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Rise of an Armenian Merchant in Turbulent Times: Unionist Ties, Commercial Networks, and Smyrna Fig Market during the World War I Years

Abstract

The outbreak of the First World War gave Ottoman governors-general the opportunity to attain dictatorial powers, and in case of necessity, take preventive measures over the residents in their realms of authority. Rahmî Bey of Aydın province was one of the forerunners of these governors who exercised considerable autonomy in the pursuit of his own political agenda and personal interests. In spite of the fact that he had close ties with the Unionist triumvirate and enjoyed Unionist networks in previous years, Ottoman participation in the war on the German side prompted the disagreement between the Unionist leaders and the pro-British governor-general. He acted as a semi-autonomous governor and ignored the decisions of the Central Office (*Merkez-i Umûmi*) of the CUP, which demanded from the governors that the citizens of the Allied Powers be interned. Rahmî Bey also objected to the decision of deportations of the Armenians in his realm of authority, since the existence of Orthodox Greeks was considered as the ‘main problem’ in the province.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Aram Hamparzum (alias Kamparsomian), an Ottoman Armenian, who was a fig merchant, appeared as the rival of “Smyrna Fig Packers” Ltd., a British firm. Despite he ceded his business to the British company by contract in 1911, he continued to work figs on his own account in opposition to the company, with the encouragement of Rahmî Bey. When the war broke out in 1914, Hamparzum, aided by H. Giraud, also a Levantine merchant, created fictitious boom on the market through selling their shares in the company. Contrary to traditional historiography of the Ottoman economy, Hamparzum case reveals that non-Muslim Ottoman merchants found themselves more often in direct competition than in co-operation with European merchants thanks to their social and commercial networks. His case shows that non-Muslim merchants continued to dominate the local market in the temporary safe haven of Smyrna, though the Central Office of the CUP employed economic measures to liquidate the non-Muslim bourgeoisie, and the Armenians were sent to the brutal death marches toward the Syrian Desert in the spring of 1915.