

THE NATION BUILDING PROCESS OF THE ARMENIANS IN EASTERN ANATOLIA AND THE ROLE OF THE GREAT POWERS IN THIS PROCESS

Res. Assist. Özgür SARI*

Abstract

The secularization process of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and the weakening authority over them of the Istanbul Patriarchate and the Gregorian clergy are analysed and the impacts of the Great Powers on the Armenians' ethnic based nation building in place of the Ottoman millet system on the grounds of religious identity are criticized.

Keywords

Russian Domination, Edcmiadzin Church, Millet System, Gregorian Church, Nation Building.

Introduction

The Islahat Edict was the stimulator of the transformation in social organizations and marked the turning point of the social and political transformation of the minorities in the Ottoman Empire. From this point on, Armenians experienced a change from the *millet* system organized on the basis of religion, to nationhood on the grounds of ethnic motifs.¹ The main initiator for this change was the activities of the Protestant missionaries begun in the 1820s. The missionaries introduced the distinctive characters of their national identity, culture, history, and religion to the Armenians. Later generations, growing up in the socio-political climate that resulted from the efforts of their predecessors, would strive to realize the idea of a "Great Armenia."

The most important of the early activities, was undoubtedly the Regulation of the Armenian Nation (*Ermeni Milleti Nizamnamesi*), first prepared in 1860 and confirmed by the Ottoman Sultan in

* Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, Research Assistant, Ankara

¹ Kamuran Gürün, *Ermeni Dosyası*, TTK, 1983, pp. 64-72

1863. With this regulation, the Armenian Nation gradually gave up their traditional religious based social organization and moved towards a more national and class based model of organization. This is reflected in Kamuran Gürün's *Ermeni Dosyası* as follows:

With the governmental confirmation, the society had a constitution the main theme of which was national sovereignty; and proper steps were taken to revitalize the national education. Within these endeavors, there was collaboration of the clergy, however their contributions were not as had been expected. They were often ineffective in promoting development that would contribute to the nation...and thus (the clergy's) influence on the Armenian nation was diminished. The new generation would not consent to be herded by the clergy. The Armenians preserved their faith, language, and traditions and were not assimilated. They held the commerce of West Asia, traveled frequently, and controlled an expansive commercial network. In other words, they could be considered an intermediary between Asia and Europe.²

Results of the Regulation of the Armenian Nation

It can be said that through this regulation, there occurred a serious secularization in the political organization of the Armenians. Moreover, there are indications of democratization in the Armenian ruling class, because the regulation ended the oligarchy of the clergy and gave the right of decision making to the Armenians living in the provinces. Constituting 99 different articles, the regulation ordered the establishment of a parliament including 140 members; 20 members from the clergy in Istanbul, 40 members from the provinces, and the other 80 from Istanbul. While the religious assembly consisting of 14 members and the political assembly with 20 members continues to exist, it was determined that the members of those assemblies would be selected by the newly constituted parliament as a democratic condition. Furthermore, the Istanbul Patriarchy would be selected by this parliament. The religious assembly would be able to announce its candidate, but at the same time the parliament could appoint a patriarch. The appointed patriarch's designation had to be made on the command of the sultan. This regulation enabled the parliament to select the patriarch in Jerusalem.³

² *Ibid*, p. 68

³ *Ibid*, pp. 68-69

By this regulation, the Armenians could be rescued from the scholasticism and hegemony of the Gregorian Church and it was one of the main steps towards their modern nation building. While the categorization of the Armenians in Ottoman lands did not change, they started to build up their relations to the state through their parliament instead of, as had been traditional, via the clergy. The sharing of the social and political affairs by individuals or classes became the basis for actions against the monarch and the patriarch, whereas until this time, these affairs had also been managed by the clergy. As these political and social organizational models gained their autonomy from religious influences and the hegemony of the church, in the suitable intellectual environment and as the result of foreign missionaries' activities, a western type of organization could be applied.⁴ In this organization, several Armenian associations were established:

Hayırssevenler Cemiyeti (Benevolent Union)

Established in Istanbul in 1860, this group and aimed to highlight the region of Kilikia.

Ararathlı (Van), Okulsevenler (Muş), Doğu (Muş), Milliyetçi Kadınlar (Erzurum)

These groups were established between 1870-1880 and had socialist views.

Kara Haç (Black Cross)

Established in Van in 1878.

Anavatan Müdafileri (Pashtpan Haireniats)

Established in Erzurum in 1881, this group was active for 1.5 years.

The free atmosphere in the Ottoman Empire brought an understanding in which belonging to different religions did not mean having different statutes. The rights owned throughout the nation (millet) were eliminated and the patriarch became only a religious leader. This means that the solution of the organic ties

⁴ See for the detailed information about the missionaries' activities in the Ottoman Empire, Seçil Karal Akgün, "The Turkish Image in the Reports of American Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire", *The Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1989, pp. 91-106; "Mormon Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire", *Turcica*, tome: 28, pp. 347-360

between the social stratas constitute the civic society and the disappearing of the most important apparatus of social control. The national identity of the Armenians became based on religion, as their identity construction against others was a differentiation in religion rather than an ethnic one. In other words, the word "Armenian" signifies the people from a different religion and moreover from a different denomination instead of from a different race.⁵

Patronage of the Great Powers

There were previous conditions for this process. Until the 19th century, there had not been any ethnic differentiation for the people living within the lands of the Ottoman Empire. In the classical Ottoman administrative system, categorization was made on the grounds of economic and religious features. In the economic sense, there were tax givers (reaya) and non-tax givers (generally military), and on the religious basis there were Muslims and Non-Muslims. The system of nation (millet) regulated the relations of different people to the state on the basis of their religious identities. Furthermore, each *millet* (Greeks, Jews, Armenians) was allowed to keep its original socio-cultural features. It was not, however, a caste system, but rather a flexible distribution system as a result of administrative and penal conditions.

Ottoman society came face to face with the concepts of "nation" and "nationality" in their modern meanings in the 18th century, when relations with the European states became intensive. Until the 19th century, the Ottomans had been calling the European societies as *Frenğistan (kefere diyarı)*.⁶ The Egyptian campaign of Napoleon and the subsequent expansion of new political thoughts throughout the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Ottoman lands, first affected the minority groups in these regions. This campaign had great effects not only on the gained statutes of the Balkan nations but also on the Arabs and Armenians.

Napoleon showed interest in the Ottoman Armenians during his campaigns in Syria and Egypt, and in the occupation of Egypt in

⁵ Salahi R. Sonyel, *Minorities and the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire*, 1993, p. 197. See for information about the appearance of the Armenians as a different nation in history, Gürün, *Ermeni Dosyası*, Ankara: TTK, 1983

⁶ Referring to non-muslim lands outside of the Ottoman lands.

1798, he added some Armenian-origin Mamluks to his army. In 1802 he sent a communication to the French ambassador in Istanbul and announced that the Armenians in Syria and Eastern Anatolia were under his protection. First he aimed to use the Armenians in his planned campaign to India. While this campaign did not occur, the Armenians did not lose their importance in the eyes of Napoleon.⁷

The protection of the Armenians proved not only to be a turning point for the ethnic consciousness of minorities in the Ottoman Empire, but also for the reshaping of the international relations between the great powers (England, France, Russia) and the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent policies of the great powers towards the Ottomans. England and Russia, who first supported the Ottomans against this policy of France, soon came to understand the role the ethnic minorities could play in manipulating the Ottoman Empire. From the first decades of the 19th century, England and Russia started using minorities to manipulate internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire.⁸ England and Russia, from the second quarter of the 19th century, became in particular the protectors of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. England managed to convert some Armenians in Anatolia to Protestantism, and forced the Sultan to accept this separate Protestant community.⁹ Russia, with the help of various geostrategic circumstances, established her influence over the Christian minorities in a more direct way. She tried to gain results through political and militarist means.¹⁰ Russia's two most important instruments in this process were the Church of Edcmiadzin and military spies. With the Türkmençay Treatment in 1828, Russia took the Yerevan and Nahçivan Khanets from Iran, thus the Edcmiadzin Patriarchate passed to Russia. Patriach Nerses in the Russian-Iranian war between 1826 – 1828, gave a group of 60,000 Armenian volunteers to the Russian military service. Russia in 1828 launched a war on the Ottoman Empire and invaded

⁷ Napoleon Bonapart established the Armenian Language Professorship at the *School of Oriental Languages* in Paris after the campaign.

⁸ The *Islahat* and *Tanzimat* edicts are the main results of this policy.

⁹ Sonyel *op.cit.*, p. 200; Gürün, *a.g.e.*, p. 66. The acceptance of the Protestant Armenian community by the Sultan is the result of the influence of the English ambassador Lord Stradford Redcliffe Canning on Bab-i Ali. The English influence on the Ottoman Empire increased after the Trade Treatment of Baltalimanı in 1838. See Stanley Lane-Poole, *Lord Stradford Canning'in Türkiye Hatıraları*, translated by Can Yücel, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1999.

¹⁰ Mustafa Gül, "1896 Van Ermeni İsyanı ve Sonrasındaki Gelişmeler", *OTAM*, Ankara, 1997, Issue 8, p. 139.

(Anapa, Poti) Ahıska castles and the Ahılkelek and Akchur regions with the Treaty of Adrianople. Russia from this time onwards accelerated her provocation policy of the Armenians and started to change the demographic structure of the region seriously.¹¹ Although the former seems a religious center, it served rather political center for the Armenians (who were living in the Ottoman Empire and Iran) to organize revolutionary and militarist activities. Russia's policy of changing the power center after the 1820s, resulted in the religious and political inspiration center of the Armenians passing through Edcmiadzin. The church of Kumkapı in Istanbul lost its former influence over its subjects. The development of the incidents in this way was the result of the changes of the religious features in the Armenian community after the 1850s. The dissolution of the religious ties meant, at the same time, the loss of the state controlling mechanisms over the Armenians, because the Patriarchate in Istanbul lost its importance for the Armenians living in Eastern Anatolia. Furthermore, in the second half of the 19th century, the Patriarchate in Istanbul was serving for the interests of the Armenian bourgeoisie and clergy instead of the Armenian subjects.¹² As the religious and political initiatives came to pass through the Church of Ecdmiadzin, and hence to Russia, politicization of the Armenians became easier. Particularly after the Crimean War, the prestige of the Istanbul Patriarchate and its authority over the Armenian people weakened.¹³ It is interesting to note that there was in fact a role of the clergy in this decreasing effect of the religion as a social controlling instrument. For instance, Mıgırdıç Hirimyan started to publish a journal entitled *Van Kartalı*.¹⁴

Tzar Nicholas I continuously claimed himself as a protector of the Ottoman Christians and during his reign, radical Armenian activities increased. These activities were organized under the leadership of Hakadur Abovian and Mikhael Nalbandian.¹⁵ As a

¹¹ See Davud Kılıç, "Rusya'nın Doğu Anadolu Siyasetinde Ecmiyazin Kilisesinin Rolü (1828-1915)", *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, issue: 2, June-July-August 2001, pp. 49-65.

¹² Sonyel, *op.cit*, pp. 202-203

¹³ In 1896, in the biggest religious festival of the Armenians (6th January), the spiritual leader of the Gregorian Church in Van, Bogos, was killed by his subjects on the road to the church. Once again in the rebellions in Van, the Akadamar Patriarch tried to prevent the events and he was killed by the Armenians. These can show clearly the role and importance of religion in the life of the Armenians.

¹⁴ Gül *op.cit*, p. 141

¹⁵ Sonyel, *op.cit*, pp. 199-200

matter of fact, it is not difficult to argue that the instrument of Russian panslavist policy over Caucasia and Anatolia was to be the Armenians. For this reason, from the second quarter of the 19th century onwards, Russian activities over the Armenians intensified, peaking before the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War. In the wars against the Ottomans (1828-29, 1854-56, 1877-78) and throughout the 18th century, Russia used the Armenians as pawns.¹⁶ For example, while the Russians were invading Erzurum in 1828, the Gregorian Armenians helped them. When Erzurum was restored to the Ottoman Empire in 1829, 90,000-100,000 Armenians emigrated to Yerevan, Ahilkelek, and Ahıska, because they thought they would be punished.

Conclusion

The weakening of the religious authority over the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire lead to their secularization, but at the same time it meant a collapse of the *millet* system over the religious descriptions of the minorities in the Ottoman Empire. As a result of this process, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire started to describe themselves as a separate nation on the basis of their ethnic identity.

Due to the policies of the Great Powers (Russia, France, and England) in international affairs and according to their interests in the Ottoman lands, patronage relations and the protective policies of the Great Powers over the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire motivated this minority to awaken their national identity.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 199; Kılıç, *op.cit*, pp. 52-53; Gürün, *op.cit*, p. 57.