of December 27, 1908, according to which in the winter of 1908/1909, 12,000 people suffered from starvation in Van province, many of them died, and people in Timar were fed only with sawdust and flax.¹¹

The situation in Van province during the coup d'état of March 31, 1909 and the April 1909 massacres in Adana

During the Abdul Hamid coup d'état of 31 March 1909 and the April 1909 Adana massacre, the contradictions that existed between the old and new regimes came to the fore. At the same time, Armenians were convinced that "they saw a multi-headed hydra standing in front of them, armed with claws and fangs against the hyena", that "the Turk, old or young, is the same wolf"¹² and that the Ittihat had already put on the robe of the sultan. On March 1, 1909, in "Hordzank" weekly published in Van, Aram Manukyan complained that the Ittihat refused to recognize the existence of "minor" nations, because it considered all of them "Ottoman".¹³

In the conditions of the general confusion prevailing in the province of Van, when news of massacre and intimidation was received from Adana, the disarmed Armenians of Van would also have been subjected to a terrible massacre, if the snowfall on April 7, 1909 did not "lock the Turks" and if Tayar Bey did not block the beastly appetites of the "Red Army".¹⁴

However, just a few days later, on April 10, 70 pro-Sultan Turkish soldiers from Aygestan, hearing about the new coup in the capital and the events in Adana, rebelled against their officers, armed themselves and shouted "long live the Sultan, no constitution", "no freedom, we only want sharia". Entering the city, they forced some Armenians to get down from the carriages and bow before them.¹⁵

Joining the Kurdish chieftains "Kyor" Husein, Shakir Agha, Mir Mhe, Said Ali and others, they prepared for the massacre. After learning about this, around 7,000 Armenians of the city gathered near the viceroy's apartment and demanded to prevent the danger. However, Yaver reassured the Armenians only with promises.

Fearing new riots, the people of Van closed the city's market for the next few days because an attack on the market was planned for April 13, which was supposed to be a signal to start new massacres in Van like Adana. However, on April 14, the threat of the massacre in Van disappeared after the capture of Yıldız ("Star" - A.H.), the Sultan's

¹⁰ Zohrap 1910: 18-19.

¹¹ Zardarian 2015: 79.

¹² Yeramean 1929: 101, 105.

¹³ "Hordzank", 1909, N 4, p. 84.

¹⁴ Yeramean 1929: 105.

¹⁵ Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, Political Archive, inv.482, list 717, sheet 19

residence in Istanbul, and the overthrow of Sultan Abdul Hamid for the second time.

On April 15, Van received the telegram of the change of power, which seems to have left the Turks and Kurds of the province in mourning.¹⁶ However, on the same day, the Kurdish gangs of Sarai Province, who had no information about the new change of power, following the example of the Turkish troops of Van, shouted “we demand sharia”, entered the telegraph office in Sarai, cursed and beat the Armenians, closed the club of the Young Turkish Committee and the reading room of the Armenians there, until they heard about the change and only then they calmed down.

On the next day, April 16, bandit leader Mir-Mhe, with his 40 bandits, attacked the village of Kanguar in Norduz province, killed seven Armenians and looted the village, because he had concluded from the sounds of 101 cannons fired in Van in honor of the new sultan Mehmed V's accession that the carnage in the town had already begun. In the atmosphere of inter-ethnic hatred, two Armenians were killed and one was injured in Archesh.¹⁷

Armenians of Van, which was the main exponent and defender of the constitutional order, also expressed its political demands. Thus, in the spring of 1909, when Mehmed V was proclaimed Sultan instead of Abdul Hamid, they closed the schools on May 1 and organized a rally in Van with the slogan “We will not be satisfied with Hamid's replacement and Muhammad's arrest, we must strive for the destruction of the crowns.” Afterwards, a large crowd of women and men marched to Karmravor Monastery to celebrate May 1st as Labor Day and organize a field fair. The Armenians offered the Turks to join their demand and participate in the May 1 celebration, but their offer remained unfulfilled. Moreover, the majority of the Muslim population of Van, being under the influence of religious fanatics, not only considered it incompatible for their women and girls to leave the harems and walk around the city with Armenians, but were also hostile towards Armenians in general, not hiding their true intentions: “No, it should not be like this, the Armenians, the infidels, have become too active, so... they should be massacred, we should repeat the massacres, which were in Cilicia.”¹⁸

That threat of massacres was discussed by a group of short-sighted Armenians, who turned to the help of the Armenian Eparchy of Van, which, as the only option for self-defense, offered to organize village guards, armed with means, provided by state. However, with the direct intervention of the deputy viceroy, the threat of massacre was averted and several Turkish provocateurs were imprisoned.

However, the situation did not change. Supporters of the old regime also planned to organize new protests similar to those in Adana on May 4, 1909 in Van market.¹⁹ As the press of the time noted: “the dark elements want to take revenge for Abdul Hamid's

¹⁶ "Mshak", 1909, May 14, N 100.

¹⁷ "Mshak", 1909, May 14, N 100.

¹⁸ "Mshak", 1909, June 6, N 119.

¹⁹ Matenadaran, fund 2, Kyuregh Srabyan archive, inv. 43, list 82, doc. 1044, sheet 1.

assumption of the throne with new massacres”,²⁰ but the Armenians closed the market of Van, which helped to avoid the massacre.

Using the excuse, Yaver started persecuting representatives of Armenian parties “as if those upset the solidarity of nations”, because according to the order received from Constantinople, it was necessary to cleanse the country of “reactionary” elements²¹. As a result, the chairman of the Van City Assembly, Nshan Kaljian, and the member-secretary of the Aghtamar City Assembly, Hovsep Khlghatyan, appeared in prison. The first one was accused without evidence as spreading the outrageous news of closing the Van market on May 4, and the second one as a rioter spreading slander against Gavashi kaimakam (governor - A.H.), hindering the internal peace of the country and the solidarity of the Ottoman nations.²²

Nshan Kaljian was one of the influential and intelligent members of the City Assembly, who was a lawyer by profession, knew Turkish well and used to avoid government provocations. In fact, he had the audacity to reject several proposals of Yaver Pasha to sign an agreement between the Armenians of Van and the Kurdish bandit leader Husein Pasha and some criminal chieftains. The authorities wanted to create the impression that there was internal peace in the province of Van, and that the Turks, Kurds and Armenians lived in peace and harmony.

Yaver was offered to the City Assembly to sign another letter as well, according to which he, as acting viceroy, allegedly ruled in the province well in the interests of the Ottoman homeland and could claim the position of viceroy in the near future. Along with these refusals, the Van City Assembly also dared to protest against Yaver Pasha's act of kissing the forehead of Sayid Bey, the rich man and criminal of Mandan village, in the presence of the members of the assembly.

Yaver considered the independent and disobedient activity of the City Assembly to be the cause of all this and wanted to take his revenge by imprisoning its influential members. The Turkish court, which was constitutionally independent from the declared executive power, unwittingly becomes an instrument of Yaver Pasha's treachery. Arshak Vramyan, the editor of “Azatamart” and Dr. Hovsep Davtyan,²³ were also persecuted in the general context of the anti-Armenian policy during Yaver's government. By the way, even after the massacres in Adana and the chaotic incidents in Van, A. Vramyan still cherished hopes of cooperation with Ittihad. During a conversation with Ariadna Tirkova, a Russian journalist and writer of “Stock Exchange Sheets” and “Russian News” newspapers, he expressed his belief that “yes, of course, Ittihad has many mistakes, but how long have they been in power?” Don't forget what a terrible legacy they got from the Hamid regime. They seek to establish legitimacy. At least they should be considered sincere friends of the constitution. If you knew what a

²⁰ "Mshak", 1909, June 6, N 119.

²¹ "Horizon", 1909, August 8, N 6.

²² "Mshak", 1909, July 5, N 144.

²³ "Kohak", 1909, August 15, N 12, p. 139.

terrible yoke the country lived under before the revolution. And then, among the Young Turks, there are righteous people who can be relied upon. Among them are the president of the current petition, Ahmed Riza Bey, Husein Jahid, and finally Tala'at Bey, who had no education, but was an ardent and just patriot, he understands that the salvation of Turkey lies in reforms." To Tirkova's question, what is the salvation of the Armenian people, after all, a massacre was organized in Adana and who can guarantee that it will not happen again, A. Vramyan answers sharply and urgently: "No, no, it cannot happen again, the massacres in Adana were a remnant of the old regime. Ittihad himself was upset. They did everything..."²⁴

Later, the main leader of the Young Turks, Tala'at, whom A. Vramyan considered one of the most honest and pure people, became the executioner of the Armenian people and the one who destroyed Vramyan and his party friends.

However, during Yaver's tenure, some measures were taken to overcome illegalities and injustices. During his term of office, the Gavash governor was notable for his anti-Armenian activities, against whose actions Bishop Hovsep, the vicar of the Catholicosate of Aghtamar, protested. In order to examine the problem, on Yaver's direct initiative, an investigative commission was created; one of whose members was also the deputy head of Van, Reverend Zaven.²⁵

In addition, on the initiative of the Turkish military of Van province during Yaver's reign, facts were collected and all the corrupt officials of the province were subjected to strict investigation and condemnation. Archak's mudir (governor - A.H.) was also found guilty. He had become a scourge on the heads of all Armenians of the province during the 1908 Davo incident and Van search.²⁶ As a result, a large number of fake and incompetent officials were expelled. Unfortunately, among the Armenians of Van, there were not enough Turkish speakers who could take over the vacant positions.

At the beginning of July 1909, Bekir Sami Bey,²⁷ an Ossetian, was appointed the new governor of Van instead of Yaver.²⁸

Attempts to regulate Armenian-Kurdish relations

In terms of a very clearly expressed differentiation of political views and inclinations, the Armenians and Kurds of Van have inadvertently found themselves on opposite fronts of activity since the very first days of the 1908 coup and the Ottoman constitution. If the Armenians were ardent constitutionalists, and the ARF was in agreement and cooperation with the Young Turks, then the Kurds, who represented an

²⁴ Tyrkova 1916: 76.

²⁵ "Mshak", 1909, July 5, N 144.

²⁶ "Ashkhatanq", 1908, September 14, N 4.

²⁷ Chelahsaty 2009, also Shlykov 2014. Also "Mshak", 1909, November 12, N 251, also <https://bit.ly/48jaBfT>, and https://www.turkcebilgi.com/bekir_sami_kunduh

²⁸ Later, Yaver Pasha participated in the 1912 Balkan Wars and was captured. See <https://bit.ly/48fV0xC>, also <https://bit.ly/3GKwAk7>

evidently anti-constitutional force, an enemy of the new regime, remained in the position of defending the Sultanate monarchy and continued to follow the same policy as in the era of Hamid.

Hoping to resolve the Armenian-Kurdish conflict, in early September 1908, the Young Turkish authorities invited to Van the Kurdish chieftains who had previously sworn obedience and loyalty, and who pledged and declared to live in peace and solidarity with the Armenians and to carry out activities exclusively according to the provisions of the constitution. However, contrary to the principles of peaceful Armenian-Kurdish coexistence declared by the Young Turks, the consequence of Kurdish impunity was that new crimes were committed by Kurds in the province.

After the revolution, the governorate of Van took some measures to punish the recalcitrant Kurds. As a result, Mlantsi Mahmad, Thakurtsi Huseyn and Shamzksi Sadam Bey were arrested for crossing the border and organizing looting in Persia. Haji-Tamir and "Kyor" Husein pashas from Haydaran were also brought to justice for the violence and massacres they committed against the Armenians in Arches-Aljavaz.²⁹ At the same time, attempts were being made to subjugate the bandit leader Mir-Mhe, who was destroying Shatakh, who was accused not only of killing Armenians and looting Armenian villages, but also of harming government troops.³⁰ Shatakh's Armenian party member Nikoghayos Aghasyan did a great job in that matter.³¹

Some work was done in bringing the Kurds to justice by the military commander of Van, Yaver, who arrested the Kurdish Sayid Bey near the border of the Archak district when he was the deputy viceroy. During the latter's imprisonment, the parliament, based on the just complaints of the villagers of Mantan village, decided that Sayid's thugs should leave the village. Although a message about the execution of the order was immediately telegraphed to Archak's mudir, it remained on paper, because Yaver demanded the mudir not to implement the decision,³² as a result of which Yaver "released him".³³

Conclusion

Thus, from August 1908 to autumn 1910, under the pashas Mahmud-Khairi, Mahmud Ferit, Yaver, Bekir Sami, the situation in Van province seemed to be bearable. During their reign, certain measures were implemented to overcome illegalities and injustices. At the initiative of the Turkish military of Van province, facts were collected and all the corrupt officials of the province were severely condemned. Conflicts between the old and new regimes emerged during the March 31, 1909 coup d'état and the April

²⁹ "Work", 1909, March 24, N 62.

³⁰ "Kohak", 1909, September 12, N 16, p. 188, also "Homeland", 1909, August 11/24, N 1448.

³¹ "Kohak", 1909, November 18, N 23, p. 256.

³² "Kohak", August 15, N 12, p. 139.

³³ "Kohak", August 15, N 12, p. 139.

1909 massacres in Adana, as Armenians were the main exponents and defenders of the constitutional order. From April 7 to May 4, 1909, following the example of the massacres in Adana, protests were also organized in Van and persecution of Armenian party figures began. Armenians put aside revolutionary illusions and saw the true face of Ittihad, as violence, arbitrariness and prison persecution began to rule again in Van.

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