

PREFACE

By Khachig Tololyan¹

Hagop Barsoumian disappeared (he was kidnapped on 31 January 1986 and in all probability murdered at an unknown date) before he could revise this work for publication. The text of this work is essentially that of his PhD dissertation for Columbia University, researched and written in the late 1970s under the direction of Professor Nina Garsoyan. At the time of its completion around 1979 it was, as it remains now, the most thorough study of the Armenian *amiras* of the Ottoman empire.

Emerging in the early eighteenth century, the *amiras* dominated the communal life of Ottoman Armenians for a more than a century, roughly 1750-1857, before losing their status and power. Barsoumian offers an analytical narrative that tells of the emergence, dominance and eventual disappearance of this elite group, which may arguably be called the internal “ruling class” of the Ottoman Armenian community during the period.

Though strongly focused on the *amiras*, the book offers several related analyses that give it richness and complexity. First, it gives a remarkably thorough account of previous studies of the topic, judiciously pointing out both their contributions and their limitations, clarifying their muddled terminology and concepts. Second, it offers what historians call a “prosopography,” that is, an analysis of genealogical connections among elite families and the role of such connections in maintaining dominance. No one has done this for the *amiras* with anything remotely approaching Barsoumian’s thoroughness. His grasp of these connections of descent and marriage enables him to write confidently about the ways in which a dominant elite constructed and sustained itself. Third, it explores some new sources, such as letters by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Istanbul commenting on

¹ Khachig Tololyan is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, USA. He is the founding editor of *Diaspora: a journal of transnational studies* and the author of many articles on Armenian literature and culture, a few of which have been collected in *Spyurki Mech* [In Diaspora], published by the Haratch Press in Paris, 1980.