

## ON THE NIHILISM OF THE TURKISH AUTHORITIES REGARDING THE “VAN REBELLION” IN 1915

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### **Abstract**

The article discusses the traditional statement of Turkish official historiography according to which the self-defense struggle of Western Armenians and especially the heroic battle of April 1915 in Van, as “rebellion”, i.e. a treason of Armenians, that was one of the main motives for the implementation of the Armenian Genocide. Based upon numerous primary sources, the author concludes that contrary to the Turkish government’s official self-justification attempt, the struggle of Van Armenians for existence started only when the Turks had already started their extermination policy and began to massacre all Armenians of Van province. Armenians resorted to arms only to defend themselves against the Turkish perception that any kind of organized rebellion against the ruling order was synonymous with rebellion against the state.

**Keywords:** Van “rebellion”, “conspiracy” of Constantinople, Pan-Turanism program

### **The issue of the “rebellion” of Van**

The issue of Van’s “rebellion” is of great political and scientific importance, as it caused the rupture of relations between the Armenian and Turkish peoples living in the Ottoman Empire and was one of the main motives for the implementation of the Armenian Genocide.

Turkish political circles, Turkish historians<sup>1</sup> and their Azerbaijani colleagues<sup>2</sup> have tried and still make attempts to present the self-defense struggle of Western Armenians and especially the heroic battle of April 1915 in Van, as “rebellion”, that is, as an “argument of treason” of the Armenians and widely exploit it as the main cause of the “Armenian disaster”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feridun: 1962: 81.

<sup>2</sup> <http://contact.az/docs/2015/Want%20to%20Say/033000110977ru.htm#Vn5BeoWLS70>

<sup>3</sup> If we take the Turkish unreal and false views as a basis, then Adana 1909 massacres are also considered “riots” and “insurrections”. Atositis 2009: 18.

It should be noted that the issue of the “rebellion” of Western Armenians is not new at all from the point of view of the falsifying tricks of Turkish historians. It was used for the first time in 1909 on the occasion of the massacres in Adana.<sup>4</sup> However, this methodology of politically slandering Armenians is widely used with the declaration of the First World War and the combat operations on the Caucasian front.

Before implementation of the deportation and extermination of Western Armenians, the Central Committee of the “Union and Progress” party had first to create a false ideological argumentation in order to justify the criminal practices of the government, which resulted in the extermination of around 1.5 million Western Armenians in 1915-1916. In that sense, over time, the anti-Armenian and anti-scientific concept that the exile of the Armenian intelligentsia and telegraph censors of Constantinople on April 11 (24), 1915, the deportations of Karin, Basen, Dersim, and in general the motives of the Armenian Genocide, has become dominant in Turkish historiography: a) the powerful political alliance of the Western Armenians with the Russian authorities,<sup>5</sup> b) the military operations of the Armenian volunteer detachments organized in the Caucasian front in 1914 and the advance of the Russian troops, c) the “anti-state” (actually, self-defense) speeches of the Western Armenians against the Ottoman “motherland” and d) the 1915 “rebellion” of the population of Van organized as a result of “Russian intrigues”<sup>6</sup>.

As a “proof” of all this, Turkish historiography takes as a starting point the groundless “argument” that the Central Committee of the ARF allegedly gave an order to its local circles that when the Russian troops crossed the Russian-Turkish border on the Caucasian front of the First World War and the Turkish army would be defeated and start to retreat, it was necessary to organize uprisings in all regions of Western Armenia so that the enemy faced two obstacles. And in case of a possible attack by the Turkish troops, the Armenian soldiers serving in the Turkish army had to leave their military units with their weapons, organize partisan detachments and join the Russian military units.<sup>7</sup>

The official explanation of the motives of the Armenian “rebellion” and the resulting Armenian massacres was presented for the first time by Tala'at Pasha, who noted that “what happened to the Armenians was a punishment for betraying them to the Ottoman state, joining Russia in the war and rebelling in Van in April 1915”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mgr Mouchegh [Serobian] 1909; Bishop Moushegh 1910: see also Memoirs of Jemal Pasha 1923: 214, Danişmend 1947: 374; Uras 1950: 456; Byzand Eghiayan 1970 (ed.): 225 and 304.

<sup>5</sup> Armenian Question on the Pages of the Turkish Press 1984: 72.

<sup>6</sup> Lepsius J. 2006 (ed.) I: 150.

<sup>7</sup> The Armenian Question on the Pages of the Turkish Press 1984: 73.

<sup>8</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 139.

The issue of the heroic self-defense of Van in 1915 became a subject of discussion in the statement of the Turkish government on June 16, 1915<sup>9</sup>, after which a concept of the “rebellion” of the Armenians of Van was formed, which became the basis of Turkish scientific and political manipulation.

At one time, Arshavir Shirakyan and Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople Zaven Yeghiayan had a correct premonition about all this. The latter stated that “this plan for the annihilation of the Armenians, which had been conceived for a long time, was put into practice under the pretext of the events in Van... and as if the intention of the Armenians in the provinces to revolt, for which it was armed.”<sup>10</sup>

Taking into consideration the importance of countering the Turkish slander, Lord James Bryce emphasized the fact that “the events in Van were of great importance”, and it was necessary to study them with undisguised impartiality.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in order to study the problem of the “Van Rebellion” in depth, and to make it understandable, it is necessary to highlight and present the most important state conceptual approaches of Ottoman Turkey and the Central Powers, as well as the Entente countries, and the views of individual political figures and researchers, which are highly contradictory in various diplomatic reports and historical works.

An absolute similarity of positions on this issue is seen in the Turkish comments. Based on the fateful trick of the Armenians’ “rebellion”, Turkish authors Tevfik Beykloğlu<sup>12</sup>, Hikmet Bayur, Esad Uras, and Ahmed Emin Yalman<sup>13</sup> characterize the punitive “measures”, taken by the Young Turks, i.e., the massacres of Western Armenians, as forced steps that they had to apply in order to ensure the security of the state. According to them, the government of Young Turks was not guilty of organizing the Armenian pogroms, because having learned in advance about the “rebellion” of Armenians being prepared in Van with the help of the Entente countries, they decided to remove them from the border regions and transfer them to Mesopotamia.

The German, Austro-Hungarian and Italian diplomatic press was guided by the same mentality. Ambassador of Germany in Constantinople H. von Wangenheim and Baron Max von Oppenheim, minister-resident at Damascus, in their telegrams of 30 April and 29 August 1915 to Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg emphasized the fact that the decisions of the Ottoman “government could not avoid the influence of the events in Van and these days, successive attacks of the Russians in the Bosphorus, as well as the joint attacks of the French and the English on the Dardanelles”<sup>14</sup> aimed at endangering the rear of the Turkish army.

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<sup>9</sup> Poghosyan 2011: 165.

<sup>10</sup> Bulletin-Register of the Armenian Question and Armenian Genocide 2024: 41.

<sup>11</sup> Bryce 1919: 46.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher 1960: 326-327.

<sup>13</sup> Yalman 1930: 215.

<sup>14</sup> Gust 2008: 40, also Lepsius J. 2006 (ed.) I: 162.

Austro-Hungarian and Italian reports have similar content. Italian Foreign Minister Sidney Constantino Sonnino's telegram, dated July 19, 1915, to Italian Ambassador Mackey in Washington stated that "Tala'at Pasha ... has been forced to take measures to prevent the impending uprising in Armenian circles."<sup>15</sup>

In order to justify the Armenian massacres by the Young Turks, false and provocative news was also spread in some German circles. In particular, the information circulated that the Armenians had already organized a conspiracy in Van, and in Constantinople they were preparing a riot on the day of the sultan's enthronement celebration, with the help of Jemal Pasha, "dazzled by English gold", who had anti-German sentiments, and with the participation of Edmond Fitzmaurice, the former first translator of the British Embassy in Constantinople. In order to suppress it, certain Turkish army units fighting in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles were transferred to Constantinople and the province of Constantinople to contribute to the successful military operations of the Allies. We also read the message of the French ambassador to St. Petersburg, Maurice Paleologue (dated February 27, 1915), addressed to the French foreign minister Théophile Delcasse, where the name of the rich Armenian Galust Gulbenkian was mentioned, who was ready to provide money to bribe some Young Turk leaders and organize a coup d'état.<sup>16</sup> As "evidence" for all that, the report published in "The Times" pointed out that allegedly a joint conspiracy of Armenians and parties hostile to the Young Turks had been discovered in Constantinople, the goal of which was to kill the Sultan, Enver Pasha, German military commanders in the Ottoman army, Field Marshal Colmar von der Goltz and General Leeman von Sanders.<sup>17</sup>

According to another misinformation spread by German travelers in October 1915, Armenians allegedly killed T. Jevdet in Van, whose corpse, as J. Bryce points out, "was dragged in the streets."<sup>18</sup>

By the way, it is strange, but it is a fact, that the American, French and Russian diplomatic press was also not free from false information.

Henry Morgenthau, the US ambassador in Constantinople, believing the "Armenian-British riot" fabrication to be true, in his letter to the US Secretary of State on April 30, 1915, stated that the governor of Van, T. Jevdet, was allegedly wounded by Armenian terrorists and died of his wounds in his residence, and that the court made a decision to suppress the "riots" of Armenians.<sup>19</sup>

A similar opinion was also expressed by Seon, the French consul in Thessaloniki, in his telegram to Foreign Minister Delcasse dated May 8, 1915, where he stated that "the Armenians in Van must have revolted by massacring the officials and Muslims...

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<sup>15</sup> Baloyan 2008: 165.

<sup>16</sup> Documents of the French Archives 1985: 24.

<sup>17</sup> The Times, May 18, 1915.

<sup>18</sup> Miragents 1920 (ed.): 107.

<sup>19</sup> Hayrapetyan 1984: 63; Zakaryan: 2002: 28.

These events must have been followed by the arrest of 2.800 Armenians in Constantinople, among whom there are many prominent persons.”<sup>20</sup>

Baron Alexander Benkendorf, the Russian ambassador to Great Britain, based on the information of the French telegram received from Thessaloniki on May 12, 1915, informed the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov that “the Armenians occupied Van, set fire to the guesthouse, destroyed the city, after which it was captured by Turks again and massacres took place after that.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The nihilism of the Turkish argument of the “rebellion” of Van**

The Turkish logic of the massacre is that if the Armenians dared to rebel, they were displaced and massacred.

According to the bulletins presented by the Sublime Porte, the “rebellions” of Armenians in the territory of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 mainly took place in six Armenian-populated places of Western Armenia and the Ottoman Empire and in six different periods, that is, in Mush (at the beginning of March, 1915), in Zeytun (March 25, 1915), Van (April 20, 1915), Shapin Garahisar (July 3, 1915), Suetia (July 30, 1915) and Urfa (October 1, 1915).

We think that in order to reveal the whole picture of Van’s “rebellion” accusation and to examine it in comparison, it is necessary to distinguish whether the Armenian “rebellions” took place before the deportations of Western Armenians, during the deportations, or after the deportations.

According to Italian diplomatic documents, before the deportations, “revolts” took place only in Mush, Zeytun and Van.<sup>22</sup> However, in the case of Zeytun, as well as Mush, it is not about “rebellions”, but minor clashes between the gendarmes and deserters, which occurred also in previous peaceful times.

Regarding the chronological classification of the heroic battles that took place in Shapin Garahisar, Suetia and Urfa, the fact that they took place after the deportations of the Armenian population by the Ottoman Empire is absolutely indisputable.

As for the “rebellion” of Van, we think that it is necessary to take into consideration the important fact that the Armenian massacres in the province of Van did not start after the “conspiracy” of Constantinople, the “rebellion” of Van in 1915, and the deportations of the peaceful population of Western Armenians, but months before the events of 1915 in Van, in November-December 1914, when Armenian massacres were carried out in Akhorik, Hasan-Tamran, Kharabasorik, Hazaren, Avzarak villages of Van province, “when there was no pretence in Van for anything.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Peillierian 2005: 89.

<sup>21</sup> International Relations in the Period of imperialism 1935: 416-417.

<sup>22</sup> Nersisyan 1991 (ed.): 30.

<sup>23</sup> Tashian 1921: 11.

One of the first opponents of the Turkish approach to the Van “rebellion” was Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov, who in his May 1, 1915 telegram to the Russian ambassador in London expressed confidence that the “rebellion” of the Van Armenians caused the massacre and not on the contrary, because it did not make sense for the Armenians to start a movement against the overwhelming Turkish forces until the Russian troops invaded Van.<sup>24</sup>

The message of Alexander Izvolsky, the Russian ambassador to Paris, dated May 15, 1915, addressed to the French Foreign Ministry, has a similar content: “There can be no doubt that the massacres gave rise to the uprising of Armenians in Van and not that these massacres followed the uprising...”<sup>25</sup>

Johannes Lepsius considers the “rebellion” of Van as an act of self-defense, a special episode in the history of Armenian massacres, and not as treason against the country, because the Armenians remained law-abiding until the moment when they organized resistance in Van and did not allow the authorities to kill them as a “harmful and dangerous” element.<sup>26</sup> He also confirms that no real connection was established between the arrests and the events in Van.<sup>27</sup>

At one time, the Turkish “reasoning” about the Armenian “riots” was also thoroughly denied by a prominent German military and diplomatic figure, the German consul in Karin (Erzurum), Max Erwin von Scheobner-Richter, who considered it his moral duty to show that there is no evidence of a general Armenian riot. In his letter of August 5, 1915, to Ernst von Hohenlohe-Langenburg, the German ambassador in Constantinople, he confirmed that “if an uprising was planned there, it would be carried out in January 1915, which was the most opportune moment,” when the Russians stood 35 km from Erzurum, and the gendarmerie in Erzurum consisted of only a few hundred people, while only the labor battalions of Erzurum included 3-4 thousand Armenians.”

Russian diplomat Andrey Mandelshtam is also right when he asserts that contrary to the false statements of the Turkish government, there was no Armenian riot or revolution in Van. Armenians resorted to arms only when they saw the threat of massacre.<sup>28</sup>

The nihilism of Van’s “rebellion” has been convincingly commented on by the Austro-Hungarian military attaché in Constantinople, Major General Josef Pomiankowski, in his book “The Fall of the Ottoman Empire”, where he states: “The uprisings in the cities of Zeytun and Van were the desperate actions of the Armenians there, who saw that a general slaughter had begun and that their turn would come in the

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<sup>24</sup> Nersisyan 1991 (ed.): 340.

<sup>25</sup> Peillerian 2005 (ed.): 93.

<sup>26</sup> Lepsius 2008 (ed.) II. 316.

<sup>27</sup> Lepsius 2006 (ed.) I: 29.

<sup>28</sup> Nersisyan 1991 (ed.): 590.

near future.”<sup>29</sup> And it was really so, because the Ittihat saw a serious danger in the 192.000 Armenians of Van province living near the Russian border.<sup>30</sup>

The clarification of the Van “rebellion” issue was carefully addressed by the Persian historian and writer Ismail Rai<sup>31</sup>, Bahram Eftekhari<sup>32</sup>, and the Arab Fuad Hasan Hafez<sup>33</sup>, Fayez el-Ghosain<sup>34</sup>, Muhammad Rifa'at al-Imam<sup>35</sup>, Musa Prince<sup>36</sup>, who impartially came to justified conclusions, noting that regardless of what happened in Van, the important thing was that it was not an uprising, but an armed defensive operation to resist the Turkish siege.<sup>37</sup>

Syrian journalist and author Samir Arbash, making an interesting comparison, notes that in February 1915, Armenians - women, children and men<sup>38</sup> - were killed in Urmia. However, on that occasion, the Turkish authors do not even have any hints about the “rebellion” of the Armenians of Urmia. Therefore, the massacres of Armenians carried out by Ottoman troops in Urmia come not only to refute the absurdity of the Turkish “view” regarding the rebellion and betrayal of Armenians, but also confirm that the massacres of Armenians were premeditated. The Young Turk leaders, before the start of the war and during the war, were concerned about the constant fear of Armenian “rebellion”, which worsened especially after a series of military defeats from Russians and British at the beginning of 1915 and the exclusion of the possibility of a counterattack by the Turks against the Russians.

That is why, from the end of August 1914, the Young Turks regularly investigated the real possibility of the Armenian “rebellion”. But the state officials did not raise any alarm about the rebellion or any threat to the security of the state.<sup>39</sup>

From the legal point of view of the nihilism regarding Van’s “rebellion” argument, there is also another convincing circumstance. Even if a “rebellion” broke out in Van, the Ittihat government had no moral right to carry out a genocidal policy against Armenians in other parts of the empire. Even if some Armenians had helped the Russians and some Armenian deputies of the Ottoman Parliament had committed “crimes” against the Ottoman “motherland”, it was the duty of the Turkish government to arrest the “criminals” and punish them as citizens of the Ottoman state. In any case, this is evidenced in the letter of Pope Benedict XV, dated September 10, 1915, addressed to

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<sup>29</sup> Pomiankowski; also Ohanjanyan 1997: 88.

<sup>30</sup> The total population of Van province was 542,000 people. Akuni 1920: 34.

<sup>31</sup> Rain 1999: 93-94.

<sup>32</sup> Begjanyan 2011: 108.

<sup>33</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 141-142.

<sup>34</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 142.

<sup>35</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 147.

<sup>36</sup> Prince 1967: 34.

<sup>37</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 147.

<sup>38</sup> Hovhannisyan 2004: 141-142.

<sup>39</sup> Akçam 2015: 213-214.

Sultan Muhammad V, where he writes: “if traitors and deserters are found among the Armenians, let them be punished in a legal manner. But your majesty should not allow innocent people to be punished.”<sup>40</sup>

It should be noted that the issue of exterminating all Western Armenians on the occasion of the “rebellion” of Van became a matter of controversy in the post-war discussions of the Ottoman Parliament when Matteos Nalbandian, the deputy of Gozan (Sis), pointed out in his speech in November 1918 that “what legal or logical basis is there? An Armenian by nationality, living in every corner of the country, is displaced, killed, and his belongings confiscated. These all brought to the events in Van”.<sup>41</sup>

### **The instigated “rebellion” of Van**

In the general background of the argument of the nihilism of the Van “rebellion”, another important fact is revealed: the Van “rebellion” was incited by the Ottoman central government and the governor of Van, Cevdet, whose main goal was to accelerate the Van “rebellion” so that the massacre of the Armenians of Van province could be carried out before the Russian troops entered Van. And the external motive for inciting the “rebellion” of Van, as the German consul in Karin M. E. von Scheobner-Richter admits in his telegram of May 15, 1915, addressed to the German ambassador in Constantinople, H. von Wangenheim, ““was the arrest and killing of several influential Armenians, especially Ishkhan and deputy of Van Vramyan, who were highly respected among Armenians.”<sup>42</sup>

Kusva Ankarsvard, the ambassador of Sweden in Constantinople, expressed a similar concern in his report of September 2<sup>43</sup>, 1915, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of his country, Knut Agaton Wallenberg. And Johannes Lepsius concludes that the Turkish government knew that “that “rebellion” was incited by Vali Cevdet Bey and had nothing to do with Russian-Turkish military operations.”<sup>44</sup>

The “rebellion” of Van was a pretext for the Ottoman state’s Pan-Turanism program to be presented to the outside world under the guise of military necessity. It is no coincidence that the German consul in Karin M. E. von Scheobner-Richter admitted in his August 10, 1915, telegram addressed to the foreign ministry of his country the following: “The Turkish government used the state of war and the occasion of the Armenian uprisings in Van, Mush, and Garahisar to forcibly deport the Anatolian Armenians to Mesopotamia.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The memoirs of Archbishop 1960: 589.

<sup>41</sup> Tatrian 1995: 44.

<sup>42</sup> Lepsius 2006 (ed.) I: 173.

<sup>43</sup> The Scandinavian Response 2014: 31.

<sup>44</sup> Lepsius 2006 (ed.) I: 24.

<sup>45</sup> Lepsius 2006 (ed.) I: 249.



Thus, the approaches of Turkish and foreign historians that if the heroic battle of April 1915 in Van had not taken place, Western Armenians would not have been massacred are blatant lies. Essentially, with intentional observation, cause is confused with effect. Contrary to the Turkish government's official self-justification attempt, the heroic struggle of Van for existence started only when the Turks had already started their extermination policy and began to massacre all Armenians of Van province. Armenians resorted to arms only to defend themselves against the Turkish perception that any kind of organized rebellion against the ruling order was synonymous with rebellion against the state.

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Jamil Gasanlı, Armenian volunteers in the Caucasian Front 1914-1916, 2015 April 24 (Wednesday) 14:01:59, <https://bit.ly/3OZ2ttz>

*Translated from Armenian by Gevorg Harutyunyan*