

## The Young Turk Revolution of 1908

Several conspiracies took place against Abdülhamid. In 1889 a conspiracy in the military medical college spread to other Istanbul colleges. The conspirators came to call themselves the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP; İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti) and were commonly known as the Young Turks. When the plot was discovered, some of its leaders went abroad to reinforce Ottoman exiles in Paris, Geneva, and Cairo, where they helped prepare the ground for revolution by developing a comprehensive critique of the Hamidian system. The most noteworthy among those were Murad Bey, Ahmed Rıza, and Prince Sabaheddin. As editor of Mizan (“Balance”), published first in Istanbul (1886) and later in Cairo and Geneva, Murad Bey preached liberal ideas combined with a strong Islamic feeling; that may have contributed to his defection and return to Istanbul in 1897. Ahmed Rıza in Paris edited Meşveret (“Consultation”), in which he set out ideas of reform, strongly flavoured by Auguste Comte’s philosophy of positivism. His advocacy of a strong central government within the Ottoman Empire and the exclusion of foreign influence led to a major split within the Young Turk exiles at the 1902 Paris Congress; Ahmed Rıza clashed with Sabaheddin, who, with Armenian support, favoured administrative decentralization and European

assistance to promote reform. Sabaheddin set up the League of Private Initiative and Decentralization.

The émigrés could supply literary sustenance to dissidents, but Abdülhamid could not be overthrown while the army remained loyal. The real origin of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 lay in the discontent within the Third Army Corps in Macedonia, where officers acted independently of the CUP in Paris. It is still unclear if a coordinated conspiracy existed in Macedonia or if a number of separate centres of disaffection, linked haphazardly through individuals, dervish orders, Freemason lodges, and other means, coalesced in July 1908 under the banner of the CUP through the pressure of events. On July 3, 1908, Major Ahmed Niyazi, apparently fearing discovery by an investigatory committee, decamped from Resne with 200 followers, including civilians, leaving behind a demand for the restoration of the constitution. The sultan's attempt to suppress the uprising failed, and rebellion spread rapidly. Abdülhamid was unable to rely on other troops, and on July 24 he announced the restoration of the constitution.

The young officers who had instigated the revolution, like their civilian supporters, were primarily concerned with preserving the Ottoman Empire; they feared that Hamidian policies and European interventions

were endangering its existence. Grievances concerning personal matters such as salary and rank, however, also may have played a part. Though some writers have argued that a new type of officer, of lower social origin than officers from earlier generations, influenced the discontent, there is little evidence to support such a theory. It is clear, however, that the officers had not thought much beyond their demand for the restoration of a constitution that had proved ineffectual in 1877–78. They had no program of action and were content to leave government to the established bureaucrats.

In April 1909, however, an army mutiny in Istanbul (known because of the Julian calendar as the “31st March Incident”) exposed the weakness of the CUP and at the same time gave it a new opportunity. The mutiny resulted from the discontent of ordinary soldiers over their conditions and their neglect by college-trained and politically ambitious officers and from what they regarded as infidel innovations. They were encouraged by a religious organization known as the Mohammedan Union. The weakness of the government allowed the mutiny to spread, and, although order was eventually restored in Istanbul and more quickly elsewhere, a force from Macedonia (the Action Army), led by Mahmud Şevket Paşa, marched on Istanbul and occupied the city.