

cooperated in business. Thus, in 1839, several *sarraḡ-amiras* entered into a joint venture and bought a merchant ship from England, which they used in the trade on the Black Sea. Reportedly they made many similar business ventures.¹¹¹

Whether they collaborated with or competed against each other, the *a-miras* remained the leaders of the *millet* until the early 1850s. Their leadership was extolled by contemporary and many late nineteenth-century Armenian writers more for their financial generosity to charitable, cultural, educational and religious institutions than for the goals they tried to attain and the policies they pursued. These philanthropic activities, of course, were laudable and deserve proper recognition. Even harsh critics admit the *amiras*' salutary and beneficial role in these fields.¹¹² But *amiras* were making these generous contributions less out of genuine desire and conviction to the benefits of charities than out of a desire to consolidate their position within the *millet*.¹¹³ Evidence of their priorities can rarely be found in Armenian contemporary sources, but the writings of Armenian Protestant missionaries, who viewed the internal affairs of the Armenian *millet* with a more critical eye, contain much revealing information.

Thus, in 1836, by imperial order, thousands of Armenian youngsters, "from eight to fifteen years of age,"¹¹⁴ were collected from "Karin [Erzurum] and Sebastia [Sivas], and other parts of Anatolia, to work in Constantinople at the *iplikhane* [spinning mill], the imperial shipyard, the factory manufacturing sails, and at [the foundry] forging hot iron; it was ordered that they be given only clothing and bread, and no salary."¹¹⁵ According to contemporary American missionaries stationed in Istanbul, some of these youngsters converted to Islam to avoid suffering and separation from their parents. The missionaries, in their collective letter, complained that

there is no one who dares present such a case as that of those Armenian boys to the government. The bankers [*sarraḡ-amiras*] dare not do it themselves, lest they should no longer

¹¹¹ Mrmerian, *Masnakan Patmutiun*, p. 144.

¹¹² Varantian, *Haykakan*, 1:235.

¹¹³ Ghazarian, *Arevmtahayeri*, p. 400.

¹¹⁴ ABCFM, Mission to the Armenians, vol. 1, no. 114, 7 January 1839.

¹¹⁵ A. Berberian, *Patmutiun*, p. 261.