

Aldo Ferrari, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

Abstract

Origin and Role of the Armenian Nobility in Russian Empire

After the fall of the national kingdoms in Armenian motherland and in Cilicia the nobility, once the dominant class of Armenian society, underwent a progressive and almost complete decline. Only in Eastern Armenia, mainly in Karabakh, some noble families (the so called *melik's*) preserved their traditional power. Beside the *meliks*, in Transcaucasia there were also some noble Armenian houses, sometimes of princely *status*, well integrated in the aristocracy of the Georgian kingdom.

After the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia these noble Armenian families continued to play quite an important role, both from a political and a cultural point of view, above all in the first decades of XIX century. Some houses, whose princely status had been already recognised in the Georgian kingdom, immediately joined the high nobility of the Russian Empire. On the contrary, the Russian government didn't recognise the princely status to the *meliks*, nonetheless they maintained an important position in Transcaucasia. According to the official statistical data, by the end of the XIX century the noble Armenian families were still quite numerous. It is remarkable that some of these families dedicated themselves to the capitalistic development of Transcaucasia.

Many members of the families of the Armenian nobility distinguished themselves in the military and civil service in the Russian Empire. I will mention here the prince Valerian Madatov (1782-1829), a hero of Napoleon and Caucasian wars, the prince Barseł Bebutov (1791-1858), whose valour emerged mainly in the Crimean war and above all the count Michail Loris-Melikov (1825-1888), a brilliant general who became the prime minister of Alexander II. Also the count Ivan Delianov, who had important political offices in the second half of XIX century, descended from a noble Armenian family.

These examples show that an accurate and not mere genealogical study of the Armenian nobility can be very fruitful also within the contemporary attempts to investigate the polycentric and multinational character of the Russian Empire, in particular as far as it concerns the co-optation of the local *élites* in the administration of the state.