

MONTESQUIEU'S THOUGHTS ABOUT ARMENIANS

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Charles-Louis Montesquieu (1689 - 1755), the famous writer, historian, economist, theorist of law, sociologist and aesthete, has his place in the brilliant Pleiad of the 18th century French Enlightenment thinkers. Much has been written about his life, activities and different sides of his rich literary-philosophical inheritance, but it would be wrong to say that everything has been done and nothing is left for us to do. On the contrary, Montesquieu is one of those great men in the history of world culture whose inheritance never becomes obsolete. The reason for this is that of the questions discussed by him he often gave solutions which anticipated his time. Moreover, there are also such suppositions, ideas and judgments in his works which, to our deep conviction, up to now have not been taken into consideration and therefore, they need to be elucidated and popularized.

There is no possibility of discussing all the ideas of the great thinker and humanist. But our aim is to present to the reader's attention only some of his thoughts about the Armenian people that even now have not lost their contemporary relevance and importance¹.

It appears that Montesquieu was not only a great patriot and humanist, but also an Armenophile and contributed greatly to the honest cause of elaborating a socially benevolent opinion about the Armenian people in pre-Revolutionary France. The invaluable contribution of Montesquieu to it is seen from the fact that four decades after his death, in the 9th year of the French Revolution, in 1797, the first Armenological department (acting up to now) was opened in Sorbonne University and on the ceiling of the building was imprinted in gold letters the word "Hayk" (Armenia).

We must also note that many of the great humanist's thoughts have not only historic, but up-to-date and cognitive significance. Very important in this respect is his first literary-philosophic voluminous work - "Persian letters", which he began in 1711 and finished in 1720. After a year it was published without signature and opened the way to serious discussions. Soon the author became known and the book was republished twice in the same year (1721). During the life of Montesquieu it had nine editions, of which the last one was published in 1754, one year before his death, with additions and changes made by the author. The great humanist worked over this book during his whole life which means that his thoughts and contemplations about our people derived from his long-term researches and thoughts.

¹ Mirzoyan H., Montesquieu and the Armenians. – Armenian Mind, vol. IV, N2, 2000, pp. 247-256.

Preferring the epistolary genre, widespread in the 18th century, Montesquieu by means of two Persians, discusses different social, political, academic, cultural, moral, aesthetic and religious questions, which worried progressive intellectuals. They mainly spoke about the military-feudal reality, but the great illuminator, first of all, was interested in France, its current state and vague future. It is clear that choosing as an object of his ponderings, the questions connected with the reality of Persia at the beginning of the 18th century, Montesquieu paid attention to the Armenian merchants and artisans who played a decisive role in the economic and cultural life of Safavid Persia. At the same time, he discusses the despotic regime of Iran's neighbor Turkey, and condemns the Turkish military-feudal regime - guilty of sufferings of oppressed peoples, among them the western part of the Armenian people.

The great thinker and humanitarian wrote about despotism and tyranny in Turkey: *“Les bachas, qui n'obtiennent leurs emplois qu'à force d'argent, entrent ruinés dans les provinces, et les ravagent comme des pays de conquête. Une milice insolente n'est soumise qu'à ses caprices. Les places sont démantelées, les villes désertées, les campagnes désolées, la culture des terres et le commerce entièrement abandonnés. L'impunité règne dans ce gouvernement sévère: les Chrétiens qui cultivent les terres, les Juifs qui lèvent les tributs, sont exposés à mille violences. La propriété des terres est incertaine, et par conséquent l'ardeur de les faire valoir ralentie: il n'y a ni titre ni possession qui vaille contre le caprice de ceux qui gouvernent.”*².

Is there any need to say that the words of Montesquieu on *Christian farmers and merchants* relates also to Western Armenian peasants and merchants.

As a theorist of geographic determinism Montesquieu sees a close connection between the natural and climatic conditions of a given country and the state of health of its population, their psychological and intellectual abilities. Accordingly, he complains about the mass deportation of peoples. He writes that people must live in their native lands because when they change their place there appear many diseases and illnesses due to a change in the climate: *“Il faut que les hommes restent où ils sont: il y a des maladies qui viennent de ce qu'on change un bon air contre un mauvais; d'autres qui viennent précisément de ce qu'on en change.*

*L'air se charge, comme les plantes, des particules de la terre de chaque pays. Il agit tellement sur nous, que notre tempérament en est fixé. Lorsque nous sommes transportés dans un autre pays, nous devenons malades. Les liquides étant accoutumés à une certaine consistance, les solides à une certaine disposition, tous les deux à un certain degré de mouvement, n'en peuvent plus souffrir d'autres, et ils résistent à un nouveau pli”*³.

Montesquieu recalls the deportation of the Armenians by Shah Abas more than a century before: *“Le grand Schah-Abas, voulant ôter aux Turcs le moyen d'entretenir de grosses armées sur les frontières, transporta presque tous les Arméniens hors de leur*

² Montesquieu, Ch.-L.. Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu, vol. V, 1816, Paris, pp. 50-51.

³ Ibid., p. 321.

*pays, et en envoya plus de vingt mille familles dans la province de Guilan, qui périrent presque toutes en très-peu de temps*⁴. Montesquieu is quite right to connect the deportation of the Armenians by Shah Abas with a military-strategic intention, but it was only one of the aims of the Shah, and not the only one. Actually, the aim of Shah Abas was to develop trade, arts and crafts in Iran.

It is notable that half a century before, the Armenian author of the 17th century, Arakel Davrizhetsi, describing the same deportation of the Armenians by Shah Abas, literally, in the similar manner severely condemned the deportation of peoples. With deep bitterness he wrote that the Armenians as well as the Georgians, suffered great losses because of these deportations. The Armenian historian along with the sufferings and losses of the Armenians, as the humanist-thinker describes also the horrible conditions in which deported Georgians lived⁵.

Montesquieu paid attention also to the role of the Armenian population and, particularly of merchants and craftsmen in the economic and cultural life of Iran as well as to the religious discrimination and persecution towards them. And so, condemning the atmosphere of religious discrimination in Safavid Iran he writes: *"Tu sais, Mirza, que quelques ministres de Schah-Soliman avoient formé le dessein d'obliger tous les Arméniens de Perse de quitter le royaume, on de se faire mahométans, dans la pensée que notre empire seroit toujours pollué tandis qu'il garderoit dans son sein ces infidèles. C'étoit fait de la grandeur persane, si, dans cette occasion, l'aveugle dévotion avoit été écoutée. On ne sait comment la chose manqua. Ni ceux qui firent la proposition, ni ceux qui la rejetèrent, n'en connurent les conséquences: le hasard fit l'office de la raison et de la politique, et sauva l'empire d'un peril plus grand que celui qu'il auroit pu courir de la perte d'une bataille, et de la prise de deux villes.*

*En proscrivant les Arméniens, on pensa détruire en un seul jour tous les négociants et presque tous les artisans du royaume. Je suis sûr que le grand Schah-Abas auroit mieux aimé se faire couper les deux bras que de signer un ordre pareil; et qu'en envoyant au Mogol, et aux autres rois des Indes, ses sujets les plus industriels, il auroit cru leur donner la moitié de ses États"*⁶.

Montesquieu writes that before that time fanatic Moslems had deported the most industrious farmers - the fire-worshippers and this had disastrous consequences for Persia's agriculture.⁷ And now persecuting the Armenians Persia would suffer a new consequence - its industry would perish. That would mean, as stated by Montesquieu, the fall of the empire, and together with it the fall of their religion, which they would like to flourish through that industry. I think that the words of the 18th century French

⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

⁵ Առաքել Դավրիժեցի, Գիրք պատմութեանց, Երևան, 1990, էջ 138-139:

⁶ Առաքել Դավրիժեցի, էջ 226-227:

⁷ Fred Dallmayr notes: "As a result of this religious zealotry, Persia was deprived of "a hardworking people who, by their labor alone, were close to victory over the sterility of the soil" (Dallmayr F., Montesquieu's Persian Letters, in: Montesquieu and His Legacy, ed. by Rebecca E. Kingston, New York, 2009, p. 249).

humanitarian are also true today and they sound as a condemnation not only to Safavid Iran's fanatic Moslems in the past but also to religious discrimination at all times.

It seems that Montesquieu wrote everything about the important role of the Armenian merchants and craftsmen in the economic life of Safavid Iran, the reasons for preventing catastrophes and perils for the country emerging from the policy of their apostatizing and deportation. Still, I should like to make an additional remark. The question is about the interpretations of the reasons for the failure of the above-mentioned anti-Armenian policy.⁸ In reality, the empire was saved from expected peril not by chance given by "the obligations of reason and policy", but due to the mass struggle of the Armenian people and especially of its heroic sons' resistance. To be assured in that it is quite enough to say that a notable man of Armenian culture, philosopher, grammarian and theologian Hovhannes of Jugha, disputed religious-theological questions not only with the Moslem spiritual leaders and philosophers, but also with two Persian Shahs - Shah Suleiman and Suleiman Hussein. He was able to persuade them to give up their program of persecution of the Armenians.

In this connection Montesquieu touches upon a very important problem that, in my opinion, needs to be commented upon. According to him, in every country those who do not profess the state religion do more useful service for that country than those who profess the state religion. The reason is, according to him, that the former had to attain dignity through hard work in order to be rich and prosperous. Montesquieu is quite right because in almost all countries the most difficult and dangerous social jobs were done by the people not professing the state religion, by those who were deprived of rights and oppressed. E.g. in Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran mainly Jews, Armenians and Greeks were busy in trade who at that time professed not the state religion. It is also true that trade, which brought much income to the state, was one of the difficult jobs in social life but not the most difficult one. But it would be wrong to say that those who had chosen the most difficult and dangerous job tended to be distinguished by luxury and richness. By the way, this phenomenon was discussed by Immanuel Kant too, who contrary to Montesquieu, proceeding from the principle of the originality of the character of peoples, explains the fact of the engagement of Armenians in trade, as their natural feature⁹. But we cannot agree with such a conclusion either. The question is that Stepanos Dashtetsi, a senior contemporary of Montesquieu, approached this phenomenon from another angle. He, who perhaps was born to become a poet or writer, musician or painter, but was obliged to accept the heavy burden of an Armenian living in Persia and to supplant the Cross and the Gospel of a clergyman, the pen and paper of a poet, the brush and the canvas of a painter with the counter of a merchant, and to wander about the world, approaches the question from other positions. Proceeding from his bitter fate, Dashtetsi writes that the Armenians had chosen that dangerous and unattractive way of their self-existence not according to their original

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁹ Кант И., Сочинения в шести томах. Москва, 1963-1966, т. VI, с. 572-573.

predispositions, or in order to gain luxury and rich, but because of persecutions by the conquerors who deprived the Armenians of their native land and the pursuit of military, legal service or arts, because Christian Armenians were despised by non-Christian authorities. And they dispersed themselves in both the Christian as well as in non-Christian countries as merchants and wandered about the world with their art of trade¹⁰.

A comparison of these three points of view about the same phenomenon allows one to say that the truth about any phenomenon may differ according to whether one looks at it from the inside or the outside. Of course, there is some truth in the opinions of Montesquieu and Kant, but as always happens, a part is far from the whole, though it may appear as if the whole.

Montesquieu, generally, highly appreciating the role of merchants in economically strengthening the country, as well as in establishing economic, political, scientific and cultural relations between different countries, also pays attention to the moral image of merchants. Of course, trade has both positive and negative features, and many merchants are greedy and untruthful, but still, there are people of high quality among them, - says the great illuminator. And among such ones, according to Montesquieu, the Armenian merchants are notable. Thus, he inspires his reader with love and respect towards the Armenian merchants and generally towards the Armenians. From this point of view his love-novel, "The History of Apheridon and Astarte", is very important where he shows generosity toward Armenian merchants. According to the story, Tartars took into captivity a woman named Astarta and then sold her to some Jews who left for Turkey. Her husband, Apheridon asked them to free her but in vain. They demanded an enormous sum. He appealed to many people, including Muslim and Christian clergymen, but in vain. Eventually, he appealed to "an Armenian merchant" asking him to buy him and his daughter. The Armenian merchant fulfilled his wish and Apheridon after receiving money paid a ransom for his wife, Astarta. They came back to the Armenian merchant and she pleaded to him to give her a job. Her appeals touched the Armenian merchant and he yielded to her appeals and gave both of them a job and in a year they were free. Several years later Apheridon became a rich merchant. This heathen Persian was grateful to the Armenian merchant. Apheridon found the latter and rendered him some considerable services¹¹.

Montesquieu wrote about the Armenians and Armenia in his valuable historic work, "Reflections on the Causes of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire"¹², where the straggle of Pontus and other Asian countries, including Armenia, is rightfully considered by him as a liberating one. The image of Tigran II the Great is depicted by Montesquieu against the background of the shortcomings of the last years of

¹⁰ Ս. Դաշտեցի. Մախաղ փշրանաց: Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցի անվան մատենադարան, ձեռ. N 9689, թ. 4:

¹¹ Persian Letters by M. De Montesquieu. Translated from the French, in two volumes, vol. I. The Sixth edition with several new letter and notes, Edinburgh, 1773 Letter LXVII, pp. 135-147.

¹² Reflections on the Causes of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire. Translated from the French of M. De Secondat, Baron De Montesquieu. The Third edition, Glasgow, 1752, pp. 58-61, 191.

Mithridates of Pontus. Montesquieu mentions Armenia also as a country where the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates are located.¹³

It is rather difficult to speak about the works that served as a source for Montesquieu when he wrote about the Armenian merchants and Armenia. But it is possible to tell something. Of course, he used the works of the Greek and Roman historians and writings and memoirs of the 17-18th cc. French travelers, Jan Batist Tavernie, Jan Sharden, Michel Febury. He also used such materials, which he could get from the Armenian merchants who were working freely in France and other European countries or through the oral tales and opinions about them. The result is a love-novel, "Histoire d'Apheridon et d'Astarte", where a generalized image of an Armenian merchant with high moral characteristics is embodied.

Thus, Montesquieu remains a unique friend of our people¹⁴. He contributed to the formation of true public opinion and the elaboration of a positive attitude towards the Armenian people in France and generally in the civilized world and deserves our warm and sincere gratitude.

¹³ Ibid., p. 127,

¹⁴ Montesquieu's work, "Reflections on the Causes of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire", under the title, "The Causes of the Greatness and Fall of the Roman Empire", was translated into Armenian by H.Ter-Karapetian in Constantinople in 1837. But it was not published. A copy (1839) of this translation is kept in the library of St. Jacobits in Jerusalem. We think that it is high time to fill up the gaps in this field and to publish Montesquieu's rich heritage.