

VAHRAM L. SHEMMASSIAN, *The Musa Dagh Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939*. Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2015. Pp. 376.

An inscription on a mural depicting Musa Dagh (Mount Moses) in a small community room next to the Armenian church in Anjar reads: “We are still on the Mountain.” In 1939, a majority of Musa Dagh Armenians relocated to Anjar after two decades of exile and return, while others scattered around the globe, from Africa to the Americas, often carrying with them their traditions and culture, thus remaining “on the mountain.” It is this multi-layered history that comes to life in the 376 pages of Vahram Shemmassian’s book *The Musa Dagh Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939*.

Shemmassian’s micro-history of the Musa Dagh Armenians stands at the crossroads of the rich Armenian tradition of the memory book (*houshamadyan*), diaspora studies, and the historiography of the modern Middle East. In eight meticulously researched chapters, an exhaustive bibliography, and appendices, Shemmassian charts the landscape of post-repatriation Musa Dagh, as several thousand Suedians/Musa Daghians return to their villages from Port Said and Hama in the aftermath of World War I. From society and culture to animal husbandry and agriculture; from industry to unemployment and emigration, the author deftly reconstructs a world that was lost to genocide, reclaimed, lost again, and recreated in Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United States.

Shemmassian delivers a scholarly text that interweaves regional and local dynamics (clashes between Suedians and neighboring Alewite communities, internecine bloodshed as Armenian political parties vie for influence, and Armenian brigandage) with demographic, agricultural, and economic data, laced with elaborate descriptions of domestic life, kinship, and gender roles. He does so by drawing from an impressive repertoire of state, church, and organizational archives, minutes of committees, newspaper articles, private papers, correspondence, in-person and phone interviews, and published and unpublished memoirs.

Yet this dense historical narrative is far from dry. The text is flavored with a plethora of examples and anecdotes that range from the sublime to the hilarious. We meet, for instance, Hagop Egarian of Bitias, waiting in a New Jersey town for his wife’s papers to be processed so that she can leave Cuba and join him. As months pass and the season changes, he writes a poem where he instructs his wife: “Send me my fur coat, and in my [stead] hug the pillow.” Or we are introduced to Hovannes Phillian, who, when asked by an insurance agent in the U.S. whether his family had a history of mental illness, responded, through a translator, that he is the sanest of them all!

With all that *The Musa Dagh Armenians* says about the interwar period, the reader remains longing for a little more than the few paragraphs the author offers here and there on pre-1919 and post-1939 developments. Shemmassian mentions in the preface that his dissertation, “The Armenian Villagers of Musa Dagh: A Historical Bibliographic study, 1840-1915,” is being revised for publication. Still, the book would have benefitted from brief chapters on the timeline outside the 1919-1939

bookends. And while we wait for the prequel and, perhaps, the sequel, this scholarly homage to the mountain and its people is well-worth the read.

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