# TRANSFORMATIONS OF ARMENIAN PRESENCE AND THE "REDISCOVERY" OF THE PAST IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY: JOSEPH EMIN (1726-1809)

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## Abstract

This article examines transformations in Armenian historical presence and the eighteenth-century "rediscovery" of the past through the intellectual experience of Joseph Emin (1726-1809). Following the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375, Armenian historical consciousness increasingly came to be mediated by ecclesiastical frameworks emphasizing the notion of a "sinful people" and eschatonlogical expectation. The article analyzes how the emergence of cultural and educational centers in the Armenian diaspora – particularly in Amsterdam, Venice, and Madras – generated reformist intellectual currents that culminated during the Enlightenment.

Special attention is devoted to Joseph Emin's role in revaluing the Armenian past and present through his European, especially British, educational experience and engagement with Enlightenment political thought, notably that of Edmund Burke. Emin emphasized education, rational self-government, and the reinterpretation of history freed from superstition and ecclesiastical dogmatism. The article demonstrates how his approach marked a decisive shift away from interpreting Armenian subjugation as divine punishment, instead framing it as the result of foreign domination and structural ignorance. This reconceptualization of the past contributed to a new understanding of Armenian national identity grounded in political interests rather than moral-theological imperatives and inaugurated a tendency toward separating ecclesiastical authority from national liberation discourse.

## Introduction

In the period following the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375, the Armenian people gradually lost confidence in their ability to restore statehood and self-governance through their own efforts. Older and newly articulated myths portraying Armenians as a "sinful people" became activated, accompanied by the periodic emergence of Armenian "liberation legends" that had originated during the Byzantine-Arab and Crusader campaigns. A mentality took shape and gained wide circulation according to which Armenians were destined from the past to be governed, while liberation would come through foreign powers (Greeks, Franks, and others). Perceptions of the past were revised, as centers of knowledge through which a coherent narrative was woven – one that organized Armenian collective memory – either did not exist or had fallen into decline. Armenian historical consciousness essentially came to a standstill, and faith in historical meaning gradually faded as well. The absence of historical meaning was filled either by a mentality of relying on the aid of the Christian West (Greeks, Franks, and others) in the liberation of Armenia, or by the concept of a "sinful people": events were no longer signs or allegories of God and Providence, but rather divine punishment that would reach its resolution at the Second Coming of Christ. A distorted perception of one's own past emerged, predicated upon normative discourses of sin and divine retribution, as well as upon myths that naturalized the salvific role of foreign powers, rather than subjecting historical experience to systematic critical analysis. This perception institutionalized ahistorical, syncretic frameworks within collective memory – frameworks devoid of causal comprehension of historical processes and grounded in mythological constructions.

Thus, in the centuries of "anarchy," "chaos," or "wretchedness," when the Armenian nation had "become uncultured and hardened," when "they not only did not read, but did not even recognize books and did not know the power and might of books" (Arakel of Tabriz, 1988, p. 203), the people became self-enclosed within a fabric of prejudices inherited from the past. The majority of medieval Armenian historical writings were consigned to oblivion, while those that remained were fragmentary and virtually inaccessible. Historical knowledge of ancestral heritage (encompassing past glory and heroic deeds) remained obscured beneath a dense veil of ignorance – knowledge that may be defined as an endeavor or impulse toward the pursuit of truth and values, rather than blind imitation of the past. Blind imitation, conversely, entailed the mechanical reproduction of external forms and customs without comprehension of their meaning, historical context, or contemporary exigencies (although such imitative practices could nonetheless play a significant catalytic role in awakening historical self-consciousness).

The situation began to change from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, when a reformist movement emerged both within the Armenian environment and in diasporic communities, thanks to the impact of the invention of printing – a movement that reached its culmination during the Age of Enlightenment, when interest in history gained new momentum, and as a result of which the historical past was, as it were, "rediscovered." As a consequence of such a revaluation of the past, new concepts of liberation were developed among subjugated or colonized nations. In the case of the Armenians, the liberation of Armenia was at that time considered possible only through external intervention, which was associated sometimes with the West, sometimes with Russia. And it was during that same period – the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – that a group of Indo-Armenians played a decisive role in the enlightenment and development of Armenian national consciousness. With the active involvement of the Armenians of India, the Enlightenment movement gained momentum upon Joseph (Hovsep) Emin's return to India and the founding of Shahamir Shahamirian's printing press in Madras in 1772 and concluded with the closure of the journal *Azgaser Araratyan [The Patriot of Ararat]* (Ghougassian, 1999, p. 242).

Particularly significant in this context was the role of Joseph Emin, one of the notable figures in the history of the Armenian liberation movement and one of the first agents of Armenian enlightenment. He was convinced that individuals like himself, dedicated to a just cause, could bring about great transformations. Joseph Emin was the first to dissociate the question of the Armenian people's liberation exclusively from foreign powers, emphasizing and bringing to the forefront the idea of relying on one's own strength. He was among the first to comprehend the paramount importance of history (social consciousness) and historical memory in the formation and development of the individual and society, of identity or statehood (state formation). Accordingly, by bringing to light the cognitive and functional purposes of historical memory in the national liberation movement and the creation of a new statehood, he thereby "redis-covered" the Armenian past and revaluated anew the present and possible future, linking them with science and education.

Thus, one of the pivotal questions in the discussion concerning the relevance of the Enlightenment centers on the nature of historical consciousness cha-racteristic of the Age of Enlightenment and the role that the Enlightenment played in shaping the modern perspective on understanding history. And this is among the questions to which the present study is devoted. The subsequent question is how Joseph Emin understood the process of enlightenment, con-ceived of time, defined the essence of humanity, and explained and perceived causal relationships. Therefore, I have kept at the focal point of this study both the history of Joseph Emin's intellectual maturation and its preconditions, which stimulated his activity. Although the Armenian community of Madras in

its entirety – including the activities of Shahamir Shahamirian's printing press (established in 1772), the circulation of Enlightenment texts, and the intellectual networks fostered through Indo-Armenian collaborative endeavors – constitutes a significant chapter in 18th-century Armenian cultural history, the present study focuses specifically on Joseph Emin's individual intellectual trajectory. Emin's case is distinctive in several respects: his direct engagement with British Enlightenment thought through personal acquaintance with Edmund Burke, his travels to historical Armenia and interactions with the local population, and his autobiography, which represents a unique first-hand testimony of intellectual transformation. This investigation adopts a history of ideas approach, analyzing the content and formation of Emin's thought rather than its reception history or subsequent influence. A comprehensive analysis of the Madras milieu and its collective intellectual production – including the ideological orientations of Shahamirian's publications, their organizational structures, and their reception among readers – merits separate scholarly treatment and will constitute the subject of future research. Here, Madras functions primarily as a geographical and cultural milieu wherein Emin's ideas initially took shape, rather than as the central object of analysis.

## The Concept of a "Sinful People" and the Transformations of the Present

The intellectual experience of the Armenian people upon entering the new Enlightenment era was deeply shaped by a range of inherited prejudices, most notably the missionary conception of a "sinful" or "punished people." This conception gradually came to supplant the theological understanding of original (Adamic) sin inherited from Adam. In its formation, Catholic missionary literature played a substantial role, interpreting the historical sufferings and displacements of the Armenian people as manifestations of divine punishment (Leo, 1969, p. 321). 17th-century Catholic travelers, such as Pietro della Valle, explicitly employed this interpretive framework, explaining these tribulations as divine retribution – *"une permission de Dieu, en punition de leurs crimes"* (a permission from God, as punishment for their crimes) (Pietro della Valle, 1745, p. 230). The consequence of this perception of a "sinful" or "punished" people was the internalization of a collective self-image as a "mass of condemnation," a condition associated with death, ignorance, and concupiscence.

The social process of meaning-making at a certain point seemed to undergo a displacement, not moving beyond the representation and presentation of the theme of persecutions and sufferings. The mentality of firmly preserving existing conditions and things, of avoiding any change in order not to disturb the equilibrium inherited from antiquity, gradually became predominant. *Historical thinking* changed accordingly: under conditions dominated by imitation and reproduction, old and established perspectives on events became activated

in medieval Armenian chronicles. More precisely, there emerged a tendency to interpret or present events through familiar archetypes, templates, and concepts rather than to perceive the new in unfolding events. More figures, episodes, and occurrences than an understanding of the meaning of history. And all this was done, in Ashot Hovhannisyan's apt characterization, "not to create new, secular knowledge and literature, but to revive the stagnant ecclesiastical knowledge and literature (Hovhannisyan, 1959, p. 165). Figuratively speaking, the Classical period was characterized by pouring new wine into old wineskins: any change was fraught with dangers.

Thus, historical consciousness among Armenians became bifurcated: it dissolved on the one hand into *chronicles* (it is not accidental that after the fall of Cilicia until Arakel Davrizhetsi (Arakel of Tabriz), what were written were particularly [minor] chronicles and memorials), and on the other hand into *eschatological literature,* where instead of historiography there are only prophetic allusions and desperate searches for signs of the final end of history, and where, although the actors change, the overall plot (scenario) remains essentially invariant.

The situation begins to shift already in the 17th century, when, alongside discourses of "predictions," "prophecies," and "visions," an emerging aspiration to overcome intellectual impoverishment becomes increasingly evident. This process unfolds in parallel with an intensification of confessional struggle (Mirzoyan, 1983, p. 7), particularly between the Armenian Apostolic Church and Catholic missionary initiatives. This regenerative movement in science and culture found its primary expression in scholastic life: existing educational institutions – mainly monastic and diocesan schools, such as those of Ejmiatsin, Syunik, and Baghesh – were revitalized, while new schools were established both within Armenia, under Ottoman and Safavid Persian rule, and abroad, within Armenian diasporic communities (for further details, see Ayntabyan, 1972, pp. 437-450). Thanks to all this, belles-lettres, art, historiography, linguistics, lexicography, and a number of other disciplines experienced an upsurge (Mirzoyan, 1983, p. 64). Despite this, generalizations concerning the scientific and cultural awakening were mainly moralistic and often derived from the modus operandi of Christianity. They were incapable of resolving the problems of political life.

Thus, from the late seventeenth century onward, the necessity of rediscovering the Armenian past was already being recognized, and steps directed toward this began in a period when the continuity of Armenian coexistence had been abruptly disrupted, and consequently historical memory was also increasingly disintegrating. History gradually returned to its former positions, which until then had been filled with "predictions," "prophecies," or "visions."

In the milieu of the Armenian intellectual movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a necessity arose to turn to history both to glorify and to authenticate being "Armenian." This process was initiated first and foremost within the framework of the expansion of Armenian commercial capital, which was active in almost all routes of the ancient world – from Novgorod to Hyderabad, from Isfahan to Kraków, from Basra to Astrakhan, from China to Amsterdam, London, and even various points in Africa (Braudel, 1979, pp. 167-168; Zekiyan, 1999, p. 54; Hovhannisjan, 2014; Hovhannisjan, 2015; Hovhannisyan, 2017, pp. 49-76). Numerous cultural-educational centers emerged, among which the cultural-educational centers of *Amsterdam*, *Venice (later also Vienna), Constantinople*, and *Madras* were particularly distinguished. All were outside Armenia – in the diaspora world. And these cultural-educational centers are especially memorable for their distinctive contributions to the "rediscovery" of the Armenian past. They turned toward intellectual traditions of the past that emphasized the necessity of preserving *historical continuity* – traditions that were more favorable as means of reviving and reorganizing Armenian identity.

Thus, the first steps toward the "rediscovery" of the past were taken in *Amsterdam*: first*, Voskan Yerevantsi (Voskan of Yerevan)* published *Arakel of Tabriz's* History in 1669, which was distinctive not only because it was the first book published during the author's lifetime, but also the first printed book that discussed contemporary life. Subsequently, in 1695, the Vanandetsi family published *Universal Geography* and Movses Khorenatsi's *History of Armenia.* These publications may be understood as an effort to rearticulate the relationship between "civilizational sign and cultural meaning" (Stepanyan, 2014, p. 35), namely, to restore the link between the material signs of Armenian historical presence – such as ancient texts, chronicles, and territorial heritage – and their semantic interpretation as constitutive elements of Armenian collective identity. Within this framework, Armenianness was presented to European audiences not merely as a religious community, as had largely been the case previously, but as a historical nation: "an ancient people that preserved its independence and political standing, interacting with Assyria, Persia, Rome, and Byzantium" (Leo, 1986, p. 300). In this sense, the Vanandetsis succeeded in establishing a new perceptual framework in which Armenianness, or Armenian identity, emerged as a tangible and recognizable historical reality. At the same time, the broader civilizational contexts to which this identity was linked – Assyria, Persia, Rome, Byzantium, and others – were rendered contemporaneous within early modern intellectual discourse, thereby reinforcing the visibility and legitimacy of Armenianness.

This unfinished project of civilizational self-fashioning initiated by the Vanandetsis found its continuation in the activities of the Mekhitarists in Venice and Vienna. Notably, their work in Venice commenced in 1717 – the very year in which, for reasons that remain unclear, the Vanandetsis' activities were discontinued.

The publications of the Mekhitarists (in the eighteenth century both in Venice and Vienna) were essentially directed particularly toward purifying classical Armenian from foreign elements and forming a rational grammar of Armenian, as well as placing Armenian historiography on a scientific foundation and reviving Armenian culture. The Mekhitarists also stood out for the schools they opened – three in Hungary (1746, 1749, and 1797), one in Constantinople (1773), one in Trieste (1774), and then twenty-three more during the 19th century. And despite such diligent and purposeful labors, their main concern was more the preparation of tools necessary for renaissance than responding to Enlightenment ideas (Oshagan, 1999, p. 162). Ultimately, the breakthrough event was the publication of *Mikayel Chamchian's* three-volume History of Armenia in 1784-1786 (Chamchian, 1784-1786). If for the Vanandetsis the issue was simply having or not having a past, then for the Mekhitarists what kind of past one possessed was also extremely important. Something that became pivotal for Chamchian in composing his *History.*

The next significant step toward the renewal of historical consciousness took place in Constantinople, where publishing activities proceeded in two main directions: first, the publication of ancient Armenian literature, and then the translation of European religious literature. It was within the framework of this Constantinople publishing activity that *Agathangelos's* History (1709), *Zenob Glak's* History of Taron (1719), and *Pavstos Buzand's* History of the Armenians (1730) were published.

Generally speaking, the characteristic feature of the "rediscovery" of the Armenian past was the initiative to break away from superstitious and mythological interpretations, to free oneself from false consciousness – an initiative that presupposed original selectivity with regard to collective memory. That is, events that did not generate positive emotions or feelings among the people were purged from collective memory, while those that opened new horizons were activated. Despite all this, it must be noted that neither the Mekhitarists' nor the Constantinople Armenians' cultural modernization constituted perspectives from which one's own present existence could be affirmed within European (and not only) presence. The fundamental issue was that the present exerted a shaping influence on representations of the past, producing a condition of estrangement from that past – an estrangement that could not be overcome through mere re-presentation alone, but required a dialogical engagement with temporality itself. At this particular juncture, however, neither the Vanandetsis, the Mkhitarists, nor the Constantinopolitans were able to provide such engagement, as their primary concerns remained focused on textual restoration and cultural preservation rather than substantive interaction with the evolving European discourses on statehood, natural rights, and historical progress that were reshaping the intellectual landscape of the era.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Madras had become a vibrant center of Armenian intellectual life in India. The community, composed primarily of merchants relocated following the decline of New Julfa,[1] benefited from its proximity to British colonial administration and educational institutions. This environment facilitated Indo-Armenian engagement with European Enlightenment ideas – an engagement that culminated in Shahamir Shahamirian's establishment of a printing press in 1772 and the subsequent publication of works reflecting Enlightenment political thought.[2] It was the representatives of the Madras Circle who sought to address this lacuna, among whom the contribution of *Joseph Emin* (1726-1809) was particularly significant. While the achievements of the earlier generation of Armenian intellectuals were crucial in ensuring cultural continuity, Emin represented a fundamentally different mode of engagement – one defined by the appropriation of European Enlightenment concepts and their deliberate adaptation to an Armenian emancipatory project. Armenian modernity originated within the context of colonial modernity, taking form through the structures of British colonial administration, bureaucratic rationality, and commercial regulation in India, which provided both the institutional framework and the conceptual apparatus for Emin's reformist thought. In this regard, Emin was the last significant figure to "mobilize both Armenians and Europeans for the liberation of Armenia" (Panossian, 2002, p. 115) and to pursue the modernization of the Armenia he sought to liberate.

## The Eminian Experience of the "Rediscovery" of History

"You, Christians, what is the reason of your objecting, if any of your countrymen should take a fancy to be a warrior? And why are you not free? Why have you not a sovereign of your own?" The answer they made was, "Sir, our liberty is in the next world; our king is Jesus Christ. " Emin said, "How came that about? Who told you so?" They answered "The Holy Fathers of the Church, who say, the Armenian nation has been subject to the Mahometans from the creation of the world, and must remain so till the day of resurrection; otherwise, we could soon drive the Othmans out of our country. " [...] He then said, "You must have heard of the Christians of Frankestan, who, if they had listened to their priests, and had understood the Gospel in the manner in which our holy fathers have explained it to us, (which may God avert!) they would have been as great slaves to the Mahometans as we are now. The meaning of shouldering the cross, is the ensign which the brave soldiers carry against the Infidels, to fight and die under it; those being the true Christians, who can inherit the kingdom of God; and not they that lead a lazy cowardly life, like us, who are become cattle, devoured by wolves."

Joseph Emin, *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin* (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142).

If an Armenian of the mid-eighteenth century had been asked about his history, he would probably have begun his history with the Creation, described the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, recounted the stories of the Flood and the Dispersion, and brought his history up to the birth and death of Christ. He would then narrate the tribulations of the "sinful people" under Muslim rule – sufferings believed to persist until the Day of Resurrection. Joseph (Hovsep) Emin similarly observes this in his memoirs when he first traveled to Western (Ottoman) Armenia and sought to assess the situation on the ground. Such a perception of past and present, combined with expectations of the future, reflected a limited framework for understanding historical events and contemporary realities. The Armenian people's faith in such a historical "fate," coupled with religiosity, undermined traditional values and moral imagination, which could not fail to trouble Joseph Emin. The question arose: why had this come about, why had the Armenian people reached such a degraded state? Of course, the situation was first and foremost a result of ignorance.

Thus, in the early eighteenth century, as the prominent Armenian colony of New Julfa declined amid political instability in Safavid Persia, most Persian Armenians gradually migrated to India, reinforcing Armenian communities that had existed there since the 16th century. As a result of such a change in circumstances, the Armenian colonies of India (Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and others) experienced an upsurge in the second half of the eighteenth century. This coincided with the final establishment of the British in India, which resulted in the activation of Armenian contacts with England, and Indo-Armenians gradually began to "engage with and participate in the social-cultural life of Western European countries" (Barkhudarian, 1989, p. 191). And thanks to connections with European countries, the influence of Enlightenment thinkers' ideas had revolutionary significance. It may be argued that, under the influence of these ideas, the concept of Armenia's political liberation was revaluated, and that for the first time within Indo-Armenian diaspora communities there emerged an imperative to examine Armenianness in historical terms. This intellectual imperative arose from a profound identity crisis, stemming from prolonged separation from historical Armenia, progressive integration into British commercial and administrative networks, and the erosion of territorial and political continuity. Lacking institutional grounding and confronted with British organizational superiority, Indo-Armenians faced urgent existential questions: What constituted Armenian identity? Could it be sustained beyond religious affiliation? And could it endure in the absence of statehood? These were questions that young Joseph Emin encountered when he settled in the city of Calcutta, India (1744), where he first interacted with Europeans and became acquainted with their advanced technology, military art, and progressive culture (Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 14).

Here he first saw "the Europeans' fortress and the training of soldiers, their ships, and that they are ingenious and perfect in everything" (Emin, 1792, p. 58). On the one hand, the wretched condition of his compatriots, and on the other hand, the prosperous circumstances of the English involuntarily led Joseph Emin to the problem of understanding the causes of these two contrasting situations. Pursuing these and other questions from Enlightenment positions, he "rebelled against the historically formed heavy, unpromising existence of the Armenians" (Topchyan, 2017, p. 4). The manifestation of this rebellion was Emin's autobiography-memoir, *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin,* which, in Sebouh Aslanian's characterization, is in many respects about a son's rebellion against his "Asiatic" heritage (see Aslanian, 2012, p. 367). Joseph Emin and those of his contemporaries who had felt the profound "estrangement" from the Armenian past, a radical alienation, felt the need to address the history of the past meaningfully and to revaluate it in accordance with new realities. In short, a certain reorientation was necessary.

Emin's aspiration for a British education brought him to England "to learn Art Military and other Sciences," since he was unable to endure "eating and drinking without Liberty or Knowledge" (Emin, 1792, p. 59). "My Father taught me, like other Armenians only to write and read our own Language, & to get Psalms be heart, to sing them in the Church, but he did not shew me to handle Arms to fight for that Church, as my Uncle, who was killed at his Church Door, nor anything to kindle up my Heart to understand great Affairs," Emin notes in his autobiography (Emin, 1792, p. 86). His aim was to restore Armenian sovereignty (Emin, 1792, p. 446) according to "the admirable European system of wise laws and useful regulations" (Emin, 1792, p. 2). Here, with remarkable determination – barely surviving and earning his living through arduous labor – he managed to some extent to resolve the question of his education. He befriended *Edmund Burke* (1729-1797), *Lord Northumberland (later Earl, later Duke of Northumberland, 1714-1786),* and other noblemen. It was precisely here that he absorbed the ideas of the British Enlightenment. Particularly impressive was the Enlightenment thinkers' faith in the power of reason, according to which humanity could, in principle, overcome all "backward" forms of knowledge on the path to social happiness – a conviction that lies at the foundation of Emin's autobiography: "Thus observing the excellence of true learning, and the horrid misery of ignorance, Emin resolved to put his honest design into execution, of giving an account of his insignificant life" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix). Emin sought education and military training in England, and his lifelong mission became to "give liberty, knowledge and civil arts to his country" (Emin, 1792, p. 85), "to tear off that obscure curtain from before their eyes," and "to rouse them from their innocent slumbers" (Emin, 1792, p. 198). In general, Emin's worldview was formed in harmony with the European

thought of his era, particularly under the influence of English ideas, especially those of Edmund Burke.

Thus, the idea of Emin's secret mission – to raise a rebellion against Ottoman and Persian rule – was gradually being placed on firm ground. According to this plan, he attempted to answer three pivotal questions: *"1. In what manner can be a country maintained, and depended against a warlike nation. 2. How is to raise money of such country which is totally rained nor has any sort of Revenue. 3. What method he is to take with the people of such Country to reason with and bring them to Industry who are as obstinate as Bares?"* (Emin, 1792, p. 178). These were questions in whose resolution the Irish-born political figure and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) made a significant contribution[3]. Burke was greatly impressed by the young Armenian's ardent pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment, for which he had left his paternal home and departed for a distant, unfamiliar country. Burke, with great enthusiasm and willingness, began to guide Joseph Emin in the matter of self-education – not only by advising him to read certain books (Emin, 1792, p. 51), but even by supplying geographical maps (Emin, 1792, p. 394). In another passage of his autobiography, Emin also mentions books "on the Art Military" (Emin, 1792, p. 239).

Soon Emin had the opportunity to become acquainted with his new friend's works as well. Burke was at that time working on his first two publications, which were published in the following years, 1756 and 1757. Burke commissioned Emin to copy them (Emin, 1792, p. 53). These were *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) and *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). According to Emin's testimony, Burke also commissioned him to copy the work of the English political philosopher, statesman, and writer Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752) (Emin, 1792, p. 53). The seemingly peculiar task of copying actually pursued a specific purpose. The point is that Burke believed that "it is by imitation far more than by precept that we learn everything; and what we learn thus we acquire not only more effectually, but more pleasantly. This forms our manners, our opinions, our lives" (Burke, 1999, p. 45). Moreover, "imitation is one of the great instruments used by providence in bringing our nature towards its perfection" (Burke, 1999, p. 46). At the same time, however, Burke noted that if "men gave themselves up to imitation entirely, and each followed the other, and so on in an eternal circle," they would "remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were in the beginning of the world. To prevent this, God has planted in man a sense of ambition" (Burke, 1999, p. 46), which ensures progress. It was through these transcriptions and readings that Joseph Emin's worldview gradually took shape, profoundly influenced by Burkean theory and best understood within Burke's conceptual framework. Emin's appropriation of Burke's ideas, however,

was neither passive nor literal. Whereas Burke developed his theory of imitation within a British society characterized by stable state structures and established cultural institutions, Emin reconceptualized it as a mechanism of national revival, through which Armenians, by emulating European military and political models, might recover capacities suppressed by centuries of subjugation. This selective reinterpretation is characteristic of Emin's broader intellectual method.

Like any complete system, the 18th-century structure had to satisfy certain fundamental intellectual needs: first, a rational explanation of the human past to replace Genesis; second, a theory and tactics of social transformation; and third, a vision of humanity's future on earth, not in heaven. These were questions that inevitably related to history, which during the Age of Enlightenment was still in its formative stage, and people at that time "naturally [saw] the past with the eyes of the present, without realizing the need for mental adjustments and transpositions" (Butterfield, 1944, p. 33), starting with the simplest of them, the anachronism.

Individuality, freedom of its development, and the description of the human spirit in history now became the chief concern of the new generation. From this arose the Enlightenment attitude toward history. Thus, it was no accident that the eighteenth century brought to life the image of the past, proposed a program of action for the present, and dreamed of future happiness (Manuel, 1965, p. 4). And if until then history had been an art, a discipline, and an amusement (Gay, 1995, p. 369), then the Age of Enlightenment can be called the age of consuming interest in history, especially when history was harnessed to the concept of social progress. Moreover, in the teachings of Enlightenment thinkers (John Locke, Bolingbroke, and others), social progress was closely connected not only with the development of scientific knowledge but also with the spiritual and moral perfection of humanity, the advancement of morality and law, the development of civil society, the flowering of education, the upbringing of people in the spirit of respect for state laws, and the principles of justice, humanitarianism, moderation, and industry.

Thus, for the Enlightenment thinkers, history became extremely important as a means of education (even re-education) for improving human activity and progress. The importance of the connection between education and history did not escape Joseph Emin's notice either: following the example of the European Enlightenment's "reviving" interest in classical antiquity, Joseph Emin attached pivotal significance to the revival of ancient Armenian history, which could break the existing view of history in order to dispel "the obscurity of ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 366), so that the Armenian people would be "thus enabled to see and to distinguish good from evil" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix). The influence of Bolingbroke is also discernible here, though transformed

critically. Bolingbroke argued that "an early and proper application to the study of history will contribute extremely to keep our minds free from a ridiculous partiality in favor of our own country, and a vicious prejudice against others" (Bolingbroke, 1967, p. 183). Writing within a context of stable statehood and a well-formed national consciousness, Bolingbroke identified the danger as uncritical nationalist prejudice, which distorted historical understanding. Emin, however, faced the opposite problem: a people whose distorted historical consciousness – rooted in the "sinful nation" paradigm and ecclesiastical fatalism – had produced not excessive national pride but collective self-abnegation. In this inverted context, Emin's appropriation of Bolingbroke's historical pedagogy served a contrary purpose: not to temper national partiality, but to cultivate a rational national consciousness where none existed. The goal was not blind attachment to the Armenian past, but informed attachment grounded in accurate historical knowledge – the very approach Bolingbroke advocated. While Bolingbroke sought to temper excessive nationalism through historical education, Emin employed analogous methods to awaken a people from historical amnesia and fatalistic resignation.

What is particularly noteworthy is that Emin's "English program" did not envisage purely military intervention: an important component of his plan was education – "European knowledge" – as a remedy for restoring Armenian autonomy: "it is not so much by strength of arms that these nations are called conquerors, as by wisdom and art. [...] everything is by art and wisdom, for without wisdom a nation is not a nation; and those who compose it are blind and unhappy" (Emin, 1792, p. 110). Moreover, "The table of learning is laid open to every man and every nation, to enjoy and to eat without charge; very different from the ancient Chaldeans, Persians, Greeks, or Romans, whose barbarous jealousy kept learning as a mystery, and deprived the people in general of improvement" (Emin, 1792, p. xxix).

Emin presents his educational program more clearly during his next meeting with King Heraclius II of Georgia (1763):

> "It is impossible for any man, who has been brought up in a wild way, without education or experience of the world, to give just hopes of anything good. The only method will be, to set up two or three common schools, and make their children go to learn the principles of religion, from seven to sixteen, that their faith may be well grounded: when that is done, frame them into companies, to be taught the use of arms, like the Europeans, from sixteen years of age to twenty. Let that be the work of the morning, and about three in the afternoon let heroic lectures be read to them, about three quarters of an hour; short and sweet: then let them go to play. [...] The difficulty is in the beginning [...]. In the meantime, the wisdom that has deserted this fine country

> will come back of itself, and make it flourishing, thus enlightened, as it
> has all the kingdoms of Europe" (Emin, 1792, pp. 207-208).

What is noteworthy here is that in his educational program, Emin emphasizes
the religious and military components, which would become the foundation for
the creation of the Armenian-Georgian state of which Emin dreamed
("delivering the Armenians, and forming a respectable alliance with Georgia"
– Emin, 1792, p. 211) (Telunts, 1995, p. 32). Religious and military – both of
which must be grounded in knowledge, since "what is not built on knowledge,
though it is very strong and lofty, is as if it were built upon sand" (Emin, 1792,
p. 113). It is precisely in this context that obstacles also emerge: on the one
hand, the obstacle of Mohammedan rule; on the other hand, the religious
obstacle: "the first take their lives away, the others keep their souls in bondage,
resembling exactly the two archangels in the Koran of Mahomed, named
Azrael and Asrafil" (Emin, 1792, p. xxx). The point is that the inherited
universal history, providential, moral, or dogmatic explanations had already
been exhausted and hindered further development. Only through receiving
"the bright dawn of true knowledge in their gloomy minds" would it be possible,
"after their inexpressible sufferings, to subdue the enemies of religion and
liberty" and "to flourish in all kinds of learning, military or civil," to "become
virtuous in all respects; to be named free and true Christians" (Emin, 1792, p.
xxx). Only after this would the Armenians be saved from "being tossed up and
down like a football, and kicked about" (Emin, 1792, p. xxxii).

According to Emin, it is not courage that the Armenians lack. Finding them-
selves in slavery and ignorance, they have become alienated from themselves
and have remained disconnected from liberty, and although some "black Ar-
menians in the Mountains were free, and handled Arms from their Childhood,"
both they and the Armenians "subject to the Turks and Persians [...] only
[fought] with a wild and natural fierceness, and so they have no order and do
nothing but like Robbers" (Emin, 1792, p. 59). If only one were permitted to
"let them break the chain of superstition and ignorance," it would become clear
"how bravely they will attack the enemies of Christ!" (Emin, 1792, p. 287). But
such people are "disorderly and ignorant; no good can be expected from them,
but only confusion and mischief" (Emin, 1792, p. 207). The point is that "their
minds are entirely destitute of all the principles of virtue" (Emin, 1792, p. xxvii).
Whereas "Bravery cannot be without Virtue; for as the Son proceedeth from
the Father, so Bravery does from Virtue" (Emin, 1792, p. 102), and "more virtue
may be found among civilized free men, than among those who only eat, drink,
and sleep, in profound ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 366).

On the other hand, the Armenians are "an industrious, brave, honest people,
and will soon become formidable, provided they can receive the light of
understanding" (Emin, 1792, p. 189), but many of them endure hunger, thirst,

long journeys, and all hardships "only for money" (Emin, 1792, p. 91). In other words, "The poor Armenians, good and bad, work and labour, to leave money for others to enjoy; which can be imputed to nothing but mere ignorance" (Emin, 1792, p. 277). Thus their sufferings are in vain and meaningless, since on the one hand "they have not Sowrd in their own Hands; so they labour in vain" (Emin, 1792, p. 68). Added to this is the complex of being a "Sheeplike-Shepherdless Armenian Nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 103). In the absence of education, "wherever learning is hated, and shut up in the dark dungeon of cruel ignorance," a "set of artful people of the same nation, most piously working on their innocent soft minds, have brought them down so low as to be despised by everybody" (Emin, 1792, p. 426).

In short, the loss of ancestral virtues and the acquisition of servile obedience are the result of ignorance and prejudice. These are viewed in Burke's conception as violations of the fundamental principle of civilization – institutions and liberties (Ktchanyan, 2017, p. 152). And so Emin fought against superstition and ignorance masquerading under the name of religion, and against ecclesiastical (clerical) despotism masquerading under the name of church governance, from which all misfortunes stem, since "great is the principle of religion! powerfully affecting the human mind in general; dividing kingdoms, setting brothers against brothers, ready to cut each others throats, and turning their hearts to inveterate enmity from social friendship" (Emin, 1792, p. 381). It should be noted that while severely criticizing the superstitious, egotistical, cunning, and dishonorable actions of Armenian clergy, he simultaneously, albeit abstractly, honors the Christian virtues of both himself and Armenians in general (honesty, truthfulness, and so on) (Panossian, 2006, p. 117).

Apart from the clergy, dangerous obstacles to the rational development of society also include Armenian merchants and "malicious nobles," who, according to Emin, "If [...] had half the attachment to liberty that they have to money and to superstitions, which are ruinous in many respects, they would have been made free long ago" (Emin, 1792, pp. 197-198), and "If they would bestow a quarter of the money upon their own children, to give them a proper education, and enable them to distinguish a rational being from a brute animal, so as to multiply the number of good plants and pluck up the weeds, they will become a free nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 157). The point is that "They actually do not know what liberty is; could they once but taste the sweetness of it, and drive old women's stories out of their good hearts, they would certainly be a great nation" (Emin, 1792, p. 198). Here Emin develops a conception of the necessity and purpose of the state, which in many respects draws on Burke's framework, according to which the state is one of the contrivances of human wisdom – created both to provide for human needs and to confer the right to life under the rule of law. Importantly, Burke's reflections on the state were formulated in the context of defending existing British institutions against

radical reform, whereas Emin applied similar principles to justify the creation of entirely new political structures for a stateless people. This adaptation placed Burkean conservatism in the service of revolutionary national aspiration. Accordingly, the existence of "man's true rights" presupposes well-understood liberty (Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 22). Also noteworthy here is that Emin attempts to harness authority and liberty together, just as Burke did, one of whose main aims in political rhetoric was the effort to subject liberty and authority to mutual accountability (Bourke, 2000, p. 454).

If Emin was initially convinced that an insurrection could restore Armenian independence within a short period, his travels throughout Armenia ultimately led him to realize that rebellion was impossible without first overcoming ignorance. The only sensible solution was liberation from ignorance, which was equivalent to liberation from Asiaticism, which in turn meant the greatest desire to become European. And all this through rational self-government or "prudent management" (Emin, 1792, p. 307), since an enlightened society is a coexistence of people based on reason, the absence of which is precisely the result of ignorance (It should be noted here that Burke's influence on Emin is again evident, as Burke in the 1750s had not yet rejected or criticized the rationalist worldview; see Hovhannisian, 1989, p. 22). If until then Christianity had been depicted as "chains […] on his neck and iron cuffs on his wrist" (Emin, 1792, p. 409), this was because ecclesiastical structures had distorted it through the doctrine of fatalistic submission – the "sinful people" paradigm that justified passivity as piety. Emin's critique targeted this institutional corruption, not Christianity itself. Through rational reinterpretation, Christianity could be rendered "natural" and liberating, aligned with reason, promoting active virtue over passive endurance, and consistent with natural law. And any social system based on oppression and violence is unnatural, and "Any law or custom against nature, must ruin cities, depopulate kingdoms, and leave nothing behind but a desert, as wild as if it had never been inhabited by men" (Emin, 1792, p. 396). Whereas the clergy liberated from unnaturalness can do much more "than naming a person prince, - he could make a king of him, or of any man he pleased, provided the party concerned had sufficient talents to deserve it" (Emin, 1792, p. 220).

There was a growing sense that the past could serve as a vehicle for instilling dignified sentiments and ideas. This mentality gave rise to the process of emancipating history from religion and theology, from reliance on miracles, from mythological frameworks of interpreting the past and present, and from eschatological expectations. The moral function of history was gradually being emphasized. For Joseph Emin, however, history and the will of God coincided, since "Nothing in this world can be done without God; nor a single hair fall from our heads without his decrees" (Emin, 1792, p. 206). Thus, Emin emphasized reason similarly within religion and theology. Accordingly, for

Emin, history and religion do not negate each other but complement one another and jointly define the "new" reality. It must be emphasized that Emin did not fully resolve – and perhaps could not have resolved – the tension between Enlightenment rationalism and providential theology. His assertion that "nothing in this world can be accomplished without God" appears, at first glance, to reproduce the theological determinism that had long underpinned interpretations of Armenian subjugation as divine punishment. If all events ultimately derive from divine will, how does Emin's position differ from the providential historiography he sought to overcome?

This unresolved tension is historically significant. Emin stands as a transitional figure at the threshold between religious and secular modes of apprehending history. His intellectual project was not to abolish theological categories but to reorient them – to relocate the center of divine providence from passive acceptance of suffering toward the active pursuit of liberation. Whereas earlier Armenian thought interpreted subjugation as punishment requiring penitential endurance, Emin reinterpreted divine will as a mandate for human agency, education, and rational self-governance. Divine providence, as Emin reconceived it, operates not through miraculous intervention but through the cultivation of reason and virtue in individuals and nations.

In this sense, Emin's theoretical framework reflects a "providential Enlightenment," in which divine will and human reason collaborate in historical progress. This synthesis, though theoretically unstable, performed an important rhetorical function: it allowed Emin to mobilize religious authority while advancing the secularizing principles of education, rational governance, and natural rights. Emin's incomplete secularizing project renders him a distinctive figure of his era: neither fully traditional nor fully modern, but emblematic of the intellectual dilemmas characteristic of Enlightenment thought across contexts. Similar tensions were also evident in Burke, who sought to reconcile preservation of tradition with the necessity of transformation.

That Emin did not achieve full theoretical coherence should not be read as intellectual failure, but as testimony to the difficulty of transposing Enlightenment categories to a radically different historical context. His achievement lay not in resolving all contradictions but in effecting a conceptual reorientation – viewing Armenian suffering not as divine punishment but as the consequence of ignorance, clerical manipulation, and the absence of rational education. This displacement, though incomplete, opened pathways for subsequent thinkers to develop more fully secularized conceptions of national liberation.

At a deeper level, Emin's conception presupposed replacing the loss of trust in traditional religious-mythological representations with new representations and trust in these representations – constructing a system that was completed by God. Like Edmund Burke, Emin also emphasized in a complex and

multilayered social environment both "human-to-human" relationships and the "human-to-God" relationship.

Until this period, the instrumentalization of history for religious purposes had been predominant, becoming one of the central concerns of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers. Here, the divergence among the English, German, and French Enlightenment traditions becomes most apparent: some currents, particularly the French, attacked institutionalized forms of religious worship; others, especially the English, sought to defend them; while still others, most notably the Germans, aimed to reinterpret religion in light of a transformed religious consciousness.

Over time, however, leading religious thinkers underwent significant shifts. They increasingly abandoned attempts to use history to prove specific Christian doctrines, instead seeking to reinterpret Christianity – and religion more broadly – through historical analysis. Joseph Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* (1736) is characteristic in this respect, defending Christianity not through scholastic theology but through the examination of historical and natural evidence. Such approaches were grounded in pragmatic history, understood as deriving practical lessons from past experience to guide present social and political concerns. Applied to religion, this approach was believed to foster a deeper understanding of social relations (for a more detailed discussion, see Barnett, 2003; Trevor-Roper, 2010; Pocock, 1999; Levitin, 2012).

In Joseph Emin's case, the appeal to the past had exclusively the purpose of making Armenians participants in the Armenian past. More precisely, history was viewed as an expansion of experience, as a means of broadening one's own vision and thereby preparing the way for an improved, rational future. By showing the nation's face in the mirror of the past, it would be possible to educate the rational being, who "ought even to be cautious not to be domineered over by his own fellow-christians; since God has created them all free alike, to be ruled or governed by good laws, with the same justice to the rich or to the poor [...] every man is honourable, otherwise he is no better than a beast" (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). With this approach, it would be possible not only to overcome superstition regarding the past and present but also to demythologize conceptions about the future. Thus the "rediscovery" of Armenian history became possible. This presupposed a break from stereotypes of the past and conceptions about the past rather than a simple representation of the past; thus, the past, being reinterpreted, was presented in a new light. The necessity of this was also conditioned by the fact that "if a nation be once subdued, their minds of course will be" (Emin, 1792, p. 192). Highly characteristic is the 1759 meeting with Armenian compatriots in a village in Western (Ottoman) Armenia called Jinis, where to his pressing question – "You,

Christians, what is the reason of your objecting, if any of your countrymen should take a fancy to be a warrior? And why are you not free? Why have you not a sovereign of your own?" – he receives the following answer: "Sir, our liberty is in the next world; our king is Jesus Christ." And to the question of how they know this, they answer: from the holy fathers of the Church, "who say, the Armenian nation has been subject to the Mahometans from the creation of the world, and must remain so till the day of resurrection" (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). We can view this meeting as an object lesson against the distortion with which Armenian clergy have presented the texts and subtexts they have studied. To refute the false interpretation of Holy Scripture by Armenian clergy, during his meetings with the people Emin read passages from "the Geographical History of Moses Khorinesis," showed "the genealogy of the kings of the Armenians," and quoted from Holy Scripture, offering an interpretation to counterbalance what the Armenian clergy preached (Emin, 1792, pp. 141-142). And all this for the purpose of sowing "the seed of true religion" and planting "the wonderful martial spirit everywhere."

Concern about what happens to the mind of a subjugated nation lies at the foundation of Joseph Emin's educational vision, which became more defined when in 1759 he traveled to Western (Ottoman) Armenia and attempted to familiarize himself with the situation on the ground. If previously Emin had thought that it was sufficient merely to make the people participants in their own past – with the sense of future time being regulated by the sense of past time – and the rebellion would be ready, the question of liberation solved, then as a result of his wanderings he understood that only continuous educational improvement would lead to the gradual reconstruction of the state and the formation of a mentality of freedom. It should be noted that it was highly symbolic that when traveling to Western (Ottoman) Armenia, Emin carried with him "the instruments of guidance, the fruits of European wisdom, in his pocket, the compass and the map" – "a pair of pocket compasses, and a map of Asia made at Paris" (Emin, 1792, pp. 139-140), as well as "the Geographical History of Moses Khorinesis" (Emin, 1792, p. 142).[4] And throughout that journey he "sowed the corn grain of true religion and planted the admirable zeal of military spirit everywhere he travelled" (Emin, 1792, p. 145). In essence, Joseph Emin's new educational vision in some way approached the cultural vision of the Mekhitarists and presupposed a program of small steps implemented silently, which, nevertheless, was ignored by subsequent figures of the liberation movement.

## Conclusion

Joseph Emin's European experience – particularly his education in Britain and engagement with Enlightenment political thought – precipitated a fundamental

revaluation of Armenian historical consciousness. Prior to this shift, Armenian collective memory had been mediated predominantly through ecclesiastical frameworks that interpreted subjugation as divine punishment for the "sins of the nation." Emin was among the first to reconceptualize this relationship with the past, foregrounding texts, events, and processes that existed within Armenian collective memory while reorganizing them according to new intellectual frameworks shaped by natural rights theory, rational governance, and Enlightenment historiography.

Emin's project went beyond merely restoring historical memory; it aimed to create a qualitatively new mode of remembrance, one that apprehended the Armenian condition through the prism of political interests rather than moral-theological imperatives. By reinterpreting Armenian subjugation as the consequence of foreign oppression and injustice rather than divine punishment, Emin initiated the conceptual dissociation of ecclesiastical authority from national identity. This reorientation carried profound implications, challenging the legitimacy of conservative clerical structures whose authority partially derived from accommodation with Ottoman or Persian rule, and who consequently opposed emancipatory endeavors threatening their institutional position.

Through this transformation, the Armenian past was effectively "rediscovered" – not as an object of nostalgic veneration but as a source of political claims and rational arguments for self-governance. Emin's achievement lay in his capacity to adapt Enlightenment concepts, developed within sovereign European states, to the circumstances of a stateless, diasporic people. While this appropriation did not yield immediate political outcomes, it opened an intellectual space for understanding Armenian identity in political rather than exclusively theological terms. Emin inaugurated a mode of historical consciousness that would play a foundational role for subsequent generations of Armenian intellectuals confronting questions of identity, autonomy, and political possibility in the era of nation-states.

## Notes

[1] New Julfa (Nor Jugha), an Armenian merchant suburb of Isfahan established by Shah Abbas I in 1605, served as the principal hub of Armenian commercial and cultural activity in Safavid Persia throughout the seventeenth century. The community experienced gradual decline following the Afghan invasion of 1722 and the subsequent collapse of the Safavid Empire, leading to widespread Armenian emigration to India, Europe, and elsewhere.

[2] A detailed analysis of the institutional structure of the Madras Armenian community, of Shahamirian's publishing activities, and of the intellectual networks

among Indo-Armenian thinkers will be presented in a separate study by the present author.

[3] It is important to note that Emin's encounter with Burke took place during the early phase of Burke's intellectual career, in the mid-1750s, prior to the formulation of the mature conservative political philosophy articulated in works such as *Reflections on the Revolution in France (*1790). At this juncture, the Burke known to Emin was still engaged with notions of natural right and transformation, as evidenced in *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) – ideas that Emin could more readily adapt to the project of Armenian national revival.

[4] The reference is most probably to Movses Khorenatsi's books printed in Venice in 1752. See Movses Khorenatsi, *Ethnography of the Line of Japheth* (Venice: Antonio Bortoli Press, 1752); Movses Khorenatsi, *A Brief History of Geography* (Venice: Antonio Bortoli Press, 1752).

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