

CHAPTER XXIII

THE "REVOLUTION" AT VAN

The Turkish province of Van lies in the remote northeastern corner of Asia Minor; it touches the frontiers of Persia on the east and its northern boundary looks toward the Caucasus. It is one of the most beautiful and most fruitful parts of the Turkish Empire and one of the richest in historical associations. The city of Van, which is the capital of the vilayet, lies on the eastern shores of the lake of the same name; it is the one large town in Asia Minor in which the Armenian population is larger than the Moslem.

In the fall of 1914, its population of about 30,000 people represented one of the most peaceful and happy and prosperous communities in the Turkish Empire. Though Van, like practically every other section where Armenians lived, had had its periods of oppression and massacre, yet the Moslem yoke, comparatively speaking, rested upon its people rather lightly. Its Turkish governor, Tahsin Pasha, was one of the more enlightened type of Turkish officials. Relations between the Armenians, who lived in the better section of the city, and the Turks and the Kurds, who occupied the mud huts in the Moslem quarter, had been tolerably agreeable for many years.

The location of this vilayet, however., inevitably made it the scene of military operations, and made the activities of its Armenian population a matter of daily suspicion. Should Russia attempt an invasion of Turkey one of the most accessible routes lay through this province. The war had not gone far when causes of irritation arose. The requisitions of army supplies fell far more heavily upon the Christian than upon the Mohammedan elements in Van, just as they did in every other part of Turkey. The Armenians had to stand quietly by while the Turkish officers appropriated all their cattle, all their wheat, and all their goods of every kind, giving them only worthless pieces of paper in exchange. The attempt at general disarmament that took place also aroused their apprehension, which was increased by the brutal treatment visited upon Armenian soldiers in the Caucasus. On the other hand, the Turks made many charges against the Christian population, and, in fact, they attributed to them the larger share of the blame for the reverses which the Turkish armies had suffered. in the Caucasus. The fact that a considerable element in the already changed forces was composed of Armenians aroused their unbridled wrath. Since about half the Armenians in the world inhabit the Russian provinces in the Caucasus and are liable, like all Russians, to military service, there were certainly no legitimate grounds for complaint, so far as these Armenian levies were *bona fide* subjects of the Czar. But the Turks asserted that large numbers of Armenian soldiers in Van and other of their Armenian provinces deserted, crossed the border, and joined the Russian army, where their knowledge of roads and the terrain was an important factor in the Russian victories. Though the exact facts are not yet ascertained, it seems not unlikely that such desertions, perhaps a few hundred., did take place. At the beginning of the war, Union and Progress agents appeared in Erzeroum and Van and appealed to the Armenian leaders to go into Russian Armenia and attempt to start revolutions against the Russian Government; and the fact that the Ottoman Armenians refused to do this contributed further to the prevailing irritation. The Turkish Government has made much of the "treasonable " behaviour of the Armenians of Van and have even urged it as an excuse for their subsequent treatment of the whole race. Their attitude illustrates once more the perversity of the Turkish mind. After massacring hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the course of thirty years, outraging their women and girls, and robbing and maltreating them in every conceivable way, the Turks still apparently believed that they had the right to expect from them the most enthusiastic "loyalty". That the Armenians all over Turkey sympathized with the Entente was no secret. "If you want to know how the war is going," wrote a humorous Turkish newspaper, "all you need to do is to look in the face of an Armenian. If he is smiling, then the Allies are winning; if he is downcast, then the Germans are successful." If an Ottoman Armenian soldier should desert and join the Russians, that would unquestionably constitute a technical crime against the state, and might be punished without violating the rules of all civilized countries. Only the Turkish mind, however---and possibly the Junker---could regard it as furnishing an excuse for the terrible barbarities that now took place.

Though the air, all during the autumn and winter of 1914-15, was filled with premonitions of trouble, the Armenians behaved with remarkable self-restraint. For years it had been the Turkish policy to provoke the Christian population into committing overt acts, and then seizing upon such misbehaviour as an excuse for massacres. The Armenian clergy and political leaders saw many evidences that the Turks were now up to their

old tactics, and they therefore went among the people, cautioning them to keep quiet, to bear all insults and even outrages patiently, so as not to give the Moslems the opening which they were seeking. "Even though they burn a few of our villages," these leaders would say, "do not retaliate, for it is better that a few be destroyed than that the whole nation be massacred."

When the war started, the Central Government recalled Tahsin Pasha, the conciliatory governor of Van, and replaced him with Djevdet Bey, a brother-in-law of Enver Pasha. This act in itself was most disquieting. Turkish officialdom has always contained a minority of men who do not believe in massacre as a state policy and cannot be depended upon to carry out strictly the most bloody orders of the Central Government. Whenever massacres have been planned, therefore, it has been customary first to remove such "untrustworthy" public servants and replace them by men who are regarded as more reliable. The character of Tahsin's successor made his displacement still more alarming. Djevdet had spent the larger part of his life at Van; he was a man of unstable character, friendly to non-Moslems one moment, hostile the next, hypocritical, treacherous, and ferocious according to the worst traditions of his race. He hated the Armenians and cordially sympathized with the long-established Turkish plan of solving the Armenian problem. There is little question that he came to Van with definite instructions to exterminate all Armenians in this province, but, for the first few months, conditions did not facilitate such operations. Djevdet himself was absent fighting the Russians in the Caucasus and the near approach of the enemy made it a wise policy for the Turks to refrain from maltreating the Armenians of Van. But early in the spring the Russians temporarily retreated. It is generally recognized as good military tactics for a victorious army to follow up the retreating enemy. In the eyes of the Turkish generals, however, the withdrawal of the Russians was a happy turn of war mainly because it deprived the Armenians of their protectors and left them at the mercies of the Turkish army. Instead of following the retreating foe, therefore, the Turks' army turned aside and invaded their own territory of Van. Instead of fighting the trained Russian army of men, they turned their rifles, machine guns, and other weapons upon the Armenian women, children, and old men in the villages of Van. Following their usual custom, they distributed the most beautiful Armenian women among the Moslems, sacked and burned the Armenian villages, and massacred uninterruptedly for days. On April 15th, about 500 young Armenian men of Akantz were mustered to hear an order of the Sultan; at sunset they were marched outside the town and every man shot in cold blood. This procedure was repeated in about eighty Armenian villages in the district north of Lake Van, and in three days 24,000 Armenians were murdered in this atrocious fashion. A single episode illustrates the unspeakable depravity of Turkish methods. A conflict having broken out at Shadak, Djevdet Bey, who had meanwhile returned to Van, asked four of the leading Armenian citizens to go to this town and attempt to quiet the multitude. These men made the trip, stopping at all Armenian villages along the way, urging everybody to keep public order. After completing their work these four Armenians were murdered in a Kurdish village.

And so when Djevdet Bey, on his return to his official post, demanded that Van furnish him immediately 4,000 soldiers, the people were naturally in no mood to accede to his request. When we consider what had happened before and what happened subsequently, there remains little doubt concerning the purpose which underlay this demand. Djevdet, acting in obedience to orders from Constantinople, was preparing to wipe out the whole population, and his purpose in calling for 4,000 able-bodied men was merely to massacre them, so that the rest of the Armenians might have no defenders. The Armenians, parleying to gain time, offered to furnish five hundred soldiers and to pay exemption money for the rest; now, however, Djevdet began to talk aloud about "rebellion," and his determination to "crush" it at any cost. "If the rebels fire a single shot," he declared, "I shall kill every Christian man, woman, and" (pointing to his knee) "every child, up to here." For sometime the Turks had been constructing entrenchments around the Armenian quarter and filling them with soldiers and, in response to this provocation, the Armenians began to make preparations for a defense. On April 20th, a band of Turkish soldiers seized several Armenian women who were entering the city; a couple of Armenians ran to their assistance and were shot dead. The Turks now opened fire on the Armenian quarters with rifles and artillery; soon a large part of the town was in flames and a regular siege had started. The whole Armenian fighting force consisted of only 1,500 men; they had only 300 rifles and a most inadequate supply of ammunition, while Djevdet had an army of 5,000 men, completely equipped and supplied. Yet the Armenians fought with the utmost heroism and skill; they had little chance of holding off their enemies indefinitely, but they knew that a Russian army was fighting its way to Van and their utmost hope was that they would be able to defy the besiegers until these Russians arrived. As I am not writing the story of sieges and battles, I cannot describe in detail the numerous acts of individual heroism, the cooperation of the Armenian women, the ardour and energy of the Armenian children, the self-sacrificing zeal of the American missionaries, especially Doctor

Ussher and his wife and Miss Grace H. Knapp, and the thousand other circumstances that made this terrible month one of the most glorious pages in modern Armenian history. The wonderful thing about it is that the Armenians triumphed. After nearly five weeks of sleepless fighting, the Russian army suddenly appeared and the Turks fled into the surrounding country, where they found appeasement for their anger by further massacres of unprotected Armenian villagers. Doctor Ussher, the American medical missionary whose hospital at Van was destroyed by bombardment, is authority for the statement that, after driving off the Turks, the Russians began to collect and to cremate the bodies of Armenians who had been murdered in the province, with the result that 55,000 bodies were burned.

I have told this story of the "Revolution" in Van not only because it marked the first stage in this organized attempt to wipe out a whole nation, but because these events are always brought forward by the Turks as a justification of their subsequent crimes. As I shall relate, Enver, Talaat, and the rest, when I appealed to them in behalf of the Armenians, invariably instanced the "revolutionists" of Van as a sample of Armenian treachery. The famous "Revolution," as this recital shows, was merely the determination of the Armenians to save their women's honour and their own lives, after the Turks, by massacring thousands of their neighbours, had shown them the fate that awaited them.