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The Changing Armenian Self-Image in the Ottoman Empire: *Rayahs* and Revolutionaries

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To speak of the self-image of the Armenian under Ottoman rule during the last century of that empire is to consider two basic ingredients of modern Armenian history. First, Armenians did not have a uniform view of themselves. The content and characteristics of being Armenian varied according to class, geographic location, and level of education. Second, whereas some groups maintained the same self-image throughout many decades of change and political upheaval, others, threatened by social, economic, and spiritual degeneration, strove to change theirs.

Radical changes in the self-image of some Armenians accompanied changes in political ideology; in fact, the docile and meek Armenian, given the name *rayah* or herd, had to define himself differently before he could take up arms against his oppressor and become a revolutionary. Moreover, to bring about such a change was the aim of systematic efforts by political writers and activists on the one hand, and the single acts of rebelliousness by individuals acting independently on the other.

At the cost of simplifying social structures, it is possible to delineate three distinct self-images of the Armenian under Ottoman rule.

The first is the self-image of the Armenian in Zeytun, an Armenian district in the Taurus Mountains in Cilicia. He is the fierce fighter of the mountains, the embattled remnant of a kingdom that had long disappeared, but the autonomy of which was tolerated by Ottoman rulers before they discovered that for the empire to survive in the modern world there had to be centralization of authority and

uniformity of rule. Despite the significance that outsiders attached to the rebellions in Zeytun, the Zeytuntsi regarded himself as the heir to a medieval principality whose affinity to the successors of the crusading European states was at least as strong as that which he felt toward contemporary Armenian society. Limited in number and in vision, the Zeytuntsi perceived of himself as the only worthwhile Armenian, and of Zeytun as the natural center of the Armenian world. The Armenian people had to come to Zeytun, spiritually speaking. Nineteenth-century rebellions against central authority and diplomatic demarches to European powers—the latter reminiscent of the policies followed by the last of the Cilician kings—were not acts of political imagination. Rather, they were steps undertaken for the preservation of the old order, the now threatened autonomy.

A second, dominant image of the Armenian is found in the prosperous, contented Armenian communities in Istanbul, the capital, and in the coastal cities. Originally typified by the *sarraf*, or banker, this was later to be supplanted by the successful merchant and liberal intellectual or administrator and professional associated with the government.

Having rid themselves of the dangerous specter of involvement in the political affairs of the Ottoman state, the Istanbul Armenian cherished the label "faithful millet"—a euphemism for the subservient millet—conferred by the Porte. Here the Armenian conceived of himself as a member of a protected community, directly or indirectly under the wings of the Sultan, without whose benevolent attitude he certainly could not have achieved economic success. To sustain that image, the Istanbul Armenian had to loosen his ties with the rest of the Armenian people—the poor in his own city, or those in the provinces. His interests were confined to the *azg* (nation), and the *azg* manifested itself through charitable, religious, and educational activities. These ruled out the possibility of any involvement in politics as a community. They were also administered by the millet, an institution that was defined by the Ottoman system. Here in the context of the millet a good Armenian was

involved in the elections of the neighborhood church board of trustees, supported the local school, and read newspapers that reported at length European fashions and parliamentary debates.

This was the self-image of a community that associated itself with European progress and enlightenment and followed the novelties of technology. The cultural awakening, the fervor of adopting the Armenian Constitution, the idea of an Armenian parliament, all primarily beneficial to the Istanbul community, came to reinforce the belief that the *azg*, the Armenian, was doing well, was progressing.

As long as the conflict within the *azg* was limited to debates between liberals and conservatives, the Armenian in Istanbul could feel contented in his status. Indeed, it must have been a rare privilege to be able to disagree with each other, to play democracy, and discuss fine points of parliamentary rules. The Armenian in this category congratulated himself for his ability to follow in the footsteps of Western Enlightenment, and for having done so without resorting to violence, through the sheer understanding of the game of politics. The Armenian in Istanbul was clever and diplomatic, he had patience, he was cautious. He had become economically secure, and this showed his intelligence. But if he avoided confrontation with the state it was not only because he had no need for it but also because he was refined in mind and manners. Again, culture and progress turned for him into tools which would justify his disdain for the uncultured peasant, for the exclusion of that peasant from the concept of *azg*.

The third dominant self-image is that of the Armenian in the provinces. He is typified by the defenseless, poor, dispossessed Armenian, the *rayah*. He is oppressed by the political system; looted, killed, and raped by the Kurd; exploited by the landlord, tax collector, administrator, and the Armenian moneylender. He is even despised by his own poverty-ridden parish priest who derived his sense of superiority from his clerical garb. The *rayah* has no world or vision beyond his daily existence. His is a dehumanized existence, the promises of an afterlife notwithstanding. Even his vague knowledge of a more dignified national experience

in the past—sensed through his attachment to the land, extant monuments of grandeur, and tales transmitted from generation to generation—was challenged by fearful preachers who reduced religion to a justification for poverty and history to an explanation of subservience.

The first self-image was drawn from the historical memory of the Zeytuntsis and was eventually destroyed or otherwise absorbed by changes in Ottoman policy and Armenian political ideology.

But the other two were essentially derived from the conditions imposed by the dominant power to perpetuate acquiescence and subservience. Another common trait between the second and third otherwise contradictory self-images is that both survived the test of time. Although for reasons other than their pervasive veracity, the “contented Armenian” and the “deprived Armenian” became images in the eyes of modern-day writers.

The Genocide of 1915 has been the great equalizer in Armenian history. Since the historical and political conflict between Armenians and Turks has now moved to the field of historiography, Turkish or pro-Turkish historians have universalized the image of the “contented Armenian.” By so doing they have aimed at undercutting the legitimacy of Armenian revolutionary activities, implied a pervasively benevolent Ottoman rule, and even represented the Armenian as that wealthy class of the empire which exploited the Turkish masses. Armenian or pro-Armenian writers, on the other hand, have perpetuated the image of the “deprived Armenian,” since the massacres were directed against Armenians regardless of economic or social status.

Historiography has failed to explain the rise of the revolutionary, the *fedayee* or guerrilla fighter. As can be expected of statist historians, apologists for Ottoman rule have ascribed revolutionary activities to foreign agitators and constantly referred to fedayees as terrorists, rather than making an attempt to understand the historical phenomenon. Sympathizers, on the other hand, have either taken the rise of the movement for granted or attributed it to the exposure of the deprived to new ideological tenets.

These explanations for the change of the Armenian from

rayah to revolutionary are not adequate. Objective, historical realities, however repressive politically, oppressive economically, and discriminative socially, are not of themselves sufficient for latent discontent to become a manifest movement of protest and revolution. This is true particularly when the self-image of the rayah contains its own explanation of oppression and constitutes its own expiation rooted in extra-territorial arrangements.

And the assumption that exposure to new ideas is sufficient to bring about a change in political behavior has yet to be proven.

A number of writers in the early 1880s had realized that it was necessary for the Armenian to liberate himself from the mold imposed by historical and political conditions, if the Armenian people were to arouse themselves from the stupor of a rayah existence.

It was Mkrtich Portukalian, nonetheless, who distinctly pointed out and systematically criticized the many areas of individual and collective behavior which, as a result of centuries of Ottoman domination, perpetuated the sullen acceptance of a degenerated existence. Portukalian had been one of the early liberal and devoted activists in Istanbul and later the provinces, particularly Van, where he had started a teacher's school before being exiled by the government. Having settled in Marseilles in 1885, he began the publication of the first prorevolutionary newspaper *Armenia*. Portukalian never committed himself fully to an armed revolution and was unable to free himself totally from the constantly wavering mentality of Armenian liberalism. Yet he played a crucial role in legitimizing the concept of a revolution and, through his newspaper, in attracting younger devotees abroad and inspiring his many followers in Western Armenia, the eastern provinces of the empire where most Armenians lived.

Throughout his editorials and signed articles, Portukalian strove toward the development of a new Armenian identity. He criticized Armenian “sins” and extolled Armenian “virtues” in *Vardapetaran Hayastani Azatutian* (Catechism for the Liberation of Armenia), a booklet written in the

format of questions and answers and printed more than once.¹

The sins listed in this pamphlet included the migration of Armenians from their ancestral lands to become laborers elsewhere, denigration of the Armenian name by engaging in fraudulent actions, profit-oriented “patriotism,” and betrayal of other Armenians. He severely criticized the habitual use of proverbs and maxims which perpetuate a lowly self-image among Armenians. Among the ones mentioned are: “Haye takeh Vardanin, Turke takeh Vardanin” (freely translated, Armenians are fair play to Turks and other Armenians); “Eli Hayutiun arir” (You did something “Armenian” again, “Armenian” being the equivalent of “bad”); “Hastn ou parak mek gin, vay e parak manoghin” (It will all end up the same anyway, woe to the one who thinks too deeply); and “Vor degh hay, ayn degh vay” (Where there is an Armenian, there is suffering).²

Having rid the language of its inbuilt dispiriting, denigrating advice, Portukalian offered his own alternative of what an Armenian should feel and think. The good Armenian is one whose sole religion is the liberation of Armenia from foreign rule and whose only prayer is: “Oh Merciful God, help me liberate Armenia.”³ Armenian virtues include giving one’s possessions and blood to the cause of the liberation, doing one’s best to convince all to go to Armenia, and assisting all those who are laboring for the liberation of Armenia.⁴ Thus the “sincere” Armenian is the one who strives for and assists in the task of liberation.

¹ Second edition (Marseilles, 1891). The booklet was published by the short-lived Armenian Patriotic Union, founded and directed by Portukalian, who also edited the booklet. The identity of the actual author or authors is not known with any degree of certainty.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11. Rouben Berberian mentions yet another usage: “Hay anel” (to make or turn into an Armenian), which at the time meant to enslave (“Hay masonnere ev ‘Ser’ Otiake Polso mech” [Armenian Free Masons and the ‘Ser’ Lodge in Istanbul], *Hairenik Monthly*, XV, 5 [1937], 80).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 11-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

All others “are useless Armenians and useless human beings.”⁵

By pointing out the unconscious elements that had permeated the Armenian psyche, Portukalian made it possible to deal with obstacles to the transformation of the Armenian. And by elevating the task of liberation of the homeland to the level of a religion—one that even for this devout man would temporarily replace and permanently change the accepted notion of religion—he provided Armenians with a frame of identification that was against and outside the mold imposed by the millet. He asserted: “Political and religious principles justify revolt against the government, in fact it is a holy duty. . . . The souls of those who die in battle go to heaven; they become martyrs and their names are commemorated forever by the Holy Church.”⁶

In addition to writing his own articles and publications, Portukalian opened the pages of his newspaper to others who described the effect of Ottoman rule on Armenian personality and mentality. Thus, Avetis Nazarbek, a Russian-Armenian activist who later helped found the Hunchakian Party, discussed the child-rearing and educational system in Armenian society. The article concluded: “The education at home and at school has destroyed within us our strength, our self-confidence, and the initiative to speak and act freely according to our beliefs.” The title of the article was, characteristically, “Inch enk ev inch piti linenk” (What We Are and What We Shall Be).⁷

A few writers, including Portukalian, were equally critical of higher education, regarded by the liberal establishment as the panacea for the Armenian problem. Portukalian himself observed that Europeanization rather than dedication to liberation was the ultimate effect of higher education on Armenians.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ *Armenia*, weekly newspaper, II, 2 (August 28, 1886). The article is signed Lerents, one of Nazarbek’s pseudonyms.

⁸ *Vardapetaran*, pp. 12-13.

Even agriculture, the preoccupation of the majority of Armenians, came under criticism because of the implications it had within the existing social relations and the impact it had on the Armenian. A writer from Van pointed out that the Armenian's involvement in agriculture was regarded by the non-Armenian ruling groups as a symptom of cowardice and his continued attachment to the land as a sign of his continued acceptance of his lower status. In addition, economic relations and the laws of the land insured his continued economic oppression and placed him in a position where mere survival would be his sole concern.⁹

Once the vicious circle was identified in all its dimensions, the status of the *rayah* presented the subject with an existential conflict. To continue accepted behavior would only perpetuate the system, and, under the circumstances, tighten the chains of oppression—a certainty that he could no longer accept. On the one hand, the promise of reform within the Ottoman and millet systems, even though unfulfilled, had legitimized Armenian grievances and raised expectations of a better life. On the other hand, the largely rudimentary education supplied in the provinces by pioneers like Portukalian and Sareyan had provided the new generation with an alternative image of the Armenian which included organized Armenian armies under ancient and Armenian kings and the heroics of Vardan and his associates. The Armenian could now find a historical, personalized model from his own history for taking matters in his own hands. He could find legitimacy within an alternative self-image, one that included the possibility of breaking the vicious circle through one's own efforts.

That the conflict was lived on the most basic, individual level can be seen from a number of articles published in *Armenia* and, subsequently, elsewhere. One writer, working in Manchester, England, asked the basic question in the title of his article "What Makes You a Man?" The answer

⁹ Gorun, "Hayer ev kurder" [Armenians and Kurds], *Armenia*, II, 17 (October 16, 1886).

was a clear statement: "We need a revolution to be able to say 'freedom [to make you a man].'"¹⁰ Yet another contributor from Van thought that the "issue was honor. . . ." Man without honor was dead. "If we want to live we must defend our honor. . . . There is nothing left but revolution."¹¹

While revolution remained a vague concept for some years, the dynamics of change on the individual level soon became apparent. It was often the single, personalized act of rebellion of an individual which transformed the life of that individual as well as the life of the community that shared the experience. Many are the examples of young Armenians who, by "impulse," usually ascribed to adolescent rebelliousness, objected to some act, behavior, or insult—otherwise routine occurrences accepted as part of one's fate—from a bureaucrat, tax collector, or local gendarme. That single act of nonacceptance, occasionally turned into retribution against the perpetrator, would automatically make him an outlaw, a marked man.

Now, the individual will perceive his new status as more befitting to his evolving new image. He will find in his single act the basis for a new self-definition, he will "become" that act of rebellion. His new identity, based on the rejection of what he perceives to be injustice, acquires its own dynamics since injustice is widespread and deeply ingrained in the system. As a "social bandit," he becomes the prototype of the *fedayee*. Fearing for his life, his family will give him moral and psychological support. The community will be polarized; many, while fearing wholesale retribution, will understand him. They might make him a hero, tell tales about him, and thus participate in the making of the new self-image.

More than the tactical implications of his battles and beyond the ideology which is formulated on the intellectual level, the *fedayee* is participating in a revolution, his own. The act of becoming a guerrilla fighter is the assertion,

¹⁰ Varand-Zadeh, "Inchov es mard" [What Makes You a Man], *Armenia*, I, 62 (March 20, 1886).

¹¹ Ned, "Heghapokhutium" [Revolution], *Armenia*, IV, 73 (June 19, 1889).

rather reassertion, of Armenian virility. He will regain his and his people's virility not only by the conscious forces of the intellect which get to know the past, glorify its forgotten heroes, and establish a direct lineage between the soldiers of the past and the present, but also through the living of the heroic act, by letting oneself live the almost irrational impulse of self-sacrifice, the ultimate act of martyrdom in the form of death on the battlefield for the cause. That experience, lived mentally a thousand times, will give sufficient meaning and respect to his life, to give it away as a worthwhile offering.

What is occasionally referred to as the "political romanticism" of Armenian revolutionaries is, in fact, the process of dignifying life in order to make its loss worthed, to convince others of the worthiness of his cause, and to inspire them. The political corollary of this process—to die willingly in order to make the lives of others worth living—is certainly present. But the process remains an individual one through which the fedayee cleanses himself, and through himself, the sins of the collective.

One of the most rigid rules for becoming a guerrilla fighter was abstention from relationships with women, platonic or otherwise. Although the rule was usually defended for tactical and security reasons, the reverence with which it was held and the strictness with which it was obeyed indicate that abstention had a deeper meaning. It is possible that the fedayee has to absolve himself as well as past generations of the sin of being unable to defend his women from rape and kidnapping by conquerors, and that he had no right to such relations until he had regained his honor and proven his manhood in his own eyes. It is also possible that abstention was meant to show unequivocal devotion to the cause.

It is hardly an accident that those devoted to the liberation movement called it the Holy Task (Soorb Gords), that the people were called the devoted "disciples" (*arakyalner*), and that the ritual during the induction of a fedayee or revolutionary group duplicated the baptism of Christ. Similarly, on the eve of battle, fedayees took Communion

and heard speeches glorifying martyrdom—much as Armenian soldiers had done in A.D. 451, on the eve of the Battle of Vardanank for the cause of Armenian religious and cultural autonomy.

The activities, real or imagined, of the fighters gave rise to a new genre of literature, the revolutionary songs. They extolled the heroism of individual soldiers and served to spread the gospel of new values. Interestingly enough, many of the themes in these songs echo the problems identified earlier by writers and activists.

One of the recurring themes is the changing relationship between the Armenian and agriculture. In one song a mother from the much ravaged Mush district begs the guerrilla fighters to take with them her beloved and only son and pleads with him to

Leave the field, the plow and the plowtail, . . .
Play a little with the rifle,
So that we are no longer fair game for the Kurd.¹²

"A Voice Thundered" relates the story of those who "left the field and instead of shovels took up rifles."¹³ Armenians from the highlands who had not lost their fighting spirit acquired added meaning in the new context. In "The Brave of Talvorik" a youth exclaims

I am the strong fighter of Talvorik,
Not cowardly like the city-dweller,
Child of the mountain, son of the rocks
I am the remnant of the ancient, brave Armenians.

I am the strong son of Talvorik
And do not bow to the Turk;
The free youth of rocky mountains,
I have never seen a plow nor a plowtail.¹⁴

¹² *Vazgen ergaran* [Vazgen Songbook], compiled by Tigran Teroyan (Boston, 1901), pp. 389-390; Teroyan, a fieldworker killed in 1898, compiled this work before his death. Vazgen was his revolutionary pseudonym.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

In the "Song of the Soldier's Mother," the mother informs her son that on that particular morning she is giving him arms instead of his usual books and that he is expected to go to the battlefield instead of the classroom.¹⁵ A young man chides his well-built friend for "Knowing how to love but not how to die."¹⁶ The qualities of the new Armenian are described in a song devoted to Aghbiur Serob, one of the most admired among guerrilla leaders:

Let him come he who is courageous,
 Let him come he who thinks nobly,
 Let him come he who has honor,
 Let him come he whose bullet does not stray,
 Let him come he who loves Serob.¹⁷

Similar qualifications were required of Armenians who joined the early political groups organized in the 1880s and the later revolutionary parties. It should be pointed out that the formation of these groups was partly a response to appeals for "unity" and "organization" in the press. This should seem paradoxical since Armenians under Ottoman rule were "unified" and "organized." The millet had a well-developed machinery for the administration of its civic, religious, charitable, and educational activities. The principle of millet, furthermore, insured a unity of purpose among Armenians.

The difference was, of course, that the unity and organization of the millet served the Ottoman state by insuring the subservience of the Armenian majority through catering to the politically harmless needs of the dominant Armenian minority within the community. As elsewhere, the unity of all under the millet had stifled diversity in points of view and the expression of conflicts.

Thus, the calls for organization in the 1880s were, in fact, assertions that alternative forms of identification and solidarity were needed. The appeals for unity were

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

¹⁶ *Pataniin ergarane* [The Songbook of the Young] (Beirut, 1959), p. 37.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

an invitation to unite behind an idea other than the millet, on a basis other than the simple fact of being Armenian. In effect, the consequence of the proposed unity would be to disunify the Armenian community, since not all disagreed with the function and goals of the millet; it would bring together those whose needs and interests were ignored by the millet hierarchy.

The early political groups and the revolutionary parties later provided that alternative. Members had to be dedicated above all to the idea of liberation, cooperation with one another, and strict discipline. They were sworn to secrecy and accepted severe punishment for breaches of security. Membership in those groups in and by itself was seen as a privilege and acquired a mystical aura. Yet despite the necessity of secrecy surrounding their activities, members of the early groups felt a deep-seated compulsion to somehow manifest their new identity and share it with the community. Thus the Sev Khach (Black Cross, a name adopted most probably to indicate its basic policy of placing a black cross mark in front of the name of any member who became a traitor, thus marking him for death) of Van paraded in the streets of the city. The Pashtpan Hayreniats (Defenders of the Fatherland) in Erzerum printed membership cards despite many warnings from sympathetic observers such as Khrimian and Ormanian of the dangers involved in having any written document. The group was liquidated and its members imprisoned when these cards were discovered by the local gendarmerie.

Finally, a word must be said regarding the phenomenon of political assassinations which in Armenian political literature is referred to as the "terror." All Armenian revolutionary groups and parties functioning in Western Armenia accepted the principle of political assassination as part of their tactics. Some did so with reluctance, others with enthusiasm. The "terror" served many purposes. At times it was used as a form of warfare against the Ottoman state; Armenians could not wage conventional battles. Revolutionaries struck down government officials as a show of power. More often than not these officials were the more cruel and unscrupulous; their elimination provided relief to the populace on the

local level. Such actions were also expected to spread fear among remaining functionaries who were thereby warned that their behavior would not go unpunished.

"Teror" was also used against Armenian traitors cooperating with the police to the detriment of the patriots. Such incidents were widespread. The motivations of Armenians in this category—monetary gain, advancement in office, fear, association with the powerful, or simply being looked upon favorably by Turkish officials in time of wholesale retribution—were seen by revolutionaries as signs of the degradation of Armenian character under Ottoman rule, a degradation that was to be halted. Equally important, then, was the function of "teror" as an accessible means of warfare and as a "tool to transform the Armenian personality and create a popular movement."¹⁸

By engulfing the whole being, rational and irrational, conscious and subconscious, revolutionaries strove to redefine the Armenian. Being a good Armenian was no longer a birthright and could no longer be equated with being subservient. Certainly, there was as much "faith" involved in the pursuit of the "Holy Task" as there was in the pursuit of the more accepted goal of mere survival. Yet this faith was now directed toward the ideals of a better Armenian and a better Armenia in the process of being created as projected, ultimately, in the outlook and goals of the Armenian revolutionary parties.

The parties, first the Hnchakian and later the Dashnaktsutiun, assigned the Armenian a new role. To become a man, he had to participate in history. To become a progressive man, he had to have partaken in the general evolution of mankind as well as contribute to the building of its future. For weak, helpless, and powerless people what better ally

¹⁸ "Terorismi dere turkahay heghapokhakan gordsuneutian mech" [The Role of Terrorism in the Activities of the Turkish-Armenian Revolution], in *Azatutian Avetaber* (Tiflis), 1, 4 (February 1884), editorial. This publication was sponsored by the Hayrenaserner Miutiun (Union of Patriots), the members of which eventually became one of the core elements of the Dashnaktsutiun.

than the iron rules of history, such as the ultimate redemption of the downtrodden, as advocated by the dominant socialist thought of the time. While national history would liberate the Armenian from the mental servility of the past, universal history would set the goal of achieving the new status of the Free Man. Armenian history was revised. Instead of the rise and fall of dynasties, the revolutionary parties discussed the general laws of historical development as accepted by socialist, positivistic thought and used them to understand the past and project the future.

Above and beyond expressing the founders' personal convictions, the new outlook adopted by the Hnchakian and Dashnaktsutiun parties gave the Armenian liberation movement an intellectual-ideological component in the struggle to be freed from the psychological and social constraints brought about by centuries of foreign domination.

Yet, clearly, a world view, however coherent and attractive philosophically, could have had no permanent impact without that other dimension of which history is made: a change in the self-perception of enough individuals who, no longer able and willing to accept the status quo, manifest that change by doing with their resources and lives something other than what existing institutions had determined and expected, other than what they were used to doing.

This must have been well understood by revolutionary field workers who, at times singlehandedly, transformed slumbering and forgotten villages into pockets of resistance to oppression and forged reliable links in the larger movement of liberation by preaching the gospel of the new, self-respecting man.