
Armenians and Jews have much in common: similar-sized populations, living mostly in diaspora, with complicated relationships to their nation states, homelands they nonetheless claim; those in diaspora today are generally well-off professionals and businessman; they both have their own religious cult, and religious distinctiveness still plays a part in their cultural identity; large portions of them do not speak Armenian or Hebrew as their mother tongue; both the Armenians and the Jews have experienced persecution (the Armenian genocide and the Shoah). But why are Jews so much better known for their outstanding people, people that were in part assimilated? Ottoman Armenians including the architects Sinan or the Balyan family, the Soviet composer Khatchaturian, the French poet Charles Aznavour and the American painter Arshile Gorky are exceptions on the Armenian side.

Once you start digging you do find Armenian artists but they have mostly lived and remained known only among Armenians and often not even to them. Armenians who do achieve fame are not usually recognized as being distinctly Armenian. No comparable stigmatization applies to being Jewish, and Jews may also be more successful in self-promotion at the expense of competing groups. Counting the number of Jewish and Armenian Nobel laureates in any case is telling. In short there are similarities but also crucial differences in the histories of these peoples. In both cases, though, the impact of Enlightenment – an eighteenth century European phenomenon – is crucial.

The latter is the theme of the book edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and David N. Myers, based on Benjamin Braude’s idea who contributes the first chapter, with contributions by Boghos Levon Zekiyan, Marc Nichanian, David Sorkin, Vahé Oshagan, Shmuel Feiner, Rubina Peroomian, Mordechai Zalkin, Vazken Ghogassian, and Steven M. Lowenstein. The book emerged out of a conference held at UCLA in November 1995. It is not a comparative study of Armenians and Jews, a kind of scholarship that does not yet exist, but an assembly of articles on one or the other, with “raw material for the next phase of scholarly labor” (2).

On close inspection, the list of differences between Jews and Armenians is rather long: Armenia always maintained a core territory that for long times belonged to other nations but that could become independent again, whereas Jews for most of their history had no physical homeland at all. It was the collapse of the polyethnic, multilingual, multireligious empires and the rise of European nation states that dealt fatal blows to the traditional existence of minority peoples and started their diaspora in the twentieth century. Jews, in contrast have a 2000-year record of diaspora. Benjamin Braude here raises a provocative thought, namely that a nation can exist without a land (38).

The Armenians, on the other hand, suffered many religious schisms – Armenian-Apostolic church with two catholicos, one in Sis, Cilicia, later transferred to Antelias, Lebanon, and one in Echmiadzin, Armenia, respectively (during the cold war Echmiadzin leaned towards Moscow, whereas Antelias was pro-Western); the Unitarian Armenian-Catholic church which is united with the Catholic Church but retains the Alexandrinic rite, and to which the Mekhitarist congregation belongs; and finally the Armenian Evangelical churches. Also, the
“role of the clergy was quite different between Armenians and Jews” (Lowenstein, 266). I disagree though with Braude, that Armenian identity was more demographic compared to the Jewish more symbolic-religious identity (23). Admittedly, Armenians had colonies and “were in a very different situation compared with the Jews” (Nichanian, 94). The impact of Enlightenment was first felt in nationalism, in creating a nation state for Armenians in Eastern Anatolia together with Russian territories that are now Armenia, and it was this struggle for national liberation that triggered the genocide of 1915. But the central factor of Armenian existence has always been and remains their unique religious identity. As Zekiyan puts it: “The Church <…> figured <…> as a reference point of national identity.” (68). Or Oshagan: “The Church was the major structure that held Armenian society together” (147). “The national culture consist<ed> mainly of the spiritual life of the Church” (Oshagan, 149). The Armenian clergy was perceived as guarantors of national culture rather than as enemies of the Enlightenment (notwithstanding the fact that the Catholicos of Echmiadzin was alarmed by the heretical ideas of the Madras group – the first exponents of Enlightenment among Armenians in the eighteenth century).

As for the Jews, enlightenment and secularization in mid-nineteenth century “called for counteracting the process of disintegration of the Jewish community and of assimilation through the development of a national consciousness” (205), claims Shmuel Feiner in his essay on the period characterized as pseudo-enlightenment. Hence the worship of a non-existing temple turned into a material homeland and to the misery of the well known Israel-Palestine conflict.

Language played a decisive role in enlightenment. There was a split into West (Istanbul) and East (Tiflis) of the Armenian vernacular language in the nineteenth century (Nichanian claims that this essential fragmentation, a term coined by Mekhitar, of Armenian people already started in the eighteenth century (120)). *Grabar*, the classical language of religious texts, was not accessible to the majority of Armenians (Oshagan, 153). Initially Armenian enlightenment was not carried by a diaspora but by the Mekhitarists in Venice who worked for the Armenian homeland, though being Catholic they did so as an external force (Zekiyan, 96). It was a permanent struggle between enlightenment and papal acquisition. In consequence Armenians had a love-hate relationship with the West (Oshagan, 154). However, the Mekhitarists in the eighteenth century still printed in *grabar* only, which contributed to a renaissance and national revival but was not the enlightenment proper.

A written vernacular (*ashkharhabar*) was only created from 1850 onwards (Oshagan, 159) and the new French trained intellectuals translated French enlightenment literature into this vernacular, which constituted the true Armenian enlightenment with Constantinople as center, a century late. “The modern Armenian language, still in its initial stages of development, was rough and uncultivated and could not meet their needs in high level communication. The classical Armenian language, on the other hand, was unintelligible to Armenian youth” (Peroomian, 214).

Jews for comparison retained Hebrew as their classical language. Early enlightenment in Germany, before 1750, was a renewal of Judaism (Moses Mendelssohn wrote in Hebrew), the next generation after 1750 wanted to reform Judaism and more significantly started to write in German. (Sorkin, 141-142). They paved the way to assimilation, a term I understand to have positive connotations. Much of the pseudo-enlightenment debate deals with retaining Hebrew
as opposed to total language acculturation. (Feiner, 181ff, 206). The “Maskilim”, enlightenment intellectuals, “discovered to their dismay that most people are not thinkers” (Feiner, 208).

Germany is indeed a paradigmatic case for the Jewish diaspora. Nowhere was the temptation of cultural integration so great and the elementary rejection of this integration of Jews so decisive – and deadly (Myers). Nothing corresponding to Jewish enlightenment existed in Armenia in the eighteenth century; their version was nationalism: “awakening of the slumbering masses of their compatriots” (Oshagan, 145). “Why this difference? Because of the political overtones of Armenian Enlightenment programs leading to irredentism and the Haskalah goals of Westernization leading to the integration of Jewish communities in the mainstream” (Peroomian, 219). Jewish enlightenment was a reform of the community to the benefit the individual Jew rather than that of a Jewish collective, and supported by the state they lived in, Germany. Armenian enlightenment was a nationalist movement whose enemies were non-Armenians, it was directed against the state they lived in, Ottoman empire. Armenian intellectuals complained about too little communal power, not about too much (Lowenstein, 269).

European territorial nation-state models of collective identity are, of course, inappropriate for diaspora peoples, for which elite families, the merchant class and institutions acted as a state’s surrogate (Sorkin, 137). Most enlightenment intellectuals themselves did not come from the economic elite, but it is telling that they directed the criticism at the religious elites or at outside enemies rather than in opposition to the economic elite (Lowenstein, 267). In comparison, in the eighteenth century were Armenian intellectuals but no Armenian elite (Oshagan, 156).

Unfortunately the book does not provide a comparison of living conditions of Armenians and Jews in Turkey and Russia where both groups have lived for a long time (Lowenstein, 269).

Let me return to my earlier question: why are Jews better known for outstanding intellectual achievements? This question is not in the focus of the book, but it is a reason to read it. The book assembles many pieces of evidence about similarities and differences in the culture of Jews and Armenians that may help explain differences in their respective intellectual presence in the world – one of the relevant factors being the history of enlightenment; but the subject surely deserves further study.

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