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Revolutions and Rebellions: Van Resistance as Rebellion (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)

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Violent clashes took place between the Ottoman troops and the Armenian guerilla bands in the city of Van on the eastern edge of the Ottoman Empire in April-May of 1915. The armed struggle in the city and the subsequent occupation of the region by the Russian army and Armenian volunteer units constitute a turning point in the history of World War I. They are particularly important as they are interpreted as a defining factor in the Ottoman government's policy of deporting the Armenian population of Anatolia, which it considered a threat to its rear on the Russian front.

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Origins and Formation

The Van "resistance" (or "rebellion") refers, in general, to violent events that occurred in various localities in the province of Van in April-May of 1915. More specifically, it is the armed struggle between Ottoman regular and irregular forces and the Armenian "National Committee of Self-Defense" which took place in Van, a city with a substantial [Armenian](#) population.^[1] Various scholars have interpreted the violent events and struggle as an outcome of the radicalization of the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) government leading up to the [Armenian Genocide](#). The events were

also put forward by government circles at the time as the main precipitating factor in the forced displacement of Armenians from the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, highlighting the role of this rebellion in the broader scheme of weakening Ottoman war efforts in the region.

The present article, in addition to providing the main outline of the events and their interpretation in the broader contexts of WWI and the genocide, highlights the primarily local nature of the events. It shows that the lack of intercommunal and mob violence, continuing negotiations between the self-defense committee and the governor, and the implausibility of claims of insurgent Armenians' coordination with the Russian forces before the events began render it difficult to sustain the argument that the violent clashes were part of a pre-organized rebellion.

Many historians who depict the events in Van as an act of resistance base their narratives primarily on rich contemporary accounts by eyewitnesses.^[2] The origins of the struggle in the city of Van can be found in growing violence and political developments that took place in the countryside over the preceding period. Prior to the clashes in the city in April 1915, relations between the local governor, Hasan Tahsin Uzer (Tahsin Bey) (1878-1939), and the leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, *Dashnaktsutiun*) could be described as collaborative. The ARF, thanks to its dominant position in local politics and consequent good relations with the CUP, was in charge of enlisting Armenian youth for the Ottoman army and was able to negotiate with the government over other demands it placed on the region's Armenian population in support of the war effort.

Relations between the local government and the Armenians began to deteriorate rapidly with the appointment of Cevdet Bey Belbez (?-1955), the brother-in-law of Ismail Enver Pasha (1881-1922), on 15 March 1915. The new governor, who had been on a military mission in Persia, arrived at the city with his Circassian irregular soldiers and augmented his forces with Kurdish bands. Tensions were heightened by the news of massacres of Christians in the eastern districts of Van province by the governor's troops and his demand that 4,000 Armenians from the district be enlisted in the Ottoman army's labor battalions. It was in this period, after the order that called for the disarming of Armenian soldiers, that service in labor battalions began to be associated with an uncertain future – quite possibly death. The second set of events began with the arrest of a group of ARF members in a major settlement to the south of Van on 11 April 1915, which escalated violence in the countryside. On 17 April 1915, Ishkhan (Nikoghayos Mikaëlean, ca. 1883-1915), one of the leaders of the ARF in Van, went to the troubled region with the governor's approval to cool down the situation, but was ambushed and killed. Ishkhan's murder was followed by the governor's order to arrest the parliamentarian Arshak Vramian (1871-1915) and his subsequent disappearance – a further indication that relations between the government and the Armenian leadership in the city were breaking down. Cevdet Bey's irregular troops' attacks on Armenian villages neighboring Van – which were met with resistance by villagers and, in some instances, protection by some Kurdish tribal leaders – resulted more often than not in the widespread killings of Armenians. In addition, the governor's order to disarm the Armenian population led the Armenian leadership to view the developments as a harbinger of massacres in the city. In response, Armenian political leaders organized two separate self-defense committees, one in the Aygestan (“vineyards” or “gardens”)

section and one in the old city around the citadel, as these sections were topographically detached from one another in the urban layout. In this process, through expulsion and fleeing, ethnically mixed neighborhoods were turned into monoethnic ones with no-man's-land in between.

Aims and Participants

Multiple accounts report that the first shots sounded in the city on 20 April 1915, as members of the Armenian self-defense committee killed some Muslims who were attempting to rape two Armenian women, or to stop the seizure of a woman by military forces. The killing of Muslim soldiers prompted a military attack on the Aygestan. The National Self-Defense Committee, a body consisting of the Armenian leadership, dug trenches and prepared barricades against imminent assaults. The self-defense effort had brought together different political factions in the community, such as Aram Manukean (1879-1919), a prominent member of the ARF, and Armenak Yekarean (1870-1925) of the Ramkavar Democratic Liberal Party, as well as members of the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party and urban notables. Sub-committees overseeing information, supplies, medical assistance, provisions, and arms production were formed and the newspaper, *Ashkhatank'*, continued to be published; thus self-defense transformed the Aygestan into a "commune." A committee made up of seven ARF members was established in the neighborhood in the old city with a similar purpose.

The struggle, which had begun as preparation for self-defense against potential massacres, had turned into destructive urban guerilla warfare between government forces and the fighters of the self-defense committee. During the armed struggle, Armenians destroyed a number of government offices and the military barracks by laying mines. At the same time, government forces demolished other buildings to capture strategic points or render them unusable in guerrilla warfare, and used the [artillery](#) in the citadel against the Armenians in the city. The struggle lasted until 18 May 1915, when Armenian volunteers from the Caucasus rushed to the city followed by Russian regular troops. Thus, a local conflict had escalated into urban warfare and gained significance in the context of the inter-imperial struggle and the ensuing genocide.

The armed struggle, unlike many similar cases, seemed not to have taken on an ethno-religious character. The Armenian Self-Defense Committee distributed a written call to the Muslim quarters of the city, in which it denounced Governor Cevdet Bey as an outsider and an agent provocateur, and depicted the Armenians of Van as one branch (the other branch being the Muslims) of the tree of the homeland, now being cut by the governor. Although there is no evidence that Muslims intervened to stop the violence, nevertheless, they did not participate in the clash *en masse*.^[3] Several considerations may have kept Muslim civilians away from the struggle: ties between ethnic groups based on shared locality, or the relatively powerful position of Armenians in the city, or the lack of a general order (or an "encouragement") to kill Armenians such as is claimed to have been issued during the mass deportations after May 1915. Likewise, throughout the struggle, unlike later deportations and massacres but similar to the first Zeitun "Resistance" in late 1914, various negotiations took place between the governor and the committee. Here men like the Italian diplomat

G. Spordoni, the American missionary Clarence Ussher (1870-1955), the acting-prelate of Van, Eznik Vardapet, and prominent local persons served as mediators.^[4] The last of such negotiations took place in early May 1915. The governor had demanded the committee's unconditional surrender in return for providing safe passage for Armenian women and children to Iran. It failed. This was followed by attacks in the countryside, including Mt. Varak, which had been hosting a substantial number of Armenian [refugees](#) from the countryside.

Sources provide contradictory numbers of troops on each side of the conflict. Rafael de Nogales Méndez (1879-1936), a Venezuelan soldier-of-fortune in the Ottoman military, gives the high, probably exaggerated (but nonetheless oft-cited in the literature), number of 10,000-12,000 for the government forces, including irregulars and the gendarme division. Armenian sources, based on documents provided by the "Self-Defense Committee," put the Armenians at the specific number of 1,053, with a limited number of weapons.^[5] Some historians who interpret the struggle as a rebellion, however, place the Ottoman forces at the more reasonable number of 6,000–6,500, whereas they place the number of Armenians fighting against the armed forces as high as 15,000, arguing that every single Armenian male – except for children and the elderly – was a combatant or at least a helper.^[6] It is true that the number of Armenians indeed rose in that period as a great number of villagers running away from the massacres in the countryside took refuge in the city, creating additional problems for provisioning the Armenian quarters in Aygestan.^[7] However, the numbers show the highly politicized nature of the events and its interpretations by scholars, who viewed them according to the mainstream narratives.

The Muslim population began to evacuate the town after 4 May 1915 due to the advance of Russian troops and Armenian volunteers from Russia and took refuge in the surrounding areas. The displaced Muslim population of refugees was followed by the Ottoman troops. After the city's capture, the Russian command established a governorate and appointed Aram Manukean as its governor. A historian of the era sees the period of May-July 1915 in Van as an understudied "Armenian experience of statehood" which was complete with internal communal struggle, particularly over the looting of Muslim properties (*talan*), but also concerning relations between Caucasian and local Armenians and between the local political leadership and the Russian administration.^[8] It was also in this period that the governorate's various policies created new victims, especially among the Kurds of the region, but also some Armenians.^[9] The governorate lasted until late July 1915, when the Armenian population of the city, fearful of the advancing Ottoman forces, withdrew along with the Russian army. Of over 100,000 Armenian [migrants](#) who marched towards the Caucasus, only two-thirds reached their destination. After the Ottoman capture in July 1915, the city changed hands once again in September 1915 and remained Russian territory until the final Ottoman takeover in 1918.

Outcome

The memory of the armed struggle in Van, as a historian of this period states, constituted “a particular focal point in Armenian narratives of heroism, dignity, and victimization.”^[10] By contrast, denialist and apologist accounts of the terror and destruction treat the events in Van 1915 as “proof of Armenian disloyalty and justification for the Young Turk government’s draconian policies.”^[11] Thus, the labels used for the struggle, namely “resistance”, “heroic battle” (*herosamart*), and “self-defense” (*ink'napashṭpanutiwn*) on the one hand, and “rebellion” (*isyan*) on the other, reflect the broader and opposing frameworks of interpreting and analyzing the origins and formation of the struggle.

Indeed, whether the struggle in the city was the materialization of an already established (or perceived) threat – a strike at the Ottoman army from the rear – is a questionable claim. The potential threat posed by such insurgents to the Ottoman war effort seems to be more imagined than real: in the words of a military historian not sympathetic to Armenians, “In fact the actual Armenian attacks on the rear of the Ottoman army and its lines of communications were isolated and sporadic, causing only minor disruptions to the war effort.”^[12] Moreover, the contact between the Armenian committee in Van and the Russian forces took place only after the struggle in Van had begun – there was no coordination with the Russian and Armenian volunteers’ advance at the beginning. Statements by Ottoman officials, including Tahsin Bey, the governor of Van who preceded Cevdet Bey, depicted the events in Van as a revolt which would not have happened “if we had not ourselves created [it], with our own hands, by using force....”^[13] The armed struggle between the government forces and the Armenian committee in April-May 1915 was therefore primarily a local one. It came in direct response to the radicalization of government policies and violence against Armenians in the war zone and the growing feeling of threat on both sides, yet at the same time it was closely connected, at least in the minds of the authorities, with broader developments in the struggle between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. This interpretation, and the measures taken before and during the struggle, rendered the “Resistance” of Van a turning point in the histories of the Ottoman Empire during WWI and the Armenian Genocide.

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Notes

1. ↑ According to various observers, Armenians constituted slightly more than half of the population in the city before World War I, more than 22,000 in a city of 38,000. According to the official figures, the *sancak* (sub-district) of Van with the city of Van as its administrative center was home to 33,789 Armenians out of a total population of 79,736. For a discussion of the population of the province and the *sancak* of Van, see Ter Minassian, Anahide: The City of Van at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, in: Hovannisian, Richard G. (ed.): Armenian Van/Vasputakan, Costa Mesa, CA 2000, pp. 179–182.

2. † For instance, Anahide Ter Minassian's and Yektan Türkyılmaz' detailed examinations of the events use such accounts extensively. See the bibliography for these studies and major contemporary accounts.
3. † Ter Minassian, Ahahide: Van 1915, in: Hovannisian, Armenian Van 2000, p. 230. It is important to note that some members of the National Self-Defense Committee were veterans of the Armeno-Tatar War of 1905–1906, during which similar accusations of dividing the society and instigating ethnic violence were directed against the Russian imperial authorities. For a translation of this call to the compatriots made in the name of the “Armenian Population of Van,” see Mkhit'arean, Önnik: Vani Herosamartë [The Heroic Battle of Van], Sofia 1930, p. 71.
4. † For letters exchanged between the governor and the acting-prelate, see Kosoyean, Hayk: Van-K'aghak'amiji Aprilyan Křiwnerë [The Battles of April in the Van Citadel], Yerevan 1992, pp. 91–104.
5. † Ter Minassian, Van 2000, p. 229; Kévorkian, Raymond: The Armenian Genocide. A Complete History, London 2011, p. 327.
6. † McCarthy, Justin et al.: The Armenian Rebellion at Van, Salt Lake City 2006, pp. 206–208.
7. † Sources mostly agree that Governor Cevdet Bey allowed these refugees to reach the city in order to put additional strain on the resources of the resistance. Yet some claim that the Armenian fighters killed some refugees before they reached the city, while others claim that they were executed by Cevdet as a warning to the resistance. See Suny, Ronald G.: “They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else.” A History of the Armenian Genocide, Princeton 2015, pp. 259 and 433, n.55.
8. † Türkyılmaz, Yektan: Rethinking Genocide. Violence and Victimhood in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1915, Ph.D. Thesis, Duke University 2011, pp. 278–279.
9. † Türkyılmaz describes in detail the governorate's “exclusionist and exterminationist policies against Kurds.” Ibid., p. 317.
10. † Ibid., p. 274
11. † Ibid.
12. † Erickson, Edward J.: The Armenians and Ottoman Military Policy, 1915, in: War in History 15/2 (2008), p. 165.
13. † APC/AP, PCI Bureau, file XLIX, M 285, quoted in Kévorkian, Armenian Genocide 2015, p. 231.

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