The Official Conceptualization of the anti-Armenian Riots of 1895-1897

Bureaucratic Terminology, Official Ottoman Narrative, and Discourses of Revolutionary Provocation

La représentation des pogroms anti-arméniens de 1895-1897 dans le discours officiel ottoman. Langage administratif et thèse de la provocation révolutionnaire

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Despite recent interventions, our knowledge of the extent, nature, and consequences of the anti-Armenian riots that swept the Ottoman Empire’s capital and eastern provinces in the mid-1890s is still limited at best. More importantly, reams of myths and misconceptions about these events continue to dominate scholarly and popular imaginations, particularly with regard to official conspiracy, responsibility, and complicity in the violence. Overshadowed by the wartime genocide of the Ottoman Armenians, the mass killings of 1895-1897 have also been viewed in a retrospective and teleological fashion, as a rehearsal for and prelude to 1915, with little or no consideration for the specific historical context of each event. Also, in

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conventional narratives, the actual perpetrators of anti-Armenian violence tend to be imagined as almost mere apparatuses acting on behalf of the state or as accomplices and accessories to the crime, behind which stood a chief, hidden culprit setting everything into motion. Elsewhere, I address the fundamental problems in conceiving the anti-Armenian riots as state-sponsored massacres that marked the beginning of a process culminating in a catastrophe.2 This paper will investigate the representation of these violent events in official language and narratives.

From the beginning, the terminology deployed by Ottoman policymakers and government officials in reference to the anti-Armenian riots of 1895-1897 was of key importance. Official language and terminology provides evidence useful in understanding the ways in which the representatives of state power, administrators, and military commanders, both at provincial and central levels, conceptualized and responded to the riots and their political implications. As the first part of this paper demonstrates, although the government documents analyzed in the present study were generated purely for internal use, the customary descriptions of anti-Armenian riots by government officials contained substantial ambiguity, linguistic camouflage, and euphemisms. I suggest that through the constant use of the passive voice and euphemistic statements, the imperial authorities sought to neutralize the violence committed against a particular segment of the population and tried to conceal the agency of the perpetrators in the mass killing of Ottoman Armenians.

The terminology of modern historians who investigate various aspects of the collective mass violence committed against Armenians in the mid-1890s is as important as that of Ottoman officials, reflecting the discursive ways in which they understand, imagine, interpret, and reconstruct these events. Throughout this paper, I refer to the events under scrutiny as riots, massacres, and pogroms. That the definitions of “pogrom,” “ethnic riot,” and “massacre” vary widely across disciplines and researchers complicates the use of these terms to label a given event of mass collective violence.


2. My forthcoming dissertation makes a comprehensive investigation of the origins, dynamics, scope, and nature of the events in question. For a preliminary study, see E. Gölbashi, 2015. For a number of remarkable studies exploring anti-Armenian outbreaks in various cases, see J. Verheij, 2012; E. Eldem, 2007; and, S. Dinçer, 2013.
Especially the terms “riot” and “massacre” have too many meanings and resonances to be deployed in an unproblematic way. Given the extent and distinct political significance of these events, using the term “massacre” to refer to them is not problematic. However, the analytical value of the term is questionable since, from my perspective, it does not capture and reflect the specific circumstances and nature of the violence adequately. The term “riot” is equally vague even though contemporary British and American journalists and observers used it widely in their accounts of the anti-Armenian events of the 1890s. Yet I purposefully utilize the term, among other reasons, to emphasize the collective character of the violence, following Donald L. Horowitz’s treatment of the subject: “A deadly ethnic riot is an intense, sudden, though not necessarily wholly unplanned, lethal attack by civilian members of one ethnic group on civilian members of another ethnic group, the victims chosen because of their group membership.” Labeling the events of 1895-1897 as riots should not be taken as indicative of them being spontaneous outbursts of violence. Nor does it seek to downplay the magnitude of violence or to mitigate official responsibility.

In the second part of the paper, I examine the chief motifs of the official Ottoman narrative regarding the origins and nature of these episodes of collective violence. The imperial authorities made no serious attempt to explore the underlying causes of the anti-Armenian riots as they had one omnipotent explanation: “Armenian sedition” or “revolutionary provocation.” Indeed, from the very beginning, the central and local government officials’ immediate response to the outbreak of intercommunal violence was to blame Armenians for causing disorders by provoking Muslims. Within the context of anti-Armenian violence in the late Ottoman Empire, the term “provocation thesis” has been first used by the political scientist Robert Melson, whose 1982 article is still relevant and successfully demonstrates principal weaknesses of the thesis. “The concern here,” Melson writes, “is that the provocation thesis neglects to inquire into the intentions of the sultan [sic], his view of the Armenians, or the context of Armenian-Ottoman relations which might have exaggerated the Armenian threat.” As this quotation illustrates, here Melson issues a historiographical critique of modern scholars of Ottoman history such as William L. Langer, Stanford Shaw, and Ezel Kural Shaw, who have

defended the so-called “official Turkish position” on the controversy
surrounding the Ottoman government’s treatment of Armenians in the
last decades of the empire.

Notably absent from Melson’s study is, however, the fact that the so-
called provocation thesis was not simply formulated by modern scholars
but rather, as we shall see in the following pages, it was developed by the
Ottoman authorities themselves although they obliviously never named
their case a thesis. In a nutshell, the official contention advanced by the
Ottoman authorities was that the mass violence was simply the reaction
of Muslim masses to the acts of provocation and aggression on the part of
Armenians closely connected with revolutionary, “seditious” committees.
According to this view of the matter, the victim’s actions and intentions
posed a serious threat and provoked the perpetrator, who eventually
responded with violence in order to eliminate the threat or punish the
provoking party. Consequently, Ottoman officials – and later government
apologists – claimed that Armenians themselves bore responsibility for
the violence.

The official narrative – or the deployment of the concept of
provocation as a direct explanation for violence – did not simply arm
the Ottoman authorities with a rhetoric they could effectively use for
domestic political consumption as well as in the diplomatic arena against
their European and American critics, but it also freed them from moral
responsibility and the punishment of Muslim perpetrators. Importantly,
narratives of provocation raise significant questions about agency,
causality, accountability, and victimhood. The representation of the anti-
Armenian riots of the mid-1890s in official discourse also reveals the
distinct positions that Muslim and Armenian communities occupied
in the Ottoman political imaginary and state policies at the turn of the
century.

In the final part of the paper, I will treat the Sivas riots as a case
study and offer a thorough examination of the reports of local civilian
and military officials to further analyze the official Ottoman language
and narrative. A full consideration of the events as they are reflected
in Ottoman documents will help us better understand not only the
paradoxes of official theses, but also the discursive methods through
which the Ottoman officials sought to neutralize, trivialize, and justify
violence.
EUPHEMISM FOR MASS VIOLENCE:
WRITING IN THE PASSIVE VOICE, NEUTRALIZING THE VIOLENCE,
AND CONCEALING THE AGENCY OF PERPETRATORS

The Ottoman authorities mostly referred to these major episodes of collective violence as ḫişâs (usually used in the plural, that is, ḫişâsât) meaning disturbance, turbulence, or disorder; şurîş, or turmoil, tumult, disarray, or chaos; gâleyan, or boiling over with rage, effervescence, or outburst; and, tehêyyûc, or excitement. In official reports and the heavily censored Ottoman press, the most utilized term to denote the mass killings of Armenians was ḫişâsât, which was a generic, catch-all term employed by Ottoman administrators and the press to describe a wide range of civil unrest, internal disorders, and riots.⁵ Like şurîş, the word “헩ﬁss” had no particular connotations for intercommunal conflict or attacks directed against a group of people by another. Terms such as “disturbances,” “turbmoil,” “chaos,” and “turbulence” tellingly reflect the ways in which the Ottoman authorities conceptualized the events of 1895-1897 as unorganized mass conflict, spontaneous outburst of popular anger, or happenstanes that were triggered by the “seditious” actions of Armenians. In the language of Ottoman governing circles, the anti-Armenian riots were also sometimes treated as if they were an epidemic or a natural disaster rather than a mass conflict that involved conscious human beings, political motivations, and violent means.

When dealing with various aspects of the pogroms in general and the actions of perpetrators in particular, Ottoman bureaucrats also systematically used the passive voice in their voluminous records, employing a language that meticulously refrains from identifying Muslims as transgressors and Armenians as victims. For instance, in the language of Ottoman bureaucrats, the perpetrators’ deliberate act of inflicting harm on Armenians becomes “the killing and wounding that took place during the said disturbance” (헩ﬁss-ı mezkûre hengâminda vuku bulan katıl ve

5. Despite its Arabic origin, the word “헩ﬁss” (اغتشاش) seems to have come into Ottoman Turkish from Persian as there is no such word in contemporary Arabic dictionaries. In modern Persian, the word ḫişâs(罅š or eghteshash) means disturbance, turbulence, disorder, or confusion, and is typically used by law enforcement agencies and press to describe various forms of civil, urban unrest such as riots, disarrays, and violent uproars. See “ Creatures - Translation - Persian-English Dictionary,” Globe, accessed February 6, 2017, https://glosbc.com.
Likewise, when the authorities referred to the buildings that were set on fire by the Muslim mob during the riots, they often used the terms “mahruk” and “muhterik,” meaning burning, burnt, or being consumed by fire, as if the fires occurred without context or the buildings were “burnt down” due to a fire that occurred by accident. Similiarly, Ottoman administrators constantly referred to the properties that were looted and grabbed from Armenian shops, houses, and villages by rioters and pillagers as the “usurped properties” (emval-i mağsube) without making references to the group identity of the rioters and the owner-victims of the properties.

One of the most striking examples of what can be characterized as “Ottoman linguistic camouflage” comes from the government documents dealing with the abduction of Armenian women and girls and with their conversion to Islam. As Selim Deringil has aptly observed within the case of the mass conversions of Armenians during the years 1895-1897, the Ottoman administrators, specifically the Governor-General of Diyarbekir, Enis Pasha, frequently referred to the Armenian women and girls who had been abducted and forced into marriage by Muslims as “Armenian women who were dispersed here and there during the disturbances” (zaman-ı iğtişâşda öteye berüye dağılmış olan Ermeni kadınların). Likewise, when the Diyarbekir authorities reported about the resettlement of the Armenian villagers who had fled their villages due to fear of attacks, they constantly referred to them as “some villagers who were scattered due to the current circumstances and are being [re]settled in their villages by special officials” (Ahval-i hâzıradan dolayı dağılan ve memurin-i mahsusa vasıatsıla karyelerinde tavattun ve iskan edilmekte olan bazı kura abalisi...).
Conversely, the Ottoman authorities carefully emphasized in their reports the alleged role of Armenians, or “Armenian mischief-makers/intriguers” (*Ermeni fesedesi* or *Ermeni müfsidler*) in the outbreak of the riots. The passive voice used by Ottoman bureaucrats in describing the crimes committed by Muslims against Armenians is replaced by a clear active voice stressing Armenian agency. As seen in a brief report written by the Field-Marshal (*müşir*) of the Fourth Army Corps, Mehmed Zeki Pasha, when the Muslim perpetrators’ deliberate actions are concerned in official reports, the disturbances simply “take place;” yet, when the Ottoman authorities referred to the larger context of the events, the troubles “are created by the Armenians.”

For some administrators and military commanders, it was almost a standard “style” to start their reports with phrases like “the disturbances that took place because of the seditious actions of Armenians” or “the turmoil brought about by the Armenians.”

Furthermore, when Ottoman officials and military authorities needed to refer to the systematic attacks of Kurdish tribes on Armenian villages, they did not omit to indicate that the context in which these attacks occurred was the “Armenian provocation.” They systematically emphasized that village raids and attacks took place simply because the Kurds, like other Muslim populations, had been provoked by Armenians. For instance, when the Governor-General of Diyarbekir reported about Kurdish assaults on Armenian villages across his province throughout the month of November 1895, he described these crimes as “the attacks on some Christian villages in the districts by the Kurds who were provoked by the Armenian sedition” (*Ermenilerin ifsadatından dolayı galeyana gelen Ekradın mülhakatça bazı Hristiyan karyelerine tecavüzü...*).

In addition, whenever officials and military commanders referred to systematic attacks by Kurdish tribes on Armenians, these crimes were also depicted as the actions of “ignorant” and “savage” Kurds. By doing so, they discursively transferred responsibility from the authorities and the wider Muslim crowds who had participated in the mass murder and the looting to the “simple,” “ignorant” segments of the population.

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12. BOA. A.MKT.MHM. 619/14, 17 Ca. 1313 (5 November 1895). Cipher telegram from the Governor-General of Diyarbekir dated 24 TE 1311/5 November 1895.
At times, the imperial administrators also referred to those who participated in the anti-Armenian violence as the Muslim folks who interfered in the government’s measures to punish Armenians or restore order and peace. For instance, after the riots in Tokad (today Tokat) in March 1897, Grand Vizier Halil Rifat Pasha sent a letter to Inspector-General Şakir Pasha, conveying a series of stringent orders in accordance with the decisions suggested by a Special Council of Ministers (Encümen-i Mahsus-ı Vükelâ) regarding the overall measures to be taken to maintain public tranquility and prevent the outbreak of new episodes of violence in the Anatolian provinces. Characteristically, these official orders primarily focused on measures to be taken against any attempts on the part of “seditious Armenians” to create trouble. The Grand Vizier demanded that, if any disorders occurred, all measures be taken immediately to suppress them “without allowing the Muslim population to interfere in” the incidents, and that wrongdoers be interned and brought to trial immediately. It was also of critical importance to anticipate and preclude such occurrences before they already commenced, and, in case of any trouble, it was the responsibility of government officials to make certain that those (1) who dare to cause turmoil; (2) who use weapons against the police and the military; and (3) who “dare to participate and intervene in the duty of the government” (hükümetin vazifesine iştirak ve müdahaleye mücaseret edenler) face legal punishment, “regardless of who they are and whatever confession they belong to.”

By “those who participate and intervene in the duty of the government,” the Grand Vizier obviously referred to Muslims who might attempt to “punish” Armenians for their “rebellious actions,” as they recently have. Regardless of whether there were any criminal actions, prior to the beginning of the events, on the part of Armenians that deserved punishment within the framework of Ottoman law, it is important to see how Ottoman administrators attributed a logical framework to the violent actions of

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13. Deringil points out that when the Minister of Police, Hüseyin Nazım Pasha, made mention of “classes of the population who intervened in the restoration of order” (asayişin iadesinde müdahil olan sınıfları), he actually referred to those who attacked the Armenians. See S. Deringil, 2009, p. 350. However, I was not able to confirm this statement of the Minister of Police in his two-volume collection of Ottoman police documents entitled Ermeni Olayları Tarihi.

Muslim crowds in line with the official discourse representing the anti-Armenian disturbances as the reaction of Muslims to the “Armenian uprisings.” As a result, by doing so, the Ottoman bureaucrats in Anatolia and Istanbul both justified the violence and empathized with the perpetrators even though they did not sanction their extremely violent behavior that they stated had undesirable political, economic, and diplomatic consequences for the imperial government.

Before moving to the analysis of the official Ottoman narrative about the origins of the events, I would like to give one final example illustrating the peculiar language used by Ottoman bureaucrats in responding to the incidents of 1895-1897. When the Sultan’s secretariat at the Yıldız Palace received the news that following an unrest in Bayburt, Muslim groups had attacked the Armenian villages around this town, seized the villagers’ goods, and murdered the entire male population in an Armenian village named Kışanta (or Ksanta), they ordered the Field-Marshal of the Fourth Army Corps in a cipher telegram to inform the palace in definite terms by next morning whether the news received was true, and, if so, who the actual offenders were, Muslims or “Armenian brigands” (*Ermeni eşkıyası*).

The commander was also instructed to report, separately, the number of casualties of Muslims, Armenians, and other groups that took place in the above-mentioned village and other places up to that time. The last question to which the palace requested a reply was a shameful one: “Who has been winning during the clashes that occurred so far, Armenians or Muslims?” It would be revealed soon by the authorities that there were no clashes in the reported areas but, instead, lethal attacks and mass murders were committed against Armenian civilians. Even if we suppose that the disorders in these areas took place in the form of a clash between more or less equal participants, how could the palace authorities ask such a question when receiving the news of two groups of Ottoman citizens slaughtering each other in a corner of the empire? As should be evident by now, official discourses reflected in the government documents analyzed so far reveal that the Ottoman policymakers around the Sultan were biased in favor of the local Muslim population.

15. **BOA. Y.PRK.BŞK.44/10, 27 Ca. 1313 (15 November 1895). Cipher telegram from the Mabeyn (palace secretariat) to the Field-Marshals of the Fourth Imperial Army Corps dated 17 TE 1311/29 October 1895.**
The official Ottoman narrative: revolutionary provocation?

The Ottoman administrators consistently claimed that the disorders in each and every case had grown out of the provocative and importunate conduct by Armenians who attacked Muslims and security forces. According to the official version of the events, the instigators of the disorders were Armenians while the Muslims simply “boiled over with rage” or acted in self-defense although the Ottoman authorities did not furnish any convincing evidence or substantiation that it was the Armenians who initiated the attacks in most cases. In the final analysis, the official narrative held Armenians responsible for the incidents, and reduced the origins of extremely violent behavior on the part of Muslim perpetrators to psychological conditions like “effervescence,” “rage,” and “excitement.” Such official claims imply that the Armenians had brought on their own destruction. In what follows, I examine the key characteristics and motifs of the official Ottoman narrative that situated the causes of the riots of 1895-1897 in the circumstances allegedly created by Armenian revolutionaries in an attempt to launch a general insurrection throughout the empire’s eastern provinces.

To begin with one particularly telling example, Field-Marshal Zeki Pasha, Commander-in-Chief of the Fourth Army Corps, briefly – and quite ambiguously – explained the origins of the incidents in a report as follows:

Since the Armenian intriguers (Ermeni erbab-ı mefsedeti), who seduced and incited the entire Armenian community with the hope of realizing the idea of autonomy and provoking foreign intervention, dared to attack mosques, public areas, and, in some localities, government houses, disorders (şuris) took place in certain cities and towns. On the one hand, the [ordinary] Armenians were deceived by the incitement of [those] Armenian intriguers; and, on the other, the disorders that occurred in these cities and towns spread to villages as various fabricated rumors (ürcufeler) to the effect that the Armenians were granted some concessions affected the [mind of] Muslim population very adversely. The disturbances and excitement were, [however,] quelled in a short span of time by the execution of military assistance in response to the requests made by the [local] governments.
The content, form, and terminology of Field-Marshall Zeki Pasha’s account of the incidents closely resemble those provided by other civilian and military officials, which invariably accused Armenians of initiating the disorders. In fact, the marked similarities regarding the plot, terms, and wording of the reports on the incidents in different parts of the region made some contemporary observers suspicious of the truthfulness of these accounts. British Ambassador Currie, for instance, reported to Prime Minister Salisbury that “[t]he accusation against the Armenians of having provoked the outbreaks appears to rest upon very slight foundations, and the similarity of the terms in which it has been repeated from every place where disturbances have occurred, make it clear that a ‘mot d’ordre’ was given from head-quarters to lay the blame upon them.”17

In fact, the Ottoman official narrative about the outbreak of riots tells almost the same story for virtually every place that witnessed widespread violent episodes in the fall of 1895-1896: one Armenian or two suddenly appears in the market square or in front of mosques and begins to randomly shoot Muslims, which eventually provokes a disturbance to be followed by a carnage. As if they were expecting an attack, Muslims fight back without panicking, and within a couple of hours, the streets are packed with corpses of Armenians, nearly all shops and houses belonging to Armenians looted, and Armenian neighborhoods set on fire. In most instances, the Ottoman authorities provided no details about the beginning and escalation of the events; nor did they identify the names of alleged Armenian provocateurs who were reported to have initiated the attack, or those of the Muslims who were supposedly killed by the Armenians in the very beginning.


17. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereafter FO), 424/184, No. 739. Currie to
Non-Ottoman sources such as reports of the foreign consular agents in the riot centers, missionary accounts, and eyewitness statements clearly acknowledge the role that Armenian revolutionary agitation played in the formation of a tense atmosphere prior to the events in a number of places, particularly in Trabzon, Erzurum, and Arabgir. At times, they also complained about revolutionary activities as an encouragement for violent manifestations on the part of resentful Muslims. However, in their accounts respecting the events in other towns, they clearly state that the claim that disorders were the work of Armenian “seditionists” cannot be substantiated. In many towns, they report, Armenians were quiet before the riots, refraining from doing anything that might provoke the Muslims especially after the acceptance of the scheme of reform by the Sultan on 17 October 1895.

To give only one example, according to the acting British consul at Ankara, Raphael A. Fontana, the massacre in Merzifon (or Marsovan, a northern Anatolian city in the province of Sivas) started as an unprovoked event when a crowd of Muslims assisted by Kurds and Circassians from the nearby villages suddenly raided the market, where most of the shops were rented by Armenian merchants.\(^\text{18}\) In a longer report based upon two detailed accounts he received from different sources in the town of Merzifon, Fontana writes that two or three days before the massacre, Muslims beat several Armenians and killed one in a street brawl. On 14 November, an Armenian priest went to the district governor (kaim-makam or kaymakam) to inform him of the fear prevailing among the Armenians of Merzifon, and of their intention to close their shops the following day. In return, the district governor assured the priest that nothing would happen. On 15 November, Friday, about noon, a Muslim ran into the Kara Mustafa Pasha Mosque, where Muslims had gathered for Friday prayer, shouting “the Armenian Committee were advancing to the attack.” Upon that scream, the Muslims rushed from the

Salisbury, Constantinople, December 8, 1895. Also see Teleogram from Currie to Salisbury, Constantinople, October 26, 1895. For published copies of these documents respectively, see Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, Turkey, No. 2 (1896), Correspondence Relative to the Armenian Question, and Reports from Her Majesty’s Consular Officers in Asiatic Turkey [hereafter Turkey No. 2 (1896)] (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1896), No. 417 and No. 105.

18. TNA: FO 424/184, No. 634. Inclosure in No. 634. Copy of a dispatch from Acting Consul Fontana to Herbert, Angora, November 21, 1895. Also see Turkey No. 2 (1896), Inclosure in No. 375.
mosques, just like the villagers from the neighboring areas did, and the crowd started to kill any Armenians in the market and loot the shops.\textsuperscript{19}

In his aforementioned report, Field-Marshal Zeki Pasha also claimed that Armenians who were actively involved in the intrigue had usually used revolvers and had sometimes been armed with Russian and Martini rifles during the events, while Muslims “defended” themselves with clubs, pieces of wood, swords, daggers, and guns like \textit{şehanıe} and \textit{kapaklı} rifles.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, other civilian and military authorities, too, constantly maintained that while Armenians used modern firearms during the clashes, Muslims had to resort to defending themselves with sticks and knives, which are obviously hard to be seen as “defense tools” vis-à-vis modern weapons. Unfortunately, the absence of autopsy reports or similar official documents makes it hard for us to exactly determine the nature of killings as well as the tools of violence that the killers used in each episode. Ottoman and foreign sources indicate that the most common tools that the perpetrators used during the massacres included knives, axes, clubs, and daggers. However, two important facts – that the number of wounded was much lower than the number of dead, and that the killing was done within a relatively short time – suggest that firearms like rifles, pistols, and revolvers were probably widely used in most cases.

One of the most important contradictions inherent in the Ottoman official narrative concerning the causes and unfolding of the riots is that although the number of Armenians killed was, in many cases, 20 to 40 times higher than that of Muslims, the authorities uniformly asserted that Muslims defended themselves using the most primitive tools. Such a disparity in death tolls, however, suggests that the killing of Armenians could not simply derive from a defensive action on the part of Muslims. Also, evidence suggests that Armenians were exposed to violence suddenly and could not properly defend themselves in most cases. One can also easily infer from Ottoman reports that in most cases, disorders came to an end only after the authorities stopped Muslims, while those Armenians who were able to escape death either took refuge in their houses, churches, missionary buildings, consulates, and in the houses of

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\item 19. TNA: FO 424/184, No. 790. Inclosure 2 in No. 790. “Report on the Disturbance at Marsovan” by Raphael A. Fontana, transmitted in a dispatch from Acting Consul Fontana to Currie, Angora, December 4, 1895. Also see Turkey No. 2 (1896), Inclosure 2 in No. 441.
\item 20. Y.PRK.ASK. 109/61 (17 January 1896).
\end{itemize}
their Muslim neighbors, or, in rare cases, fired from their houses on the Muslim rioters. That the rioting in most cases ended in this way provides yet further evidence that Armenians were not equal participants in these disorders, let alone perpetrators advancing the attacks.

During the riots, the religious leaders and notables of Armenian and other non-Muslim communities from provincial capitals and other riot centers sent letters or telegrams of thanks and “declarations of loyalty” to the Sultan or the Sublime Porte. Some of these letters were signed jointly by community leaders from several non-Muslim confessions including Apostolic, Catholic, and Protestant Armenians, Assyrians, and Orthodox Greeks, while in some cases, signatories included only the notables of a particular non-Muslim community in a particular town. These letters or telegrams generically declare that it was the “Armenian plotters” who provoked the Muslims and initiated the disorders, and, therefore, that they were responsible for these outbreaks of violence. Several such letters signed by non-Armenian Christian community leaders also express their gratitude to the Sultan and the government for having been protected by the police and military during the riots.\(^\text{21}\)

Various sources claim that the Ottoman authorities forced or “encouraged” non-Muslim community leaders to sign such collective letters, telegrams, and declarations generated by government officials in the immediate aftermath of a riot in a certain place, reflecting official versions of the events. For instance, the British Consul at Trabzon, Henry Z. Longworth, reported to Ambassador Currie that in order to put the blame on the Armenian community, the authorities in Trabzon were resorting to the “worn-out expedient of compelling the inhabitants to sign a Declaration,” claiming that unfortunate incidents had taken place in the town due to “a latent spirit of revolt detected among

\(^\text{21}\) For instance, see BOA. Y.PRK.AZN. 15/1, 2 B. 1313 (19 December 1895). Letter signed by twenty-four persons from Diyarbekir including Assyrian and Orthodox community leaders; Turkey No. 2 (1896), No. 258. English translation of the telegram sent by the Vicar of the Assyrian (Syriac Orthodox) Patriarchate and some notables of his community from Harput to the Sublime Porte dated 15 November 1895. There are also similar documents signed jointly by Muslims and Armenians. See, for instance, BOA. Y.A.HUS. 347/28, 18 N. 1313 (3 March 1896). The mazbata (report) signed by nineteen Muslim and Armenian notables in the town of Arabgir dated 25 TS 1311/7 December 1895. See also BOA. Y.A.HUS. 347/28, 18 N. 1313 (3 March 1896). The mazbata (report) signed by nineteen Muslim and Armenian notables in the town of Arabgir dated 25 TS 1311/7 December 1895.
some Armenians.” Reports of the Greek Consul at Trabzon confirm that the authorities compelled the Greek Metropolitan and Catholic Armenian Bishop in the city to sign such a declaration. Yet, since the metropolitan and the bishop refused to sign, the Governor-General of Trabzon issued another document and invited some notables of these non-Muslim communities to sign it. This second attempt of the governor-general seems to have succeeded in producing a joint account of the events bearing the signatures of the local civilian and military authorities, ulema, or ulama, and notables of the Muslim, Greek, and Catholic (Armenian) communities in Trabzon.

Likewise, in a letter from Giresun (Kerassunde) addressed to Michael H. Herbert, Secretary of the British Embassy at Istanbul, a British subject resident in the province of Sivas claimed that after the mass killings in the town of Karahisar, the Ottoman authorities had required the Greeks of this town to sign a mazbata (report) to the effect that it was the Armenians who had provoked the incident by attacking and killing several Muslims. The Greeks had signed the document in order to save their lives. The anonymous author of the letter added that it was “utterly untrue that the Armenians gave the slightest provocation on this occasion.” According to British sources, a similar procedure was observed in the town of Kayseri. In his letter addressed to the acting British Consul at Ankara, Henry K. Wingate, a well-known American missionary in Talas, wrote that there had been attempts on the part of the authorities to get signatures to a paper declaring that Armenians were responsible for the outbreak in the town of Kayseri. Yet, Wingate went on to say, it was a failure thus far as the Armenians showed “considerable nerve in the matter.”

24. See BOA. Y.MTV. 130/10, 1 Ca. 1313 (19 October 1895). Report addressed to the Grand Vizier signed by the local civilian and military authorities, the ulema, and the notables of Muslim, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox communities in Trabzon dated 2 TE 1311/14 October 1895. The Sublime Porte communicated a French translation of this report to British Secretary of Embassy Herbert. See Turkey No. 2 (1896), Inclosure in No. 239. “Account of the Trebizond Massacres,” transmitted, with an English translation, by Herbert to Salisbury, in a dispatch dated Constantinople, November 6, 1895.
25. TNA: FO 424/184, No. 621. Inclosure 2 in No. 621, “Letter addressed to Mr. Herbert,” dated Kerassunde [Giresun], November 19, 1895. Also see Turkey No. 2 (1896), Inclosure 2 in No. 364.
Given the multiple cases in which such practices were observed, it can be surmised that, rather than being a local initiative, it was a central policy to generate such documents signed by the leaders and notables of non-Muslim communities in the region so that the official version of the events could be more convincingly presented to the representatives of the Great Powers. The Ottoman government sent copies of these documents to the Ottoman embassies in European capitals via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the government efforts to refute critical foreign press coverage and make the Ottoman case before the European public. It should also be noted that these letters and declarations were widely published in the Ottoman press.

As Melson aptly points out, putting the record straight against the provocation thesis does not mean that “the victim was a pure scapegoat whose motives and actions played no role in the violence.” A rigid victim-perpetrator dichotomy fails to recognize that Armenian revolutionaries were active agents in the intercommunal tensions in the region. Indeed, we should not underestimate the anxiety, suspicion, and fear that Armenian revolutionary movements might have evoked among Muslim masses on the eve of the riots, especially after the events that took place in Istanbul (September, 1895) and Trabzon (October, 1895).

Lack of substantial research and comprehensive studies on Armenian revolutionary organizations and activities in the Ottoman Empire on the provincial/regional/local levels makes it hard for us to properly situate the actions and reactions of Armenian revolutionaries in the full picture of these events. The existing literature focuses exclusively on the ideologies, programs, and leaderships of the Armenian revolutionary parties, while Ottoman government documents mostly consist of police reports and exaggerated accounts written by local government functionaries. There is, however, no doubt that Armenian revolutionary agitation contributed to the formation of an atmosphere conducive to hostile confrontations, and that Armenian revolutionaries had motivations for sacrificing civilian lives for the supreme cause, especially when they thought peaceful political action was fruitless vis-à-vis increasingly oppressive state mechanisms and violent manifestations on the part of the local Muslim populations.

27. R. Melson, 1982, p. 496.
On the other hand, to render Armenian revolutionaries responsible for these violent outbreaks is to suppose a great deal of influence and power on the part of Armenian political organizations, which there is ample reason to doubt. A revolutionary organization that was as threatening as portrayed in official narratives would require a resistance equivalent to the power attributed to it by the Ottoman authorities. Apart from the assassination attempt on a former governor-general of Van in Trabzon and the intensification of Armenian revolutionary activities in a number of locations on the eve of widespread riots, there were no signs of strong revolutionary activity and organization anywhere that could be blamed for provocative actions, let alone preparations for a coordinated Armenian rebellion across the eastern provinces in the fall of 1895. On the contrary, evidence suggests that in many instances, the anti-Armenian massacres were made possible by the lack or weakness of Armenian revolutionary organizations and armed self-defense capacity.

Furthermore, we should also be careful about how the imperial authorities and local Muslim populations conceived certain actions as threatening in essence, problematizing the ways in which they viewed the political motives, complaints, and demands of Armenians. Indeed, what constituted a “legitimate provocation” in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities and ordinary Muslims was not always clear. In such situations open to hostile confrontations, any action of a given minority group can arouse the passions of the majority. A request for a certain percentage of Armenian civil servants to be employed in provincial administration, for instance, could be disturbing and intolerable enough for the Muslim populations inhabiting the region. Likewise, a plea for the appointment of a Christian to a high-ranking provincial position could be a provocative, insolent demand. Given that Ottoman ruling elites traditionally defined the term “fesad” (sedition, mischief, intrigue) very broadly and liberally, even any peaceful demonstration and protest, especially from non-Muslim groups, or any condemnation of state officials and practices could be seen as a revolt. At this point, it is important to note that the official terminology and narratives analyzed in this study were also associated with a broader set of ideas and practices symptomatic of the anxiety and unease that characterized official and popular attitude towards certain population groups,
political movements, and specific categories of individuals deemed “threatening,” “unreliable,” “deviant,” “subversive,” or “troublemaker.”

THE RIOTS OF SIVAS: OFFICIAL LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSES OF “VENGEANCE” AND “PROVOCATION” IN A CASE STUDY

The long-dreaded riot in the town of Sivas took place on 12 November 1895. The same day, the Governor-General of Sivas, Halil Bey, sent a telegram to the Sublime Porte reporting in outline form that an outbreak occurred in the town following the provocative actions of a number of Armenians who shouted at Muslims “What are you waiting for? Let whatever is going to happen start now!” (Ne duruyorsunuz? Ne olacaksa olsun!) and attacked them with guns. In response, Halil Bey continued, Muslims had attacked Armenians and the fighting between the two sides had immediately spread. According to the governor-general’s version, when he telegraphed the central government in Istanbul, the killing and looting were still on-going, while provincial administrators, the military, and the police were closely cooperating to suppress the incident. In his report, the governor-general also claimed that a group of local Armenian traders had secretly carried some of the goods stored in their shops to their houses the day before the incident broke out. By saying this, he implied that the Armenians knew what would happen beforehand, and, therefore, the reason behind the events in the town was nothing but an organized Armenian provocation.

The same day, the Commander of the Fourth Army’s 16th Division stationed in Sivas, Lieutenant-General (ferik) Mehmed Hulusi Pasha, reported the same claims with almost the same wording to the Yıldız Palace by telegraph. Both reports, however, do not explain why the local authorities did nothing to prevent the alleged Armenian
provocation since they anticipated that the Armenians would take action. According to the commander, the civilian and military authorities were vigilant the days before the outbreak and took necessary precautions to keep order and peace in the town. Yet, following an attack by Armenians, the Muslims “had gotten excited” and a disturbance had taken place suddenly in the market place at a time when all the high-ranking provincial officials were together in the government office. The commander also reported that the riot was suppressed within hours and that the town was now well patrolled by about five hundred soldiers. The number of casualties from the two sides, the general added, was still unknown but expected to be low, while official investigations would later show that within just a few hours, hundreds of Armenian men had been killed in the town of Sivas on November 12.\footnote{2}

After the riots were suppressed, the authorities had collected the dead bodies in an abandoned house on the outskirts of the town, to be counted before burial.\footnote{3} Three days after the outbreak, British Embassy Secretary Herbert informed Salisbury that according to the intelligence sent by American missionaries to the U.S. Minister in Istanbul, 10 Muslims and 800 Armenians had been killed in the town of Sivas.\footnote{4} Later, British Consul Longworth extracted a letter from the U.S. Consul at Sivas, Milo A. Jewett, estimating the number of Armenian casualties at least to be 1,200. According to Longworth, Jewett also reported that the Armenian priests had claimed to have the names of 2,050 missing Armenians, while a police officer had said that 17 Muslims had been killed, some by mistake.\footnote{5} According to Barbara J. Merguerian, who has investigated the records of the U.S. ministers to the Ottoman Empire and of the U.S. Consulate at Sivas, Consul Jewett reported that “Turkish sources” estimated that 1,200 Armenians and only 4 Muslims had been killed in Sivas.\footnote{6}
final official statistical account, on the other hand, put the total number of Armenians killed in the town of Sivas at 600, six of which were women.  

Several days later, the Governor-General of Sivas sent a longer telegram to the Sublime Porte explaining the reasons for the recent disorders in a rather ambiguous way. According to the governor-general’s version, the disturbances took the lives of more than 400 Armenians and only 4 or 5 Muslims, two of whom were accidentally killed by Muslims themselves. In the other towns of the province, the number of Armenians killed and the damage done to Armenian property was great, while Muslim losses once again remained insignificant. After giving this brief information about the extent of the events in his province, the governor-general suggested that the Armenians had become especially impudent during the past couple of years, as their “malignant and malicious” actions were not punished properly and vigorously enough. For this reason, he claimed, the local Muslims had “boiled over with rage beyond measure” (derecesiz galeyana gelerek) and attempted to take revenge on and punish the Armenians for their alleged seditious actions.  

The themes of “boiling over” (galeyana, or ebulition) and revenge were repeated in Halil Bey’s subsequent reports in no less an ambiguous and equivocal fashion. According to the governor-general, “the fact that the Muslims did not attack the Greeks and the Catholic Armenians during the disturbance proves that the [Muslims’] boiling was based on the idea of taking revenge only from the [Apostolic] Armenians who were involved in seditious actions.” This is an odd statement because by definition, “boiling over” (in the sense of ebulition) refers to a sudden outburst of emotion erupting with strong excitement and rage, which is a feeling of intense and violent anger that suddenly
explodes in response to an external symptom or event, real or perceived.\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, such an emotional outburst does not take place on the basis of an idea. Obviously, by the word “\textit{galeyan},” the Governor-General of Sivas referred to the very action of the Muslims, that is, attacking and killing the Armenians, apparently because in describing the events, he, like most officials, refrained from using any words that might admit or underscore the agency of Muslim perpetrators. In other words, in the governor-general’s language, the word “\textit{galeyan}” was a linguistic euphemism that served to mask whatever the Muslims did.

In addition, not one of these official Ottoman reports provided details about the identity and actions of the alleged Armenian offenders who were reported to have initiated the incident. Nor did they mention any specific events immediately prior to the riots in the town of Sivas that could produce anger and a strong desire for vengeance on the part of Muslims. Nevertheless, in a telegram dated 3 December 1895, the Governor-General of Sivas linked the outbreak of disorders – hence the reason for the Muslims’ desire for retaliation – to the Armenian revolutionary activities that had taken place over the past couple of years, not specifically in Sivas Province but in general, such as printing “harmful publications,” posting placards and leaflets, burning public and private buildings, committing murder and assassination, forming armed bands, attacking mail coaches, causing affrays, using improper/abusive language against the government, and raising funds for their committees.\textsuperscript{41} It appears that in the governor-general’s language, these revolutionary activities, no matter whether they had occurred in the province of Sivas or elsewhere, were anger-generating events etched into the minds of Muslims who then killed their Armenian fellow citizens in response. Meanwhile, it is significant to note that the precise trigger for the violence – that is, the alleged Armenian attack – was only mentioned in the first report of the governor-general and it disappeared from his later accounts of the events.


\textsuperscript{41} Y.MTV. 132/116 (3 Dec. 1895). Cipher telegram from the Governor-General of Sivas dated 21 TS 1311/3 December 1895.
As a matter of fact, not one of these aforementioned events explain the specific timing of the riots. Evidently, the Governor-General of Sivas sought to situate the violence of Muslim crowds in a logical, understandable framework, retrospectively linking the past events to the outbreak of the anti-Armenian carnage in the town. Indeed, openly stating that the violence was driven by an act of revenge with “rage beyond measure” (*derecesiz galeyan*), he implied that the action of the Muslims was understandable to a certain extent, if disproportionate, unfortunate, and unacceptable. In fact, not only in the Sivas case but also in every instance, the lethal and widespread anti-Armenian riots were justified by the Ottoman authorities and those who participated in or supported the violence as political vengeance for the “seditious” activities of the Armenians – perceived or real.

Meanwhile, about two weeks after the riots, Governor-General Halil Bey held an interview with the French Vice-Consul at Sivas, Maurice Carlier, in the government office, where they talked about the recent events that unfolded in the town. According to his report on this meeting, the governor-general repeated the same claim to the French consul: the disorders had been caused by the “seditious actions” and murders that Armenian revolutionaries had committed for the past couple of years. For Halil Bey, the looting and seizure of Armenian properties had simply taken place as a natural consequence of the disturbances. More interestingly, the governor-general told Vice-Consul Carlier that “one should not be surprised by the light damage (*hasarât-ı hafifeye*) that the Armenians suffered in some parts of the empire, considering that a lot of properties and goods belonging to the Italians were looted by the French following the assassination of the French President, Mr. Carnot, by an Italian [anarchist].”

Vice-Consul Carlier must have been very surprised by this analogy, as the Armenian sufferings during the fall of 1895 can hardly be compared to the relatively minor damage done to the Italians during the incidents of June 1894 in France. Obviously, the governor-general deliberately belittled the true extent of the anti-Armenian riots and sought to justify the violence perpetrated by the Muslims before the French diplomat.

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42. BOA. Y.PRK.UM. 34/13, C. 1313 (1 December 1895). Telegram from the Governor-General of Sivas dated 12 TS 1311/24 November 1895. For a published and transliterated version of this document, see *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni İsyanları II*, 2008, p. 33.
On the other hand, it should be noted that like several other high-ranking provincial administrators, Governor-General Halil Bey often openly spoke about the serious threats that the current situation posed to government authority, public security, and civil tranquility not only in his province but also across the whole eastern provinces. In one of his above-mentioned reports, for instance, he expressed his concern about the potentially negative effects of negligence on the part of the government towards the suppression of disorders and the punishment of Muslims involved in the incidents by frankly saying:

If such actions of the Muslims are not immediately put to an end with every precaution, and, when needed, even with armed forces and severe legal and political punishment, the government will seem to be a mere spectator, a condition which, as stated before, may lead to foreign intervention. A disruption of government authority due to the ongoing situation may also cause the disobedience of the Kurds and the like.\(^{43}\)

To move back to the main topic discussed above, apparently upon the inquiries made by the central government authorities in Istanbul regarding the reason for the huge disparity between the Armenian and Muslim losses that occurred in the town of Sivas, Governor-General Halil Bey reported that it was simply because of “Armenians’ cowardliness” and their inability to use guns properly.\(^{44}\) In fact, Ottoman officials almost uniformly claimed that although it was the Armenians who caused disturbances and mass killings everywhere by provoking Muslims, they had displayed their customary cowardice vis-à-vis “the courage and might of Muslims.” These claims raise two important questions: Could the extreme disproportion between Armenian and Muslim casualties be explained by the “fact” that the Armenians did not have the ability to use guns effectively? And, how could Muslims consider these so-called coward and incompetent revolutionaries to be a serious threat that deserved such ruthless revenge?

43. Y.PRK.UM. 33/109 (17 November 1895). Original quotation: “Şu kadar ki efad-ı Müslümanın bu harekette her türlü tedabirle ve hatta ledel-hace kuve-i müsellaha ve mücazat-ı şeide-i kanunyiye ve siyasiy ile bir an evvel nihayet verilmesse hükümet seyirci gibi kalarak evvelce de arz olunduğu vechile müdahale-i ecnebiyeyi badi olacak bir rengi vermesi ve nüfuz-ı hükümetin sekte-dar olarak bi’l-ahire Ekrad ve emsalinin adem-i itaatlerini intac etmesi melbuz bulunduğun cibetle [...]”

44. Y.MTV. 132/116 (3 December 1895). Cipher telegram from the Governor-General of Sivas dated 21 TS 1311/3 December 1895.
Not only the huge disparity between Armenian and Muslim losses but also the aforementioned statements of the governor-general unequivocally indicate that what happened in the town of Sivas on 12 November 1895 was an indiscriminate, deadly attack by a group of people on another, not necessarily wholly planned and well-organized but deliberate, politically motivated, and calculative. Even though the precipitating event, if any, is still unclear, it was an episode of extreme violence inflicted upon the Armenians by a Muslim crowd that took place in the context of the anti-Armenian riots of the fall of 1895. Even if we suppose that it was indeed a number of Armenians who triggered the violence, it is evident that the attack was used as a pretext for the local Muslims to kill Armenians indiscriminately and *en masse*. The Muslim crowd did not simply punish the reported provocateurs but targeted the collective identity and existence of Armenians.

Although the killings in Sivas came to an end within less than a day, plunder and looting in the town lasted seemingly frantically for more than twenty-four hours and continued sporadically during the next three days. In addition to “marauder” groups who already came to the town to join plunder, especially Muslim villagers, the Kars *muhacirs* (Muslim immigrants from South Caucasus settled in East Anatolia after the Ottoman-Russian war of 1877-78) and Circassians were still coming from nearby villages for the spoil. Indeed, the governor-general reported that such “marauders” had been detained when seen in the town center upon the orders that he gave during his visit to the scene of disorder for inspection with the commander the day after the riots. Yet it seems that the provincial authorities failed to restore order and tranquility completely, as they reported a couple of days later that excitement had not been fully quelled in the town due to the ongoing looting and plunder, and that they therefore called for three more redif (second reserve) troops from the district of Zile to deploy in the town. Moreover, on 15 November 1895, a few more Armenians were killed by the Muslims in a minor clash caused by, according to official reports, “those marauders who instigated the [Muslim] people by spreading the rumor that the Armenians are attacking the Muslims.” However minor,

45. BOA. Y.PRK.UM. 33/88, 25 Ca. 1313 (13 November 1895). Telegram from the Governor-General of Sivas to the First Secretary dated 13 November 1895. Also see Turkey No. 2 (1896), No. 257. A copy and translation of a telegram from Tevfik [Tevfik] Pasha to Rustem [Rüstem] Pasha, Constantinople, November 15, 1895.

46. BOA. Y.PRK.UM. 33/88, 25 Ca. 1313 (13 November 1895). Telegram from the Governor-General of Sivas to the First Secretary dated 13 November 1895. Also see Turkey No. 2 (1896), No. 257. A copy and translation of a telegram from Tevfik [Tevfik] Pasha to Rustem [Rüstem] Pasha, Constantinople, November 15, 1895.
this attempt at a second round of anti-Armenian carnage in the town of Sivas, as seen in many others instances, suggests that the Armenians were very exposed to the danger of sudden attacks easily stimulated by false rumors and gossip throughout the events of 1895-1897. Also, who can be assured that the first incident in the town was not triggered by such an unfounded rumor deliberately spread by someone who wished to incite violence against Armenians?

Foreign sources, particularly the first-hand accounts received from local observers by British consular officials, present stark contrasts to Ottoman official reports and claims with regard to the outbreak of the riots and the conduct of the local officials during the events in the town of Sivas. It seems that for British consular officials, the main source of information concerning the events in Sivas was the U.S. consul resident in the center of this province. We understand that the British consul at Trabzon, Longworth, and U.S. Consul Jewett exchanged letters throughout this period. In what follows, I present an account of the outbreak in the town of Sivas as reflected in Jewett’s letters extracted by British Consul Longworth in his dispatches to the British Embassy at the Ottoman capital.

In response to Longworth’s questions as to whether the events in the province of Sivas were provoked by Armenians in any way, Consul Jewett openly wrote in a letter, dated December 10, that he had no doubt in his mind that “[s]ome branch of the Government ordered the massacres or some clique that appears in the guise of the highest authority.” According to the U.S. consul, for a long time before the riots, there was rumor of a massacre on the part of Christians in the town, which was originated partly by revolutionary Armenians who wanted to stir up trouble. But after the promulgation of the reforms in mid-October, all the Armenians of Sivas kept very quiet, with most of them being “ready to put up with all manner of annoyances and wrongs rather than give any excuse for disturbances.” Afterwards, the Muslims had said, Jewett went on to report, that they were going to slaughter the Christians, and several Armenians had been warned by their Muslim friends that “the massacre was going to occur on the morning of the 12th November.”48 It was probably due to these
warnings or rumors that the Armenian traders had moved the valuable goods in their shops before the riots, which, as mentioned above, was interpreted by the governor-general and other local authorities as a sign of the alleged malicious intention of the Armenians to stir up disorder. Such interpretations drawn by provincial officials and their superiors in Istanbul, in the case of Sivas and elsewhere, tended to ignore, or deliberately deny, the possibility that Armenians might have done so simply because they feared a Muslim attack.

In fact, to continue with Jewett’s account, some Armenian traders and craftsmen had not opened their shops on 11 November and others had wanted to close them the next day. Yet, upon the governor-general’s order, Armenian priests went about the city and told their co-religionists that they must keep the shops open. Also, the Mayor of Sivas told some of the leading members of the community that the Armenians should carry on with their businesses as usual, and that nothing would happen. However, half-an-hour before noon on 12 November, suddenly a turmoil took place throughout the market. According to local Armenians, Jewett claimed, “in all parts of the market, the Turks, Karslis [Kars muhacirs], and Circassians began killing and plundering” upon the signal given by Bazarbashi Shukri (Pazarbaşı Şükri). As soon as the incident broke out, the soldiers had sounded the trumpets, “To Arms.” At the same time, the muezzin had called from a minaret “La illaha ill-Allah” (“there is no god but Allah”), which appeared to Jewett and local Armenians alike not as a call to prayer, but rather as a call to massacre. During the riots, the soldiers and zabtiyes, including their officers, had taken a large part in the killings. As soon as hearing the firing began in the market, Jewett himself had seen soldiers and policemen who rushed into the market place laden with spoils. Indeed, the reason for the absence of self-defense on the part of the Armenians, he believed, was that the mob was composed largely of soldiers and policemen.

“An exceptionally reliable Armenian,” Jewett continued, had heard a lieutenant-general shout out to the soldiers and the Bashi-Bazouks (başbozucks or irregulars) as he rode through the streets: “The city is delivered up to you for three hours.” Other Armenians said that the Mufti

of Sivas had gone through the market the next morning and said to some of the rioters “[A]re you not ashamed to keep up for twenty-four hours when the order was only for three?” Furthermore, in Jewett’s account, the Commissary of Police and a Lieutenant are reported to have said that the soldiers might easily have stopped the riot if they had wanted to. The U.S. consul also claimed that the governor-general, the commander of the city, the judge (kâdi), and the gendarmerie commander had kept away from the scene of disorder until quite late in the day or until the next day.50

As a result, British and American sources suggest that the attacks on Armenians in the town of Sivas were coordinated by Muslim community leaders and conducted with the permission of the authorities who left Armenian civilians at the mercy of the Muslim crowd for a certain period of time. Moreover, as implied above, foreign consular officials believed that the massacre in Sivas was planned long ago and completely organized down to the smallest detail. Whether the anti-Armenian riots grew out of an official order and plan, on the levels of both the central and provincial governments, is certainly a question of evidence and interpretation that I investigate in detail elsewhere.51 It is, however, significant to note that, as a recurrent theme both in the Sivas case and in general, contemporary observers, specifically British, French, and American citizens living in the affected areas, reported that the local Muslims believed killing and plundering had been done at the request of the government or with its permission. In fact, in the case of Sivas, Merguerian writes that Jewett also reported to his superiors that a variety of reasons were given for the violence; but “whether justly or unjustly the Muslims think the government wanted them to kill and ruin the Armenians, and the conduct of government soldiers and police corroborates this.”52

Ottoman sources, as well, indicate that some of the perpetrators themselves and ordinary Ottoman citizens contemporary with the riots

49. Ibid. In addition to his letter to the British consul at Trabzon, as seen in Merguerian’s study, Jewett also reported to his superiors in Istanbul that “on the basis of personal observation and corroborating testimony,” there was no doubt that the soldiers and police actively participated in killing and looting, and that the government made no serious attempt to stop the riots until the next morning. See B.J. Merguerian, 2004, p. 256.
50. FO 424/184, Inclosure in No. 854.
51. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of my forthcoming dissertation focus particularly on this issue. For a preliminary analysis and discussion, see E. Gölbashi, 2015, p. 155-159, 161-163.
were convinced, or pretended to be convinced, that the violence was organized or countenanced by the government. The legendary claims and rumors to the effect that the Sultan issued a *ferman* (decree) permitting the killing and looting of his Armenian subjects easily found willing ears among Muslim masses, especially among Kurdish tribes. Leaving aside such allegations, myths, and conspiracy theories, it is important to note that in many cases, the perpetrators believed violence against the Armenians was desired and would not be punished by the government authorities. As historical and contemporary cases proved, a sense of impunity and official support on the part of aggressors is an important aspect of ethnic-religious riots across time and countries.\(^{53}\)

CONCLUSION, OR WHAT OFFICIAL NARRATIVES ECLIPSE

As Ronald G. Suny aptly points out, the provocation thesis neglects to inquire into what he terms as “the negative features of the Ottoman social and political order” and “the social and political conditions out of which [Armenian] resistance and protest grew.”\(^{54}\) Also, this view of the matter makes even less sense since it does not take into consideration the Hamidian regime’s propensity to deploy violent and coercive measures to “solve” the so-called “Armenian question” for good. Furthermore, even if one supposes that the anti-Armenian pogroms took place only because Armenian revolutionaries’ political actions became visible and threatening, provocation narratives nevertheless cannot explain why it was so easy for revolutionary agitators to trigger such a great wave of massacres across a vast region, or in Melson’s words, “why the reaction was so heavily incommensurate to the supposed provocation.”\(^{55}\) To put it another way, the official Ottoman narrative and the resultant modern historical accounts have blamed the violence on its main victims without questioning the immediate, extensive, and extremely severe character of the anti-Armenian riots of 1895-1897. Both at interpersonal and intergroup levels, viewing the provocation thesis as a legitimate explanation for violence ultimately justifies the action by transferring responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim. Leaving aside its evident paradoxes in the face of factual evidence, the official Ottoman narrative also serves to neutralize a host of

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\(^{54}\) R.G. Suny, 2011, p. 24-25.

significant questions regarding the intentions and political agency of the perpetrators, as well as about the processes by which ordinary Muslims and Armenians descended into an unprecedented level of hostility and conflict in the 1890s.

Bibliography


