

their patriarchal dominance over the life of their people. But in the process, they acted like harsh but benevolent patriarchs who lose control of their progeny. Having achieved a certain degree of prosperity, education and room to maneuver for the Armenian *millet*, they were challenged by a coalition of *esnafs*, i.e. artisans, intellectuals and liberalizers, some of the latter being from their own ranks (some of the technocrat-*amiras*). Together, these challengers generated pressures and acted as one arm of a pincer, the other arm of which was the increasing dependence of the Ottoman Empire on Western political protection against Russia, and Western exploitation of economic and financial opportunities in the Empire. These pincers broke the control of the power elite whom the Armenians rightly considered a class apart. Their hold broken, the *amiras* quickly disappeared into the ranks of the Armenian upper bourgeoisie, leaving behind them many traces of their economic, cultural and political activity in the Empire and the Armenian *millet*.

It is worth stressing that the activities and influence of the *amiras* extended over two planes: the Armenian millet and the Ottoman government. While as part of the latter, they were members of the Ottoman ruling stratum, enjoying distinct privileges, status and semblance of power, as Armenians, they were members of a *zimmi millet* with well-known handicaps. This duality of status clearly affected their twin role, with positive and negative results. The explanation and interpretation of the dichotomy of their status and the seeming contradictions of their roles are pivotal for this study. At the same time, this dissertation is an attempt to reconstruct the rise and fall of this class, in the hope that an understanding of what happened to the *amiras* and how it happened will also broaden our understanding of the way in which the Ottoman government ruled (and sometimes failed to rule well) the *millets* it had created.

During the course of this study a number of Ottoman and Armenian institutions are focused upon; the purpose is not to examine those institutions *per se*, for example the Ottoman financial system or the mint, or the Armenian patriarchate, but to shed enough light on them to bring out the role, usefulness and contribution of the *amiras*.