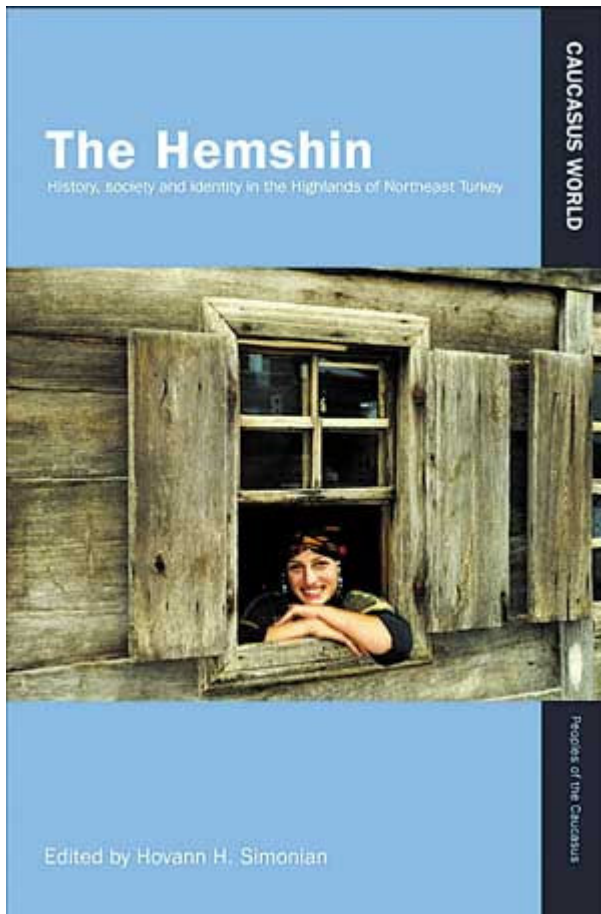


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The Hemshin: a community of Armenians who became Muslims

by Aram Arkun



Hovann H. Simonian, editor, *The Hemshin: History, Society and Identity in the Highlands of Northeast Turkey*. London and New York: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2007, 417 pages including index and illustrations.

Nearly all Armenians would insist that the Christian faith is one of the major components of the Armenian identity. Yet today more and more is heard about Muslim Armenians and crypto or secret Armenians. The very existence of Muslim Armenians in particular raises interesting questions about what fundamentally constitutes an Armenian, especially when there are Muslims who speak Armenian and preserve and practice various elements derived from Armenian culture and tradition.

The Hemshin, also called Hemshinli, include both Muslims and Christians, and speakers of dialects of Armenian as well as those who speak only versions of Turkish or other non-Armenian languages influenced by the Armenian language. They have a long and complicated history, during much of which they lived in isolation from mainstream Armenian society and faced great oppression. The Hemshin themselves have conflicting notions concerning their identity. Today numbering as many as 150,000 according to some estimates, they live in Turkey, Russia, and Georgia, as well as in some diaspora communities in the West. Not much has been written about the Hemshin in English, so the volume edited by Hovann Simonian provides a welcome introduction.

This book, focusing on the Hemshin living in Turkey, consists of chapters written by writers from a diverse group of disciplines and nationalities. A second volume, focusing on the Hemshin of the Caucasus and the rest of the former Soviet Union and including a general bibliography, is planned for publication.

Origins

Anne Elizabeth Redgate's introductory chapter examines Armenian historical sources on the origins of the Hemshin. The 7th-century Arab invasions of Armenia led to harsh treatment of the Armenian population in the subsequent century. According to the historian Ghevond's History, part of the Armenian leadership, including the Amatuni clan, rebelled, leading to the emigration of Shabuh Amatuni, his son Hamam, and many companions circa 790. They founded a new principality in the Byzantine-controlled Pontos, northwest of Armenia proper. Its capital was named Hamamashen (after Hamam), and this word was later transformed into Hamshen and used for the whole area.



Historical Hamshen lies between the Pontic mountain chain in the south and the Black Sea to the north, today part of the Turkish province of Rize. The Hemshin also live further to the east, in the Artvin province of Turkey, in the region around Hopa. Unlike their Laz neighbors, the Hemshin tend to live among the higher mountains, not immediately around the coast. Thanks to the Pontic mountains overlooking the Black Sea, Hamshen is not only fairly inaccessible, but also one of the most humid areas of Turkey, with a semi-tropical climate that sees an average of 250 days of rain every year. An almost permanent fog covers the area. The Armenians there were always in close proximity to the sea, even when their political borders did not quite reach it.

In the next chapter, Simonian briefly reviews the same Armenian historical sources referred to by Redgate, and dismisses two alternate hypotheses concerning the origins of Hamshen: that refugees following the fall of the Armenian capital of Ani in 1064 were its founders, and that after the initial arrival of the Amatunis, a sparse local Tzan population was Armenized by migrants from Ispir and Pertakrag to the south.

Much of the history of this area is still obscure. Between the late 8th and early 15th centuries, there are only two extant mentions of Hamshen, so that one can only suppose that the principality of Hamshen survived as a vassal of the larger Armenian, Byzantine, Georgian, and Turkic powers around it. Armenian manuscripts from the 15th century reveal that Hamshen had become a principality subservient to the Muslim lord of Ispir to the south, as well as to an overlord,

Iskander Bey of the Kara Koyunlu Turkmen confederation. Ispir, exclusively Armenian until the 17th century, was Hamshen's only neighbor sharing a population adhering to the church of Armenia. The other Christians in the area were Orthodox Chalcedonians. Hamshen fell to the Ottomans in the late 1480s, with its last ruler, Baron Davit (David) exiled to Ispir. The most famous member of the Armenian ruling family of Hamshen was the monk Hovhannes Hamshentsi, an eminent scholar and orator who died in 1497.

Hamshen came to be referred to as Hemshin in early Ottoman documents, where it was noted as a separate district or province. It was subject to the devshirme, or child levy, in the 16th century.

An intellectual center in a dark age



In the third chapter, Christine Maranci examines manuscript illumination in Hamshen, which, together with scribal activity, extended from the 13th to the 17th centuries. A wide variety of texts were copied, demonstrating that Hamshen was a significant intellectual center even in the 16th century, often considered a "Dark Age" for medieval manuscript illumination.

In another chapter, Simonian traces the process of Islamicization in Hemshin to the end of the 19th century. Simonian does a good job of utilizing at times contradictory or obscure Armenian and Turkish sources to better understand that process.

Ottoman records show that Hemshin was overwhelmingly Christian until the late 1620s. Starting in the 1630s, the Hemshin Armenian diocese began to decline, while one of the first mosques in the area was built in the 1640s. Conversion to Islam seems to have taken place gradually. However, it is not known whether there were particular episodic periods of crisis in which conversion accelerated. The need for equality with Laz Muslim neighbors, the desire to avoid oppressive taxation of non-Muslims, increasing general Ottoman intolerance of non-Muslims in a period of weakness for the Ottoman Empire, and anarchy created by local valley lords are some of the causes of Islamicization. Islam took root in the coastal areas first, and then advanced slowly to the highlands.

Emigration of Armenians also took place during this period of pressure on Armenians, from the 1630s to the 1850s, though fugitives who fled to other parts of the Pontos were still often forced to convert. Simonian looks at the killings, violence, and other difficulties faced by the Hemshin Armenian communities of Mala, Karadere, and Khurshunlu.

The Gesges emerge

Christians still persevered, though small in number, in Hemshin at the beginning of the 19th century. Members of the new Muslim majority produced a large number of Islamic clerics, civil servants, and military leaders for the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. These emigrants to large Ottoman urban centers all bore the epithet Hemshinli. During the centuries of conversion, odd situations were created. Mothers in some families remained Christian in belief, while fathers became Muslim; one brother might have converted to Islam, and another remained Christian. Furthermore, there emerged a segment of crypto-Christians called gesges (half-half). These Hemshin Armenians outwardly converted, but privately kept practicing various Christian customs, even sometimes including attending church services. This category of Armenians largely died out by the end of the 19th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, Ottoman proclamations of religious equality as part of the Tanzimat reform efforts led some Muslim Hemshin in the broader area to try to convert back to Christianity. This in turn led to a backlash by Muslim preachers and the opening of Turkish schools in the area. The pressure exerted by local authorities, combined with new opportunities in Muslim Ottoman society for economic and social advancement, led to the loss of the ability to speak the Armenian language for most Hemshin Armenians. However, Armenian influenced the type of Turkish spoken by the Hemshin through vocabulary, phrase structure, and accent. The Muslim Hemshin developed their own unique group identity, and have managed to maintain it till the present.



By 1870, according to Ottoman statistics confirmed by the British consul in Trebizond, there were only 23 Christian Armenian families in Hemshin. The remaining 1,561 families were Muslim.

Alexandre Toumarkine writes about the Ottoman political and religious elites among the Hemshin from the mid-19th century until 1926, with information about specific individuals and families. The Hemshinli, like the rest of the people of their area of the Black Sea, supported Atatürk initially, but entered into the camp of the opposition during the early years of the new Turkish republic. The chief organizer of the failed 1926 plot to assassinate Atatürk was a Hemshinli named Ziya

Hursid, and four other Hemshinli were also accused of being involved. In an epilogue, Toumarkine notes that a number of contemporary politicians have Hemshinli origins. They include Mesut Yilmaz, prime minister between 1997 and 1998, and Murat Karayalçın, deputy prime minister from 1993 to 1995.

Tensions in 1878-1923

In his third chapter, Simonian focuses on the 1878-1923 period and the interaction of Muslims of Armenian background and Armenians. The district of Hopa, adjacent to Hemshin, was occupied by the Russians as a result of the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War. The approximately 200 households of Islamicized Hemshinli Armenians in Hopa proved their complete adherence to Islam by not reverting to Christianity under Russian Christian rule, unlike other Armenian converts.



Part of the responsibility for the distancing between Christian and Islamicized Armenians was due to Armenians themselves. The Armenian church did not attempt to actively work with the Muslim Hemshinli, perhaps fearing problems with the Ottoman authorities. However, even in the Russian Empire, the Armenian church made no effort to try to proselytize Islamicized Armenians, and, in some cases, actually created new obstacles in the path of those who wished to revert to Christianity. At the same time, even relatively progressive secularist thinkers like Grigor Artsruni could not accept as Armenians any Muslims like the Hemshin unless they first reverted to Christianity.

Muslims of Hemshin were hired by the Catholic Armenians of neighboring Khodorchur to the south, the last district of Ispir still populated by Christians, as guides for travelers, guards, and seasonal workers. Despite these generally friendly relations, some Hemshinli Muslims who engaged in banditry also periodically attacked the Khodorchur Catholic Armenians. During World War I, some Hemshinli and other Muslims of Armenian descent robbed their Khodorchur Armenian neighbors and took over their properties. The last Christian Armenian village in Hemshin, Eghiovit (Elevit), was destroyed, with its population deported and killed. After the war, Khodorchur was partially repopulated by Hemshinli.

In Hopa and more particularly in Karadere Valley and regions closer to Trebizond, Islamicized Armenians helped Christians instead of robbing them.

During the war, some Hemshinli were mistaken for Armenians because of their language and killed. During the Russian occupation of the area from 1916 to 1918, there were no recorded instances of reversion to Christianity among the Islamicized Armenians and Greeks.

Hagop Hachikian has a chapter on the historical geography and present territorial distribution of the Hemshinli, examining toponyms and historical sources to ascertain where and when settlements were established. Interestingly, Hemshinli Armenians settled in areas around the western Black Sea in various waves of emigration beginning immediately prior to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Emigration to this area continued in the period of the Turkish republic, with Hemshinli usually either settling in separate quarters of villages, or establishing monoethnic villages. Hemshinli continued to migrate, with diaspora communities of thousands now existing in Germany and the United States.

Meanwhile, thousands of village names that were found to have non-Turkish roots were changed by 1959, adding to the changes in names taken from the start of the 20th century under the Young Turks. This eliminated many of the originally Armenian names of the Hemshinli villages.

Villages today

Erhan Gürsel Ersoy writes about the present-day social and economic structures of the Hemshin people living in Çamlıhemşin in Rize Province from the perspectives of cultural ecology. Houses are in the middle of agricultural land, so that villages have no real center and residences are dispersed over wide expanses. Ersoy looks at recent attempts at modernization of infrastructure in the region, including the building of some roads and the advent of telephones and electricity in the 1980s and 1990s.



In the early 19th century, many men from the Hemshin area emigrated to the Caucasus and Balkans, as well as large Ottoman cities. Emigration within Turkey continued in modern times, with Hemshinli becoming entrepreneurs and opening a large number of patisseries, bakeries, tea houses, coffee shops, restaurants, taverns, and hotels in large cities and towns such as Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. Though the Hemshinli are a patriarchal society, a high number of women serve as the de facto heads of their households, given the fact that so many men migrate to the towns. The rural extended family structure has been breaking up. Locally most households still subsist on agriculture and animal husbandry, with women doing most of work.

Gülşen Balıkçı examines western Hemshin folk architecture in three villages of the Rize area. Like many traditional Armenian homes, the stable for animals is located at the ground floor at the back of the house. People live on the second floor, and there is a third floor too. An outdoor toilet is near the stable. Baths are taken either in the stable or near the oven inside the house. A fountain is built near the back entrance, and water is brought into the house through a hose. Food that will be used shortly is hung in cloth bags from the ceiling, as a way of protection against mice and insects. A number

of auxiliary buildings or structures are placed next to the house. The most important of these is a raised storage platform on posts called serender, in which food was kept for long periods.

The languages of the Hemshin

Bert Vaux explains that the language of the Armenians of Hamshen depend on their location. The western Hemshinli living in the Turkish province of Rize speak Turkish peppered with Armenian words, while the eastern Hemshinli in the province of Artvin speak a dialect of Armenian they call Homshetsma. Non-Islamicized Hamshen Armenians who live in Russia and Georgia speak the same dialect.



Homshetsma, never a written language, developed in isolation. Thus it preserves various archaisms, along with developing some idiosyncrasies. Homshetsma belongs to the Western Armenian family of dialects. Vaux provides some short texts in eastern and northern Homshetsma dialects as appendices to his overview. Uwe Bläsing, the author of two monographs concerning the Hemshin dialect, provides an overview of the Armenian vocabulary still used by the now Turkish-speaking western Hemshinli.

Hagop Hachikian examines aspects of the Hemshin identity. Two distinct Hemshinli identities exist: Rize and Hopa, or west and east, with distinct geographical and linguistic attributes. Aside from differences in language, the Hemshinli of Hopa do not use the traditional head covering of those of Rize. Those in the west still observe a festival of Armenian pagan origin known as Vartevor or Vartivor (Vartavar in Armenian, transformed through Christianization into a celebration of the Transfiguration of Christ) and have a richer repertoire of traditional dances. Their level of literacy and education is much higher than that of the east. The Rize Hemshinli, whose members have achieved high office, thus manage to preserve their distinctiveness while proclaiming a Turco-Muslim identity. Both branches of the Hemshinli still have some Armenian-derived family names.

In public, many Hemshinli reject an Armenian origin, and some even insist they were descended from Turks from Central Asia who founded the "Gregorian" denomination of Christianity. They are upset by Lazi and others who call them Armenians.

A lively culture

Ersoy, in another chapter, also examines aspects of identity. The western Hemshinli follow a very pragmatic version of Islam, and still drink alcohol, sing folk songs, and dance in mixed company. Ersoy looks at the Vartevor festival. Today it is organized by a committee with a chairman. Money is collected from each household in the highland pastures to pay a

bagpipe player, buy alcohol, and pay for any other expenses. Drinking, fireworks, and folk dancing are the main attractions. Ersoy looks at a second festival with Armenian roots, the Hodoç festival, which takes place during haymaking, but is not as widely celebrated as Vartevor. It, too, includes food, drink, and folk dancing.

Ildikó Bellér-Hann explores Hemshinli-Lazi relations. The Lazi (Laz in Turkish), converts to Islam from Christianity during Ottoman times, live in the same areas as the Hemshinli, and number perhaps around 250,000. They have preserved their Caucasian language, related to Georgian, orally, and so are bilingual like the eastern Hemshinli. Lazi and Hemshinli are locally often contrasted with each other. The Lazi stereotypically are represented as agriculturalists, as opposed to the pastoralist Hemshinli. The Hemshinli are considered pacifists and calm, compared to the nervous, hot-blooded, and violent nature of the Lazi. The Hemshinli are said to be planners, whereas the Lazi are entrepreneurial and ambitious but live for the day. Hemshinli consider the Lazi mean and inhospitable, and also point out their large noses, while Lazi complain of the odor and lack of hygiene of the Hemshinli (a result of work with large numbers of animals).

Intermarriage between the two groups has been limited. Traditionally, it has been asserted that Hemshinli brides were taken by Lazi men, but no Lazi women married Hemshinli men. However, statistics from the 1940s and 1950s, and the late 1980s and early 1990s, belie this pattern.

Rüdiger Benninghaus examines the methods and consequences of the manipulation of ethnic origins by both western Hemshinli and non-Hemshinli, especially Turks. Attempts to prove the Hemshinli to have Turkish origins fit in with broader historiographical and linguistic approaches in Turkey, which in the 1930s went to the extreme of proclaiming that all languages derived from Turkish, and all civilizations were either Turkish in origin or influenced by the Turks historically.



Simonian's volume contains a wealth of information on the Hemshin, but may be a little difficult for general readers who are not familiar with Armenian and Turkish history. The problem is due in part to the complicated nature of the topic as well as the disparate approaches of chapters common to many multi-author works. There is some overlap between chapters, which perhaps could have been avoided. A general map of the region would have been useful for readers in the early part of the volume. It may be hard to keep track of the different towns of the original Hemshin territory, versus those to which the Hemshin later spread.

Most of the captions of the photographs of manuscripts and bindings pertaining to Christina Maranci's chapter have been matched to the wrong image, forcing readers to guess at the correct ascriptions. An errata insert would alleviate this problem. Some of the black-and-white illustrations in other sections of the book appear a bit faint.

Overall, this is an excellent resource book, and it is obvious that Simonian and the authors have put in much effort to use inaccessible primary sources in a variety of languages. Hopefully, Simonian's second volume will soon appear, and the two volumes in turn will lead to new monographic studies.