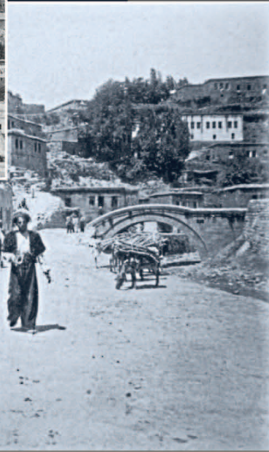
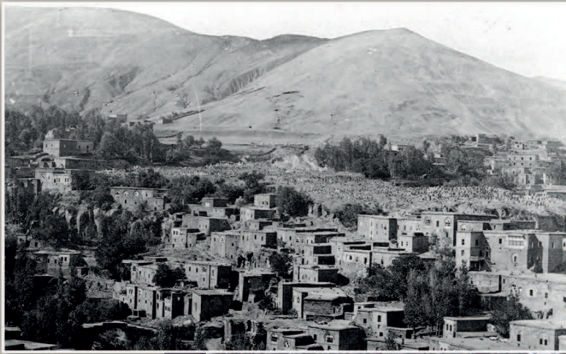


GOR YERANYAN

# THE KURDISH-SPEAKING ARMENIANS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND PRINT



Հատորը հրատարակվում է «Հայագիտական ուսումնասիրությունները  
ֆինանսավորող համահայկական հիմնադրամ»-ի և  
«ՋԵՅ ԹԻ ԱՅ ԱՐՄԵՆԻԱ» ՓԲԸ-ի ֆինանսավորմամբ:  
Մատենադարան Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցի անվան հին ձեռագրերի ինստիտուտը  
և «Մատենադարանի բարեկամներ» բարեգործական հիմնադրամը  
երախտագիտություն են հայտնում աջակցության համար

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Երևան 2025

MATENADARAN  
MESROP MASHTOTS INSTITUTE OF ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS

GOR YERANYAN

THE KURDISH-SPEAKING  
ARMENIANS OF THE OTTOMAN  
EMPIRE: IDENTITY, LANGUAGE  
AND PRINT

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This monograph is dedicated to the pre-Genocide history of the Kurdish-speaking Armenians of the Ottoman provinces of Bitlis and Diyarbekir (Tigranakert). The history of this unique and often overlooked population is examined in the wider sociopolitical contexts of Ottoman and Western Armenian life. For the first time, a detailed district-by-district demographic picture is provided of the area of Kurdish-speaking Armenian habitation. There follows a discussion of several questions relating to Kurdish-speaking Armenians' identity, including their self-conception, description by other Armenians and foreign travellers, and the place of linguistically assimilated Armenians amid competing religious and linguistic paradigms of national identity during the late Ottoman period. A separate chapter is dedicated to efforts to educate Kurdish-speaking Armenians in their ancestral language: their driving motives, their results, and their reflection of the aspirations and hardships characteristic of Armenian life in the Kurdish-speaking provinces at the turn of the 20th century. The final chapter presents a bibliographical list and discussion of all known Kurdish-language books printed in the Armenian alphabet.

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This new edition has been revised by the author.

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# Acknowledgments

I had not planned to write a book on the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians; as a researcher at the Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran), my initial undertaking was a study of the Armenian-script Kurdish manuscripts kept in the Matenadaran archives. It was in the course of this inquiry that I became convinced of the need for a more comprehensive work reflecting on the spread of the Kurdish language in historical Armenia and the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians. As a historian, I have found this topic to be of great interest in itself. Another significant personal experience also contributed to the evolution of my initial research into a broader study: I was born and raised in the village of Darakert in the Ararat province of the Republic of Armenia, where a significant part of the local population (not including my own family) are descended from Kurdish-speaking Armenians who settled there in the 1940s.

On this occasion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Matenadaran, which has afforded me the chance to undertake this project. Concurrently, while working on the monograph, I engaged in discourse with the elderly Kurdish-speaking Armenians of Darakert, some of whom shared their personal memories or passed on written memoirs, for which I express my profound gratitude. It is worth noting that a number of these individuals have passed away in recent years, may God rest their souls.

During this period, I engaged in constructive discourse on various issues with my scholarly friends and colleagues, to whom I also extend my sincere thanks. Most of all, I must express my deep gratitude to my wife and parents for their unwavering support and assistance throughout my academic journey.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to the translator of the book, Thomas Toghramadjian, for his exemplary professionalism, meticulous work, and productive collaborative discussion.



## Translator's Note

In translating this rich and thorough study, which draws extensively on both Eastern and Western Armenian primary sources, we have found it impractical to adhere to one single system of Armenian transliteration. Rather, we have employed Eastern or Western Armenian phonetic transliteration as the context demanded. Our objective in all cases has been to provide a readable and accurate phonetic equivalent of the original term. For the sake of consistency and clarity the following rules have been maintained:

1. We have generally followed the 2023 Library of Congress Armenian Romanization Table, which avoids the special characters used in other Armenian transliteration systems (*kh* rather than *x*, *gh* rather than *ġ*, *sh* rather than *š* or *ş*, and so on). Only the special character *ě* is employed as an equivalent for the Armenian ը (IPA /ə/, as in the English until). Except when providing Armenian terms in parentheses, we have omitted the apostrophes used to represent aspirated sounds, as well as the dotted *ṙ* used to distinguish the rolled Ռ from the soft Ր.
2. For sources in classical Armenian orthography, the letter Ե is transliterated *ye* in initial position, *e* in medial and final position, and *y* when forming a part of the diphthong *kuu*. Similarly the letter Յ is transliterated *h* in initial position, *y* in medial position, and omitted when silent at the end of a word. The standalone լ is transliterated *v*, the diphthong իլ is rendered *yu*, and ու (oo as in boot), is transliterated *u*.
3. The names of Armenian authors and historical figures are presented in their most commonly accepted English form. In cases of conflict or names not widely referenced in English-language sources, we have determined whether to use Eastern or Western Armenian spelling based on the individual's place of origin and primary

milieu. The distinction is generally marked by the use of the -ian suffix for Western Armenian surnames and a -yan suffix for Eastern Armenian surnames. Hence Peniamin Zhamgochian rather than Beniamin Zhamkochyan, Mgrdich Dikranian rather than Mkrtych Tigranyan, and so on.

4. Historical Armenian toponyms have been consistently transliterated according to the Eastern Armenian standard, which more closely corresponds to the classical pronunciation. Hence Tigranakert rather than Dikranagerd, Karin rather than Garin, Taron rather than Daron, Baghesh rather than Paghesh, Nprkert rather than Nprgerd and so on. In quoting source materials, we have elided simple differences in Eastern and Western Armenian spelling; for instance, Պիթլիս and Բիթլիս both become “Bitlis,” Սղերդ and Սղերս both become “Sghert,” and so on. As a rule, however, we have transliterated names directly, preserving the variety in usages such as Kharzan/Gharzan, Silvan/Slivan, Rêndvan/Rdvan, and Bashnegh/Bashnik.
5. Aside from proper nouns, all Armenian words, including the names of periodicals and newspapers, have been transliterated according to the Eastern Armenian standard. Hence *Avetaber* rather than *Avedaper*, *Azatamart* rather than *Azadamard*, and so on.

The names of hundreds of Armenian and Assyrian villages appearing in the text and appendices present a special challenge, as these refer in practically all cases to locales that no longer exist under their former names, if at all. Such minor toponyms have been transliterated phonetically in agreement with the Armenian standard (Eastern or Western) of the source in which they are mentioned. In an overwhelming majority of cases, this has entailed Western Armenian transliteration. However, it appears that the editors of the 1985 edition of Arisdages Devgants’ *Visit to Armenia*, a key source of demographic information, introduced certain features of Eastern Armenian phonology into the spelling of toponyms, for which reason we have found it necessary to exercise a degree of independent discretion. For the reader’s convenience and in order to avoid unnecessary distortion, we have provided the original Armenian spelling of the villages listed in the appendices.

A still greater challenge was the proper romanization of Kurdish text in Armenian script—in effect, producing a transliteration of a transliteration. For various reasons, the basically phonetic approach adopted throughout the remainder of the book was deemed unsuitable for this task. The author himself has provided two transliterations of all titles and extracts of Armeno-Kurdish books discussed in Chapter 4. In each case, the first transliteration strictly follows the Hübschmann-Meillet system, based on classical Armenian pronunciation, which has the virtue of using a single character to represent each separate Armenian letter. The second transliteration follows the Western Armenian pronunciation of consonants (corresponding to the authors' own usage), and employs the Hawar alphabet currently used for representing the Kurmanji language. It should be emphasized, however, that this Hawar transliteration emulates the texts' original Armenian spelling rather than modern Kurdish orthography and pronunciation. Again, for the sake of accuracy and convenience, the original Armenian has been maintained alongside the transliteration.

Citations of Armenian sources are provided first in parallel English and Armenian, and subsequently in English. Very occasionally, for unattributed and untitled newspaper articles, we have simply listed the publication, date and page in English. For repeated citation of press materials, we have preferred redundancy over abbreviation so that the reader interested by a particular passage may find the source without losing time in search of the initial citation.

**Thomas Toghramadjian**

# PREFACE

This monograph represents an inquiry into the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians, their identity in the late Ottoman period, and Kurdish-language literature printed in the Armenian alphabet. Before turning to the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians themselves, it is necessary to first outline a general account of the formation of this cultural-historical environment: the origins of Armenian-Kurdish relations.<sup>1</sup>

The first incidental contacts between Armenians and Kurds, in all probability, began during the period of Arab rule during the 8th-9th centuries, but intercommunal contact became more pronounced and more visible during the 10th-11th centuries. The mass migration of Kurdish tribes, however, is not always recorded in primary sources; Kurds entered Armenia not only as armed invaders, but as herders as well. Perpetual migration and the vital necessity of finding new grazing areas induced tribes of pastoral nomads to move towards Armenia.

It was most likely the movement of the Seljuks out of the depths of Iran toward Atropatene (Iranian Azerbaijan) that obliged the region's large Kurdish population, in turn, to move toward Mesopotamia and Armenia. This migration of Kurdish tribes took place along two primary vectors: from Atropatene toward Vaspurakan (the vicinity of Lake Van), and from Mesopotamia toward Arzanene (between western Tigris and the eastern Taurus Mountains). The weakening and gradual breakdown of Mongol rule

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding initial Armenian-Kurdish contacts, see **Leo**, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, Yerevan, 1967, pp. 635-641 (**Լեո**, *Երկերի ժողովածու*, հտ. 2), **Asatrian G.**, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds*, "Iran and the Caucasus", vol. 13, 2009, pp. 1-57, **Margaryan, H.** The tradition of the origin of the Zakaryans in medieval Armenian historiography, *Patma-Banasirakan Handes*, 1992 № 2-3, pp. 139-152 (**Մարգարյան Հ.**, *Չաքարյանների ծագման ավանդությունը միջնադարյան հայ պատմագրության մեջ*, «ԳԲՀ»). See also: **Поладян А.**, *Курды в VII-X веках (по арабским источникам)*, Ереван, 1987, **Poladyan A.** *The Kurds in the era of the Abbasid Caliphate (X-XI centuries)*, Yerevan 1999. (**Փոլադյան Ա.**, *Քրդերը Աբբասյան խալիֆայության ժամանակաշրջանում (X-XI դդ.)*).

during the 1330s proved a decisive factor in the establishment of local Kurdish dominion, creating the opportunity for Kurdish tribes to assume sovereignty in the southern regions of the Armenian Highland. Immediately following the end of the Mongol period, Kurdish tribes established rule in Bitlis (the Rojki or Ruzki tribe) and around the basin of Lake Van (the Shamo or Shambo tribe).<sup>2</sup> It is not incidental that the oldest known Kurdish text, a 15th-century prayer in the Armenian alphabet, was written at Arjesh (Erciş) in the vicinity of Lake Van. This may be considered the earliest attestation of the knowledge and use of the Kurdish language in an Armenian environment.

After these regions' accession to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, the local authority of Kurdish tribes was consolidated by the Ottoman administrative system. In the decentralized Ottoman system of governance, the administrative units called “*yurtluk*,” “*ocaklık*” and especially “*hükümet*”<sup>3</sup> would become the hereditary property of local Kurdish rulers—a circumstance which left an indelible stamp upon the historical fate of these regions and their inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> By the late Ottoman period, Armenians and Kurds constituted an absolute majority in the aforementioned regions (encompassing the southern and southwestern areas of the “Eastern Anatolia” and “Northeastern Anatolia” regions of the

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<sup>2</sup> During the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the domains of the Shamo or Shambo (Hakkari) Kurds extended over Julamerk, Gavar, Aghbak, Van, and Vostan. The domain of the Rojki encompassed Baghesh (Bitlis) Khlat (Ahlat), and the neighboring regions. For further information on these semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities, see Levon Khachikyan's treatment of the subject in: **Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts of the 15th century**, Part II (1451–1480), Comp. L. Khachikyan, Yerevan, 1958, pp. LIV-LVIII (**ԺԵ դարի հայերեն ձեռագրերի հիշատակարաններ**, Մասն երկրորդ). Concerning the Shambo Kurds see also **Khachatryan, A.** Regarding the problem of the formation of the Hakkari Kurdish principality (14th century), *The Countries and Peoples of the Middle East*, № 13, Kurdish Studies, Yerevan, 1985, p. 134 (**Խաչատրյան Ա.**, Հայքարի քրդական իշխանության կազմավորման հարցի շուրջ (ԺԴ դար), Մերձավոր և Միջին Արևելքի երկրներ և ժողովուրդներ).

<sup>3</sup> In the Ottoman administrative system, the districts known as “*yurtluk*,” “*ocaklık*” and “*hükemet*” differed from ordinary, classical Ottoman cantons by virtue of the various special privileges they enjoyed. See **Agoston, G.** “A Flexible Empire: Authority and its Limits on the Ottoman Frontiers”, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, 9, 1 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 15-31.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding relations between the Kurdish emirs and the Ottoman central authorities see: **Özcoşar, İ.** Sultan Ve Mir: Osmanlı Kürt İlişkilerine Giriş, Osmanlı Devleti Ve Kürtler, edit. İbrahim Özcoşar-Shahab Vali, İstanbul, 2017, pp. 9-35.

modern-day Republic of Turkey), with the Turkish demographic element being practically inconsiderable, sometimes expressed only in the presence of Ottoman officials. These areas also were home to significant Assyrian and Yezidi minorities.

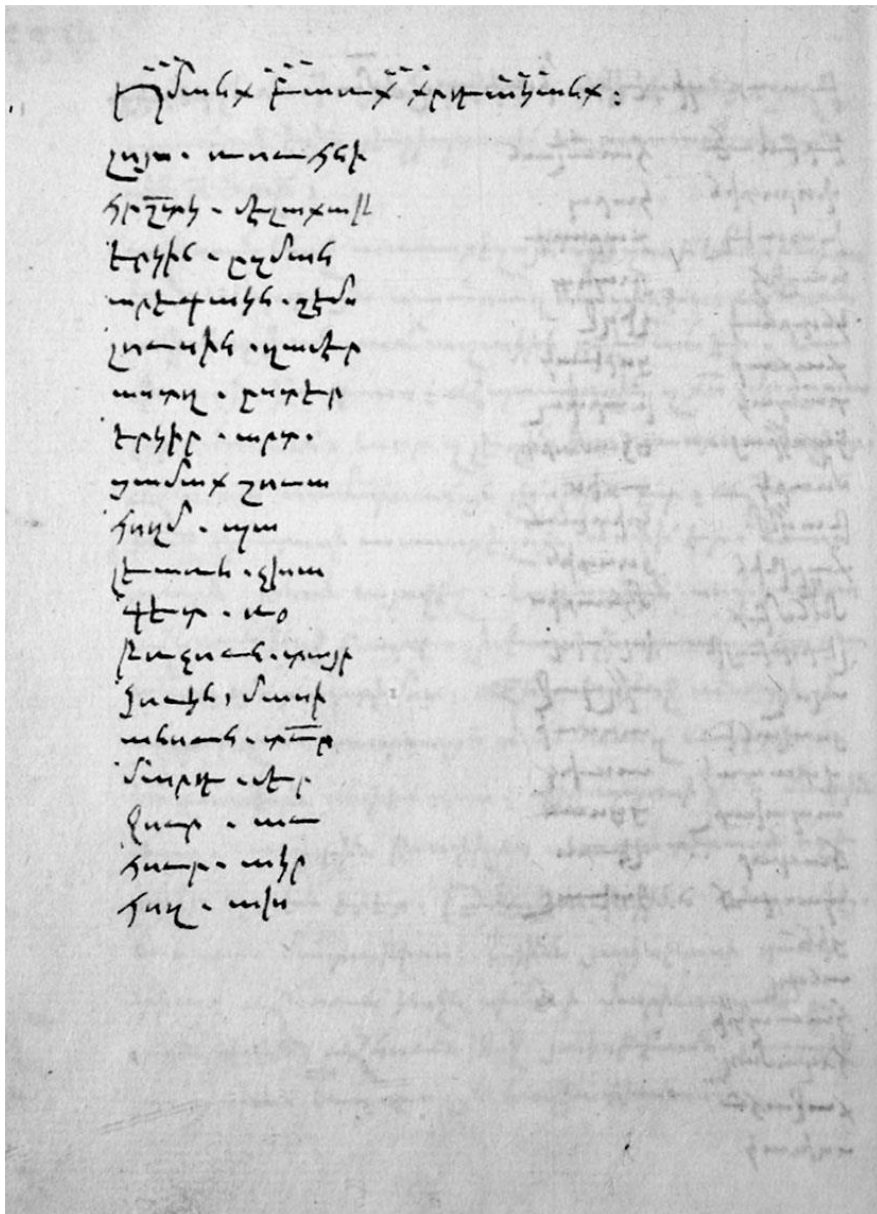
It was only in one small belt of the general region of Armenian and Kurdish habitation that the local Armenian population became Kurdish-speaking. Cut off from the centers of Armenian spiritual life and constituting isolated islands in a Kurdish sea, these Armenians gradually forwent the use of their native language and adopted the idiom of their surroundings.

Naturally, the process of forgetting Armenian and adopting the Kurdish language required a considerable length of time. By the early 20th century, the Kurdish-speaking character of certain districts was regarded as “having taken root over the course of centuries.”<sup>5</sup> In an 1806 book concerning the Tatik district of Bitlis, Ghukas Inchichian writes that “they speak Kurdish, having forgotten Armenian.”<sup>6</sup> Since Tatik constituted the northern extremity of the Kurdish-speaking Armenian regions, it is possible to say in all confidence that the more southern regions had also become entirely Kurdish-speaking at least by the time of Inchichian’s writing. The fact of the matter is that, by the beginning of the 19th century, these Armenian-populated districts were already entirely Kurdish-speaking, in the strict sense of the word—Armenian speakers were simply nowhere to be found.

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<sup>5</sup> **For the Kurdish-Speaking Armenians**, Farghin, *Azatamart*, Constantinople, 1911, № 641, p. 3. (**Քրտախօս Հայերուն Համար**, Փարդին, «Ազատամարտ»).

<sup>6</sup> **Inchichian, Gh.** *Geography of the Four Parts of the World: Asia, Europe, Africa and America*, vol. I, Venice, 1806, p. 180. (**Ինճիճեան Դ.**, Աշխարհագրութիւն Չորից Մասանց Աշխարհի՝ Ասիոյ, Եւրոպայի, Ափրիկոյ և Ամերիկոյ, Մասն Առաջին. Ասիա, հտ. Ա.).



Attempted composition of an Armenian-Kurdish dictionary,  
MM Ms № 771, 18th century

It is necessary, at this juncture, to provide a terminological clarification. In saying “Kurdish” we refer in the first instance to the

Kurmanji language; therefore the term “Kurdish-speaking” may be understood to mean “Kurmanji-speaking.” In referring to “Kurdish-speaking Armenians” we mean that portion of the Armenian population which had forgotten the Armenian language and spoke only Kurdish. With respect to the process by which Armenians became Kurmanji-speaking, consideration should also be made of the Yezidi communities which periodically existed in close proximity to the Kurdish-speaking Armenians, particularly in the regions of Sghert and Diyarbekir.

One central concern of this monograph is to clarify the boundaries of Kurdish-speaking Armenian habitation during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Insofar as our discussion pertains to the late Ottoman Era (from the 19th century until the Armenian Genocide), we will base our presentation of Kurdish-speaking Armenian districts on the Ottoman administrative divisions of this same period. Drawing upon the information presented in a wide variety of sources, we have reconstructed a demographic picture of Kurdish-Armenian provinces, cities, and clusters of villages, indicating the extent of their Armenian population.

In certain cases, sources present conflicting information regarding the predominance of the Kurdish or Armenian language in a given region. We have considered it proper to extend our review to these “disputed regions” as well, undertaking as far as possible to understand and reconstruct the linguistic mosaic once extant in these areas.

However much the Kurdish-speaking Armenian districts may have presented the appearance of isolated communities, they did not fail to take part in broader trends affecting of the Ottoman Empire; accordingly, the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians must be examined both in the overarching context of the Ottoman Empire and its eastern provinces, as well in relation to the particular situation of Western (Ottoman) Armenian communities. This monograph dedicates particular attention to the identity of Kurdish-speaking Armenians, their self-description and description by outsiders, and conceptions of this community in Armenian-speaking and foreign circles. We simultaneously examine the ideological ferment among Western Armenians during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the definition and re-definition of their collective identity, and attempt to locate the place of the Kurdish-speaking Armenian within these general currents.



The third section of the monograph describes the inception and course of various initiatives to teach the Armenian language to Kurdish-speaking Armenians, their motives, and their religious and national components. We have singled out two comparatively major, large-scale efforts to this end. The first such effort, called the “Kurdistan Mission” (*Krdstani misia* or *Krdistani gorts*), was undertaken by in the 1860s by Armenian Protestants living in the regions of Tigranakert (Diyarbakir) and Kharpert and having an immediate familiarity with Kurdish-speaking Armenian communities. The second initiative was linked to an educational organization based in Constantinople, the United Armenian Society, (*Hayots' miats'yal ênkerut'tyun*), which founded primary schools, academies and other provincial educational institutions for the benefit of the Kurdish-speaking Armenians of Tigranakert and Sghert.

One consequence of the prolonged interrelation between Armenians and Kurds was the emergence of Kurdish manuscript and, later, printed literature in the Armenian alphabet. The concluding section of this book presents for the first time a comprehensive bibliographic catalogue of Kurdish-language books printed in the Armenian alphabet, along with details unearthed about the circumstances of their publication and certain observations regarding their linguistic-stylistic features.

It is necessary to emphasize that although a large part of the Kurdish-speaking Armenian population was massacred and deported during the Armenian Genocide, Kurdish-speaking Armenians constituted the one segment of the Western Armenian population that continued to live, more or less collectively, in their previous places of habitation until the 1930s, and in certain cases (i.e., in Kharzan-Bsharik) until the beginning of the 1940s. Gradually departing the Republic of Turkey mainly in the 1930s, Kurdish-speaking Armenians later took up residence in Syria (primarily in Qamishli). After the Second World War, from the 1940s until the 1960s, a part of the Kurdish-speaking Armenian population established itself by stages in Soviet Armenia. Descendants of Kurdish-speaking Armenians remaining in the vicinity of Kharzan (Garzan, Kurtalan), Bsharik (Beşiri) and Sghert (Siirt) lived within the bounds of Kurdish or Islamic identity,

although some maintained the memory of their Armenian origin.<sup>7</sup> Massacres of Kurdish-speaking Armenians during the Armenian Genocide and their post-genocide history are, however, beyond the scope of this work.<sup>8</sup>

We may permit ourselves to observe that there exists to date no comprehensive scholarly work dedicated to Kurdish Armenians as such, aside from Hrachya Acharyan's brief discussion regarding the area of their habitation.

In sum, this monograph is an attempt to reconstruct the history of Kurdish-speaking Armenians, an inquiry whose central concerns are to outline the linguistic micro-landscape in which they resided, to examine the particular features of Kurdish-speaking Armenian identity, to determine the place of Kurdish-speaking Armenians within the broader frame of Armenian identity, and to analyze Kurdish-language books printed in the Armenian alphabet.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a pressing need for scholarship concerning the identity and history of Kurdicized or Islamized Armenians who remained in their previous areas of habitation after the Armenian Genocide.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding massacres of Kurdish-speaking Armenians, see **Kevorkian, R.** The Armenian Genocide, A complete History, London, New York, 2011, pp. 339-40, 367-368. Regarding massacres in the district of Sghert, see: **The Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey: Survivor Testimonies, Collected Documents**, Vol. II, Bitlis Province, Yerevan, 2012, pp. 107-121. (Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը Օսմանյան Թուրքիայում, Վերապրածների վկայություններ, Փաստաթղթերի ժողովածու, հտ. II, Բիթլիսի նահանգ).

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