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## *THE 1915 VAN REBELLION IN RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC DOCUMENTS AND THE REPORT OF THE CHARGE D'AFFAIRES OF FRANCE IN THESSALONIKI*

*Rus Diplomatik Belgelerinde 1915 Van Ayaklanması ve Fransa'nın Selanik  
Maslahatgüzarı'nın Raporu*

*Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Eray Bayramol*

Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat Üniversitesi

[eray.bayramol@alanya.edu.tr](mailto:eray.bayramol@alanya.edu.tr)

ORCID ID: 0000 0002 1979 0271

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## THE 1915 VAN REBELLION IN RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC DOCUMENTS AND THE REPORT OF THE CHARGE D'AFFAIRES OF FRANCE IN THESSALONIKI

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**Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Eray Bayramol**

### Öz

Osmanlı Devleti'nden koparacakları topraklar üzerinde kendilerine ait bir devlet kurmak isteyen Ermeniler için Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın çıkmış olması büyük bir fırsat olarak nitelendirildi. Geçmişten itibaren İtilaf Devletleri ile bu hususta birlikte hareket eden Ermeniler, Osmanlı Devleti içindeki ayrılıkçı faaliyetlerini Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın yaklaşmasıyla birlikte özellikle Rusya güdümünde devam ettirdiler. Birinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan önce başlayan Ermeni-Rus iş birliği savaşla birlikte en yoğun halini aldı.

İstanbul ve Boğazların işgal edilerek büyük Rus imparatorluğunu kurma hedefini gerçekleştirmek isteyen Rusya ise Ermenileri Osmanlı Devleti'ne karşı harekete geçirmek amacıyla desteklemeye devam etti. Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın en çetin geçtiği günlerde Ermenileri ayaklandıran Rusya, Osmanlı Devleti'ni savaştığı cephelerde zor duruma düşürmek istedi. Bir taraftan Ermenileri askeri olarak desteklerken, politik olarak desteklemeyi de ihmal etmedi. 1915 yılında Van'da baş gösteren Ermeni ayaklanmalarını ve Ermenilerin Müslüman ahaliye karşı gerçekleştirdiği katliamları gizlemek için Fransa ve İngiltere'yi de yanına almak amacıyla bazı siyasi girişimlerde bulunmak istedi. Bu girişimlerden biri, Van'da Ermeniler tarafından gerçekleştirilen kıyım faaliyetlerini ört bas etmektir. Bu sebeple, İngiltere ve Fransa ile birlikte Van olayları hakkında uluslararası bir bildiri yayımlamak istedi. Fakat tam da bu sırada Fransa'nın Selanik Maslahatgüzarı tarafından, Van olaylarını Ermenilerin başlattığı ve Osmanlı Devleti'nin isyanı bastırmak için müdahale ettiği hususunda tuttuğu bir rapor gündeme geldi. Bu rapor, Rusya'nın Ermeni politikasını sekteye uğratabilecek niteliktedir.

Bu çalışmada, Rusya'nın Van olayları ile ilgili yayımlamak istediği bildiri hususunda Rusya Dışişleri Bakanlığı'nın gerçekleştirdiği girişimler, Bakanlığa ait diplomatik yazışmalar kullanılarak ortaya konulmaya çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Osmanlı Devleti, Rusya, Ermeni, Van, bildiri.

### Abstract

The outbreak of World War I described as such a marvelous opportunity for the Armenians, who desired to found a state of their own through the lands that they were going to break off from the Ottoman State. Armenians who had been acting together with the Entente Powers in this case: perpetuated their separatist activities in The Ottoman State, under the guidance of Russia by the approach of the World War I. The association of Russian- Armenian, which initiated before the First World War took its most intense form with the war.

Russia on the other hand which desired to substantiate its goal of founding the Great Russian Empire by occupying Istanbul and Straits, perpetuated to back up Armenians in order to prompt them riot against The Ottoman State. Russia, which provoked the Armenians against The Ottoman State during the toughest times of The World War I; wished to entrap The Ottoman State on the fronts it battled. It did not disregard to back the Armenians up politically as well while supporting the Armenians militarily. It desired to initiate some political enterprises in order to conceal the Armenian rebellion and the massacres of the Armenians on Muslim community in Van, 1915, also with the intention of taking England and France as allies. One of these enterprises was to cover up the slaughter operations carried out by the Armenians in Van. Accordingly, Russia desired to establish an international declaration about Van incidents accompanied with England and France. However, at this exact moment a report came to the fore by the charge d'affaires of France in Thessaloniki that the incidents which took place in Van was initiated by the Armenians and The Ottoman State intervened to quell the rebellion. The mentioned report was such as to bring to a standstill the politics of Russia on Armenians.

In this study, the initiatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the declaration that Russia desires to publish about the Van events is going to be attempted to be revealed by the use of diplomatic correspondence of the Ministry.

**Keywords:** Ottoman State, Russia, Armenian, Van, declaration.

## Introduction

The operations of the Armenian committees, which increased with the declaration of mobilization by the Ottoman State, turned into systematic rebels. Russia aimed to put the Ottoman State into demanding situations on the fronts it battled by supporting Armenians while these events were carrying through. Russia took advantage of every tactics to support Armenians as of the mentioned reason. Aid picked up for the Armenians through media operations and the propaganda of the Armenian organizations. The idea of Russia being the guardian of the Eastern Christians attempted to spread. Commissioned Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman military forces decamped with their armaments. Mentioned soldiers attacked to Turkish villages, disrupted military transportation by causing incidents on the army supply roads. One of the most significant supports given by the Armenians to Russia was to clear the way for the Russian army by attacking the Turkish army right after the Russians crossed the border. The fugitive Armenian soldiers joined to the Russian army, which crossed the border.<sup>1</sup>

The Dashnak organization, which acquired a powerful influence on the Armenian community in advance of the World War I, was particularly effective in Van, Bitlis and Erzurum. Armenians, who had speculated the Russians were going to take a great victory against the Ottoman State in World War I, thought that they spotted a great opportunity to establish a state of their own. They commenced to take advantage of the freedom atmosphere that had emerged in the early days of the declaration of the II. Constitutional Monarchy in order to realize these goals and secretly began to take up arms. The centre of these movements was the province of Van. Separatist activities began to be organised by the Dashnak, Hunchak and Armenakan organizations with the beginning of 1913 in Van, which was determined as the centre of the rebellion. The weapon depots found in Van were demonstrating that the preparations of the Armenian rebels had reached to a serious level quite before the World War I. As early as 1908, the amount of the weapons unearthed in Van was 2000.<sup>2</sup>

The second most densely populated province of the Armenians living under the roof of the Ottoman State was Van right after Bitlis. It had a strategic significance for the Russians, as it constituted a border with Iran. Russia was trying to gain influence over the Anatolian Armenians through the Caucasus Armenians from the beginning of the 19th century from the one hand, Van was desired to be turned into a headquarter by the Russians for the mentioned reason. Russia aimed to initiate a Van-based rebellion movement in Anatolia under the leadership of Caucasian Armenians due to the location of the province of Van. During the preparation phase for the rebellion; military, material, and logistical support provided to the separatist Armenian organizations in Van. Separatist Armenians secretly crossed into the Caucasus and trained in Tbilisi by the Russians.<sup>3</sup> Van brought into the base of the separatist Armenians in Anatolia as the consequence of the Russians' efforts.

## Armenian-Russian Alliance and Van Rebellion

Armenians, who desired to improve their relations with Russia against the Ottoman State, assembled various appeals to the Russian State through the Catholicosate of the Etchmiadzin, shortly after the World War I started. Furthermore; Armenians' associations with the Russians commenced quite before the World War I, through the Treaty of San Stefano, which was made after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878. Armenian Patriarch Nerses Varyabedian visited the Russian army, which had advanced to Yeşilköy, and held a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Duke Nikolay. The Patriarch demanded autonomy for the regions occupied by the

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<sup>1</sup> Esat Uras, *Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi*, Belge Yayınları, İstanbul, 1976, s. 596-606.

<sup>2</sup> Justin McCarthy, *Türkler ve Ermeniler*, çev: Fatma Sarıkaya, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 2019, s.132- 134.

<sup>3</sup> Hasan Babacan, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sırasında Ermeni Sorunu, Tehcir Meselesi ve Talat Bey*, Ermeni Meselesi Üzerine Araştırmalar, Haz: Erhan Afyoncu, Tarih ve Tabiat Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, s.151.

Russian armies in Eastern Anatolia at the meeting. The mentioned demand of the patriarch was included in the 16th article of the San Stefano Treaty. The Ottoman State had agreed to make a series of reforms in the provinces where Armenians lived in Eastern Anatolia according to this article. However, the main purpose of this article, which added into the treaty under the name of reform, was to create an autonomous Armenian state in these regions.<sup>4</sup>

European states signed the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 as the consequence of the rise of objections to the Treaty of San Stefano. The Berlin Treaty included that while many articles of the San Stefano Treaty were revised, the sixteenth article regarding the Armenians was rearranged as the sixty-first article and stated that the reforms undertaken by the Ottoman State in the regions where the Armenians lived were going to be controlled by Russia. Russia became the protector of Ottoman Armenians as the consequence.<sup>5</sup>

Catholicos Kevork sent a letter addressing the Tsar to the General Governor of the Caucasus, Vorontsov Dashkov on April 29, 1914, expressed his gratitude for the support of Russia to the Armenians regarding the reforms to be realised in the regions where the Armenians lived. Kevork stated in the letter that the plans to destroy the Christians could not be realised thanks to the great saviour Tsar, and said that the Tsar led all Christians to material, spiritual, holy, sacred unity and solidarity. Kevork, who desired the support of Russia to continue in the next period for the Armenians, was ending his letter by stating that thanks to the Tsar, they could now worship freely, and that they had long prays for the Tsar and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Russian-Armenian relations proceeded in the period leading up to the World War I. Catholicos Kevork assembled some demands on the Armenian State planned to be established in the future in another letter he sent to Russia's Caucasus General Governor Vorontsov Dashkov, on 5 August 1914. The establishment of an Armenia region covering six provinces, Russia assigning the appointment of a high-ranking Christian as the head of this region and the control of the reforms to be assembled only by Russia were among these demands. Kevork concluded his letter by declaring that the Armenians were loyal to Russia.<sup>7</sup>

The volunteered unions formed by Armenians began to act together with the Russian army, as the consequence of the instructions of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul, with the entry of the Ottoman State into the First World War. Armenians launched attacks on the settlements where Muslims lived within the framework of the instructions given by the Van deputy Papazyan. Sabotages carried out to prevent the movement of the Ottoman army.<sup>8</sup>

The Russians achieved the most significant success in their cooperation with the Armenians in the spring of 1915 located in Van. Van Governor Cevdet Bey stated in the information he conveyed to the Commander-in-Chief in March that the Armenians were about to initiate a rebellion in Van. Armenians set many government offices and Muslim homes on fire in the rebellion located in Van that started in April. The gendarmerie division in Van surrounded the rebellious Armenians nevertheless; they could not suppress the rebellion. Halil Bey set out with his army to suppress the rebel when the Armenian rebellion spread to the whole of Van, however; the Russians captured the Başkale region before Halil Bey did and blocked the way to Van. Upon

<sup>4</sup> *Türkler-Ermeniler ve Avrupa*, Haz: Bayram Kodaman, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 2015, s. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Akdes Nimet Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya XVIII. Yüzyıl Sonundan Kurtuluş Savaşı'na Kadar Türk-Rus İlişkileri (1798-1919)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 2011, s. 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Sbornik Diplomaticheskikh Dokumentov Reformy v Armenii 26 Noyabrya 1912 goda – 10 Maya 1914 goda, Gosudarstvennaya Tipografiya*, Petrograd, 1915, s. 178-180, Belge No: 158. For detailed information see Eray Bayramol, *Rus Kaynaklarında Ermeni Sorunu 1914-1915*, Bilge Kültür Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul, 2013, s. 86-87.

<sup>7</sup> Hüsamettin Yıldırım, *Rus-Türk-Ermeni Münasebetleri (1914-1918)*, Kök Yayınları, Ankara, 1990, s. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Erdal Aydoğan, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Doğu Politikası 1908-1918*, Ötüken Yayınları, İstanbul, 2007, s. 338-339.



this, the Governor of Van could not stand the Russian and Armenian pressure any longer, and the city fell into the hands of the Armenians. The third army took action to save Van from the occupants. The Turkish army that came to Van with large forces attacked on July 22 and regained the city after long battling. However, the Russians took action again in August and recaptured Van.<sup>9</sup>

Various preparations were completed in Van before the revolt. Armenians living around Van came to Van and settled in the city centre. Despite the declaration of mobilization, Armenians who were supposed to join the Ottoman army fled and secretly came to Van. Meanwhile, the Armenians destroyed some telegraph lines. Armenians attacked volunteer soldiers of 300 Muslim people moving from Bitlis towards Van. Meanwhile, Armenian rebellions started in some parts of Van and attacks were carried out on soldiers and the people of the region. The telegram sent by the Van Gendarmerie Division Command on March 16, reported that the Armenians attacked the Şitak gendarmerie station. Finally, the telegram of the Governor of Van on 20 March, reported that a rebellion movement had begun all over Van. As the Muslim men in Van left the city to join the army due to the mobilization, Armenian rebels began to attack vulnerable villages in many parts of Van. A telegram sent by Van Governor Cevdet Bey on April 11, reported that an Armenian gang of 4000 people came to Van and attacked the civilian population.<sup>10</sup>

Russian general Maslovskiy stated that during the uprisings of April 12-14, Armenians massacred the Gendarmerie station here, and then Kazım Bey intervened in the events by sending soldiers to Van. Russian troops under the command of General Turihin and General Nikolaev were sent to the city to help the Armenian rebels.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Initiative of Political Support Planned by Russia**

Van became the centre of the activities of the Dashnaks long before the World War I. The stated issue, which the reports of the Russians frequently mentioned, held in 1912. Stating in a military report written on November 2, 1912 that Armenians were getting prepared for rebellion in Van, Muş and Zeytun and therefore they were stockpiling weapons. Reporting in another report dated January 14, 1914 that large numbers of rifles and thousands of bullets were shipped from Yerevan region to Van. The information was given in the aforementioned reports again that the Armenians who had crossed the border gathered in Van.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian army began to advance in the direction of Van as the consequence of the Armenian revolt that started on April 20, 1915. Ottoman soldiers withdrew from Van on 16-17 May as the consequence of the Russian army reaching the city. Armenians under the command of Khachatur Amiryan and Drastamat Kanayan handed over Van to the Russians on 20 May. The leader of the Dashnaksutyun in Van, Aram Manukyan gave the key to the city to Russian General Nikolay Yudenich. Armenians established a government in Van by the Russians who took over the city and Aram Manukyan was made the governor of Van. Russian General Pavel Voronov became the governor of the province after the Russians completely dominated Van.<sup>13</sup>

Sazonov, who served as Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1910 and 1916, gave special significance to the Armenian issue. Armenians were such a useful mean for Russia in order to keep the Ottoman State under pressure, to keep the Ottoman State busy behind the front line in the World War I and to hit its army from behind. In addition, an Armenian country to be

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<sup>9</sup> Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi*, C.3/3, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 1991, s. 2-6.

<sup>10</sup> Şenol Kantarcı, "Van'da Ermeni İsyanları", *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, S. 5, Bahar 2002, s. 146-151. (138-167).

<sup>11</sup> Ergünöz Akçora, *Van ve Çevresinde Ermeni İsyanları 1896-1916*, Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul, 1994, s. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Mehmet Perinçek, *Ermeni Milliyetçiliğinin Serüveni*, Kaynak Yayınları, İstanbul, 2015, s. 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Nejla Günay-Güzin Çaykırın, "Rusların 1915 Yılında Van Vilayeti ve Çevresinden Ermenileri Kafkasya'ya Göç Ettirmesi", *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, C. 14, S. 27, Kış 2020, s. 137.



established in the east of Turkey would be an alternative to the Straits for Russia. If Russia could not dominate the Straits, it would descend to the warm seas through this Armenian country. Sazonov promised the Armenians a country of their own for the mentioned reason. Armenians and Sazonov maximized their cooperation for the mentioned reason that they intensively started before the World War I, with the World War I.

The first signs of cooperation between the Armenians and the Russians began to be seen as the consequence of the attempts of the Dashnaks. The Armenians accepted Russia as the only power from which Armenians could get help on their way to independence. The Dashnak representatives contacted Mihail Giers, the Russian Ambassador in Istanbul for this reason. The Dashnak representatives agreed that the Armenians would support Russia with all their might, in Russia's struggle with Turkey as the consequence of the negotiations. Articles began to be written about the common interests of Armenians and Russians in the Orizon newspaper, the media organ of the Dashnak Party.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin was carrying out activities for the realization of Armenian-Russian cooperation. Catholicos Kevork visited Russian Tsar II. Nikolay and stated that the only salvation for Armenians was an Armenian state under the auspices of the Russians in 1914, just before the World War I. Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, the highest religious office of the Armenians, decided just as the Dashnak Party that the Armenians should fight as allies with the Russians against the Turks. The Armenians therefore would fulfill the task of leading troops in the Russian occupation of Anatolia.<sup>15</sup>

In the days when the Van revolt started, Russia wanted to take political initiatives in order to add a political meaning to the revolt. In this initiative they planned together with Armenian Catholicos V. Kevork, Catholicos conveyed their demands to the United States and Italian Governments for assistance to the Armenians. In the telegram V. Kevork sent to Sazonov on 20 April 1915, he informed that massacres had begun against Armenians in Erzurum and Zeytun, and bloody clashes took place in Bitlis, Van and Muş, and asked for help from the Russian Foreign Minister. In this telegram, Catholicos Kevork stated that he applied to the President of the United States of America and the King of Italy for assistance to the Armenians and asked the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassadors to the United States and Italy to take initiatives to support the Armenians in their countries.<sup>16</sup>

The telegram sent from Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov to Russia's Deputy Governor of the Caucasus, Myshlaevsky, on April 22, 1915, was about Russia's support for this demand of Catholicos. Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov was ordering Russia's representatives in Washington and Rome to support Catholicos's appeal to the governments of the United States and Italy. Sazonov's telegram stated that although the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not yet made a final decision on the future structure of Turkey Armenia<sup>17</sup>, as soon as this issue is accepted, Russia is going to inform the Caucasus Governor General of this decision. The future structure of Turkey Armenia, as stated by Sazonov, was essentially to create an Armenian state in eastern Turkey under the control of Russia.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Perinçek, *age*, s. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Ramazan Erhan Güllü, *Ermeni Sorunu ve İstanbul Ermeni Patrikhanesi*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 2015, s. 456.

<sup>16</sup> Seyit Sertçelik, *Rus ve Ermeni Kaynakları Işığında Ermeni Sorunu 1915-1923 Sömürge Savaşı*, SRT Yayınları, Ankara, 2015, s. 142-143.

<sup>17</sup> In Russian Diplomatic Documents, the term "Turkish Armenia" is used for the places where Armenians live in Anatolia.

<sup>18</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryaya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 1817, Belge No: 583, s. 227.

The Russian Ambassador to Washington applied to the authorities of the United States of America to support the Armenians upon Sazonov's instruction. He informed the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sazonov, about this appeal in a telegram dated April 28, 1915. The Russian Ambassador was replied during the meeting with the United States Department of State that any official information regarding the massacre of Armenians in Turkey had not reached the US authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov, who made long efforts to provide political support to the Armenians, desired to take the issue to an international dimension within the framework of this cooperation. He acted together with the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin for this reason. He gave various instructions to Russia's overseas representations for this purpose. One of his instructions lurked in the telegram he sent to Izvolskiy and Benckendorff on 25 August. he reported in the telegram sent from Sazonov to the Russian Ambassador to Paris Izvolskiy and the British Ambassador Benckendorff on April 25, 1915, referring to the telegram numbered 1818 that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had received new information about the anarchy in Turkey and the massacre of Armenians by Turks and Kurds. Sazonov was instructing the Ambassadors to invite the governments of France and England together with Russia to issue a call to the Porte in which the responsibility for the Armenian massacre would be given to all members of the Turkish Council of Ministers, just like the civil and military officials who participated in the events in question upon this information. The mentioned call could have brought the harsh measures to the agenda again taken after the massacre that took place in Syria in 1860 according to Sazonov.<sup>20</sup> If the British and French governments accept, this call should have been published as soon as possible and at the same day in Russia, England and France.<sup>21</sup> The instruction given by Sazonov to the Ambassadors had a content that both accused and threatened the Ottoman political leaders in the Armenian issue. Izvolskiy and Benckendorff were about convincing the governments of the countries they were in that the "Armenian massacre" was carried out with the knowledge of the Ottoman political leaders. If Sazonov's wish comes true and the British and French governments issue a declaration stating that the responsibility for the Armenian "massacre" rests with the entire Ottoman Council of Ministers, the second step of Sazonov would probably be the presentation of the Ottoman State in international platforms as a "massacrist" in the Armenian events and the alleged Armenian massacre.

Moreover, after the meeting with the Russian Ambassador to Washington, Bryan, the United States Secretary of State, instructed Morgenthau, the American Ambassador in Istanbul to investigate the allegations. Morgenthau stated together with the Italian Ambassador in Istanbul that they applied to the Ottoman government. The local administrators were instructed to protect innocent Armenians and those who did not comply with the instruction would be punished, in the reply given by the Minister of Interior of the Ottoman State.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sertçelik, *age*, s. 143.

<sup>20</sup>In 1860, conflicts broke out between the Maronites and the Druze in Syria. There were attacks by the Druze against the Maronites in Aleppo, Damascus and Lebanon. Things soon turned into clashes. Britain and France intervened in the rebellions in the region. It was decided by France to send 5000 soldiers to Syria. Britain, Russia, Prussia and Austria supported this decision. Fuat Pasha was appointed by the Ottoman State to suppress the events. After Fuat Pasha calmed the events, the "Lebanese Regulation" was signed on 9 June 1861. According to the regulation, Syria was made a governorship and Lebanon was to be governed by a Christian appointed by the Porte. A Catholic Armenian named Davit Efendi was appointed to the Governorship of Mount Lebanon. For detailed information, see. Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, C. 6, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 2011, s. 29-40. Fatma Uygur, "Fransız Diplomatik Arşivlerine Göre Suriye Olayları", *Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, C.16, S. 3, Eylül 2018, s. 181-200.

<sup>21</sup>*Mejđunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryä- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 1876, Belge No: 609, s. 252.

<sup>22</sup> Sertçelik, *age*, s. 143-144.



The telegram dated 10 May 1915, which was sent to the Russian Ambassador of Paris Izvol'skiy and London Ambassador Benckendorff, mentioned the content of the designed information text, regarding the text of the call that Sazonov suggested to be handed to the Porte regarding the Armenian events. Sazonov claimed in the text that for about a month in the region, he called Armenia, the Kurdish and Turkish population had carried out massacres of Armenians in secret agreement and often with the help of the Ottoman authorities. These massacres took place in mid-April, all over Erzurum, Tercan, Eğin, Bitlis, Muş, Sasun, Zeytun and Cilicia. The inhabitants of a hundred villages around Van were massacred and the Kurds according to the allegations in the text besieged the Armenian district of the city. The Ottoman government nevertheless, was suppressing the dissident Armenian population in Istanbul. The allied governments announced to the Sublime Porte that in the presence of these new crimes committed by Turkey against Christendom and Christian civilization, those who participated in the Armenian massacres would be personally responsible for these crimes.<sup>23</sup>

It is seen from the text written by Sazonov that there is an effort to give an international character to the events in the regions where the Armenian revolts took place. The expression of "these new crimes committed by Turkey against the Christian world and civilization" in the telegram in question was an effort to transform the Armenian issue from not only about Armenians nonetheless into an issue of all Christianity. The aim of Sazonov in this attempt was to wear away at Ottoman State politically by providing the support of other states related to the Armenian issue in the World War I and to use it as a pressure tool for concessions that Ottoman State were going to make in the future.

Meanwhile, a development occurred that would disrupt Sazonov's attempt. The charge d'affaires of France in Thessaloniki reported some information about the Van events. He also sent this report to the Under-Secretary of the British Foreign Office, Arthur Nicolson. The information, which was also reported to Nicolson, was mentioned in the telegram sent from Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador to London, to Sazonov, referring to the telegram number 2119 on May 12, 1915. The report described how the Armenians captured Van, blew up the caravanserai, destroyed the city and then, how Turks recaptured Van. According to Nicolson, if the report of France were confirmed, Turkey would find evidence in these events for the claim that the Armenians started an open uprising. Benckendorff argued in response to Nicolson's statements that after the bloody events and provocations, the Armenians probably had no other choice and that such claims would make no sense when the Turks were in the question. Nicolson; in response to these statements of Benckendorff, did not insist on the allegations in the report.<sup>24</sup>

The report kept by the charge d'affaires of France in Thessaloniki was confirming the events that took place during the Armenian revolt in Van. During the occupation of Van in fact; Armenians and Russians carried out massacres against Muslims in Van. Some of the Muslim population was able to leave Van during the occupation in Van nevertheless some remained. The 50 out of 250 Muslim households merely were able to leave Van. Armenians massacred the Muslim population in Van, regardless of women, elderly or children. The testimonies of the witnesses about the events clearly revealed the massacres carried out by the Armenians against the Muslim population in Van. Van Military High School Teacher Rasih Efendi himself and his three children were cut into pieces and murdered by a gang of two Russians and four Armenians after the Armenians occupied Van according to the information conveyed by the wife of Hodja

<sup>23</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, 14 Yanvarya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 2155, Belge No: 724, s. 400.

<sup>24</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvarya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 333, Belge No: 740, s. 416.

Rasih Efendi. Tayyar Ağazade Ağa and his 55-year-old wife Zühre Hanım, their 25-year-old daughter Vahide and 8-year-old grandchild, who were living in Van, were also brutally murdered. People in addition, returning to Edremit after Van were recaptured from the Armenians, encountered Muslim corpses and burned-down houses everywhere.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the information held by France's charge d'affaires in Thessaloniki about the massacres perpetrated by the Armenians against Muslims regarding the events in Van, and those who witnessed the massacres committed by the Armenians in Van during the occupation were identical. As the Russians were also involved in the massacres carried out by the Armenians in Van, Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov asked for having the aforementioned proclamation urgently published by gathering England and France with him to clear Russia by blaming the Ottoman State for what happened in Van. The reason for the Russians were also in Van when the Armenians massacred the Muslims in Van. The emergence of this fact could put Russia in a critical position. Once Sazonov became aware of the report kept by the the charge d'affaires of France in Thessaloniki, he desired to publish an international statement accusing the Turks of the Van incidents and this was revealing the panic and desperation of the Russian Foreign Minister.

Due to mentioned reason, Sazonov alerted his diplomatic missions. The telegram that Sazonov sent to Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador to London on May 15, 1915, included that the information in the report kept by the the charge d'affaires of France in Thessaloniki on the Armenian events were being examined. The mentioned information according to Sazonov could not differ in terms of the reliability of the information in the reports given by Russia's officials in the Caucasus and its consuls in Iran. In other words, according to Sazonov, the information from the Caucasus and Iran also confirmed that the Armenians were massacred therefore Sazonov was approving Benckendorff's answer to Nicolson. According to Sazonov, the uprising of the Armenians in Van stemmed from the massacre because it would have been pointless for the Armenians to launch a movement against the strong Kurdish and Turkish forces before the Russian troops reached the city. Due to mentioned reason, Sazonov repeated his order for making a statement that Armenians were massacred in Van, not Muslims. He asked Ambassador Benckendorff to reapply to the British government for the publication of such a joint statement, which would in any case raise the spirit of the Armenians, even though it did not make a favourable impression on the Porte because according to Sazonov, such an attempt would be beneficial for Russia in the fight against the Turks.<sup>26</sup>

It was clearly stated in the above telegram of Foreign Minister Sazonov that it was significant for Russia to benefit from the Armenians in the environment created via the World War I. Due to mentioned reason, the issues that the Armenians demanded from Russia had to be fulfilled. In fact, it was clear from the statements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the above telegram that "it will be beneficial for Russia in the battle against the Turks" that Russia only supported the Armenians for its own interests.

Finally, Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov, in the telegram he sent to Izvol'skiy, the Russian Ambassador to France on 20 May 1915, stated that the joint declaration he proposed to be made regarding the Armenian massacre in Turkey was accepted by the UK. British Foreign Secretary Grey; stated to Sazonov that the call would be made in London as soon as the French government

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<sup>25</sup> *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni İsyamları*, IV (1909-1916), T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, Yayın Nu: 99, Yayına Hazırlayanlar: Recep Karacakaya, Aziz Mahmut Uygun, Numan Yekeler, Mustafa Çakıcı, Yılmaz Karaca, Salih Kahriman, Seher Dilber, Ümmihani Ünemlioğlu, Ankara, 2009, Belge 74, s. 134-135.

<sup>26</sup> *Mejdu narodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryaya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 2247, Belge No: 768, s. 461.

approves the text of the call. Due to mentioned reason, Sazonov asked the French Ambassador Izvolskiy to accelerate the process regarding the declaration.<sup>27</sup>

In the telegram dated 20 May 1915 sent from Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador to London, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sazonov, some comments were made about the rebellions in Van. Benckendorff denied the fact that the reason for the Turkish army killing the Armenians was that they had attempted a rebellion and therefore Turkish soldiers killed the rebellious Armenians. British Foreign Secretary Grey did not object to this claim of Benckendorff. However, Grey remained sceptical that publishing threats that may have minor impact on Turkey would also make a tangible contribution to the issue. Benckendorff had informed Grey that the assurance that the Armenians would carry on to be supported by the Allied Powers under the leadership of Russia was of particular significance in maintaining the morale of the Armenians. However more significantly, in terms of Russia's military interests, it was a necessity to ensure the Armenians' trust in Russia to carry on therefore, the strategy proposed to Grey would have a certain impact on Armenians in general and would spread very promptly over the entire Armenian population. Benckendorff was pressing Grey to approach the issue from this perspective. Grey, on the other hand, was sceptical as to whether Britain, Russia and France alone would be sufficient to provide political support to the Armenians. Benckendorff on the other hand, stated that the struggle for the Armenians and the declaration of condemnation by England, Russia and France about the Van incidents mentioned above were significant for political interests and morally quite valuable. Benckendorff thought that he had a certain effect on Grey about this matter. Due to mentioned reason, Grey said he would reconsider the offers of Benckendorff.<sup>28</sup>

As the consequence, it was acknowledged in the letter sent by the British Foreign Office to the Russian Foreign Ministry on 22 May 1915 that the British government accepted the statement that Sazonov requested to be published and that this statement could be published on 24 May. The published statement was as follows:

*For nearly a month, Armenia's Kurdish and Turkish populations have been carrying out massacres of Armenians in agreement with the Ottoman authorities, often with the help of the Ottoman authorities. Such massacres took place in mid-April, all over Erzurum, Tercan, Eğin, Bitlis, Muş, Sasun, Zeyton and Cilicia. Residents of a hundred villages around Van were massacred. The Armenian quarter of the city is besieged by the Kurds. At the same time, in Istanbul, the Ottoman government is oppressing the Armenian population. For these crimes committed by Turkey against Christendom and Christian civilization, the allied governments announce to the Supreme Porte that those involved in these massacres will be personally responsible.<sup>29</sup>*

The above statement, which was announced on May 24, 1915, was published by the Armenian agency Havas. In contrast to mentioned declaration, which was jointly published by England, France and Russia, a statement was made by the Ottoman State in order to reveal the inner face of the events. In the mentioned statement, the Ottoman State unconditionally denied these allegations, stating that the allegations of massacres against Armenians were not true. The statement in question was as follows:

<sup>27</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryaya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 2324, Belge No: 797, s. 488.

<sup>28</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryaya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 352, Belge No: 799, s. 490.

<sup>29</sup> *Mejdunarodnie Otnoşeniya v Epohu İmperializma, Dokumenti İz Arhivov Tsarskogo i Vremennogo Pravitelstv 1878-1917 gg.*, Seriya: 3, Tom: 7, Çast: 2, 14 Yanvaryaya- 23 Maya 1914 g., (redaktor: M.N. Pokrovskiy) Moskva/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsialno- Ekonomičeskoe İzdatelstvo, 1935, Telegramma No: 2155, Belge No: 724, s. 400-401.

*As the Armenians of Erzurum, Tercan, Eğin, Sasun, Bitlis, Muş and Cilicia did not take any action to disturb the comfort and security, it was not necessary for the Ottoman officials to take some measures against them. The consuls of neutral states also know the mentioned fact. The accusations of the Triple Entente governments are nothing but prevarication. Those who know the affairs and matters of the East may well know that those who took advantage of every opportunity to incite Armenian community to a rebellion against the Ottoman government were the officials of the Triple Entente, especially Russia and England. These constant provocations have emerged since the enmity between the Ottoman government and the aforementioned governments became evident. Besides, the consuls and other officials of these states in Bulgaria and Romania sent young Armenian gangs of Ottoman subjects to the Caucasus through Varna, Sulina, Constanta and other ways. The Russian government did not hesitate to include these young Ottoman Armenians in the imperial Armenian circles, either after they recruited these young Ottoman Armenians and equipped them with weapons and bombs and after they gave the revolution notices and programs. Their task was to create a secret revolutionary organization in these circles and to direct the Armenians of Van, Şatak, Havasor, Gevaş and Timar to an armed rebellion against our government. They were also provoking Armenians to kill Turks and Kurds....<sup>30</sup>*

### Conclusion

Desiring to acquire new colonies and expand its imperialist goals, Russia sought to land in warm seas for centuries. In order to achieve this aim, Russia should have become a maritime state as well as a land state therefore, Russia battled with the Ottoman State to seize Istanbul and the Bosphorus. Just before the World War I, Russia thought the war was a great opportunity to achieve these goals. However, it would not be effortlessly to defeat the Ottoman State and seize the Straits and Istanbul because the Russian navy was still not in the strength to win the war therefore, Russia sought to benefit from the Armenians it supported politically in the San Stefano and Berlin Treaties signed in 1878. Consequently, Russia decided to take advantage of the Armenians living in Anatolia against the Ottoman State. By promising the Armenians an autonomous or independent state, Russia invited them to cooperate against the Ottoman State. The Armenians immediately recognized the invitation. Catholicos' requests for help from Russia were encountered and the Armenian-Russian alliance took place before the World War I. As the consequence of this alliance, Russia presented political support to the Armenians as well as weapons, money and logistic support. Russia tried to implement the project of creating an independent Armenian state under the guise of "reform" and made special efforts to make the Armenian case an international issue. Due to the mentioned reason, Russia asked support from England and France.

Within the framework of these policies, the Armenians initiated a great uprising in Van. They attempted the mentioned uprising with the courage they received from Russia. Russia tried to present the Van revolt as an "Armenian massacre" to the world. Russia carried out international propaganda activities because of this. However, at the time of the uprising, a report written by the charge d'affaires of Thessaloniki of France on the Van rebellion came to the fore. In the mentioned report; it was stated that the Armenians killed by the Ottoman soldiers in Van were rebellious Armenians. Undoubtedly, the emergence of such a report would endanger Russia's entire strategy about the Armenians. Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov applied to France and England and demanded the publication of an international declaration by England, Russia and France regarding the Armenian incidents that the Ottoman State carried out a "massacre" for the mentioned reason. As reporting this request to the governments of the related states, Sazonov specifically stated that it must be carried out in order not to interrupt the Russian policies against the Ottoman State. One of the striking points of the declaration was the allegation that the Turks committed crimes against the entire Christian civilization. As followed, Sazonov tried to put the Ottoman State under

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<sup>30</sup> Esat Uras, *age*, s. 610.



pressure during the World War I by trying to make the Armenian case an issue of all Christianity. Armenians acted in accordance with the mentioned political strategy of Russia.

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