



PROJECT MUSE[®]

Armenians and Diasporas: A Breakthrough Book

John E. Wills, Jr.

University of Southern California (emeritus)

From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa. Sebouh David Aslanian. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Keywords: *Armenians, New Julfa, trust, circulation society, com-menda*

The variety of historical situations discussed as “diasporas” is very great. If we find some common features of, say, the Jewish and Armenian diasporas, we may find fewer between them and the Chinese, the Indians, the Lebanese, and even fewer with the case many would say is the most important in world history, the completely involuntary diaspora of millions of Africans sent to the Americas. Complications multiply if we ask diaspora-studies questions about the great nineteenth-century migrations to the Americas, Australia, and so on, noticing the Irish fleeing famine, encountering prejudice in the US, and staying involved in the violent politics of their homeland; go on to the great flows in so many directions after 1945; or just ask a taxi driver in London, Toronto, or Washington, DC, about the politics of his homeland.

The story of the Armenians after the terrors of 1915 is part of every general discussion of diaspora, and is important to many of us in our urban lives; in Pasadena, California, I probably still can find a “Boycott Turkish products” sign on someone’s front lawn, and I know of five or six Armenian churches and benevolent societies that do not always get along well with each other. However, the singular story of the Armenian early modern diaspora gets much less attention. Philip Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, which raised the ante for a comprehensive view of diasporas by starting with what he knew best, the inland trading routes of west Africa, included a whole chapter on the

John E. Wills, Jr., “Armenians and Diasporas: A Breakthrough Book,” *Diaspora* 16, 3 (2007): 416–422. © 2013 *Diaspora: a journal of transnational studies*.

Armenians (Curtin 1984, 179–206); Robin Cohen’s survey, although it drew on Curtin, missed entirely the crucial change occasioned by the forcible resettlement of the Julfa Armenians in 1605 (Cohen 1997, 31–3, 42–55).

Around 1500 the real opportunities for enterprise were in Istanbul. The Armenian heartland east of the Black Sea was a battleground between the Ottomans and the Safavids. In 1605 the Safavids occupied part of that core and forcibly transferred most of its Armenian population to areas more firmly under Safavid control. The peasants were settled in Gilan Province south of the Caspian, where they contributed to its rise as a major center of silk production. The merchants were settled on the outskirts of Isfahan. Rarely in world history has a forced relocation opened up such opportunities for the forcibly moved. The great Shah Abbas (reigned 1588–1629) already was making astute use of Georgians and Armenians who had converted to Islam in building up an effective central bureaucracy. The new forced settlers were not required to convert. Aslanian points out (2) that as non-Muslims they would be conveniently neutral in moving back and forth between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and militantly Shi’a Safavid Persia. They soon took on key roles in the management of main lines of trade, especially the silk trade, where the rural Armenians of Gilan were among the key producers. At New Julfa on the outskirts of Isfahan, they had churches, the headquarters of great merchant houses, and schools that taught their own heritage as one of the first peoples to convert to Christianity and a great deal of sophisticated bookkeeping and commercial management. The great Armenian merchant houses were very helpful to the Safavid shahs in managing key lines of trade and collecting taxes. Merchants connected to the great houses spread out on the trade routes from Lisbon to Manila, sending detailed reports to the home house.

Sebouh Aslanian’s new book represents a quantum leap in knowledge of the New Julfa-centered diasporic network. In addition to drawing very carefully on all the Western-language scholarship, some of it pretty obscurely published, and the scholarship in modern Armenian, he has assembled more than 10,000 documents from thirty-one different archives in eleven countries. This clearly is a project that would have taken several lifetimes before the age of the digital camera. Aslanian has told one of the best of his detective stories in this journal (Aslanian 2004). There is no doubt a fascinating bit of insider-outsider human relations involved in his access to the archives of the All Savior’s Monastery in New Julfa.

The rapidity of the buildup of New Julfa itself was amazing; by 1650 it had ten churches, and was divided into a grid of twenty wards, each along one of ten major north-south streets, the whole divided by an east-west street, each represented by a prominent individual on the council of the community that managed relations with the Persian monarch and court and settled disputes among Armenian traders spread out

all around the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The English East India Company was especially hospitable to their presence in its settlements. Aslanian takes us on a forty-page tour of the places where they were settled. Madras was one of the most important and intriguing; in South Asia there also were Armenians in Surat, Agra, Calcutta, Chinsura, and many more. There even was a small colony of Armenians in Lhasa, Tibet, whose main business was annual trips to exchange silver for gold, worth more in India than in China, across the north Tibetan wastelands to Xining in northwest China, where there may have been an occasional resident Armenian.¹ There were Armenian communities with their own churches in four cities in Burma, in Batavia, Java, and after 1800 in Penang and Singapore. A few joined in the multinational “Canton trade,” and others settled in Manila, where they often used their ships flying “Armenian colors” to evade English and French restrictions on trade between their ports and Manila. Quite a few of them found it prudent to visit the Inquisition and repent their schismatic allegiance; the long accounts they gave the Inquisitors of their voyages hither and yon from Astrakhan to Amsterdam to Madras are some of the best Aslanian has found on these globe-trotting young men. A few made the Manila Galleon voyage to Acapulco, and one lived for some years in Mexico City.

One of the Julfa Armenians’ trading routes tapped Mediterranean trade, with Aleppo and later Izmir as major hubs and Venice the most important Armenian center. Some of this network was well established before the forced move to Isfahan. At Venice the dangers for schismatic Christians were not quite as great as they were in Spanish territory, but many Armenians became Roman Catholic, and made very good use of their wealth to support the Church of Rome and keep the Catholic powers hospitable to their trade. Especially important was the great family named Sceriman in Italian, Shahrinian in Armenian, who were given noble rank in a number of Italian principalities. Monsignor Basilio Sceriman was the governor of a number of regions in the Papal States. The first Armenian book was printed in Venice in 1512 and in the 1700s the erudite Armenian Catholic priests of the Mkhitarist Congregation diligently collected and collated ancient texts, making a key contribution to the preservation of the Armenian cultural heritage into our own times. Livorno, where the Grand Dukes of Tuscany welcomed all traders, including an important community of Sephardic Jews maintaining trade connections through Lisbon all the way to Goa (Trivellato 2009), had an important Armenian community. In its early years it buried its dead in a Catholic church, but later had its own church, cemetery, and press. At Cadiz the Armenians had only a chapel in a Catholic church where they could follow their own rites, but no separate church or press. The schismatic-but-tolerated status of the Armenian church in Catholic countries and its variations from Venice to Cadiz to Manila would seem to be one source of their flexible and durable insider/

outsider status in Christian Europe. In northern Europe, Amsterdam clearly was the center, with a church and a thriving press, which published the first printed Armenian Bible in 1666; the Armenian presence in London and in Paris was much less impressive, but it is wonderful to notice a major Parisian cultural turning point, when an Armenian opened Paris' first café in 1672. French policies toward the Armenian presence at Marseilles were changeable, with episodes of protectionism. When trade was less restricted, there were times when the Armenians brought almost as many Indian cottons as the French East India Company and helped the French learn the Indian-origin technology of calico printing.

The Russian network had its center at Astrakhan, straight across the Caspian from northern Persia. There the Armenians had three churches and their own elaborate and respected commercial code. Other centers were in Kazan, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. The sea links out of St. Petersburg and even out of Archangel around the North Cape were known and occasionally used. Explicit permission to transport goods across the Muscovite realm was obtained after the presentation to Czar Alexei Mikhailovich in 1659 by the Julfa community, especially the Julfa branch of the Scrimans, of a splendid jeweled throne, which was used for the coronations of czars for several centuries.

From coffee to calicoes to printing to a jeweled throne, the range of topics that comes up somewhere in these chapters is remarkable. Anyone with a special interest in a city where there was an Armenian community will want to consult Aslanian's book for surprising connections and the perspectives of some very canny outsiders.

The variety of phenomena labeled *diaspora* make generalization unusually challenging but potentially very rewarding. In an opening chapter and in the second half of the book, Aslanian develops some major ways in which attention to the Armenian case advances the discussion. He draws alertly and intelligently on several major bodies of theory; the book will be required reading not only for students of entrepôts from Amsterdam to Aleppo to Manila but also for historians of the *commenda*, theoreticians of trust and social capital, and much more. Aslanian begins by offering an overarching focus on circulation within a trade network as of wider and deeper heuristic power than the focus on dispersed settlement of a "trade diaspora" developed by Curtin and others. Some of the passages he criticizes seem to me offhand, not intended as major theoretical statements. Curtin's intellectually ambitious work, by a leading historian of Africa, doesn't really hold up as a comparative survey of "trade diasporas"; he discusses the Jews only in passing, and the "victim diasporas" simply were not part of his project. Aslanian builds a powerful case for the centrality of circulation of information, resources, and people in the amazing survival and success of the Armenian diaspora. Others, such as the diasporic communities of inland west Africa described by Curtin, seem to have had less

systematic circulation and to have relied more on separated settlement and mutually acceptable relations with their neighbors. But the African trade must have involved some circulation, and Aslanian tells us a great deal about Armenian churches, cemeteries, and quarters. Both “trade diaspora” and “circulation society” seem to be useful, even essential, heuristics for the study of diasporas, useful precisely because the proportions of the two sets of phenomena vary from case to case.

All forms of circulation can be traced in documents, and the constant and conscientious circulation of documents was itself a key to the cohesion of the diaspora. This would seem obvious, but it becomes overwhelmingly convincing in the wake of the work of Aslanian and his digital camera. (The book contains a fair number of photos of neat and thorough documents, impressive even to those who can’t read them at all.) Although these letters were between the heads of family firms in New Julfa and their far-flung *commenda* agents (on which more shortly), they regularly did such a thorough job of reporting general political news and details of trade and prices that Aslanian is right to see in them anticipations of the formation of a “public sphere” by the first Armenian newspaper, published in Madras in 1794 (87). I would add that this assumes, plausibly, a great deal of exchange of information among the tight-knit elite of New Julfa; that these apparently private letters probably were more effective in getting news from far-away places into circulation among a commercial elite than the centralized and controlled reporting processes of the English or the Dutch East India Companies; and that similar content was very important in the early printed gazettes of seventeenth-century Europe. The young men reporting from distant places had been trained in a special school, which in the 1680s had as many as three hundred students, attached to the monastery in New Julfa. Their studies seem to have begun with a great deal of penmanship and some pretty involved commercial calculation, but also included quite a lot about trade commodities and geography; Aslanian has found a copy of one of their textbooks (136–7). Letters might be entrusted to other merchants or to special couriers; letters from around the Indian Ocean might be assembled at Surat to go overland to New Julfa. But New Julfa was not the only center; the Scerimans in Venice got letters from every place where Armenians traded.

The most explicit function of all this letter-writing, of course, was the management of trade. Typically, a family firm employed a junior merchant, perhaps a junior relative, to be the active partner in a trade venture on classic *commenda* terms; the senior partner would receive three-fourths of the profit from the venture and the junior partner one-fourth, the junior partner would follow strictly the instructions he was given, would not be liable for any losses, and the senior partner would be responsible for the welfare of family members of the junior partner who stayed behind. Aslanian gives an excellent summary of the long-running discussion of the origins and evolution of the *commenda*,

including a strong argument for its “Islamicate” origins; after all, tradition has it that the Prophet himself was a junior merchant for the widow Khadija in such an arrangement. He concedes that this arrangement may have given less room for expansion of an enterprise than a form that was hospitable to many small investments, but argues that it fit the family firm perfectly. The junior partner got experience, took no financial risk (but of course did risk his life), and stuck to his instructions and kept accurate accounts, since he wanted to be employed again and his family was more or less hostage for his good conduct. But of course it must have been hard to fire a nephew. Some of these junior partners were headed for places that were little known and where there were no other Armenians to help him, and in any case conditions might change drastically from those reported a few years before, and some of these young men clearly had very itchy feet; it is hard to see what kind of instructions the men may have been following who gave the amazing accounts of their restless travels to the Inquisition in Manila (140–2). But if they made it back to New Julfa they contributed to a fantastic concentration of eyewitness geographical knowledge there.

The formal mechanisms of control of junior merchants were of course strongly reinforced by trust, by a sense that the partners were members of a community. Aslanian discusses a social science literature of the “social capital” created by relations of trust, finds some of it too likely to assume that trust was just *there*, and shows how the New Julfa community worked to create and maintain it. If an individual seemed less than trustworthy, comments would be made in letters. Correspondence among the priests of the far-flung churches was very important in these moral assessments. When the enforcement of an agreement was disputed or it was especially important to make it binding, recourse could be had to the formal authorities of the New Julfa community—a single head who was responsible to the Persian court for the affairs of the community, and an Assembly of Merchants made up of the twenty heads of its territorial divisions. In all these offices there was a strong tendency to inheritance in one powerful family. Aslanian has found many documents, transfers of title, powers of attorney, and so on, bearing the seals of some or all of the twenty-one members of this assembly and sometimes of leading clergy also. In outlying settlements an informal meeting of the community might arbitrate a dispute, which might then be referred to the New Julfa Assembly for ratification. Penalties and punishments might be assessed, but the real hope was that an individual would find the good opinion of the community so important to his self-respect and his future employment that he would make great efforts to avoid negative comment; as Aslanian puts it, “Trust in gossip, but bastinado when needed” (197).

In the mid-1700s the New Julfa community was destroyed by predatory taxation by a succession of warlords, culminating in the burning

alive in 1747 by the psychopathic Nadir Shah of four Armenians, four Zoroastrians, and four Jews. Many had already fled.

Aslanian concludes the book with a lucid comparison of three great trade networks, those of the New Julfa Armenians, the Hindus from the Multan region, and the Sephardim. The Armenians were by far the most vulnerable to external shocks because of their small numbers, but even they managed to maintain communities in some outlying ports, such as Madras, Venice, and Amsterdam. There are many topics on which we can hope that other historians will follow up on Aslanian's ideas and discoveries, and we can expect to profit a great deal from his future work as well. How many women joined their husbands in outlying settlements? Several of the more important outlying communities deserve to be studied in all their relations with their neighbors. I want to know a lot more about the Armenian Church in this diaspora—its network of communication, its circulation of priests, its usefully ambiguous relation with the Church of Rome. I find it fascinating that in many major centers of settlement the Armenians had a church *and a press*. From a Eurocentric, Islamocentric, or Sinocentric perspective it's easy to write an early modern history that privileges the consolidation of territorial states. Aslanian's splendid book, along with much recent important work on the Jewish diasporas, shows us how much we can learn by paying attention to peoples who were powerfully early modern without any territorial bases of their own.

Note

1. The survival and modern publication of a merchant diary has made this fairly well known; for a brief summary and sources see [Wills \(2001\)](#), 289–91, 314.

References

Aslanian, Sebouh. 2004. "Trade Diaspora versus Colonial State: Armenian Merchants, the English East India Company, and the High Court of Admiralty in London, 1748–1752." *Diaspora* 13 (1): 37–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2006.0002>

Cohen, Robin. 1997. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: University College London Press.

Curtin, Philip D. 1984. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511661198>

Trivellato, Francesca. 2009. *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Wills, John E., Jr. 2001. *1688: A Global History*. New York: W.W. Norton.