



*Position d'un clairon du 1<sup>er</sup> bataillon du régiment  
des Chasseurs-Orientaux*

## The Armenian Pioneers of Middle Eastern Photography

Badr El-Hage

Position of bugler of the First Battalion  
of the Fire Brigade, Constantinople, taken  
between 1880-93. Photo by 'Abdullah Bros.  
*Source: Library of Congress.*

**T**he Armenian community played a principal role in the flourishing of various crafts and trades in the Ottoman Empire; this involvement continued even after the fall of the Ottomans. As a response to political persecution and genocide, Armenian crafts and trades spread to refugee areas in the Eastern Arabic regions of the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt, as well as to Iran and Middle Asia.

The spread of photography, at the forefront of those trades where Armenians played a leading role, was met with puritanical religious opposition. Because photographers were labeled 'unbelievers' by some religious puritans put off by the creation of human images, only specific groups of 'Ottoman citizens' – Armenians, Syrian Christians and other minorities – pursued the craft. From the last decade of the nineteenth century, these minority groups owned photographic studios in most cities in the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt.

Such fundamentalism was challenged by gradual waves of modernization that passed from Europe to the Ottoman Empire. Prior to Francois Daguerre's announcement of his discovery of photography in Paris in 1839, Sultan Mahmoud II showed particular interest in inventions that were being publicized in the West. He turned to European experts for assistance in further developing the Ottoman army and the creation of orchestras and theatre companies mirroring those in Europe. The most prominent manifestation of the crumbling wall of tradition was the permission granted (for the first time since 1836) for the hanging of an oil painting representing the Sultan in the Suleymaniya barracks in Istanbul. That same year, medals with the drawn image of the sultan were manufactured and distributed to his guests and distinguished leaders. And in 1847, the composer and musician Franz List performed a classical concert in the sultan's palace and afterwards was gifted with a medal of the sultan. In this way, little by little, the custom of hanging portraits spread – with the picture of the sultan invading government offices and citizens' homes – ultimately becoming accepted practice among the general public.

The remainder of the puritanical atmosphere was limited to preventing Armenians from teaching the trade of photography. This, in fact, did not impact them negatively, but rather invigorated their activities in this area. The opportunity existed to gain a foothold and eventually, without exaggeration, Armenian photographers dominated the photography production market in the East until the mid-twentieth century.

There were a number of reasons why Armenians contributed to the spread of photography, some of them political and economic and others related to increasing cultural and scientific activity in the community. The latter resulted from an influx of foreign missionaries to the Ottoman Empire during the last part of the nineteenth century that sought to work with 'Ottoman minorities'.

Politically, gradual European penetration of the Ottoman Empire in the military, cultural, and scientific spheres at that time played a crucial role in shaping the economic and political structure of the East. This culminated in the final demise of the Empire, and the creation of political entities that remain in existence to this day. The French campaign in Egypt and Syria in 1799 opened the doors to increasing interests in and competition from the West over the East. Despite the failure of their military campaign, the British succeeded in the occupation of Aden in 1838 and forced Sultan Abdulmejid I to declare the *Hatt-i Sharif of Gulhane* reforms in 1839. These granted certain freedoms to religious minorities in exchange for European support against Muhammad Ali Pasha, whose intent was to expel the sultan from Syria. Militarily, the French intervened in 1855 in Lebanon during the civil war that was preceded by French and British involvement on the side of the Ottomans against the Russians in the Crimean War (1853-1856).

At the end of the war, Sultan Abdulmecid I was forced by the Europeans once again to declare an edict. The *Islahat Fermani* of 1856 granted increased benefits to non-Muslim residents of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, while consolidating European reforms, on the other. All this was done in return for support from the Europeans at the Paris Conference that ended the Crimean War. Subsequently, the British led another military intervention in 1882, whereby their forces landed in Alexandria and soon thereafter occupied Egypt.

This political and military intervention paved the way for cultural interventions. Missionary expeditions increased throughout the Ottoman Empire, including the remotest regions of the Anatol to the Levant, Iraq, and Istanbul. Armenian society, especially Catholic Armenians, witnessed a resurrection in classical Armenian studies after the eighteenth century, centered mainly in San Lazaro in Venice where books on chemistry, mathematics, physics, history, and the arts were published by the town publisher. These publications helped spread the news of European scientific inventions appearing in rapid succession, particularly after the Industrial Revolution. Among them came photography. In this remarkably educated and intellectual environment, photography spread easily.

The Armenian literary renaissance that began in the 1840s also contributed to a nationalist awakening and the spread of modern thought among their ranks. The educated, the students, and the Catholic Armenians who had lived in Paris and were greatly influenced by the French Revolution led calls for national awareness. At their forefront was Garabed Hajian, owner of *Mais* magazine, which pushed for Armenian consciousness.

Protestant Armenians, on the other hand, experienced an influx of British and American missionaries from 1840 on. These missionaries funded 131 schools in Istanbul, 'Ayntab, Marash, and other towns and cities. The French also supervised over 127 schools. In 1897, 653 secondary schools belonged to Gregorian Armenians, while 198 schools were run by Protestant Armenians. This massive expansion in the number of schools transformed the Armenian community culturally and educationally, altering its economic position while spurring competition for foreign missionary loyalties.

Istanbul was a central gathering place for Armenians coming from the Ottoman countryside. Their numbers in 1844 approximated 85,438 people in the capital city, rising noticeably in 1886 to 149,590. (Forty-three percent of them were employed in commerce, trade, industry, and skilled trades.) They also occupied respected positions in banks and as representatives of European trading companies. Foreign companies who had signed trade agreements with the Ottomans preferred Armenians as their representatives.

After the end of the Crimean War in 1856, a flood of Europeans descended upon Istanbul. By the mid-1880s, they numbered close to 10,000, the majority of them residing on Bira Street, which was jam-packed with banks, fancy warehouses displaying the latest fashions, and European products. This also explains the prominence of Armenian photography studios on this main street for over a half-century.

The existence of so many Europeans in Istanbul, increasing numbers of European tourists to the East and especially Egypt, and the growing numbers of pilgrims to the Holy Land all created a demand for previously unheard-of services and crafts (like photography). Official tourists to Istanbul, for example, proceeded directly to ‘Abdullah Brothers photography studio to record their visit with a snapshot. Among the studio patrons were British Prince Albert Edward in 1869, Emperor Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie de Montijo, and the Emperor of Austria Franz Joseph.

The popularity of Armenian photographers such as the ‘Abdullah Brothers, and the awards they claimed at international exhibitions, led the Ottoman sultans to select them as official court photographers. In 1863, ‘Abdullah Brothers Studio was selected by Sultan ‘Abd al-Azziz as palace photographer. This opened new horizons for the ‘Abdullah Brothers. They participated in the International Paris Exhibition in 1867 as part of the Ottoman wing and Sultan ‘Abd al-Azziz attended, officially visiting Paris in the first foreign visit by an Ottoman sultan. In 1886, the ‘Abdullah Brothers moved to Cairo and established a branch in their main headquarters. With a grant from the Khedive Tawfik Pasha, the studio flourished, continuing production until 1895.

At a time when the ‘Abdullah Brothers had demonstrated their cornering of the Istanbul market, facing no significant competition, Jerusalem was the site of a photographic experiment. Armenian priest Yessai Garabedian opened the first photography school for orthodox Armenians towards the end of 1859 in Saint James



Portrait of photographer Johannes Krikorian, in WWI era. Source: Aida Krikorian collection at the *Fondation Arabe pour L'Image, Beirut.*

monastery. This school played a leading role in the spread of the craft of photography among Armenians residing in the Levant. The school trained Armenian and Syrian photographers like Garabedian, Wickyfork Krikorian, Khalil Ra'ad and others.

The end of the nineteenth century was distinguished by a great number of brilliant Armenian photographers and their command of the photography production market in major cities throughout the Ottoman Empire. Armenians fell victim to political violence and massacres during the final decade of the nineteenth century between 1894 and 1897. These conditions continued between 1915 and 1917 at the hands of 'The Young Turk Organization', which forced the expulsion of many Armenians to Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and the migration of others to Europe and North America. The craft of photography was one of the means used by Armenians to rebuild their lives as they relocated. For the Armenians, the crafts they mastered became capital, dependent, as they were, upon expert knowledge. Armenians' forced migration from one country to another meant starting from zero. But with knowledge and craft as their primary capital, Armenians rose to prominence in their new communities, proving their worth, and leading economic activity in various arenas. Despite heavy migration from the Levant to North America, Armenians remain to this day key craftsmen, manufacturers, and traders.

A final observation must be made here: the Armenians were distinguished in their *esprit de corps*. From the very beginning, when they became integral to the production of photography in the early 1860s, their activity resembled a family of bees building a beehive. Brothers participated in the work. The craft was transferred from fathers to sons, or from one brother to another, or from one family to another by way of marriage. Examples of this abound.

In conclusion, what Armenian photographers produced over nearly a century is a photographic archive of great importance in a region undergoing radical changes. The photographic shots recorded by Armenian eyes remain as witness, not only to the competence of the photographer, but to a time long gone, its sole memory images upon photographic paper.

*Badr El-Hage is a London-based photography collector and author of several books on the history of photography in the Middle East. He wrote this essay on the occasion of the "Armenia is My Friend" exhibition in France. It was translated by Al Faris.*