THE SULTAN WHO WAS NOT MEANT TO BE SULTAN

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By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, 10 March 2025

Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz, who ruled from 1861 to 1876, recognized the urgent need for the empire's modernization. On his return from state visits to London, Paris, and Vienna in 1867, he implemented several reforms, including a new legal code, a modern postal system, an improved education system, and the establishment of the Ottoman Bank to stabilize the economy. He also sought to improve diplomatic relations with Tsarist Russia, despite Russia's role in fostering uprisings among the Christian populations in the Balkans.

Abdülaziz's reforms faced significant resistance from the conservative Muslim elite, who viewed them as a threat to their privileges. In 1876, a coup with the indirect support from Britain and France, led to his deposition. Abdülaziz was imprisoned in the Topkapi Palace and was later found dead under mysterious circumstances. While his death was officially ruled a suicide, many suspected foul play. He was only 46 years old.

The Ottoman imperial succession was governed by a unique system that often prioritized court politics over a strict hereditary order. Any son born to a woman in the harem was considered legitimate and had a claim to the throne.

Abdülaziz' nephew, Murad, ascended to the throne. Unbeknownst to the British and the French, Murad V suffered from severe mental health issues, including paranoia and fainting spells. On the day of his coronation, he had a mental breakdown, vomited, and jumped into a pool. His erratic behaviour led to his swift deposition after just 93 days. His younger half-brother, Abdülhamid, ascended to the throne as the 34th Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, head of the Ottoman Caliphate, and Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.

Unlike his charismatic half-brother, Abdülhamid was socially awkward and insecure. His mother, a slave-concubine likely of Circassian or Georgian origin, passed away when he was seven, leaving him without the protection of a maternal figure. His father, Sultan Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–1861), saw no promise and showed little interest in the boy. Abdülhamid grew up interacting primarily with the eunuchs and women in the harem, where he faced constant mockery for his unattractive appearance. His isolated life in the harem during his formative years likely gave him an inferiority complex that contributed to his insecurities.

Many hoped that under pressure from European powers, Sultan Abdülhamid II would be a moderate reformer. The empire was gripped with internal dissent, economic instability, and external threats from European powers, particularly Russia. One of his first significant actions was the promulgation of the Ottoman Constitution, which established a parliamentary system. The initial enthusiasm for constitutionalism quickly faded when the empire became embroiled in a disastrous war with Russia (the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.) Abdülhamid suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, and reclaimed absolute power through a series of decrees. By focusing on promoting the Islamic identity of the multi-ethnic empire rather than pursuing liberal

reforms, he revealed himself to be a staunch Sunni Muslim. Many conservative Muslims, fearful of change, rallied behind the autocratic regime as Abdülhamid emphasized his role as Caliph, the protector of Muslims worldwide and a champion of pan-Islamic unity.

The Armenian Massacres

Ottoman and Armenian relations were characterized over the centuries by a high degree of coexistence and integration, particularly in urban centres. Armenians, as one of the empire's largest Christian minorities, were referred to as the millet-i sadıka, the loyal millet, due to their historical loyalty to the Ottoman state.

In rural areas, particularly in eastern Asia Minor, tensions were rising between Armenian peasants and Kurdish tribes or local Muslim landowners. Armenians often faced exploitation, land seizures, and violence, and the central government which made no effort to halt the abuses. In 1894, an Armenian protest in the capital for equal rights was met with violent repression. Abdülhamid tacitly approved further violence. Armenian nationalist movements, inspired by similar movements in the Balkans, began to advocate for greater autonomy. European powers began to intervene in Ottoman affairs, often using the protection of Christian minorities as a pretext. As nationalist movements gained momentum across the empire in the 1890s, Abdülhamid focused on the Armenians as a growing threat to Ottoman unity despite the fact that, unlike the Greeks, Serbs, and other nationalities within the Ottoman Empire who actively sought independence, the Armenians' demands were not centred on secession. Moreover, while Greeks and Balkan Slavs established nation-states with the help of Russia, Armenians did not have a clear path to statehood as they lacked an external ally. Armenians believed that the empire could modernize and evolve into an inclusive and pluralistic state, allowing them to live in safety and prosper.

Faced with the empire's decline and the loss of territories in the Balkans, Abdülhamid feared the Armenians as potential allies of Russia. The Hamidiye regiments, comprised of Kurdish irregulars, carried out a series of massacres in the Eastern provinces. Armenians endured decades of systemic discrimination, sporadic violence, and economic marginalization. Estimates of Armenian deaths during the 1894–1896 period range between 100,000 and 300,000, with countless others displaced. These atrocities earned Abdülhamid the title of the "Red Sultan" in European circles, cementing his reputation as a ruthless and despotic ruler.

Despite these challenges, the Armenian leadership and intellectuals continued to advocate for equal rights, protection from arbitrary violence by the authorities and Kurdish tribes, fair taxation, and greater autonomy in regions where Armenians formed a significant portion of the population.

The Young Turks, a reformist movement, came to power in 1908. They forced Abdülhamid II to reinstate the constitution. The following year, they deposed Abdülhamid and exiled him. His half-brother, Mehmed V, succeeded as sultan. The Young Turks initially promised equality and reform

but soon embraced a radical Turkish nationalist ideology. Their goal was to create a homogenized Turkish state, which marginalized non-Turkish and non-Muslim communities. The Adana massacres of 1909, in which thousands of Armenians were killed, foreshadowed the violence to come.

The Young Turks also viewed the Armenians' calls for reform with suspicion. This mistrust was exacerbated once again by the European powers, who occasionally intervened on behalf of the Armenians, further fueling the paranoia about foreign intervention.

The failure to implement meaningful reforms, coupled with escalating violence against Armenian communities, ultimately pushed some Armenians toward more radical political movements. Even then, their primary goal remained reform and security rather than outright independence.

What If?

Abdülhamid II remains one of the most controversial figures in Ottoman history. For some, he was a pragmatic ruler who delayed the empire's collapse through modernization efforts and strategic diplomacy. He invested in large infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Hejaz Railway, which aimed to connect Constantinople to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He also promoted industrialization and opened several modern schools across the empire. Politically, he displayed remarkable skill in navigating the complex geopolitics of his time playing European powers—Britain, France, and Germany—against one another. His close relationship with Kaiser Wilhelm II brought significant German influence to the empire. Germany received concessions for military and infrastructure projects, including the development of the Baghdad Railway, a critical transportation project linking the Ottoman heartland to its Arab provinces. Years later, this alliance would lead to the Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I on the side of the Central Powers.

For others, he was a tyrant whose reign was marked by brutal repression, which contributed directly to the empire's decline. For Armenians, his rise from an overlooked prince to a despotic ruler in a collapsing empire was a calamity. He was the ruler who laid the groundwork for the persecution that would culminate in the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916. His successors in the Young Turk and Kemalist governments completed what he started.

One can speculate about the fate of the Ottoman Armenians had Abdülhamid never ascended to the throne. Could their fate have been different?

This is a haunting question without a clear answer.

While coexistence and relative harmony between Armenians and Turks had been possible in earlier periods, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a shift toward exclusionary policies and violence, culminating in the Armenian Genocide. Understanding this history requires acknowledging both the earlier periods of harmony between Turks and Armenians and the complex dynamics that led to its tragic end.

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Varouj Pogharian was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His grandparents were from Van, Arapkir and Urfa. His family moved to Canada when he was 18. He retired from the Canadian federal government following a career that included assignments in South America. He is currently working on a historical novel, which is set in Asia Minor during the tumultuous period that spanned the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the rise of the Young Turks. His narrative is poised to explore the complexities of this historical backdrop.



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