

“Kuleli Incident”: Armenian Sources



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Various Armenian sources have great significance for studying the history of the Ottoman Empire. In the cases when the Turkish sources are missing or are inaccessible, they acquire exceptional importance. The page of Ottoman history which has got the name “Kuleli Incident” is a case of the kind.

The history of the Ottoman Empire is full of conspiracy, successful and unsuccessful attempts of coup d’etat. But none of them has aroused such a scientific and political interest and at the same time a flood of mutually exclusive commentaries as the conspiracy against Sultan *Abdülmecit*, which was disclosed in September 1859 in Constantinople.

In the middle of that month a group of conspirators were arrested in the capital. Its members arrested in the military barracks called “Kuleli”, were questioned within three-four weeks and tried very quickly by a special commission consisting of high-ranking statesmen. Four of them were sentenced to death, and the rest to different periods of imprisonment or exile. Capital punishment was substituted by exile at Sultan *Abdülmecit*’s command. This unsuccessful attempt of conspiracy was recorded in the chronology of the history of Turkey as “Kuleli Incident” (Kuleli Vak’ası). The interest of researchers towards this incident, not differing in anything from previous conspiracies at first sight, is conditioned by the circumstances that the conspirators had set up, according to modern comprehension, the first political organization in the history of Turkey. It had its political program round which the members of the organization had gathered¹.

However, the sources elucidating the important incident are scanty, in particular the text of the conspirators’ plan hasn’t been discovered yet². The bulk of the sources known to researchers was put into scientific circulation in the 30-60s of the past century and didn’t have any significant supplements in the future. Its foundation was laid down by the Turkish historian *Uluğ İğdemir*, in whose monograph texts of the official records of evidences of the conspirators’ trial discovered by the author in the Ottoman State Archives in the collection depository “Hazine-i Evrak” are used and published (İğdemir U., 1937). A few years after the publication of *İğdemir*’s book the generalized works of distinguished historians *Tarık Zafer Tunaya*, *Enver Ziya Karal* and *Ismail Hami Danişmend* based on Ottoman sources were published one after another, where the elucidation of “Kuleli Incident” takes on special significance (Tunaya T. Z., 1952, pp. 89-90).

In the following years, foreign experts touched upon the study of conspiracy, trying to supply its source study base with the involvement of Western and Russian archival material. *Vera Shpilkova* – a Turkologist from Moscow was the first to undertake the

research of Russian diplomatic sources for that purpose, publishing all in all one non-voluminous article which has, however, preserved its scientific significance up to now (Shpilkova V. I., 1959, pp. 100-104). Later, Irma Fadeyeva has also transiently touched upon the Russian diplomatic documents (Fadeyeva I. L., 1985, p.76).

American Turkologist *Roderick Davison* who studied the British, French, Austrian, Swedish and American archives had got acquainted with the official documents of Western diplomats dealing with “Kuleli Incident”. He had also included some memoirs of contemporaries and press information. In the monograph on the Ottoman reforms belonging to Davison’s pen a very important description of that incident, though in condensed form, can be found (Davison R., 1963, pp. 100-103).

The source study base of “Kuleli Incident” has mainly been formed due to the works mentioned above. There are a number of important questions which remain open: Ottoman archives haven’t been properly studied; most of the evidences of contemporaries and press remain unknown to specialists. Thus for instance, the answers of conspirators during examinations published in *İğdemir’s* book are sparse and incomplete. It can’t be excluded that their considerable part has later been abolished by authorities (İğdemir U., 1937, pp. 34-37). The use of diplomatic documents in most cases doesn’t contribute to elucidation of problems either; the reports of foreign Embassies of Constantinople to their Governments being often based on doubtful sources of information. The fact was once fixed by above mentioned *R. Davison* – a good expert of Western archives, who was writing that the Embassies had got information on conspiracy that were contradicting each other (Davison R., 1963, p. 102). This conclusion is proved even by the fact that researching the Russian diplomatic documents, *V. Shpilkova* and *I. Fadeyeva* have come to considerably differing conclusions.

In essence, all the further researchers have relied upon the above mentioned works and depending on their historical approaches and political preferences have suggested this or that commentary on “Kuleli Incident”. The lack of sources is a serious obstacle for more deep and thorough analysis of that important incident.

The lack of sources can to some extent be accomplished by involving the materials of the Armenian press of the time. In some cases its publications repeat already known facts, but the notifications containing noteworthy information are not few in number.

Thus for instance, from the news of the pages of the weekly “*Masis*”, Constantinople, one can conclude that in the period preceding the conspiracy, serious increase of antichristian mood was noticed among the Turk population of the Ottoman Empire, which in some cases was expressed in the form of bloody requitals against the Christians (*Masis*, July 23, 1859). Cases of mass riots against the westernization policy of the government, which were usually led by the representatives of Mohammedan clergy, have been registered by “*Masis*”. From that standpoint the incidents in *Akn* settlement, Kharberd district, are characteristic. According to “*Masis*”, which has reprinted that news from “*Mecmuai Havadis*” written in Turkish but in Armenian letters, the Moslems of *Akn* at the head of *mufti* rose against governmental edict, by which the church bells were allowed to ring. That edict was a part of policy within *tanzimat*

reforms by the government and contradicted *Şaria*, which used the *mufti*, arousing the mob against the Christians and the government having westward inclination. The newspaper confirms that the mob demanded to destroy not only the churches of “*gâvur*”, but also the orders given by the government and those bringing to their notice (Masis, August 13, 1859). The descriptions of the incidents of the kind in detail allow us to have an idea about the atmosphere, that existed in the Ottoman Empire and influenced the views of conspirators.

The discussion on the nature of “Kuleli Incident” is still going on. Most of the researchers, following the “hyper westernized paradigm” of the Modern history of Turkey, describe the conspiracy as “antimonarchist”, state that their participants had “liberal” and “constitutional” ideas and consider it the first expression of constitutional movement in the Ottoman Empire (Shpilkova V. I., 1959). This approach was once met with *Atatürk*'s approval and found its place on official pages of history published by the Turkish historical society (Tarih III, 1933, p. 252).

Some contemporaries have also written about the constitutional views of the conspirators. But they haven't been guided by reliable facts. Thus for instance, *E. Engelhardt* the French Consul settled in Belgrade then had touched upon the 1859 conspiracy. Several years later he published a voluminous book of memoirs, where the official policy of France towards the Ottoman Empire was defended, whose aim was to retain its territorial entirety. It was mentioned there that the aim of the conspiracy was the proclamation of parliament; moreover, it was to consist of Moslems and Christians (Engelhardt Ed., 1982, p. 159). The source of that important information according to Engelhardt was some “unknown publicist” (Ibid. p.158). Unfortunately, this doubtful information has been used by historians over and over again without being subjected to serious examination.

There are also specialists who see relation between the conspirators and the secret organization of the first Turk constitutionals, i.e. “New Ottomans”, or even considered the conspiracy as an incident proclaiming the origin of the revolutionary movement of Young Turks³.

Another rather a great group of researchers find that the main purpose of the conspirators was to put an end to *tanzimat* reforms having western inclinations and to restore the inferior legal condition of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire consolidating the laws of *Şaria* in their “pure form” (Collas L., 1909; Davison R., 1954, Vol. LIX. No 4, p. 861; Petrosyan Yu. A., 1961, p. 108; Füzuzan H. T., 1965, pp.16-17). The supporters of this view rely upon the evidences of the arrested as well as the circumstance that most of the conspirators belonged to the Mohammedan clergy.

This last interpretation is indirectly affirmed by publications of the Armenian press. For example, from an interesting material inserted on the pages of “*Masis*”, it becomes clear that immediately after the disclosure of the conspiracy sultan *Abdülmecit* who was the target of the conspirators, had quickly begun the solemn religious ritual of “Replacement of the Golden Tube in his palace of *Topkapı*”⁴, trying in this way to re-establish his shaken authority in the eyes of the Orthodox Moslems in consequence of *tanzimat* reforms (Masis, September 10, 1859).

The conspirators have been well-organized and had numerous co-thinkers. According to the evidences of the arrested, ten thousands of military men and members of religious organizations were ready to join them (İğdemir U., 1937, pp. 59-63). Arrests were made after disclosing it in consequence of the treason. "*Masis*", not yet having official data, was carefully informing about "numerous arrests (*Masis*, September 10, 1859) and "*Meghu Hayastani*", a weekly newspaper of Tiflis, relying upon Russian sources, wrote about two hundred people "put in prison" (*Meghu Hayastani*, October 10, 1859). But the government soon sobered up and tried to slur over the real size of the conspiracy, putting obviously reduced numbers of the arrested with that end in view. In the corresponding issue of "*Masis*", their number made up 34 people altogether (*Masis*, September 17, 1859).

One of the notifications published by "*Meghu Hayastani*" shows that if necessary how quickly the Ottoman Empire was orienting and acting and spreading favourable news from its viewpoint. The newspaper reads that the Turkish Embassy in Paris, no more than two days after the disclosure of the conspiracy, got a telegram from Constantinople, where it was emphasized that the conspiracy was against the sultan and there "wasn't anything eminent" in it, that the number of the conspirators didn't outnumber forty and the majority of them were "Circassians and Kurds" (*Meghu Hayastani*, October 17, 1859). These principal propositions which considerably differed from the testimonies of the conspirators and a number of other evidences were later put on the basis of official commentaries and greatly influenced the approaches of some representatives. So the information of the Armenian paper mentioned above, in conditions of Ottoman archives and inaccessible foreign press of the time, has an important role from the point of view of more balanced research of historiography of "Kuleli Incident".

After revealing the conspiracy, according to non-official information, some incidents took place, which throw additional light on the main aims of the participants. "*Meghu Hayastani*" informs us about one of them, saying that in the European district of the capital "a burning machine" was found, whose aim was "to commit the district of Franks to flames" (*Meghu Hayastani*, November 7, 1859). So the belief that the conspiracy was antichristian and anti-western in nature is proved once again. This information also proves that after the arrests of the conspirators, their co-thinkers were in freedom and were trying to act. It is worthwhile mentioning that some Turkish historians have also mentioned the fact⁵.

The situation in the capital after the disclosure of the conspiracy was too tense during the first few weeks. The Government, ruled by *Sadrizam Ali* pasha, which was under the serious pressure of the Great Powers, hurried to appease both the foreign Embassies, and the Christian subjects of the country, affirming that though the conspirators were against western reforms, they didn't plan to do damage to the Christians. Before making the results of the inquiry public, the authorities organized a flowing out of information with that end in view. Pro-governmental "*Masis*", not mentioning the source of information, read that it had become known that "this conspiracy is the work of the people with old ideas, nevertheless [the conspirators –R.S.]

they didn't intend to do damage to the Christians" (Masis, September 19, 1859).

It is remarkable that the official results of the inquiry held by the committee set up by the sultan's order and led by *Ali* weren't published completely; they were just summed up in a special reference book and were given to the sultan. According to "Masis" in that "voluminous" book the details of the examination and the results of the examination of the conspirators as well as conclusions about the nature of the conspiracy can be found (Masis, October 29, 1859). The newspaper assumed that it would fully be published a few days later (Masis, October 29, 1859). But the government allowed publishing only the little part of the book, where, by the way, the names of the arrested and some information about them being known for a long time were presented (Masis, November 5, 1859).

After disclosing the conspiracy the Ottoman authorities took drastic measures, whose aim was to exclude the possibility of recurrence of such incidents (Davison R., 1963, p. 102; Shpil'kova V. I., 1959, pp. 103-104). The information about it found in the Armenian press is important first of all by that that in certain cases the facts provided there weren't found in other sources and are unknown to the researchers. Thus for instance, it becomes clear from the publication of "Masis" that by order of *Şeyh-ül İslam* a new "commission" was formed which was to follow the behaviour of *sofia* (students of spiritual institutions of education) and according to it give them corresponding testimonials. Those, getting negative testimonials, should immediately be expelled and returned to their birthplaces (Masis, November 19, 1859). This decision being unprecedented proves how great the restlessness about the incident formed among the *sofia* was.

The facts stated above give us the opportunity to conclude, that the publications of the Armenian press of the time contain many pieces of new information about the "Kuleli Incident" that are missing in other sources and can contribute to the enlargement of its source base.

Notes:

1. That viewpoint has once been put forward and justified by the well-known Turkish political scientist and historian Tarık Zafer Tunaya. See: Tarık Zafer Tunaya (1952), *Tjurkiye'de siyasi partiler* (1859-1952). Istanbul: Arba. It is not disputed at present.
2. German researcher B. Stern in his book devoted to reformist activity promoted in Ottoman Empire has even cited from the plan of conspirators, but hasn't mentioned any source. See: Bernhard Stern (1901), *Jungtürken und Verschwörer. Die innere Lage der Türkei unter Abdul Hamid II.* Leipzig, S. 110.
3. That point of view has many times been expressed but not justified with convincing facts by Ahmed Bedevi Kuran (1948; 1959) – a participant of Young Turks movement and a researcher. See, e.g., his following books: *Inkılâp tarihimiz ve İttihad ve Terraki*. Istanbul: Tan. *Osmanly Imparatorlughunda ve Tjurkiye*

Cumhuriyetinde Inkyljap Hareketleri. Istanbul: Cheltjut.

4. In that tube the "sacred" drops of rain gathered from the Mosque of Mecca were kept.
5. The number of those avoiding arrests was thus left unknown. See: Ismail Hami Danishmend (1955), *Izahly Osmanly tarihi koronolojhisi*. Gilt: 4, 1703-1924. Istanbul.

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16. Masis, September 10, 1859.
17. Masis, September 17, 1859.
18. Masis, September 19, 1859.
19. Masis, July 23, 1859
20. Masis, August 13, 1859.

21. Masis, October 29, 1859.
22. Masis, November 5, 1859.
23. Masis, November 19, 1859.
24. Meghu Hayastani, October 10, 1859.
25. Meghu Hayastani, October 17, 1859.
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ՔՈՒԼԵԼԻԻ ԻՐԱԴԱՐՁՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ. ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ ՍԱՍՈՒԼԻ ԱՐՉԱԳԱՆՔԸ

Օսմանյան կայսրության հայկական մամուլը կարևոր աղբյուր է այդ բազմազգ կայսրության քաղաքական պատմության ուսումնասիրման համար: Այն դեպքերում, երբ բացակայում են, սակավ են կամ դժվար հասանելի են թուրքական աղբյուրները, այն ստանում է բացառիկ կարևոր նշանակություն: Այդ դեպքերից է Օսմանյան կայսրությունում 1859թ. սեպտեմբերին բացահայտված սուլթան Աբդուլ Մեջիդի դեմ ուղղված դավադրությունը, որը մասնագիտական գրականության մեջ անվանվանվում է Քուլելիի իրադարձություն :

Հոդվածի հեղինակը հանգում է եզրակացության, որ ժամանակի հայկական մամուլի հրապարակումները պարունակում են մի շարք նոր տեղեկություններ Քուլելիի իրադարձության մասին և նպաստում են Օսմանյան կայսրության պատմության այդ կարևոր իրադարձության հետազոտման աղբյուրագիտական հենքի ընդլայնմանը: