

"EUROPEAN" ARMENIANS

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✘ Editorial, 31 August 2014

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To consider—as most people do--the Ural Mountains are the static dividing line between Asia and Europe would be inaccurate. History shows that Europe's eastern boundaries have been elastic. A millennium ago the River Don was the boundary between Asia and Europe. At the end of the 15th century the line advanced to the banks of the Volga River. A century later the demarcation line had reached the River Ob. In the 19th century the Urals affixed the boundary between the two continents. In the 20th century the boundary shifted to the banks of the Rivers Emba and Kerch, near Kazakhstan. Clearly, in the past millennium geography has not been the determinant of Europe's eastern boundaries.

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Culturally, Armenia is a blend of the East and the West. While in recent decades Johnny-come-lately Turkey has typically barged in to claim that it's 'the' bridge between Asia and Europe, Armenia was the original bridge for two-thousand years. Surrounded by Muslim nations (and sometimes occupied by them), Armenians are Christians—a faith they share with Europeans. Christianity has also been the main channel of Armenian cultural expression in the past 1,700 years.

Even before the birth of Christ, Armenians were rubbing shoulders with the Greeks and the Romans:

~~sometimes fighting them; sometime occupied by them; sometimes forming alliances with them.~~ A few decades after the Crucifixion, King Drtad I of Armenia received his crown from Emperor Nero. Armenia maintained relations with the West through Byzantium, the eastern half of the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages Armenia even sent missionaries and monks to far away Ireland. Then came the Crusaders and further alliances with the West. A number of respected scholars believe that in addition to exporting Armenian military architecture to Europe, the Crusaders took Armenian civic architecture to Europe. The latter was given the "Gothic" misnomer in Europe, although the Goths were barbarians whose contribution to Europe was pillage and death; they were forerunners of the marauding Turkic tribes.

After the fall of Ani, many Armenians fled to Eastern Europe and established towns, trading posts as far north as Poland. By the 16th century Armenian merchants were traipsing up and down Europe thus continuing cultural cross-pollination between Armenia and Europe. After the establishment of the Romanov dynasty Armenians began their tortuous and prolonged campaign to persuade Russia to liberate Armenia from Turkish/Persian rules. In the 18th and 19th century Armenians came to perceive Europe as the fountain of modern civilization and progress. Armenian young men in Tiflis and in Constantinople headed to Venice, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Dorpat (then German-ruled Estonia), and Paris for their education. They returned brimming with ideas of the Enlightenment. Armenians have maintained that cultural adoration/aspiration, and imitated Western ideals and values. In the 60 years following the Genocide, Armenians, who had survived the Genocide and settled in the Middle East, were often modems between Western culture and the Arab world.

If race is the determinant as to what continent Armenia belongs, Armenia would be as European as the denizens of London, Paris and Rome. Like them, Armenians belong to the Aryan (not a scientific term) race and their language is Indo-European.

What would be the benefits, for Armenia, to be considered European? It's certainly not an admission ticket to the European Union. Neither will it guarantee Armenia's security. Europe can't defend Armenia against Turkey. Armenia also can't expect the United States to abandon its long-time ally Turkey for Armenia: when America considers Asian and Muslim Turkey far more important than European and Christian Greece, what chance does Armenia have of American support in case of conflict with Turkey?

Some political pundits and scholars in Armenia and in the Diaspora insist that Armenians are in denial and that Armenia is a Middle Eastern country with a future that should be firmly in the East. However, the East right now is not an option for Armenia: Turkey and Azerbaijan are hostile; the Arab world continues to be in tumult; in Central Asia the people are mostly Turkic. While Tehran is eager to solidify its relations with Armenia, Iran is isolated since the West decided to make it a pariah state. As well, Iran is not a big player on the world political or economic stage.

While Arab countries co-operate, to some extent, with other Arab countries because of shared

religion, ethnicity and cultural affinity, Armenia doesn't have similar "siblings". In most places outside the Arab world, religion, ethnicity, geography are not significant factors in weaving alliances. What matters in international politics is naked self-interest. Justice and religious proximity are not part of the equation. We learned that lesson at the Congress of Vienna close to 140 years ago. We learned that lesson when Britain said its ships couldn't climb Mount Ararat, although they could certainly climb the much-higher Mount Everest. We learned that lesson when the French abandoned us in Cilicia.

To be a desired friend, a country has to be desirable. To have solid allies Armenia has to offer something (political, economic, military, strategic, strategic, and cultural) of value to potential allies.

Whether Armenians are European or Asian is really of tertiary importance, if not irrelevant. Besides, they say we now all live in a flattened and "globalized" world.

