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# SULTAN ABDÜLHAMİT II'S ALLEGED ROLE IN THE 1909 ADANA EVENTS

(SULTAN II. ABDÜLHAMİT'İN 1909 ADANA  
OLAYLARINDA İDDİA EDİLEN ROLÜ)

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**Abstract:** *For Armenians, Adana became a symbol of a sacred and national cause to build Cilicia Armenia by attaining the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, a former Armenian state of historical importance, and gathering the Armenian people scattered in Anatolia in this region. The Sis Catholicosate, one of the most important religious centers for Armenians, was also located in this region. The "Armenian national awakening movement" was initiated with the support of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which had carried out missionary activities especially in the eastern and southern Anatolian regions since 1830. The Armenian nationalists, who could not find the support they expected from the Great Powers of the period for their demands of establishing Armenia in the "Six Provinces" of Anatolia, followed a similar path to the policy of the Balkan countries who seceded from the Ottoman Empire after the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. Through the terrorist organizations they established, the said nationalists started to attract the attention of the Christian public opinion by instigating revolts in the region. The biggest obstacle in front of Armenian ideals and aspirations was the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamit II. With the measures he*

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took in 1890, Abdülhamit II to a large extent prevented the revolts from spreading and the Armenian nationalists from reaching their goals. Abdülhamit II's Islamist policies and the methods he used in suppressing the revolts were used by the Christian missionaries in Anatolia to relay exaggerated descriptions of a "Christian Massacre" to the Western public, which made him known as the "Red Sultan" in a short time. Abdülhamit II was portrayed as a blood-drinking monster in the Western media, cartoons and articles were prepared in line with this portrayal. Armenian separatists, in cooperation with the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) who were against Abdülhamit II, accelerated the insurrectionary activities until the declaration of the Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, and took advantage of the turmoil in the Balkan countries to start a new revolt. Especially with a revolt they started in this region, the intervention of the Western public would be ensured, and an Armenia would be established in the Cilicia region by the landing of foreign soldiers in Mersin. The events that started with the murder of two Turkish youngsters by Armenians on 27 March 1909 turned into a revolt after spreading on 13-14 April, and thousands of people were killed on both sides, the exact number of which is not known. In the reports sent to the Western media by ABCFM missionaries who were in the region during the revolt, an effort was made to portray the violence experienced in the revolt as "a planned massacre of Sultan Abdülhamit II". The simultaneousness of the Adana events with the reactionary uprising in Istanbul brought about the debates on whether the Sultan was responsible for the Adana events. This study aims to analyze the role of Sultan Abdülhamit II in the Adana events based on the testimonies of the witnesses of the period.

**Keywords:** Adana, Events, Allegations, Role, Abdülhamit II, Armenians

**Öz:** Ermeniler için Adana; tarihsel önemi ve geçmişte kurdukları hükümlerlik olan Kilikya Ermeni Krallığı'na ulaşarak, Anadolu'da dağınık bulunan Ermeni halkını bu bölgede toplayarak Kilikya Ermenistan'ını inşa etme isteği sebebiyle kutsal ve milli bir davanın sembolü olmuştur. Ermeniler için dini merkezlerden ve en önemlilerinden biri olan Sis Katolikosluğu da bu bölgede bulunuyordu. 1830'dan itibaren özellikle Doğu ve Güney Anadolu bölgelerinde misyonerlik faaliyetlerini başlatan Dış Misyonerlikler için Amerikan Komiserler Kurulu'nun (ABCFM) desteği ile "Ermeni milli uyanış hareketinin" başlatılmıştı. 1878 Berlin Anlaşması'nda Anadolu'da "Vilayet-i Sitte'de" kurmak istedikleri Ermenistan istekleri dönemin büyük devletlerinde beklemedikleri desteği göremeyen Ermeni milliyetçileri, Balkan ülkelerinin Osmanlı'dan ayrılmak için uyguladıkları siyasete benzer bir yol izlediler. Söz konusu milliyetçiler kurdukları tedhiş örgütleri vasıtasıyla bölgede isyanlar çıkararak, Hristiyan kamuoyunun dikkatini çekmeye başlamışlardır. Ermeni ideal ve isteklerinin önündeki en büyük engel olan Sultan II. Abdülhamit, 1890

yılından itibaren aldığı önlemlerle isyanların yaygınlaşmasını ve amaçlarına ulaşmasını büyük ölçüde önlemiştir. II. Abdülhamit'in İslamcı bir siyaset izlemesi ve isyanların bastırılmasında kullandığı yöntemler, Anadolu'daki Hristiyan misyonerler tarafından Batı kamuoyuna abartılı olarak "Hristiyan Katliamı" olarak anlatılması kısa zamanda onun "Kızıl Sultan" olarak isim yapmasına, Batı medyasında kendisini kan içen bir canavar gibi gösteren karikatürlerin çizilmesine ve yazıların yazılmasına neden olmuştur. Ermeni ayrılıkçılar, II. Abdülhamit karşıtı olan İttihat ve Terakki üyeleri ile iş birliği yaparak 1908 Meşrutiyet'in ilanına kadar komite faaliyetlerini hızlandırarak, özellikle Balkan ülkelerindeki karışıklıklardan faydalanarak yeni bir isyan hazırlığı içine girmişlerdir. Özellikle bu bölgede başlatacakları bir isyanla, Batı kamuoyunun müdahalesi sağlanacak ve Mersin'e asker çıkartılarak Kilikya bölgesinde bir Ermenistan kurulabilecekti. 27 Mart 1909 günü önce iki Türk gencinin Ermeniler tarafından öldürülmesi ile başlayan olaylar 13-14 Nisan'da yaygınlaşarak isyana dönüşmüş ve sayısı tam olarak bilinmemekle, her iki taraftan binlerce insan öldürülmüştür. İsyan süresince bölgede bulunan ABCFM misyonerlerinin Batı medyasına gönderdiği raporlarda isyanı "Sultan II. Abdülhamit'in planlı bir katliam hareketi" olarak göstermeye çalışmaları, Adana olaylarının İstanbul'daki gerici ayaklanma ile eş zamanlı olması, Sultanın Adana olaylarında sorumluluğu olup olmadığı tartışmalarını da gündeme taşımıştır. Çalışmanın amacı, Sultan II. Abdülhamit'in Adana olaylarındaki rolünü dönemin tanıklarının ifadelerine dayanarak analiz etmektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Adana, Olaylar, İddialar, Rol, II. Abdülhamit, Ermeniler

## Introduction

The prominent argument of the circles advocating for the existence of “the Armenian Genocide” is that the relocation decision of the Ottoman state, part of a supposed plan to eliminate the Armenians, was brought to its final stage by taking advantage of the environment created by the First World War. According to this argument, which is based on the continuity of violence against Armenians, the events in Eastern Anatolia during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamit II, and the relocations during the First World War prove that the Ottoman state had implemented a systematic and long-term plan to eradicate Armenians. The events in Çukurova/Adana in 1909 are the crux of this argument by pro-Armenian authors.

The historiography advocating the “Armenian Genocide” states that the events of 1909 were a planned massacre and “genocide rehearsal” against Armenians, and were an integral part of the process from the 1890s to 1915. This interpretation claims that the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), who are considered to be responsible for the 1915 events, were neither sincere nor determined about the constitutional regime from the very beginning, and that the Armenian organizations were right to distrust the constitutional regime and to plan for armed actions.<sup>1</sup>

The response of the opposing side to these allegations by those advocating the existence of the “Armenian Genocide” has been to place the Adana events in a similar meta-narrative. Accordingly, just like the Armenian rebellions that started in the 1890s and the Armenian armed uprisings, which were seen as a justification for the 1915 relocation, the Adana events of 1909 were planned by Armenian organizations and were an attempt to ensure foreign intervention in the region. According to this interpretation, the Adana events showed the insincerity of the Armenian organizations about the desire to live together with the Muslims within the framework of the constitutional regime and their aim to establish an independent Armenian state by taking advantage of the freedoms brought by the new regime.<sup>2</sup> The common point of these two contradictory interpretations is that they show what happened in 1909 as a forerunner of what happened in 1915, in other words, 1915 as the natural and inevitable extension of 1909.

On the other hand, the interpretations that consider the Adana events as “massacre” in this context became generally accepted theses only after 1915. For those who defend the genocide thesis and Armenian nationalists, these

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1 Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 179-183.

2 Esat Uras, *Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1987), 550-568 ; Enver Ziya Karal, *Osmanlı Tarihi IX. Cilt* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1996), 93-96.

events were used to reinforce the genocide claim, as well as to strengthen Armenian national identity, which was reshaped and homogenized after the war through the claim of the sacrifice of the Çukurova Armenians.<sup>3</sup>

Although examples of interpretations presenting the events of 1909 as an Armenian revolt or planned massacre can be seen before 1915, these are mostly those who took part in the events and needed to defend their own position, and were more keenly in political rivalry with the mainstream parties of the period, CUP and the Dashnaks. They were thus produced by those who adopted a position as a political strategy.<sup>4</sup>

The interpretation, which was generally accepted immediately after the events and was accepted as an official thesis at least until 1915, is very different. This thesis, defended by the CUP and the Dashnaks, attributes the actual responsibility of the violence to some radicals from both sides, but argues that the main reason underlying the events is “reactionism”.

According to this thesis, the Adana events were the local extension of the 31 March Incident in Istanbul and were under the political responsibility of Abdülhamit II. According to the claims of those who defend this thesis, although a similar massacre of Armenians was planned in Istanbul, it was prevented at the last moment by the intervention of the Action Army (*Hareket Ordusu*).<sup>5</sup>

### 1. About Sultan Abdülhamit II

Sultan Abdülhamit II, the 34th ruler of the Ottoman Empire (1876-1909), is one of the most controversial figures in the empire's political history. Praised and criticized in almost equal measure, usually determined by one's ideological worldview, his alleged role in the 1909 Adana Events continues to add fuel to the fire of this debate. Yücel Güçlü has provided a very informative summary of what kind a person Abdülhamit II was and the controversy surrounding him. This summary is reproduced below:

“There is little consensus regarding the character or the nature of conduct of Sultan Abdülhamid II. In fact, his name has elicited reactions that range from harsh scorn to profound gratitude. On the one hand he has been praised as a clear-headed, far-sighted statesman, with an

3 Vahe Tachjian, “Adana Ermenileri: Milliyetçi İdeolojilere Ters Düşen Farklı Bir Kimlik”, *Toplumsal Tarih*, (191/Kasım 2009), 58-69.

4 Sarkis Atamian, *The Armenian Community* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 173, 175.

5 FO 421/251, *Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of South-Eastern Europe* (May and June 1909), 145.

unbounded capacity for hard work and a strong interest in what he held to be the true welfare of his subjects. Under his rule the Ottoman Empire was arguably in a stronger strategic position than it had been in decades. Railways, telegraphs, and paved all-weather roads were beginning to unite the empire, improving communications with provincial authorities while giving a solid spur to internal trade. By the turn of the twentieth century, over eight hundred kilometers of new roads were being laid every year, and another four hundred and fifty kilometers repaired. While the empire still ran a large trade deficit with Europe in manufactured goods, Ottoman exports of foodstuffs, cotton, silk, carpets, tiles, and glass, along with coal and certain increasingly strategic metals like chrome, borax, and manganese, were booming in turn. He was quietly supporting the expansion of European-style education in the empire. Eighteen new professional colleges were established during his reign, teaching subjects like French, composition, geography, statistics, economics, and commercial, civil, and international law. Hundreds of new state schools were being built across the empire, along with new public libraries serving an increasingly literate urban population. The number of students attending secondary schools with a secular curriculum doubled in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Sultan Abdülhamid II's life was one of incessant labor. He devoted himself most assiduously to the work of his great office. He was absolute master of his ministers and of his state. His fez and Western coat testified to his ambition to modernize his empire. His idea of the modern was order, stability, and centralized power. He loved opera and carpentry, making much of his furniture in the Yıldız Palace. On the other hand, he has been denounced in unmeasured terms as a loathsome, cowardly tyrant, with his hands dipped in the blood of his subjects, lacking in all moral sense and working with a sort of low cunning merely to maintain himself on the throne regardless of the impending ruin of his empire. Western politicians, publicists, and cartoonists, under strong impressions of the massacre of Armenians in the 1890s, have seen him not only as a despot but as the "red sultan." From the testimony of all who came in contact with him, Sultan Abdülhamid II appeared reserved, polite, always affable, with a lively intellect and a certain charm of personality which fascinated everyone who approached him. Rather timid by nature, he was a man of extreme tenacity of purpose and determination of will."<sup>6</sup>

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6 Yücel Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909: Cemal Pasa and Beyond* (London: Hamilton Books, 2018), 220-221.

### 2. The 1909 Adana Events

On the basis of these events, it is claimed that the Ottoman government planned to eliminate the Armenians who were claiming that their lands were unjustly confiscated during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamit II.<sup>7</sup> However, when examined carefully, it will be seen that this argument is not explanatory about the violence in Çukurova. The weakest point of this argument is that although there were occasional territorial disputes in Çukurova, which were based on the pre-constitutional situation, when compared to other provinces where Armenians were settled, Çukurova was among the places where such conflicts were experienced the least.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Çukurova was not one of the focal points of the Armenian migrations abroad in the 1890s, which had not caused such conflicts. For this very reason, the Çukurova region was not included in the reform bill submitted by the government to the parliament in February 1909, including the resolution of land disputes, and the Armenian deputies did not bring up such an issue.<sup>9</sup>

Cotton production in Çukurova experienced a rapid increase, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century. While 40,000 bales of 200 kg cotton were produced in the region in 1903, this figure reached 50,000 in 1906, 60,000 in 1907, and 75,000 in 1908, that is to say, it almost doubled in five years.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this rapid increase in cotton production in the early twentieth century made the region increasingly dependent on seasonal migrant workers from neighboring provinces for both harvesting and hoeing.

From this framework, disgruntlement would be seen in 1909 when a series of factors come together in a short time. The first was the drought and famine that lasted from 1905 until 1908, especially in the interior of Anatolia.<sup>11</sup> This process, which was the first great famine since the one in 1873-74, caused the loss of farm animals which were raised by some of the Anatolian villagers.<sup>12</sup> No matter how much the government and local peoples tried to remedy the situation, these efforts proved insufficient.

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7 Hrachik Simonyan, *The Destruction of Armenians in Cilicia April 1909* (London: Gomidas Institute, 2012), 27-28, 31.

8 Foreign Office. Turkey No. 1 (1898), Further Correspondence respecting the Asiatic Provinces of Turkey: in continuation of "Turkey No. 7 (1897)"- C. 8395 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 153-154.

9 MM 1/1/L- *Meclis-i Mebusan Levayih ve Tekalif-i Kanuniyye ve Encümen Mazbataları*. Devre: 1, İçtima Senesi: 1. Sene 1324-1325 (Ankara: T.B.M.M. Basımevi, 1992), 108-111.

10 W.F. Bruck, *Vorläufiger Bericht über Baumwoll-erzeugung und Verbrauch in der Türkei* (Augsburg-Berlin, 1917), 13.

11 Muammer Demirel, *İkinci Meşrutiyet Öncesi Erzurum'da Halk Hareketleri* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1990), 9.

12 The British Chamber of Commerce of Turkey, *Trade Journal*, No 1- 15th March 1908.

The second factor was the increase of labor in Anatolia. While the demobilization of a significant part of the army after the proclamation of the constitutional monarchy in July 1908 caused many young people to join the labor force, many Ottoman subjects from abroad had returned to the country in the same period too. During this period, especially during the reign of Abdülhamit II, Armenians who were not allowed to enter the country for security reasons, and who were mostly in the United States and Transcaucasia, returned to their homeland in masse in the autumn of 1908.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Armenians returning from the US were able to accumulate a certain amount of capital during their stay abroad, the same was not the case for the Armenians returning from Transcaucasia, as they were exposed to the oppression of the Tsarist Russian government and the violence during the internal turmoil in 1905-1906. When this group returned to the Ottoman lands, it was in a needy situation.<sup>14</sup>

The third factor was the lifting of the travel ban for Istanbul in connection with the proclamation of the constitutional monarchy. In the previous period, it was difficult and expensive for both Turks and Armenians to obtain travel permits to and from Istanbul, but as of July 1908, this obligation was lifted, and Ottoman subjects had the opportunity to travel within the country to Istanbul without any permission.

With the combination of all these factors, starting from the autumn of 1908, an increasing number of people flocked to the cities and agricultural basins where job opportunities were available. For example, people returning from Transcaucasia and coming from Anatolia had caused serious unemployment and disorder in Istanbul. The effects of this rapid increase in labor supply throughout Anatolia was also seen in Çukurova in the spring of 1909.<sup>15</sup>

The month of April, when the Adana events took place, stood out as a time when Çukurova was filled with labor migration every year. The most important labor movement in Adana was the harvest season, which started in February and lasted until May.<sup>16</sup> While the number of migrant workers who came to Çukurova is given as 30,000, a source about the Ottoman period mentions 50,000 migrant workers, 20,000 of whom were Armenians.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Armen Garo, *Armen Garo'nun Anıları* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınevi, 2009), 201.

14 Garine Narzakian (ed.), *Memoirs of Sarkis Narzakian* (Ann Arbor, MI: Gomidas Institute, 1995), 143.

15 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 222.

16 Hilmi Uran, *Meşrutiyet, Tek Parti, Çok Parti Hatıralarım (1908-1950)* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2008), 569-570.

17 Duckett Z. Ferriman, *The Young Turks and the Truth about the Holocaust at Adana in Asia Minor, during April 1909* (London: 1913), 81.



## Sultan Abdülhamit II's Alleged Role in the 1909 Adana Events

The role played by the Armenian deputy named Bishop Musheg was important here. Musheg had influence among government officials, and managed to place a large number of Armenian migrants (in the appearance of seasonal workers), brought from the surrounding provinces of Adana, in vacant lands, in houses in the city, and nearby villages, and armed them. The inadequacy and weakness of the government officials in the region was apparent, as they were unable to detect the insurrectionary preparations of Musheg and the Hunchak and Dashnak organizations.

There was a lot of evidence that migrant workers played the leading role in the Adana events of April 1909. One day before the mass violence started, the murder of two Muslims by an Armenian who supposedly provoked the events, took place on Tuesday, 13 April, the day of the labor market.<sup>18</sup> The narratives about 14 April, when the events began, draw attention to the fact that a large crowd still roamed the streets of the city despite the end of the labor market. Although some pro-Armenian writers claimed that this crowd stayed in the city on orders to commit massacres, it is highly probable that they were workers who stayed in the city because they could not find a job in the labor market.<sup>19</sup>

The first spark of the events, the shooting of two Muslim youths by an Armenian on Friday, 9 April 1909, increased the tension between Turks and Armenians in Adana. While the Muslims wanted the government to take away the murderer from the Armenians, the Armenians wanted a Muslim who had killed an Armenian before to be handed over to them. Otherwise, they said that they would not hand over the murderer to the authorities. Then, the government tried to apprehend the murderer, but they were unsuccessful.<sup>20</sup> After one of the Armenians killed a Muslim named Imamzade Nuri Efendi, the events that devastated the Adana Province began around 4 pm on 13 April.<sup>21</sup>

Mutual killings that started in Adana center on Wednesday continued until the evening and continued the next Thursday as well. With the massacres in the city, looting started, a fire broke out, and three-fifths of Adana was destroyed. As a result of the recurring violence on 25 April, Adana was utterly devastated.<sup>22</sup>

While the British consul in Adana was visiting the city, he wanted to see the Armenian neighborhoods and understand the situation of the Armenians. Even

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18 S. Soskin, "Die Baumwollkultur in der Kilikischen Ebene und ihre Ausdehnungsmöglichkeit hier sowie in Nordsyrien". *Der Tropenpflanzer*: 19. Jahrgang (Berlin Mai: 1916. Nr. 5. (255-272), 264.

19 Ferriman, *The Young Turks and the Truth about*, 22.

20 Bayram Kodaman ve Mehmet Ali Ünal, *Son vak'ânîvis Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi Tarihi: II. Meşrutiyet olayları (1908-1909)* (Ankara: TTK Yayınevi, 1996), 94.

21 BEO., 3621/271523 (Quoted by Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 223-224).

22 BEO., 3621/271523 (Quoted by Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 223-224).

though he was accompanied by the gendarmerie commander, a few cavalymen, and thirty soldiers; the Armenians shot at the soldiers while walking in the Armenian quarter, and the consul was shot in the arm while trying to warn the Armenians not to shoot. Luckily, his wound was not serious. The British consul had personally witnessed the Armenians shooting the Turkish soldiers, and pouring kerosene on them and burning them.<sup>23</sup>

The Ottoman Ministry of War ordered the 5th Army Command to send various military units to the region of Adana to prevent the events from spreading and to ensure security.<sup>24</sup> It was decided to urgently send military units to Mersin from the Gallipoli and 2nd Army region and Ministry of War requested ferries to take the military troops.<sup>25</sup> The Governor Cevat Bey was dismissed from his post, and Mustafa Zihni Pasha, the Governor of Burdur, was appointed instead. Commander Ferik Remzi Pasha was also dismissed from his post. Government officials began to confiscate all the weapons in the hands of the people in Adana, regardless of religion and sect.<sup>26</sup>

In the events that took place in Adana, a total of 15 people, 9 Muslims, and 6 non-Muslims, were sentenced to death and 6 people were sentenced to hard labor for 15 years.<sup>27</sup>

It was not easy to determine the number of people killed and injured during the violence; as such the given figures are not exact. There have been many speculations about the number of deaths and the figures provided by Turks, Armenians, and foreign sources are very different.<sup>28</sup> Adana Governor Mustafa Zihni Pasha gave detailed information about those who died and were injured in the events in his telegram dated 25 April 1325, which he sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mustafa Zihni Pasha stated that a total of 1924 deaths and 533 injuries from Muslims, 1455 deaths and 382 injuries from non-Muslims occurred during the Adana events, and that the claims that 20,000 or 30,000 Armenians died during the events could not be true, due to the total Armenian population in Adana being 48,477.<sup>29</sup>

Deputy Agop Babikyan, a member of the Investigation Committee established to investigate the Adana events, claimed that 20,008 people were killed all over the province, 620 of them were Muslims and the remaining 19,400 were non-

23 BEO., 3536/265166 (Quoted by Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 223-224).

24 BEO., 3534/264992 (Quoted by Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 223-224).

25 BEO., 3535/265099 (Quoted by Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 223-224).

26 *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No: 207, 11 Mayıs 1909.

27 BEO, 3568/267534; BEO, 3568/267600.

28 Salahi R. Sonyel, *İngiliz Gizli Belgelerine Göre Adana'da Vuku Bulan Türk-Ermeni Olayları (Temmuz 1908-Aralık 1909)* (Ankara: TTK Yayınları, 2014), 38.

29 DH. MKT, 2807/40.

Muslims.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Faik Bey, another member of the committee, declared that the total loss of Muslim, Christian, and general deaths from the people of Adana was about 6000 and that the claimed amount of 20,000 or 30,000 was definitely not true.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. The Allegations About Sultan Abdülhamit II's Role in the Adana Events

Among the newspapers controlled by the CUP was the widely read *Tanin*. The words of its respected editor Hüseyin Cahit regarding the Adana events had a significant impact on the reporting of the events by other publications. Cahit wrote the following on these events:

“The province of Adana has been the scene of terribly tragic events. Men, women, and children were massacred mercilessly with savage fury. Nearly 20,000 of our citizens have perished. Whole families have disappeared. The orphans are many. Humanity in its entirety has trembled with horror before this plight. The Adana tragedy, the last spasm of Absolutism, stretches as far as İstanbul. [...] We understand the silence of Abdülhamit in front of the evils he perpetrated, but we cannot interpret the government's silence on the result of the inquiry.”<sup>32</sup>

British journalist Sir Edwin Pears, using a supposedly well-informed local correspondent, claimed that “it is believed that throughout the provinces of Asia Abdulhamid instructed high officials to exterminate the Christians”,<sup>33</sup> and claimed:

“It was a terrible success there (in Adana) and was contemporaneous within the capital. Elsewhere the reactionaries waited to see which side in Constantinople would win; and when, in less than a fortnight, the result showed the powerlessness of the Sultan, no further attempt at reaction took place. Amid some problems which are still unsolved, it cannot be doubted that there was a deliberate attempt to raise Anatolia against the new regime.”<sup>34</sup>

American journalist James Creelman also blamed Abdülhamit II, stating he had ordered the massacre of Armenians in Asia Minor:

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30 *Tasvir-i Efkar*, No: 39, 8 Temmuz 1909.

31 *Yeni Tasvir-i Efkar*, No: 43, 12 Temmuz 1909.

32 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 222-223.

33 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 224.

34 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 224.

“Creelman believed that it was not a religious movement at all, but a political plot hatched out in Yıldız Palace. There were hundreds of men in the lower orders of Islam, who wore the turban badge of religious vocation- engaged in the conspiracy, but there was abundant evidence to show that the real leaders of the Muslim faith had nothing to do with it.”<sup>35</sup>

Other people opposed such claims, however. British author Charles Woods indicated that he had encountered a supposed telegram from Abdülhamit II instructing the Adana Governor to “zealously kill Christians”. Woods contended that “there is no proof that such a telegram was ever sent to Adana from [İstanbul], and if it were transmitted, no evidence has been produced that its dispatch was authorized by Sultan Abdülhamid II.”<sup>36</sup> Further adding weight to his argument, Woods indicated:

“it was impossible for those intimately acquainted with the condition of affairs in the Ottoman Empire between July 1908 and April 1909 to believe that during the closing months of his reign Sultan Abdülhamid II was actually in a position to send any direct or secret orders to the governmental authorities in the provinces.”<sup>37</sup>

The German writer Wendland of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper argued that it was local political rivalries, not Abdülhamit II’s intrigues or an outburst of Muslim extremism that led to the violence in the Adana events. Indicating that Adana was like a powder keg ready to explode, Wendland added:

“The Armenian agitators, who had made many pecuniary sacrifices to aid in the bringing of the new Constitution, expected to exercise a vital political influence through its operation, and their elated bearing was such as to exasperate the Mohammedans. The leaders of this agitation were generally foreign members of the Armenia committee or certain stirrers up of race hatred in Adana. While these leaders took care to secure safety for themselves, they proved the ruin of their poorer fellow countrymen, who were sacrificed by thousands for no fault of their own.

[...]

It may easily be imagined that this new awakening of national Chauvinism [among Armenians] was soon perceived by the

35 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 225.

36 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 226.

37 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 226.

38 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 226-227.

## Sultan Abdülhamit II's Alleged Role in the 1909 Adana Events

Mohammedans and while the Armenians were giving too free a rein to their tongue and their enthusiasm, the Mohammedan authorities were kept fully informed by Turkish spies. It is therefore a gross error to declare that religious fanaticism was responsible for the late massacres.”<sup>38</sup>

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and Antep’s medical missionary, Fred Douglas Shepard, going against the exaggerated reports of many other missionaries working in the Ottoman Empire, argued that:

“[...] Armenians, intoxicated with the new wine of freedom, were often offended by wild speech or arrogant behavior. The Bishop of Adana openly advised his people to take up arms, and many of the youth bought guns and carried them ostentatiously. The Muslim public was quickly persuaded by the exaggerated news about the treacherous plans of the Armenians, and thus Everything was ready when the news came that, Sultan II. Abdulhamid had taken the reins and came back to power.”<sup>39</sup>

There were also those who occupied a sort of middle ground in terms of the assessment of the Adana events. For example, the aforementioned deputy Agop Babikyan, one of the members of the investigative committee, summarized his findings as follows:

“I have not been able to secure a single document in evidence of Abdul Hamid having any finger in the whole affair of Adana. [...] On the other hand the local government has been an accomplice in the massacres, and even the central government is guilty of carelessness and prompt action.”<sup>40</sup>

It is apparent that the assessments of the Adana events by the contemporaries of that time and their views on Abdülhamit II’s alleged role demonstrates parallels with the heated contemporary debate concerning Abdülhamit II’s personality and legacy. It can be confidently stated, however, that it is simply not possible to convincingly argue that Abdülhamit II ordered or orchestrated violence against Armenians during the Adana events.

### Evaluation and Conclusion

After the re-proclamation of constitution in 1908, Armenian nationalists indulged in wild and provocative discourse: they talked openly of Armenian

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39 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 228.

40 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 228.

independence (possibly of Cilicia as a self-governing principality) and preached the duty of revenge against Turks.<sup>41</sup> This was not the first Armenian attempt to establish an independent principality. After the 1876-1877 Ottoman-Russian War and the disintegration process of the Ottoman Empire that started with great land losses, the Armenian nationalists started the independence movement by organizing terrorist acts in Eastern and Southern Anatolia with the illegal organizations they established in the empire and the revolts they started. The basis of this initiative, which took the independence movements of the countries in the Balkans as an example, was “religious brotherhood solidarity”. Especially since 1830, the schools and aid organizations established by American missionaries in Anatolia where the Armenian population was densely populated contributed greatly to the Armenian national movement’s expansion.

As of 1830, American missionaries sent by the ABCFM had active presence in Cilicia of the Adana province. The Bible used in schools was printed in Turkish and transcribed in the Armenian script by these missionaries.<sup>42</sup>

After years of propaganda, the Christians in Cilicia, as in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, bought arms in quantities exaggerated by the fear of the Muslims. Similarly, reports were circulated that the Muslim faith was threatened and that the Christians were preparing to rise against the Muslims. There were plenty of people to fan the anxieties on both sides. It was evident that the spirit of antagonism between Muslims and Christians was increasing. Fuel was added to the fire by the open boasts of some Armenians that they were arming themselves and speaking abusively of Muslims.

Additionally in April 1909, the concentration of seasonal Christian workers coming to the Adana region from various parts of Anatolia, especially from Transcaucasia, gave rise to the thought that a revolt would have a high chance of success.

On the other hand, the revolt initiated by the CUP, which had acted together with the Armenian nationalists just ten months ago, in the Balkans had succeeded, and Sultan Abdülhamit II was forced to re-enact the constitution. The weakening of the authority of Abdülhamit II and the CUP, which the Armenians saw as the biggest obstacle<sup>43</sup> to their goals, would increase the chances of success for the revolt they would initiate in the Adana region.

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41 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 230-231.

42 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 231.

43 Güçlü, *The Armenian Events of Adana in 1909*, 231.

Likewise, especially since the late 1890s, the Dashnak and the Hunchak organizations, who could not carry out work in Anatolia due to the effective efforts of Abdülhamit II and whose activities were almost completely limited to foreign organizations, were now on the rise in the region.

The excuse they used in their efforts to turn the Adana events into a “massacre” was the “31 March Incident”. The justification of those who defend this thesis is that the main reason behind the events is the claim that it was reactionism supported by Abdülhamit II. According to this thesis, Adana events were an extension of the locality of the March 31 Incident in Istanbul and were under the political responsibility of Abdülhamit II. According to the claims of those who defend this thesis, although a similar massacre of Armenians was planned in Istanbul, this had been prevented at the last moment by the intervention of the Action Army.<sup>44</sup> However, after the proclamation of the Constitutional Monarchy, most of the bureaucrats and commanders affiliated with the old regime were dismissed and the opportunity of Yıldız Palace to penetrate the countryside was eliminated.

As a result of linking the Adana events with the 31 March Incident, the CUP showed themselves as the protectors of the constitutional regime, as well as the security of life and property of the Armenians against the “reactionaries”. The aim of this was to gain prestige for the CUP in the eyes of foreign states and among Armenian voters. This strategy was partially successful.<sup>45</sup>

After both events (31 March and Adana Events), the CUP dethroned Sultan Abdülhamit II, whom they held responsible, sent him into exile in Thessaloniki, and replaced him with his brother, Sultan Mehmet Reşat V, on the throne.

As a result, the revolt started with the illegal Armenian organizations, which dreamt of establishing an independent Armenian Principality of Cilicia, taking advantage of the weakness of the public authority and purposefully fueling the hatred of the Armenian people in the region, resulted in a great disaster. The articles published in local newspapers before the events and some thoughtless behavior of the youth undoubtedly increased the tension between Muslims and Armenians. Perhaps much more decisive than these was the deterioration of the bureaucratic hierarchy after the constitutional monarchy and the inability of the civil and military chiefs to intervene in the events due to the demobilization of the army.

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44 FO 421/251 *Further Correspondence Respecting The Affairs of South-Eastern Europe*. May and June 1909, 145.

45 Arsen Avagyan, “İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti ile Ermeni Siyasi Partileri Arasındaki İlişkiler”, *Ermeniler ve İttihat ve Terakki* (İstanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2005), (11-141), 76.

After the events, as they did after every revolt, nationalist Armenian organizations spread the propaganda that the Ottoman government destroyed their fellow Armenians, when in fact it was these same organizations that armed the Armenians and sent to death to gain the support of the western Christian public opinion. They did not hesitate to accuse Abdülhamit II for all the blame, whom they saw as the biggest obstacle to their aim, even though they had no real evidence.

Before and after the constitutional monarchy, the Armenian nationalists were in alliance with the CUP against their common enemy, Sultan Abdülhamit II. These alliances, which lasted until after the 1912 elections, fell apart after the scenario they devised in 1915 led to a catastrophe, and Armenian assassins linked to these nationalists eventually killed all the CUP administrators. It can be thus said that the machinations devised for 1909 created a trail of blood that went to 1915 and beyond.



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