

ARMENIA AND ARMENIANS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Levon Abrahamian

In the article, a remarkable regularity is traced: whenever the borderline between East and West shifts in different historical times, Armenians seem to appear in this very region. This intractable distinctive feature seems to be used to work out new strategies of survival.

Europe and Asia that form the Eurasian continent, are not only adjacent, conditionally demarcated geographical territories, but also culturally and politically opposite concepts. Since there is no definite natural borderline between Europe and Asia¹, it is drawn in different ways. Mainly it varies in the area between the Caspian and Black Seas. Usually the borderline runs through the main Caucasus Range or a little northward, through the Kumo-Manych depression, so Armenia finds herself in Asia, together with entire Transcaucasia. While sometimes Transcaucasia is included into Europe², and Armenia turns out to be located in Europe. However, according to other, not exactly geographical, divisions, Armenia is located in Europe with greater permanency. For example, Armenia's soccer team is included into the European Football League or Armenia is admitted to the Council of Europe³, although she faces the prospect of being expelled from it, unless she behaves as a European, i.e. civilized state. Such a «European encouragement» from the outside meets a counter-reaction from the inside: generally Armenians consider themselves Europeans. However, this is the civilizational self-appraisal of many, perhaps, all the peoples living in the vicinity of the geographical borderline of Europe. Thus, Turkey claims to enter the European Union, while Georgia manifests the most striking Eurocentric trend: after the recent discovery in Georgia of the most ancient skull of European appearance (this skull is often treated by

¹ On the original bounds of Europe mentioned in the Homeric hymn see [1].

² See, e.g., the article «Europe» in the Big Soviet Encyclopaedia [2, p. 383-384].

³ Cf. [3, p. 68] for a similar situation in the case of Georgia.

Georgians as the «ancestor of the Europeans»), Georgians began to consider themselves Europeans also paleo-anthropologically.

At the same time, present-day Armenia semiotically manifests its closeness to Asia. For example, the first «Western free market» in Yerevan (on the level of small vendors) was introduced through a typical Asian bazaar structure, or Western consumer goods were introduced in their Eastern disguise [4]. One can easily continue examples of double, European and Asian, «citizenship» in Armenia¹, so that, judging from many characteristics, Armenia appears to be a kind of a middle ground between Europe and Asia, endowed with the distinctive features of both continents.

The present Asia – Europe controversy suggests and was preceded by a more general East – West controversy. This controversy is of a more general order and manifests itself in the whole the orientation of the human being in the outer world, being not only a geographical one. Moreover, the nature and borders of the world division according to the East – West principle are the result of human beings' activity, their active and aggressive exploration of the world. At the same time, unlike the borderline between Asia and Europe, which may shift a little in the minds of borderline territory dwellers, geographers and policy makers, the borderline between East and West is much more flexible and mobile. The strange thing is that Armenians seemed to be involved in these borderline shifts in one way or another.

Thus, as a result of the Seljuk expansion this borderline shifted toward the West, to the edge of the Eurasian continent, where crusaders tried to stand against the conquerors moving from the East. And suddenly just on this new borderline between East and West and nearly at the time when this borderline «paused» here before shifting further to the present-day borderline between Asia and Europe, an Armenian kingdom of Cilicia appeared in the 12th-14th centuries, away from the ethnic territory of the Armenians.

For Armenia – Russia relations, the East – West direction often corresponded to the South – North direction, which passed via the Caucasian mountain range, the natural borderline between the North (West) and the South (East). And it is just in this borderland that we find the Circassian-Armenians who appeared here in medieval times and who since the early 20th century have played the role of an important intermediary trading link between the «Northern» West and the «Southern» East².

¹ See [5] for a striking ethnomusicological example of this type.

² On the history and ethnocultural character of the Circassian-Armenians see [6]. Cf. similar intermediary role of the Armenians of the Ukraine and Poland [7, p. 49, 61].

Another example is the dramatic demise of Jugha, a city in Armenia, which was a flourishing trade center in the 16th century. When the Persian king Shah Abbas decided to move the borderline between East and West toward his country, he accomplished this by destroying Jugha, the former intermediary point between East and West, and moving its population to Persia in the beginning of the 17th century to found New Jugha, which soon became a new intermediary point between East and West. Nearly two centuries later, when this borderline moved further to the East, to India, this time as a result of the activities of the British East India Company, the British found Armenians, who had already created a trade network just at this borderline. The Armenians, who were tradesmen from New Jugha, helped the Company in its initial steps into the Indian market and played the role of a buffer between Western and Eastern merchants. *Armenians* were even granted the privileges of the British in India in 1688 due to this important intermediary role, but were deprived of them when they supported the rebel Bengal nawab Mir Kasim (Kasim Ali-khan) in the early 1760s¹.

There are many more such examples and each example has, of course, a different and specific history ranging from deportations to adventurous trade expeditions, which hardly fit a common model. But, however different the reasons for these moves were, the result was the same: wherever the flexible borderline between East and West shifts, Armenia and/or the Armenians are in some mysterious way right there, as if waiting to become intermediates between the newly established East and West. Usually this happens against their will. Armenians are as if doomed to become intermediates, but sometimes it becomes a point of political strategy, as it is, for instance, in the case of present-day Armenia's ambiguous intermediate position between Iran (South/East) and Russia (North/West), which annoys the West, especially the United States.

The many minor cases, in which Armenians play the role of intermediates in local East – West divisions, for example, between the British and the Turks in Cyprus, show that we really deal with a universal model of an Armenian way of life. The last example also illustrates that this is not always a successful model of survival. In Cyprus, the Armenians who fled Turkey during the Genocide first settled in the part of the island inhabited by the local Turks (that is why they played the role of intermediates between the British and the Turks), but after the

¹ See [8, p. 70]. On this anti-British rebellion and Gergin-khan, the legendary Armenian commander-in-chief of the Bengali army, see [9, p. 383-418; 8, p. 50-71].

Greek-Turkish conflict they had to move to the Greek part of the island [10, p. 50-51, 108, 119-122]. Beyond this mini-model, the general model also shows that there are two sides of the coin and a cost to «being in between»: the same fate of being in between has brought many misfortunes to Armenia and the Armenians, since the West and the East not only cooperate, but also wage war, and those in between become the immediate victims thereof.

This «trend» of always being between East and West also refers to the Diaspora-forming processes in one way or another. Both sides of the coin contribute to these processes. Thus, the division of Armenia between Persia and Byzantium in 387 led to the formation of the first Armenian communities, which moved from the Western, «Byzantine» Armenia further to the West. On the basis of such groups the kingdom of Cilicia was later formed on the border between East and West. This kingdom fell as a result of the same East – West confrontation. Nowadays, when caravans do not cross Armenia any more, Armenians look toward new models that fit the old intermediary model to survive in the modern world of airplanes flying over the former busy crossroads of East and West. Especially as the East – West borderline seems to be preparing for a new shift. The mystical logic outlined in this essay gives us a clue, a litmus test for prognosticating the location of the new borderline between East and West: one just has to look for large concentrations of Armenians on the world map. Presently, such a place is California. The increasing numbers of Asians living there gives a visible «confirmation» of such a possible future shift. The trend of the US to realize trade communications via the Pacific instead of the Atlantic Ocean since the 1980s [11, p. 116] also points in this direction¹. Thus the relationship between the two sections of the Armenian people, the Eastern (Armenia) and the Western (Armenian Diaspora)², may require some new strategies in the near future in order to be ready for the next shift of the East – West borderline that already seems to take shape.

January, 2006

¹ A. Kukhianidze [3, p. 67-68] uses this possible Pacific orientation to prognosticate a new East – West division of the world, but sees the Caucasus as the possible intermediary between the future Eurocenter and the Pacific center.

² For more details on the stable dichotomy of the Armenian people see [12] (a slightly changed version was reprinted in «Диаспоры» (2005, № 3, p. 170-194) and in «21-й век» (2005, № 2, p. 137-155)).

Reference sources and literature

1. *Рабинович Е.Г.* Europa propria? // Имя: внутренняя структура, семантическая аура, контекст / Тезисы международной научной конференции. Часть 1. М., 2001, с.59-61.
2. Европа // Большая Советская энциклопедия, 2-е издание, т.15, М., с. 382-427.
3. *Кухианидзе А.В.* Кавказоцентристская концепция демократии // Научная мысль Кавказа, N 4, 1995, с. 66-72.
4. *Արրահաւիյան Լ., Գուլյան Ա., Մարության Հ., Շազոյան Գ., Պետրոսյան Հ., Հայկական շուկայի ազգագրություն. Մի քանի հարցադրում // Արդի էթնոմշակութային գործընթացները Հայաստանում, 1, Հանրապետական գիտական նստաշրջան / Զեկուցումների հիմնադրույթներ, Եր., 1997, էջ 5-6:*
5. *Abrahamian L.H., Piki-chian R.V.* Observations on the Ethnography of a Modern City: The Example of Erevan. 1. The *Rabiz* and the Variability of the Urban Social Hierarchy // *Soviet Anthropology & Archeology*. Fall 1990, Vol. 23, N 2, p.34-44.
6. *Аракелян Г.* Черкесоган // Кавказ и Византия. Вып. 4. Ер., 1984, с.28-129.
7. *Григорян В.П.* История армянских колоний Украины и Польши (армяне в Подолии). Ер., 1980.
8. *Абрамян Р.А.* Армянские источники VIII в. об Индии. Ер., 1968.
9. *Seth M.J.* Armenians in India. New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, 1983.
10. *Pattie S.P.* Faith in History. Armenians Rebuilding Community. Washington and London, 1997.
11. *Hague P., Harrop M., Breslin Sh.* Comparative Government and Politics. An Introduction. L., 1992.
12. *Абрамян Л.* Армения и армянская диаспора: расхождение и встреча // Диаспоры. 2000, N 1-2, с.52-76.