

Nation and Fatherland in Nineteenth Century Armenian Political Thought

Gerard J. Libaridian

NATIONALISM has been generally regarded as one of the central concepts in the understanding of nineteenth century Armenian political thought. Taking root in the 1850s, it came to embody the concerns and goals of many segments of the Armenian people. Nationalism is also an abstract concept; while universalizing the Armenian experience, it might tend to overshadow the exact processes which give meaning to that term at different times and in different places.

One of those processes among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was the increasing antagonism between the privileged urban population and the dispossessed rural masses. The two segments of the population once shared a self-definition imposed by the Ottoman state, that of a *millet* — a depoliticized community whose members belonged to a single religion or religious denomination. Within this context the term **nation** described, in a sociological sense, the elite of the *millet*, represented by the clergy and the economically successful elements. That leadership, even when selected in democratic fashion, was limited to urban elements which by and large had no fundamental interest in pursuing the cause of the oppressed and repressed in the rural areas.

Thus, as the *millet* mechanism failed to resolve the social and economic crisis of the Armenian provinces and a political consciousness evolved among the rural and small town Armenians, many became aware of the political implication of social and economic stratification. For the rural Armenian **fatherland** came to replace **nation** as the central component of Armenian nationalism. By merging with *hayrenasirutian* (love of fatherland), Armenian nationalism

entered a new, more dynamic phase dominated by issues relevant to craftsmen, peasants, and non-skilled workers. Through patriotism the lower classes asserted the primacy of their own concerns in the determination of national goals beginning in the 1860s. This democratization led to the revolutionary phase of the Armenian liberation movement by the end of the 1880s and the adoption of socialism as the ideology of emancipation.

The nationalism associated with the interests of the dispossessed classes in the provinces acquired additional potency since the laboring Armenian classes were in the Armenian provinces, where most Armenians lived; and what were rural outposts from the perspective of the Ottoman government and the Istanbul Armenian establishment constituted the historic fatherland of the Armenian people. By grounding nationalism in a historically well-defined territory, love of fatherland gave the emancipation movement a political legitimacy denied to those whose love was for the abstracted cultural-religious heritage of Armenians.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

In the context of the Ottoman Armenian people, the difference between *azgasirutiu* (love of nation) and *hayrenasirutiu* reflected not only a chronological progression in political thought but also divergent, if not conflicting, class concerns. This was most clearly articulated in the debates which took place in the capital of the Empire, Istanbul. Here, a large Armenian colony, headed by the Patriarch, was given the impossible task of representing all Armenians.

Any political advantage that proximity to the center of power could have offered Armenians in the capital was neutralized by the *amira* class's control over the patriarchate through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The *amira* class, composed largely of *sarafs* ("money lenders"), high level Armenian bureaucrats, and a few other influential families, dominated the patriarchate.¹ Because of their tight control of the *millet* structure, the position of all Armenians was identified with that of the *saraf*.²

The outlook of the *amira* class reflected the concerns of an elite that was successful in the economic sphere but lacked political security. Their financial and often physical well being was dependent on the

¹H.M. Ghazarian, "Arevmtian Hayastan" [Western Armenia] in *Hay Zhghovrdi Patmutiu* [History of the Armenian People], Ds. B. Aghayan, et al., eds., (Erevan, 1964) V, 20-25; also, by the same author, *Arevmtahayeri sotsial-intesakan katsutiune 1800-1870 tt* [The socio-economic condition of Western Armenians during 1800-1870] (Erevan, 1967), pp. 377-378; Sarkis Atamian, *The Armenian Community* (New York, 1955), pp. 29-30.

²Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), pp. 43-45; Mikayel Varandian, *Haykakan sharzhman nakhatpatmutiu* [Prehistory of the Armenian movement] (Geneva, 1913), II, 73-94.

success of Ottoman officials whose careers or projects they financed. The *amiras* accepted the definition of Armenians as a religious community represented by a state-imposed church hierarchy. This acceptance or bias was construed as a non-political attitude and, consequently, not subject to any judgement by political standards. For those who championed the cause of the *amira* class, this non-politics was articulated in the belief that "there was no solution outside the Armenian [Apostolic] Church."³ The best known publicist of the cause of the *amiras* reasoned:

It has been discussed, and it is undeniable that our people do not have, politically speaking, a national [institution] . . . but we do have an alternative through which our people will survive. The governments ruling over us have been protectors of this [alternative] institution and nucleus of union; to preserve our ethnic identity we do not need a political one. This link is the unity of religion through which all Armenians are related regardless of their place of residence or of the state of which they are subjects.⁴

By defining the Armenian predicament as one of survival of ethnic identity, it became possible to formulate a political agenda that denied the Armenian people a political future. Political leadership, reduced in form and content, was assigned willingly to the clergy not because there was no political institution, but because there was no need for one. Unity through the Church gave the concept of nation a transcendent dimension and relegated other categories such as class and caste into secondary and expandable dimensions.

The sanctioning of the Church as the only legitimate context within which a commonness could be articulated signaled more than a mere appreciation of an old and quite flexible institution that had managed to survive the destruction of Armenian dynasties. It reflected a general view of society within which existing hierarchies in the economic and social spheres supported each other in the task of using the nation as the necessary but otherwise missing social foundation of conservative institutions.

This view was shared even by the Mekhitarists, the Catholic Armenian order headquartered in Venice and Vienna, who were instrumental in bringing about an Armenian cultural renaissance. Erudite monks from the Mekhitarist centers introduced the Armenian reading public to a large number of European concepts. Inspired by romanticism, they attempted, above all, to give Armenian identity historical roots.

³Garnik Guzalian, *Hay kaghakakan mtki zargatsume ev H.H. Dashnaksutiune* [The development of Armenian political thought and the A.R. Federation] (Paris, 1927), p. 42. In Eastern Armenia Sedrak Manandian expressed the same view: "How should we cover it up! We are all fanatic *Iusavorchakans* [members of the Apostolic Church]; we consider Armenianism and the creed of the Lusavorich as one, since that is our national peculiarity;" quoted in Guzalian, p. 87. See also Mikayel Varandian, *Haykakan sharzhman nakhatpatmutiu* (Geneva, 1912), I, 287-291.

⁴H. Chamurjian-Teroyents in *Erevak* [Istanbul, 1861], no. 109.

Yet the Mekhitarist view of Armenian culture and history had a wholesomeness, a harmony which Armenian society lacked. The discrepancy was particularly evident among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire whence most Mekhitarists were recruited and where most of the Congregations' efforts concentrated. The Mekhitarists were most conscious of the cultural backwardness of Armenians and strove to educate and enlighten them. But they were careful not to transform cultural views into political trends. The Europeanization of the Armenian self-image was not intended to be a prelude to the adoption of the Western pattern of a radical-conservative antagonism in the political spectrum. There was to be an evolution in Armenian society, but not necessarily a dialectical one.

The Mekhitarists promoted a history built around heroes and villains, a history which celebrated isolated individuals and events as the embodiment of a glorious yet tragic past. In 1861 the Mekhitarists of Vienna reissued in booklet form an article first published in 1849 when Europe was in turmoil and when a few Armenian young men, who studied in Europe at that time knew that turmoil meant revolution.⁵ The major portion of the booklet eulogizes some of the great figures from both Western and Armenian ancient histories. After ascribing the greatness of past heroes to classic patriotism, the author warns against the "abuses of patriotism" then rampant in European capitals. The booklet ends with a special plea to Armenians not to sympathize with these abuses or their perpetrators. To insure against such a possibility, the author defines what patriotism should mean for Armenians of different classes. For those who have wealth and power, "true patriotism" involves helping the less fortunate, respecting the law by not being whimsical, donating funds for the construction of public institutions, and not forgetting that wealth does not release one from the duties and obligations of "good citizenship." Those without money or power, the author of the article asserts,

must respect the above mentioned [rich] Armenians and honor them as interpreters and executors of the law, as the lieutenants of God. [The lower classes] must have faith in them and must not nurture doubts without good reason. If they note any shortcomings in the upper class, they should not consider them unjust and evil or demean their names in the presence of others. Rather, to the best of their ability, they should cover up for the others' shortcomings and should praise them publicly. Even if they cannot honor the person, they should honor their rank and position, so that the respect for the rule of law is not diminished and law and order are not eroded. Those with average or no means should not be jealous of the rich and should not attempt to imitate the rich in

⁵H., *Khosk vash hayrenasirutian* (Vienna, 1862).

everything the rich do. They should also not expect that the rich give all of their wealth to other causes.⁶

Cultural awakening, then, should not occur at the expense of the preservation of social harmony and national subservience for the benefit of the upper classes and the Ottoman state. Yet the author glorified Armenian historical or mythical figures like Hayk, Aram, Tigran, and Vardan who distinguished themselves by rejecting foreign rule and subjugation to the will of others. The author most likely believed that identification with the past was a sufficient source of pride to obviate the need for emulation. History was introduced to neutralize political aspirations rather than inspire them. In this manner, historical figures were abstracted from their historical reality and then offered to Armenian readers as sources of pride. Acts of heroism, self-sacrifice, and courage were introduced as manifestations of spiritual values rather than tactical means to resolve a political crisis.

MIDDLE CLASS LIBERALISM

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was brought within the sphere of the European-dominated world market system. Trade between the Ottoman Empire and the West increased tremendously, although the import of manufactured goods exceeded by far the exports from traditional industries such as dried fruits and rugs. Armenians, along with other largely non-Muslim groups, made up the merchant class that carried out this trade.⁷ Gradually, in addition to the comprador bourgeoisie, the new middle class included professionals such as doctors and lawyer; literati such as writers, teachers, and editors; and small manufacturers. These groups had little involvement with tax-farming, the economic basis of the *sarafs*.

This new middle class began a process of secularization and democratization of Armenian institutions which performed the classical function of liberalization. Yet this middle class lacked the social legitimacy and integration within dominant institutions that the *amiras* had enjoyed. The economic interests of this class placed them outside the political structure as well as in opposition to it. Political power, which could have guaranteed if not promoted class interests, was not to be found in the Ottoman Empire. Aside from their timid attempts under the *Tanzimat* ("reforms"), the middle class made no effort to create a political power base. The economic activity

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 23-24. In other publications the Mekhitarists expressly criticized Balkan and Italian national movements as well, generally speaking, democratic tendencies in political movements. See also Ghazarian, "Arevmtahay hasarakakan hosanknere" [Western Armenian social currents] in *Hay zhoghovrdi patmutiun*, V, 428.

⁷A.J. Sussnitzki, "Ethnic Division of Labor" in Charles Issawi, ed., *The Economic History of the Middle East, 1800-1914* (1967), pp. 114-125; Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (London, New York, Melbourne, 1977), II, 242, 244.

of the middle class did not even have any relationship with the Ottoman elite. Thus, this new middle class was deeply alienated from the established Ottoman structure. To make up for its alienation, the middle class developed greater reliance on the West. Merchants sought their individual economic security through the acquisition of citizenship of Western countries. They also sought to establish social legitimacy by sponsoring a cultural renaissance. Inspiration for such a renaissance came from Europe and demonstrated their inclination to act as cultural mediators.⁸

The cultural-ideological relationship between the European and Armenian societies, while based upon unequal economic and political standings, was nonetheless dynamic because of the challenge the West presented to Armenians as a historical entity. The Armenian awakening was predicated by the answers to some basic questions raised by that challenge: Why did such a difference emerge between Asian and European societies? What is the substance of that difference? These seemingly rhetorical questions were asked to legitimize the overriding goals of "progress" and "enlightenment," to be achieved through education, science, learning, industry, and trade. The corollary questions were: How can Armenians close the gap between the two societies? In what political framework can they hope to do so?

The concept of nation was instrumental from the beginning in defining the Western challenge and Armenian responses to it. Certainly, in the 1860s the concept had evolved into more than a gathering of coreligionists. It included civilizational achievements of the past, albeit still devoid of a political context. The past was there to inspire and remind Armenians that they were once able to deal with Europeans as equals, and therefore they could expect the same in the future. The existence of a glorious past gave Armenians the right to recover their dignity. In fact, as early as in 1846 the Istanbul newspaper *Hayastan* clearly indicated this direction of thought:

Wake up, Armenian nation, from your death-inviting slumber of ignorance; remember your past glory, mourn your present state of wretchedness and heed the example of other enlightened nations: take care of your schools, cultivate the Armenian language, learn other useful languages and liberal sciences [professions] . . . only then can you reach the goal of happiness.⁹

Liberalism introduced a dynamic concept of nation as opposed to the conservative religious definition. Yet enlightenment, the ultimate in

⁸See, for example, James Etmekjian, *The French Influence on the Western Armenian Renaissance, 1843-1915* (New York, 1964); Nalbandian, pp. 32-34.

⁹*Hayastan* (Istanbul), July 27, 2846. See also V. Chukasian, "Arevmtahay lusavorichnere ev *Hayastan* tert'e" [The Western Armenian enlighteners and the Newspaper *Hayastan*], *Banber Erevani hamalsarani*, 2(1969):214-224. The concept of national development as a prerequisite for progress is also discussed by Guzalian, p. 59.

individual and social happiness, was perceived to be attainable within the status quo because it was essentially a matter of culture and civilization. One of the chief architects of the national awakening, Ser-vichen, placed the process of change strictly within the confines of the *millet* structure. He stated in his 1863 opening address to the newly elected National Assembly:

Our duty is not only to protect our religion bequeathed to us by our ancestors but also to use all means for the single purpose of developing the national spirit: a spirit which is the lone factor in enlivening the nation and which we will try to reconcile first with the spirit and the course of our times and second with national obligations toward our benevolent government by rejecting foreign intervention.¹⁰

Nahapet Rusinian (poet, publicist and physician) even considered banning the word "political" from the Armenian language to ensure the proper interpretation of national goals.¹¹ The best nation, argued a writer following the Zeytun rebellion, is one which respects the authority of the state and the best defense of people's liberties is obedience to the laws of the land.¹² The cultural definition of a national awakening was shared by most liberals and enthusiasts of education. For instance, the students of the Nupar-Shahnazarian school in Istanbul espoused literature, the most expressive mode of culture, as the ultimate solution: What Armenia needed was "not heroes, but geniuses; it does not need soldiers of arms but soldiers of Light. . . . We will produce Madame de Staels and Lamartines."¹³

In the context of this national awakening, education and literacy became overriding concerns. The National Constitution insisted on free education for all Armenian youth.¹⁴ Societies were also established to educate *pantukhts* (migrant workers) in Istanbul. They, in turn, were expected to return to their villages and spread literacy there. Literacy was the solution to poverty. The Baregortsakan (Benevolent) Society of Istanbul took the more practical step of setting up a model farm in Cilicia through which they educated local farmers in scientific agriculture.

Most Istanbul Armenians were concerned though with the goal of bringing education, progress, and enlightenment to the capital. The liberal creed of Armenians there was overwhelmingly an urban one. During a debate on the unequal distribution of deputies in the Armenian Assembly, the respected liberal *Masis*, the newspaper founded

¹⁰Varandian, II, 6.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 66.

¹²Dj. Aramian, *Zeytuntsik ev lusavorchakan hayk* [The People of Zeytun and Apostolic Armenians] (Istanbul, 1867).

¹³Varandian, II, 261.

¹⁴Avedis Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 40-41.

and edited by the French educated Karapet Utujian, defended the preeminence of Istanbul:

Istanbul must have priority since, firstly, it is the capital of the state; secondly, it is the center of the national [Armenian] administration. The Patriarch is there, the progressive and educated elements of the nation are there. In one word, the great strength of the nation is there.¹⁵

In this view, urban dwellers were the only subjects who needed to be educated in order to give substance to the idea of enlightenment. The nation, as understood by Istanbul Armenians, could have prospered in and by itself in the capital. The strength of the nation, based upon the unity of goals such as progress and enlightenment, would be secured when each class accepted its own function in society. According to *Masis*, the upper class was responsible for the care of the poor; the middle class was to submit to and cooperate with the upper class; and the lower class was to accept thankfully what was given to them by the other classes.¹⁶ Unity, the ultimate precondition for happiness, would be achieved when moral and financial virtues were spread.¹⁷

THE "HAYASTANTSIS"

For a long while the provincial Armenians shared the urban social vision based on communal harmony. Garegin Srvantstians, a clergyman who devoted his whole career to the welfare of the rural Armenian population, was hopeful for the future. He believed the common good could be achieved by people caring for each other: the rich helping the poor, the healthy caring for the sick, the older assisting the younger, and the fortunate looking after the unfortunate. He founded his vision on a particularized version of "patriotism," however. In 1861 he declared patriotism "the real root of all good," and defined the "good" to be the welfare of the community. He thus pointed out common misconceptions that should be corrected:

I feel more sorry for those who, although educated, hold the idiotic opinion that one's fatherland is where he was born. . . . They say "Here is our fatherland, where we acquired wealth, where we have properties and inheritances. I must work for this place, I must labor for the education of my children and progress of the city. We owe it to ourselves that our children grow happy. Thank God we have our Churches and masses, beautiful sceneries, spots of entertainment, and the means to have a good time. And we feel secure. This is our fatherland, the comfort which we seek."¹⁸

The criticism of this diasporan thinking and its culture also led to a

¹⁵*Masis*, July 5, 1861.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, December 31, 1859.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Garegin Srvantstians, "Hayrenasirutium ev hayrenik" [Patriotism and fatherland] in *Ardsvi Vaspurakan*, 3(1861):92.

further distinction between *hayrenasirutium* and *azgasirutium*. While the first advanced the people as the dominant and dynamic force, the latter focused on the concept of nation as an abstract and timeless entity. Quite early in his career Srvantstians pointed out that culture, however enlightened, cannot supplant the love of the fatherland, i.e., a sense of history and of the individuals that assure its continuity. Thus, "true patriotism" required a change in focus:

Our fatherland is where our history, our heroes and saints are. It is the people there that make our fatherland real with their sufferings. It is they who need and are worthy of assistance. Had it not been for the *hayastantsi* [inhabitant of Armenia], Armenia would have turned by now to a thing of the imagination.¹⁹

Mkrtich Khrimian was instrumental in developing a critical look at urban perceptions and values. Khrimian was a self-taught clergyman born in Van who identified himself with the interests of the provincial Armenians. He began as a teacher and ended his career as Catholicos of All Armenians. As a young teacher he encouraged his students to look at the past, which for him began with the Bible, to legitimize change. The Bible allowed him to be critical of all existing political authority within an accepted framework. Through his student, Srvantstians, he asserted: "God did not create the enlightened soul so that it is kept in the dark, and he did not condemn any nation to slavery. Let us become like Adam [in the Bible]."²⁰ Another of Khrimian's students proclaimed: "Only national history gives life to dead souls."²¹ The student presented a long list of Armenian heroes from Hayk to Tigran; he expected this knowledge to have a liberating effect on all Armenians. Khrimian himself used history effectively to recreate the dilemma of the nation. In an imaginary conversation between a "glory-seeker" and a "patriot," Khrimian presented the quintessential Armenian political issue.

Glory-seeker: Was it not the patriotic Vardan who got into something above his head and caused the death of thousands of young men?

The Patriot: For the welfare of my people I am willing to sacrifice everything. If Armenia had not been covered with the blood of young men, the Armenian people would not have blossomed now.²²

By elevating the welfare of the people above all other considerations, Khrimian began a shift in Armenian political thought — from an abstract nationalism to a concrete populism, although he was not to be the one to articulate the populist program.

Much of the implied advice in these discussions was obviously

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

²⁰*Ardsvi Vaspurakan*, 1(1862).

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 10(1862):289-308.

directed at the Armenian leadership in Istanbul; they were also not heeded. Gradually it became clear that conflicting interests rather than harmony dominated the Armenian community. By the sixties, the contrast between urban and rural life became a major theme in Armenian journalism. At the height of the debate on the ratification of the National Constitution, Khrimian's Van-based monthly journal published an imaginary dialogue between a city dweller and a peasant. While the article highlighted the importance each group had for the economy and general welfare of society, the primary purpose of the dialogue was to present the case for an equitable — if not proportional — share of seats for provincial Armenians in the National Assembly. To the scorn shown by the urban dweller, the peasant responded, "your laws are like traps in which the poor and the weak peasants are caught. You suck our bloods like spiders through bribery, restrictive measures, prohibitions, and other forms of injustice."²³ In his dialogue, the city was the home of money-seeking hypocrites who professed but did not live by the liberal creed, of a power-hungry clergy; of journalists who were more impressed by the parliamentary rhetoric of Gladstone than the utter poverty and wretchedness of most Armenians surrounding them; and of middle class parvenus who spoke loudly of philanthropy but spent most of their money on dresses — believing, meanwhile, that they had saved the nation by having organized dances.²⁴

During the debate on the National Constitution Bishop Khrimian had shared the view that "Constantinople must be the focus of Armenian political power since it is the seat of the Sultan." Nonetheless Khrimian had invited Istanbul Armenians to make Western Armenia the focus of their attention.²⁵ In 1862 Srvantstians was wondering whether any of Khrimian's messages had any value for the *millet*. In an article in which he discussed the government's torture practices, Srvantstians asked:

Does the government have the right to torture? Of course not. But who is objecting, who is knocking at the government's door? Where are the intermediaries, where are the modern leaders, the leaders of the nation? Thank God we have them, but they are being cautious.²⁶

Khrimian made *pantukhts* (migrant workers) and the provincial masses the focus of his attention. His efforts merely earned him the label "*hayastantsi vardabet*" or "the priest from Armenia." *Hayastan*

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 289-308.

²⁴Much of satirist Hakob Paronian's writings depict not only the superficiality of the claims of westernization of an essentially "oriental" community in Istanbul, but also the use of that claim to ignore the appeals of Armenians in the provinces.

²⁵*Ardsvi Vaspurakan*, 1(1857):1-3.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 3(1862-63):79.

[Armenia] was thus reduced to a locale like so many others.²⁷ While the label intimated a provincialism unbecoming urban intellectuals and bourgeoisie, the reduction of Armenia to a mere geographic entity enabled "the enlightened" to regard Istanbul as the proper location for the rebirth of the nation. For Mateos Mamurian, an editor and novelist from Ismir, who once chaired the National Executive Committee, nothing should have been expected from the *millet* leadership anyway, since its leaders were too busy fighting each other.²⁸

Nonetheless, for the majority of Armenians in major urban centers the capital city continued to represent "the strength of the nation" while historical Armenia was an alien place. The literati of Istanbul devoted much time to discussing administrative details, resolving conflicts related to churches, charities, and schools. They called their efforts the *azgayin* or national business.

The program for progress and enlightenment proposed by the literati and the middle class of the capital acquired its legitimacy from contact with European cities and cultures as well as from the conviction that such a program had universal validity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the liberals applied their agenda for attaining enlightenment and progress to the provinces without consideration of the issues raised by the rural Armenians. The inherent values of the ideology and Istanbul Armenians' need for legitimacy became important factors in the belief of the urban liberals that their program provided a fundamental solution to the ills plaguing the rural population.

This belief was further encouraged by the spirit of the *Tanzimat* which led many to believe the Porte was ready to support essential reforms. In fact, the Armenian National Assembly in Istanbul, in a daring and imaginative act, elected the *Hayastantsi* Khrimian as Patriarch. Khrimian began his brief tenure in Istanbul by encouraging provincial Armenians to submit reports on their social and economic problems to the Assembly. They followed his advice. Activist teachers and clergymen in the provinces helped communes articulate reports which poured into Istanbul. Based on these reports, a final study indicated that, in addition to not having benefited in any way from the *Tanzimat*, provincial Armenians were heading toward economic ruin and suffering increasing social deprivation and dislocation — a process

²⁷Khrimian Hayrik complained that the Armenians of Istanbul knew more about Europe than about Armenia; see Sarukhan, *Haykakan khentim ev azgayin sahnadrutuine* [The Armenian Question and the National Constitution] (Tiflis, 1912), p. 61. An 1850 geography textbook has scant reference to elements of Armenia's geography in a general chapter on Asia; Agheksander Vardapet Baljian, *Ashkharhagruitiun ev hrahangs* (Vienna, 1850), pp. 123-134.

²⁸Rouben Berberian, "Hay masonnere ev 'ser' otiake Polso mech" [Armenian masons and the "Love" Lodge in Istanbul], *Haitenik Monthly* 5(1937):80-81. The novelist Raffi thought the National Constitution was a weapon in the hands of the Ottoman government to distract Armenians from their real problems; see his *Erkeri zhoghovadsu* (Erevan, 1958), IX, 263.

leading to the disintegration of Armenian collective life in the historic homeland as well as to total dehumanization. The report also made recommendations — to end the obvious inequalities in taxation, justice, and religious intolerance — which, if enacted upon by the Porte, would alleviate the desperate situation. Furthermore, rather than denying the authority of the central government, the report asked the Porte to strengthen its position with regard to provincial governments to guarantee that local officials follow directives sent to them from a capital now interested in reforms.²⁹

The Assembly was divided on the question of actually submitting the report to the Ottoman government. Some thought it would invite the Porte to question the loyalty of Armenian leaders, hence affect their privileged position in the capital. At the end, a milder version of the report was presented. Ultimately, it was discarded by the government and conveniently forgotten by the Assembly.³⁰

Khrimian also sought, without success, a revision of the National Constitution in order to give provincial Armenians a larger share of representatives in the Assembly. The Constitution had ensured an absolute majority control by the Armenians of Istanbul. The Patriarch realized that without proportional representation the cause of the provinces would be lost. He realized that the Istanbul bourgeoisie acted only in the interest of its own security and perception of Ottoman institutions. Moreover, he fought for the creation of a second *kaghakakan* ("civil" or "political") council which would deal specifically with provincial issues. The existing council provided by the Constitution was composed of Istanbul Armenians who interpreted "political" to mean largely non-religious matters, such as schools and orphanages.

Khrimian resigned in 1873. His support of provincial Armenians made him an enemy of many influential Armenians in Istanbul. His enemies accused him of arbitrary rule, hence of opposing the Constitution.³¹ They also charged that Khrimian spent too much money on *pantukhts*, neglected the prestige of the Church, diminished the power of Istanbul in favor of the provinces, and supported the cause of the poor and oppressed at the expense of others. His critics disapproved of his closing the prison of the Patriarchate where opponents could be

²⁹Varandian, II, 50-63. For a detailed presentation of this report, see Lilian Etmekjian, "The Armenian National Assembly of Turkey and Reform," *Armenian Review*, 1(1976):38-40.

³⁰L. Etmekjian, pp. 42-43.

³¹The charges of anti-constitutional behavior were levelled against Khrimian when he based some of his actions on the "spirit rather than the letter of the Constitution." The patriarch's resignation speech included the response to the charge: "The pages of the Constitution are even gentler than the petals of a rose; if you handle them rudely, they will fall apart. . . . I want to embrace the Constitution, but I do not want to press it so hard as to strangle it."

jailed by the order of the Patriarch or the Assembly. They were dismayed at his refusal to use the state police to secure Armenian compliance to *millet* decisions. Finally, he spoke so much of the conditions and problems of the provinces, remarked an opponent, that he "endangered the nation."³²

Khrimian's brief term became a test of Armenian liberalism among the middle class. The limitations of that liberalism were clearly exposed by its timid and reluctant approach to the question of reform. By acquiring the privilege of playing democracy in the capital, the Armenian intelligentsia and middle class assumed responsibility for absorbing the shocks of social discontent in the poverty-ridden villages of Western Armenia.

Thus the failure to achieve concrete reforms remained the more fundamental cause for Khrimian's resignation. The expectations that the *millet* system, however democratically designed, could be used to mediate a change in the structure of the Ottoman state was a subversion of the purpose for which the *millet* system had originally been established. The temporary enthusiasm of the Assembly in pursuing the cause Khrimian advocated had stretched to the limit whatever ambiguity one could read into the role of the *millet*. The 1863 Constitution of the Armenian *millet* spoke eloquently of the rights and responsibilities between the Armenian collective and Armenian individuals; but it disregarded the more essential relationship between the Armenian individual and the Ottoman state while asserting that "in particular circumstances [the Patriarch] is the medium of the execution of the orders of the Ottoman Government" with regard to the *millet*. The reverse — the right of the Patriarch or the Assembly to represent the interests, and especially the complaints, of Armenians as a collective — was not inherent in the document; it depended on the goodwill or political mood of the Porte.

A BOURGEOIS NATION

The urban enlightened continued the quest to reconcile its ideology of progress with the difficulties inherent in the situation. They believed a solution was on hand when Western powers temporarily assumed the sponsorship of reform in the Ottoman Empire through the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. Confident that the Ottoman state could be coerced into implementing reforms in the Armenian provinces, the usually timid liberal Armenian community poised to lead the reforms; after all, no other segment of the people was better equipped to apply European concepts among Armenians.

While a number of writers expressed reservations with regard to the usefulness of Article 61 of that treaty prescribing the reforms in the

³²Hayk Ajemian, *Hayots Hayrik* [Tiflis, 1929], p. 452.

Armenian provinces, others wanted to see in it the ultimate opportunity for the realization of the liberal political program. The most important and effective spokesmen for that position were Patriarch Nerses Varjapetian and Bishop Maghakia Ormanian. Varjapetian had a vested interest in presenting the result of the Congress of Berlin (and at San Stefano before that) as a success: after all, he was responsible for the Armenian diplomatic initiatives. Ormanian was a highly educated, concerned, and ambitious clergyman. Soon after the Treaty was signed, the two put forth a vision which constituted a close approximation to a bourgeois program for nation-building. In lectures and booklets they argued that the international concern for Armenia assured a rush toward the exploitation of its natural resources. Varjapetian was convinced that British capital would soon invade Western Armenia. The immediate task of the nation was to ensure that Armenian capital from coastal cities and Europe gained ownership and control of resources in Armenia and, by bringing progress and enlightenment, assure a better life for all. The nation was invited to send to Armenia its best industrialists and doctors, teachers and preachers, financiers and bankers. Capital and culture, until then viewed as Western commodities, were to be armenianized to achieve what the diplomacy of begging had started.³³

Ormanian emphasized the need for social harmony if the program is to succeed. Unity became the panacea for the problems of an inherently impotent institutional structure.³⁴ Ormanian argued that the Church was best equipped to bring about that unity.³⁵ He further argued that Armenianism should begin to break away from an abstract-intellectual context, and the promised reforms provided that opportunity. "If a person is inspired by the question of reforms," he stated in a lecture, "he would not consider it below him to labor [in Armenia]; he would not consider it worthless to do commerce there or help the arts [crafts] flourish, or be a landlord and landowner there."³⁶ Ormanian developed his ideas further in a lecture in 1880 on the responsibilities of the youth. He urged provincial Armenian youth to learn reading and other technical skills. But it was important that Armenians do the teaching for, if the Europeans did it, they alone would benefit from it. Ormanian exhorted, "Those who know how to establish their interests in that land . . . the land will know how to

³³Berberian, pp. 158-160.

³⁴The lecture was printed in booklet form under the title *Miutun hayutian* [Unity of Armenians] (Istanbul, 1879). The lecture was delivered in Scutari, for the *Krtasirats* Miutun, or Education Society.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 24-38.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 39-42.

reward its benefactor. Blessed are those who will be the first to undertake that task, since not only will they have given content to patriotism and be praised for it, but also because they will reap the profits of their endeavors and labors."³⁷

Except for a few highly motivated teachers, history does not record an influx of capital or of men to the provinces, neither Armenian or British — not until the revolutionaries. The waning of Western concern and increase in Ottoman oppression produced only a loss of interest in the provinces among the liberals. The capital community finally made its peace with the Porte when the Patriarchate and the Assembly agreed not to meddle in affairs which were outside its sanctioned jurisdiction. Thus, the *millet* leadership could present *takrirs* ("petitions") regarding churches and monasteries, but not political matters.³⁸ The Assembly expressed its intention to remain within its prescribed limits by requesting that Ottoman censors cease the publication of the Istanbul-based newspaper *Meghu*. The editors of this maverick newspaper had dared to criticize the Assembly for its inaction regarding the status of Armenians in the provinces.³⁹

THE POLITICIZATION OF CULTURE

The ethnic identity of Armenians in the provinces was rooted in the historic land on which they lived. The residents of Van did not need to labor at cultural edifices or intellectual definitions to assert a link between themselves and history. Dead heroes and living legends served to integrate the physical environment of mountains, valleys, and rivers into the cultural environment that included ancient fortresses and medieval monasteries. The peasants' link to the land of Armenia was neither culturally inspired nor politically negotiable. Rather, it represented the most basic relationship between man and nature. The land was their source of livelihood, just as it had been for their ancestors throughout the centuries. This identity was not, therefore, in and by itself an acceptance or rejection of Ottoman rule, just as Armenians' attachment to the land was neither a threat to nor a confirmation of Ottoman territorial integrity.

³⁷The lecture was delivered in Istanbul on February 24 and published the same year as *Hay eritasardutian* [To the Armenian Youth]; p. 39.

³⁸Rafik Hovannisian, *Arevmtahay azgayin-aztagrakan sharzhumnere ev Karini "Pashtpan Hayreniats" kazmakeputiune* [Western Armenian Liberation Movements and the "Defenders of the Fatherland" organization of Karin (Erzerum)] (Erivan, 1965), p. 205. The instruction was given in 1880. Reporting that the Porte would no longer accept *takrirs* on provincial Armenians, Hakob Paronian wrote: I suggest that a letter be forwarded to Kurds to inform them that henceforth they should spare our property, our lives, and our honor and violate only our religion; see Paronian's *Ambohgdjakan gordser* (1962-1977), IV, 447-448.

³⁹Berberian, p. 125.

The politics of rural people revolved around survival, which hinged on the basics of land, water, harvest, and taxation. The goal of the peasantry was to create an environment where the preservation of traditional norms was possible as well as desirable for each successive generation and where change was manageable. All else was judged within this context. Irrelevant national or international politics were reduced to legend. Legends included words uttered by kings and foreign potentates, words which were adjusted instantly into local terminology. These legends were measured against accepted local wisdom, which was ready to analyze and amplify the significance of events that had relevance to their own affairs. Whether there to oppress or to assist, the outsider had to adjust to the world of the peasant and, to some extent, become a part of it. Culture had meaning only if understood in the widest social sense. As such, it could not be removed or alienated from politics through bureaucratic or legal definitions.

The religious-ethnic definition of the Armenian, imposed by the Ottoman system and glorified in the capital, had not really pervaded the depths of consciousness of Armenians in the provinces. To be sure, the *millet* was still the structure through which civil matters were formally regulated; Armenians continued to adjust to and explain in this context the routine policies and daily practices of the ruling Ottomans. But in the provinces, especially in those areas with the least amount of formal cultural development, political-economic oppression meant cultural oppression. The corollary was also true. Cultural enlightenment was understood as political change; cultural pride was not dissociated from political self-respect. The middle class and clergy, on the other hand, continued to believe that culture, economy, and politics were distinct activities as alien from each other as their professions often were from the course of Ottoman policies and developments. The provincial Armenian, totally dependent on domestic laws, practices, and conditions, could not afford such delusions. The patriotism of the Armenian peasant and town dweller (who often lived not so distant from rural life), consisted of a simple attachment to a land invested with historical and spiritual significance. Patriotism was a natural part of their identity. The new, culture-laden *azgasirutiun* of Istanbul had been a distortion of the patriotism, *hayrenasirutiun*, of the provinces.⁴⁰

This patriotism was injured before and after the Russo-Turkish War

⁴⁰This explains, at least in part, the unusually enthusiastic reception in the provinces accorded the adoption of a National Constitution in 1863. The Polsetsis knew what they were getting; the provincials did not make the necessary distinctions between *millet* and state to avoid disappointment. Rafik Hovannisian, p. 220; Ajemian, p. 556; Artak Darbinian, *Hay azatagrakan sharzhman orenen* [From the days of the movement for Armenian liberation] (Paris, 1947), p. 118.

of 1878. Fires of suspicious origin destroyed the Armenian market sectors in a number of cities, including that of Van in 1876. Confiscation of Armenian land by Turks and Kurds became a common occurrence in the Diarbekir and Van provinces. But it was the war itself that most devastated the economy and fueled the patriotism of provincial Armenians. Ottoman armies passed through Armenian provinces as if the latter were being conquered anew. The armies destroyed crops, treated civilians cruelly, and made extraordinarily harsh demands for provisions which turned a requisitions policy into officially organized looting. Western Armenians were filled less with the celebrated sympathies toward the Russian armies than with outrage against the Turkish soldiers. It was as if the Ottoman state sought to punish the Christian Armenians for the sins of Balkan peoples.

It was to these devastated people that a few urban liberals such as Mkrtich Portukalian and Martiros Sareyan came to speak of enlightenment, progress, and national pride following the Treaty of Berlin. Their words could be absorbed by the rural population only in the context of its own, yet unarticulated, political agenda.

Consequently, as soon as Western pressure decreased, the Porte adopted a policy of systematic repression under the leadership of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II. Sultan Abdul-Hamid II lacked the commitment to social and political reforms that some of his predecessors had. He perceived his role primarily as the embattled ruler of a once-powerful empire now threatened by foreign encroachments. The millions of subjects of different religious and ethnic backgrounds whose welfare depended on his policies were significant only in relation to the higher and narrower goal of the survival of his state and the preservation of the *status quo*. He was open to modernization in those areas which strengthened the army and the power of the state. Thus the government was extremely sensitive to any signs which might have signaled the rise of a political consciousness among Armenians. It therefore established strict censorship on all publications and scrutinized the activities and words of any element that might have given independent articulation to Armenian discontent.

Ultimately, the efforts of the government backfired. Its attempts to prevent the politicization of culture through the suppression of culture radicalized discontent. Names of historical figures such as former kings, once devoid of any emotional charge, acquired political significance when uttered against the laws of censorship. Ordinary people were transformed into heroes and martyrs for having used words such as *azatutiun* (freedom). For the new heroes, the act of imprisonment, exile, or torture by a hated government became more ingratiating than the original infraction of the law.

Eventually, these incidents acquired a historical significance. But in the eighties they were still isolated cases which no one interpreted as the beginning of a revolution. Nonetheless, at that time it was clear that the situation in the Armenian provinces was rapidly deteriorating and the community was threatened on many fronts. In a long and bitter piece of correspondence to Mateos Mamurian in November 1883, Bishop Garegin Srvtantsians, who once dissuaded his compatriots from converting to Russian orthodoxy to secure protection, noted:

Although it is the compatriots in Akn who do not let me leave, the state of national affairs in Istanbul and confused situation on the roads also are considerations in my decision to stay here a while longer. Let conferences, plenipotentiaries, 66ers [sic, reference to those supporting Article 16] and 61ers give and take, let writers and editors beat their drums without coming to their senses, without recognizing the ones who are actually pulling the strings and watching them fight, and without realizing who is in fact benefiting from the noise we are making. We see the paths of the foreigners and follow them, although our purpose is to reach our fatherland. The path of the foreigner leads to the city of the foreigner; yet we get there, we get tied down there, and then we tell our nation that that is the path to the fatherland. Even more amazing are those who knew the foreigner well and used to point out its traps to the nation, warning us to run away; those same [individuals] are sitting today in the halls of congress [of the foreigner] as agents from within and from without. There is no need to write their names; the ones who were close to you, you know well; the ones at a distance you called them glory-seekers. How many have we seen of the devoted who turned devotees of profit and glory; self-denying and patriotic ones who, in the name of the Armenian Question, sought personal benefit and glory; those who secured their cuts from the funds collected for the starving only declare themselves benevolent; those who opened schools for the benefit of their relatives and, having robbed the nation through fundraising, closed down the schools, leaving to the nation only the blame for their own acts and the deficit of their spending. They planted a Catholicos in Sis and now are forcing the fruits of that action down the throat of the nation; they assign the glory of Zion to the Patriarch, but his debt to the nation; the prelates they have assigned to the largest sees, the nuncios and directives they forwarded have resulted in parishes and districts that remain unattended and in people subject to oppression; a number of Armenians are rotting in prison, others are trampled upon by bandits; these [Armenians] are denied protection since speaking on their behalf and supplication are being left unanswered by the *barekhniam* ["the one who takes good care" — an adjective used for the Sultan]. Fallen materially and exhausted spiritually, times such as this I do not believe Armenians have had to endure. The wheel of 61 turns in many directions and some of the children are running behind it, falling in ditch after ditch. The wheel is turning North. Finally the Catholicos too has decided to act [but] the commotion on that subject is meaningless. The murderous and roaming tribes from Russia are filling the Armenian province on this side; Armenians, cut off from the land and from the hope of land, are forced out . . .⁴¹

⁴¹Srvtantsians to Mamurian, November 1, 1883; in *Divan hayots patmutian*, G. Aghanian, ed., [Tiflis, 1915], XIII, 451-454.

Beyond the hopelessness it conveys, the letter suggests a relationship between corruption in community institutions and inadequacy at the diplomatic level. Most importantly, it constitutes a summary of the criticism directed toward the liberal program of the Armenian middle class from the perspective of provincial Armenians and a few urban radicals.

By 1881 the right of Istanbul to lead Armenians was challenged radically. Arsen Tokhmakhian, a student who toured the provinces and published his thoughts, reasoned:

The Western intelligentsia is in Istanbul. They are fine people, writers and rhetoricians. But they are living in an imaginary world. They are solely concerned with the Patriarchate and the National Assembly. They declare each other great men and geniuses. But what have they done to deserve those adjectives?⁴²

Khrimian and the provincial intelligentsia of the sixties and seventies were unable to shed their original belief in the goodwill and benevolence inspired by an unadulterated Christianity. Others were more willing to project the existing conflicts and divisiveness into the past and learn new lessons. Tokhmakhian argued that a cohesive, undifferentiated, and idealized history that failed to relate the desperate present to the distant and glorified past was an obstacle to a clear vision of the future:

Ancient Armenians have never lived, never ruled as one nation, as children of one fatherland. They were divided into many tribes which eroded each others' strength in incessant struggles. . . . The turning point at which one can speak of an all-national idea came when the *nakharar* and dynastic houses were eradicated from within, leaving behind the sorry consequences which are still with us . . .⁴³

Tokhmakhian too wanted to glorify Armenians, but he had a different group in mind:

What has kept our nation going is the working class, not religion. It is the nation that has kept religion, and suffered because of it; while the Church was unable to keep the old colonies, the peasant was able to preserve the nation. . . . I beg you to turn your attention to and study all aspects of the life of the peasants who constitute the root of nationhood; [I beg you] to know him and the world in which he lives, which is called fatherland.⁴⁴

It was obvious that by the early 1880s the Armenian *millet*, the Ottoman state, and Western powers had failed to fulfill their promise of reform for the majority of Armenians living on their historic lands.

⁴²Arsen Tokhmakhian, *Hayreniki pahandjnere ev hay gughatsin* [The needs of the fatherland and the Armenian peasant] (Tiflis, 1881), p. 7.

⁴³Arsen Tokhmakhian, *Masis lerneri haravayin storotner* [The southern slopes of the Masis mountains] (Tiflis, 1882), Book 1, pp. 21-23.

⁴⁴Tokhmakhian, *Hayreniki pahandjnere* . . . pp. 60-61.

While the search for alternative strategies began earnestly with the founding of the newspaper *Armenia* in Marseilles by Mkrtich Portukalian, a shift in political terminology had already taken place. Patriotism had come to signify a whole range of new problems. The role of nationalism itself, and therefore its historical value, had changed toward a radical direction. ■