

## LITERARY LIFE IN THE FIRST REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA (1918–1920)

**Davit Gasparyan\***  
**Gurgen Vardanyan\*\***

### Abstract

The article presents the literary life in the First Republic of Armenia. It was preceded by the Armenian Genocide carried out by Ottoman Turkey in 1915, as a result of which we lost the golden generation of Western Armenian literature: Grigor Zohrap, Ruben Zardaryan, Daniel Varuzhan, Siamanto, Ruben Sevak and others. Abroad, during this period, great Eastern Armenian writers continued to write: Hovh. Tumanyan, Av. Isahakyan, A. Shirvanzade, Nar-Dos, V. Teryan and others, who sought to contribute to the revival of the motherland. Literary figures in Armenia were taking steps to regulate the literary life of the republic. In turn, the leadership of the First Republic paid serious attention to the publication of works by Armenian authors.

**Keywords:** Hovhannes Tumanyan, Armenia, parliament, Yerevan, “Pandok” club, literary society, Yeghishe Charents.

### Introduction

The rise of Armenian literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was followed by a period of new expectations and deep disappointments. The main Armenian intellectuals, who lived in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, writers, had great expectations in the beginning of World War I, hoping to see a large part of their homeland, Western Armenia, liberated from the Turkish yoke. However, the implementation of the Armenian Genocide by the Young Turks in 1915, especially the physical extermination of the Western Armenian intelligentsia, including the constellation of writers D. Varuzhan, G. Zohrap, Siamanto, R. Sevak, R. Zardaryan and others, the wanderings and suffering of the Armenian diaspora caused deep disappointment and a sense of decline. The threat of physical extermination of their native people forced many Eastern Armenian writers to temporarily leave the literary

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\* *Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor Institute of History, NAS of the RA, grakanagetgasparyan@mail.ru*

\*\* *Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor Institute of History, NAS of the RA, gugvard57@gmail.com*

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world and engage in public activities. Partly owing to their efforts, the majority of Western Armenian diaspora found refuge in Eastern Armenia, the Armenian-populated cities of Transcaucasia and Russia.

Armenian literary figures were among the first to respond to the radical changes that began in Armenian socio-political life after the February Revolution in Russia in 1917. Inspired by the idea of a national awakening, Armenian writers got involved in the socio-political structures of national life, striving to contribute to the spread of democratic views in Armenian reality and the revival of national culture. Hovhannes Tumanyan, Avetis Aharonyan, Levon Shant and other prominent literary figures were actively engaged in public activities. In October of 1917, after the establishment of Soviet power in Russia, the Commissariat for Armenian Affairs of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR operated among the Russian Armenians, the deputy commissar of which was the prominent Armenian poet Vahan Teryan.<sup>1</sup>

This period of 1917–1918 in Armenian literature can be characterized as transitional, when the Armenian classics Hovhannes Tumanyan, Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, Shirvanzadeh had not yet adapted to the new social relations and were on the path of self-reaffirmation in terms of creativity. In turn, as a result of the revolutionary events, a new worldview was being formed, the result of which was the emergence of a new literary generation: Ye. Charents, K. Zaryan, St. Zoryan, Ren (Ruben Vardanyan), Azat Vshtuni, Gevorg Abov, Vesper and others. “The old, the great are silent, the new are singing, let us listen to them and understand and distinguish them,” writes G. Shahinyan in the article “Armenian Literature in 1918.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Organization of Literary Work**

Thanks to the victorious heroic battles of May 1918, the revival of independent Armenian statehood was welcomed by many Armenian literary figures. “Until now, our literature has not had native land under its feet; it has been largely colonial literature. The poet's feet must be on native and real soil, only after that can he rise. The guarantee of the development of beautiful Armenian literature in the future is free Armenia, free, native land, people,” wrote Hovhannes Tumanyan in early 1919.<sup>3</sup> Some of the great figures of Armenian culture, N. Aghbalyan, L. Shant, Vrt. Papazyan and others, took an active part in the process of national state building. In Tiflis, the president of the Armenian Writers' Association, the great poet H. Tumanyan, whose authority was accepted by the leaders of the republics of Transcaucasia, did a great job in establishing Armenian statehood.

Literary life in Armenia was in the formative stage. Despite the difficult socio-economic situation of the republic, the Armenian people once again proved that they

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<sup>1</sup> Khudaverdyan 1966: 33.

<sup>2</sup> Zang, January 12, 1919, No. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Topchyan and Aghababyan 1957 (eds): 21-22.

have a special love for literature. In early December 1918, the newspaper “Zhoghovurd” (People) published poems by G. Mahari, Haystan (Nairi Zaryan), G. Sirvan (Garnik Khachatryan), and other young writers, along with poems by Hovh. Tumanyan.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1919, on the initiative of the Minister of Public Education G. Melik-Gharagozyan and several representatives of the intelligentsia N. Aghbalyan, V. Aharonyan, A. Shahkhatuni and others, the Literary and Artistic (Artists’) Union was founded, which organized several events.

The first major event in literary life took place in February 1919, when the Armenian people celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the All-Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan. Large celebrations were organized by the Armenian community of Tiflis, in which representatives of the Georgian and Russian intelligentsia also participated<sup>5</sup>. The poet received congratulatory telegrams from the Prime Minister of the Republic, the Chairman of the Council of Armenia, state and public organizations. In the reply telegram, Hovhannes Tumanyan wrote: “The good wishes and the first greeting of the first government of my motherland touched me deeply. I explain all these feelings not with my literary merits, but with the indomitable spirit of our people, which neither hunger nor disease, nor suffering nor deprivation can crush.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the difficult situation, jubilee events were also organized in Yerevan. In early March 1919, the Literary and Artistic Union celebrated Tumanyan’s jubilee with great solemnity in the parliament hall.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1919, at the invitation of the Literary and Artistic Union, the prominent Russian poet Sergey Gorodetsky, who had visited Western Armenia in May-June 1916, came to Yerevan.<sup>8</sup> He delivered lectures to the Armenian public on the topics of “Shadows of Van” and “Modern Armenian Lyricism”. The first lecture was dedicated to the impressions he received from Van, and the second to the prominent figures of Armenian poetry of the beginning of the century: H. Tumanyan, Av. Isahakyan, V. Teryan, D. Varuzhan.<sup>9</sup> Armenian intellectuals also delivered lectures. Thus, in June, at the initiative of the union, Bishop Garegin delivered lectures on the topic “The Development of Fine Arts in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in Upper Armenia”.

The founding meeting of the Literary Society of Armenia, convened on the initiative of Armenian writers on July 4, 1919, played a great role in organizing the literary scene of the republic. 30 people participated in it: writers, journalists and other representatives of the intelligentsia. The Provisional Board was elected by N. Aghbalyan. The board statement said that members of the Caucasian Society of Armenian Writers who had settled in Armenia, as well as writers, scientists and journalists who submitted a written application, could become members of the society. It was planned to convene a general

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<sup>4</sup> Zhoghovurd, December 1, 1918, No. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Topchyan and Aghababyan 1957 (eds): 20. Taraz, 1919, No. 10, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Zhoghovurd, March 14, 1919, No. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Zhoghovurd, March 12, 1919, No. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Zakaryan 2015: 85.

<sup>9</sup> Hayastani Ashkhatavor, May 3, 1919, N 15.

meeting of the society in September, where a reception would be held and the statute would be approved.<sup>10</sup> Armenian writers were greatly excited when the prominent literary critic N. Aghbalyan was appointed Minister of Public Education and Arts. He carried out fruitful activities to regulate the educational and cultural life of the newly created republic.

On September 28, 1919, under his presidency, the Literary Society of Armenia was founded in Yerevan.<sup>11</sup>

On September 29, the first general meeting of the Literary Society of Armenia took place, which approved the charter of the Caucasian Society of Armenian Writers with some amendments as a temporary charter. At the meeting, 10 more people became members of the society. N. Aghbalyan was elected honorary president of the society. D. Ananun, A. Abeghyan, V. Khoreni, V. Aharonyan, Vesper, Ler Kamsar, Bakhshi Ishkhanyan, Hambardzum Mazmanyanyan, Shahan Natali, Khachik Samvelyan, Arshavir Khondkaryan and others were elected members.<sup>12</sup>

In the autumn of 1919, literary life was becoming increasingly active.

In order to further activate literary work, the “Pandok” literary club was formed on the same days by about 15 members of the Writers’ Union<sup>13</sup>. It was created on the example of Hovhannes Tumanyan’s “Vernatun” literary group that previously operated in Tiflis. The name “Pandok” was suggested by the poet Vostanik. Among the elders, L. Shant and N. Aghbalyan participated in the gatherings, among the young ones: St. Zoryan, Ren (Ruben Vardanyan), Garnik Kalashyan, Vostanik Hovhannisyan, V. Terzibashyan, Anurj (Nikol Kalash), D. Ananun, V. Khoreni, A. Tigranyan, P. Bseghyan, A. Kalashyan and Charents joined them after he settled in Yerevan at the end of January, 1920. Once a week, the group gathered in the “Rostom” library. They read their new works, discussed, debated.

Nikol Aghbalyan, as the Minister of Public Education and Arts, was busy with the educational and cultural life’s affairs of our young republic.

### **A new poet - Yeghishe Charents**

The Literary Society of Armenia organized literary evenings dedicated to the great figures of Armenian literature and young, promising writers.

The most memorable of the events organized by the Literary Society of Armenia was the second evening “A New Poet – Charents”.

The young Charents had attracted the attention of N. Aghbalyan earlier. From Aghbalyan’s memoirs it turns out that he got acquainted with Charents’ books “Three Songs of a Sorrowful Girl” and “Dante’s Myth” in 1917 at the editorial office of the Baku

<sup>10</sup> Zang, July 8, 17, 1919, NN 42, 45; Hayastani Ashkhatavor, July 8, 1919, N 90.

<sup>11</sup> Hayastani Cooperatsia, October 15, 1919.

<sup>12</sup> Haraj, October 4, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Levon Shant 2019: 20.

newspaper “Arev” (Sun). Aghbalyan saw a talented and promising writer in the books with those remarkable titles<sup>14</sup>.

The event consisted of two parts: literary and artistic. The first part was a speech by the honorary president of the society, N. Aghbalyan. He specifically outlined the nature of Charents’ work. He noted that instead of Vahan Teryan’s melancholic songs, Charents opens a new revolutionary page in Armenian poetry. Literature is being created that demonstrates the heroic abilities of our new generation<sup>15</sup>. The event was also attended by the talented Western Armenian writer Vahan Tekeyan, who made a speech. According to him, “Charents is a strong, new and original poet in our reality.”<sup>16</sup> There was also an artistic section with piano and violin accompaniment<sup>17</sup>.

Charents was not present at that literary event and learned about it from the press. He expressed his enthusiasm for this in the poem “Charents-name” written in 1922<sup>18</sup>. A few days after the lecture, Charents was already in Yerevan and visited Aghbalyan. By his order, Charents was appointed an official in the Ministry of Public Education and Arts<sup>19</sup>.

What was Charents doing in the ministry? One of the high-ranking officials of the ministry, in fact Aghbalyan’s deputy, Poghos Sotnikyan, complained, “Mr. Aghbalyan, this man is too privileged, he does not obey anyone, does nothing, and he has not yet drawn up the ministry’s inventory journal.”<sup>20</sup> With a good-natured smile, Aghbalyan replies, “You are a smart man, Mr. Sotnikyan, Charents can write a poem tomorrow that will be worth more than all the rotten property of your ministry... Leave him alone.”<sup>21</sup>

After the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia on December 2, 1920, the literary ties between N. Aghbalyan and Charents continued. In the following years, the exiled literary critic followed Charents’ creative path.

Let us add that N. Aghbalyan had a unique ability to discover gifted young people with literary talent. Charents is not a unique example. With his blessing, V. Teryan, St. Zoryan, Armenuhi Tigranyan and others entered the literary world at one time.

### **Other Undertakings of the Literary Society**

In November 1919, the Literary Society of Armenia held memorial evenings for Western Armenian writers who were killed during the Genocide. During these evenings, a number of interesting lectures were delivered by V. Tekeyan about D. Varuzhan, Sh. Natali about Siamanto, the editor of “Chagatamart” (Battle) A. Misakyan about G.

<sup>14</sup> Gasparyan 1997: 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> Gasparyan 1997: 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Zhoghovurd, October 22, 1919, No. 116.

<sup>17</sup> Hayastani Dzajny, 1919, October 30, No. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Charents, 1955, 428.

<sup>19</sup> Shant 1952: 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ananyan 1987: 57.

<sup>21</sup> Ananyan 1987: 57.

Zohrap and R. Sevak.<sup>22</sup> In December, the Society organized new lectures dedicated to national problems, educational issues, etc. Reports were made by N. Aghbalyan, V. Khoreni, D. Ananun and Ye. Frangyan.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the Society carried out tremendous public work. At the end of December 1919, at the suggestion of the Society, the Presidium of the Republic's Parliament initiated the publication of the one-day newspaper "The Army Day", all the revenue of which was transferred to the needs of the army. This newspaper published poems by the great Armenian poets Hovhannes Tumanyan, Hovhannes Hovannisyanyan, Av. Isahakyan, articles were published by Leo, N. Aghbalyan, S. Vratsyan, D. Ananun and others.<sup>24</sup>

As for the publication of literary works, in 1919–1920 Leo's book of stories "The Armenian Heroes" was published, as well as the collection of lyrical poems "The Last Girl" by the young, gifted poet N. Kalashyan and the book "Eternal Tales" by S. Torosyan<sup>25</sup>. At the end of 1919, M. Epikian's publishing house in Tiflis asked N. Aghbalyan for permission to publish a collection of his literary criticism articles. In April 1920, N. Aghbalyan gave his positive response regarding this initiative. N. Aghbalyan wrote the preface to the book and gave many advices on the titles of the articles. However, the collection was never published.

In order to organize the publication of works by Armenian and foreign authors in Armenia, in May 1920 the Council of Ministers of the republic adopted a law allocating 1,610,000 rubles to the Ministry of Public Education and Art<sup>26</sup>. In the summer of 1920, some work had already been done in that direction, but it was interrupted as a result of subsequent political events.

The Armenian periodical press did a great job in publishing the verse works of Armenian writers. A. Bakunts, who was taking his first literary steps, appeared on the pages of the press, and the young Western Armenian writer Ler Kamsar and others published satirical sharp articles. The works of poets N. Zaryan, G. Mahari, Sarmen, V. Norents, Kh. Dashtents were published in the orphanage press<sup>27</sup>.

It is worth mentioning the literary section of the biweekly "The Armenian Cooperation", whose editor D. Ananun made great efforts to make it interesting and meaningful. He appealed to Armenian writers, offering them to send their works to the newspaper's editorial office. The newspaper published poems by Hovhannes Tumanyan, stories by D. Demirchyan, as well as stories by Ye. Charents, works of V. Totovents, Vesper and other promising young people<sup>28</sup>. However, most of the writers refused, because they were in a hopeless social situation. In response to the reprimand

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<sup>22</sup> Haraj, November 7, 1919, No. 39; Zhoghovurd, November 15, 1919, No. 128

<sup>23</sup> Haraj, December 3, 16, 26, 1919, NN 61, 69, 76

<sup>24</sup> Zakaryan 2023: 108.

<sup>25</sup> Haraj, February 7, 1920, N 28, MLA, G. Levonyan's fund, file 954, sheet 1

<sup>26</sup> NAA, fund 199, inv. 1, file 156, sheet 4.

<sup>27</sup> Hovakimyan 1998: 41.

<sup>28</sup> Zhoghovurd, March 7, 1920, No. 32.

of D. Ananun, Vrt. Papazyan writes in his letter that one should not blame and consider it strange that most of the Armenian writers refused to cooperate. “I know well about the others. I know that Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, whom you also reprimand, does not have enough resources to feed his large family. ...Haven’t you seen how a gray-haired writer is crying, telling you all this in a trembling voice?”<sup>29</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church provides some assistance to the poet, who is in a difficult social situation<sup>30</sup>. As early as August 1918, the president of the Armenian Writers’ Association, Hovhannes Tumanyan, concerned about the difficult financial situation of Armenian writers, turned to the government of Armenia with a request for support<sup>31</sup>.

The government of the republic was only able to address this issue in July 1919. A law was adopted, “On allocating 100,000 rubles to provide assistance to Armenian writers, scientists and publicists.”

The money was to be transferred to the Caucasian Society of Armenian Writers, which was to distribute it not only among the members of the society, but also intellectuals “working in the Armenian reality”.<sup>32</sup> The Council of Ministers had planned to allocate 10 thousand rubles of this amount to Hovhannes Tumanyan, but the great poet refused this amount, giving it to other writers in need.<sup>33</sup> Of course, the provision of this assistance could not improve the material condition of the Armenian intelligentsia, it had more of a moral significance, but it shows that the Motherland was ready to help and protect the Armenian intelligentsia. The government of the republic also provided assistance to the prominent Armenian writer and historian Leo (Arakel Babakhanyan). The Minister of Public Education and Arts N. Aghbalyan, taking into consideration the writer’s poor health and difficult social situation, applied to the Council of Ministers in August 1919 to appoint Leo to state pension.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the government of the republic purchased 500 copies of the first volume of Leo’s work “History of Armenia”, which were to be distributed in schools.<sup>35</sup> In April 1920, Leo arrived in Yerevan. The Armenian Literary Society celebrated Leo’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday with great solemnity. L. Shant, V. Khoreni and other representatives of the Armenian intelligentsia expressed their best wishes to the writer.<sup>36</sup>

Armenian writers saw the caring attitude that the newly independent state showed towards literature. Many expressed a desire to come to the motherland and contribute to the creation of an independent national statehood. In mid-1920, Derenik Demirchyan arrived in Armenia, who assumed the position of Head of the Department on Arts Affairs

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<sup>29</sup> MLA, D. Ananun’s fund, file 106.

<sup>30</sup> Behbutyan S.A. 1999 (ed.). 272.

<sup>31</sup> Hovhannes Tumanyan 1999: 294-295.

<sup>32</sup> NAA, fund 199, inv. 1, file 57, sheet 132.

<sup>33</sup> Hovhannes Tumanyan 1999: 330.

<sup>34</sup> NAA, fund 207, inv. 1, file 48, sheet 74.

<sup>35</sup> MLA, D. Ananun’s fund, file 54, sheet 6.

<sup>36</sup> Haraj, April 22, 1920, No. 81.

at the Ministry of Public Education and Art. The return of Leo and Tumanyan was expected in the autumn. However, the difficult political situation in the republic in the autumn of 1920 did not let this become a reality.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of the article is to present scientifically the literary life of the Republic of Armenia (28.05.1918–2.12.1920). This was preceded by the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Turks in 1915, who killed the golden generation of Western Armenian literature: Grigor Zohrap, Ruben Zardaryan, Daniel Varuzhan, Siamanto, Ruben Sevak and others. During this period, the great Eastern Armenian writers Hovhannes Tumanyan, Av. Isahakyan, A. Shirvanzade, Nar-Dos, V. Teryan and others continued to work abroad, striving to contribute to the revival of the motherland.

Literary figures in Armenia were taking steps to regulate the literary life of the republic.

In January 1919, the Literary and Artistic Union (Artists) was founded on the initiative of the capital's intellectuals, and in February 1919, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the All-Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan was celebrated. In this period, the prominent Russian poet Sergey Gorodetsky, who had visited Western Armenia, delivered lectures for the Armenian public.

In September 1919, the Literary Society of Armenia was founded in Yerevan and a literary group called "Pandok" was created.

In 1919–1920, the Literary Society of Armenia organized literary events, the most memorable of which was an evening dedicated to the young, talented poet Yeghishe Charents. Commemorative evenings were organized in memory of Western Armenian writers who had fallen victim to the Great Genocide.

At the initiative of the Society, the one-day newspaper "The Army Day" was published at the end of December 1919.

The leadership of the Republic paid great attention to the publication of works by Armenian authors. Thanks to the allocation of financial resources, in 1920, the collections of short stories by writers Leo (A. Babakhanyan) "The Sad People", St. Zoryan, books of poems by Ye. Charents, A. Vshtuni, G. Abov, N. Kalashyan and the volume "Eternal Tales" by S. Torosyan were published.

It is worth mentioning the literary section of the biweekly newspaper "The Armenian Cooperation" (editor: literary critic D. Ananun), where the works of novice poets were also published.

Armenian writers saw the caring attitude that the newly independent state showed towards literature. In July 1919, a law was adopted "On allocating 100,000 rubles to provide assistance to Armenian writers, scientists and publicists", which somewhat improved their social conditions.



Thus, in the First Republic of Armenia, there were necessary conditions for an old and stable literary generation, a new generation that came into life, a literary organization was created. Literary life was revived and prepared for its new rise already during Soviet times.

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