

ALEXANDER KULEBYAKIN AND HOVHANNES TUMANYAN

Anushavan Zakaryan¹**Abstract**

The Russian Major General and Terek Cossack, Alexander Parfenyevich Kulebyakin was a striking personality who combined the talents of a military officer, a poet, and a public figure. His multifaceted activities hold significant historical and documentary value for completing the picture of Armenian reality at the beginning of the last century. This article discusses in detail his relations specifically with the great Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan, demonstrating that they represent an interesting chapter in the history of Russian-Armenian cultural ties during the 1910s.

Keywords: Alexander Parfenyevich Kulebyakin, Hovhannes Tumanyan, Tiflis, Guild of Poets

Russian Major General and Terek Cossack Alexander Parfenyevich Kulebyakin (1871–?) was a vibrant personality who combined the talents of a military man, a poet, and a public figure. Kulebyakin's multifaceted activities represent great historical and factual value; the pages of his life also enrich the Armenian reality of the 1910s².

A. Kulebyakin maintained friendly relations and worked with many prominent Armenian military leaders, representatives of Armenian culture and literature, and socio-political figures. He developed particularly close relations with the great Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan. In his memoirs "About Hovhannes Tumanyan," the famous Armenian writer Derenik Demirchyan wrote: "His (Tumanyan's – A.Z.) house was a meeting place even on those days when he was absent from home or the city. Political and cultural figures, and businessmen had friendly or other ties with him, not to mention representatives of art and literature. In recent years, there were enough military men too. He was approached by a colonel, or perhaps a general, Kulebyakin, who on the Van front began to familiarize himself with Armenian antiquities and with Armenians, and started writing poems about the life of Van"³.

In all probability, the friendship between A. Kulebyakin and Hovhannes Tumanyan starts as early as November-December 1914, when Hovhannes Tumanyan, together with the writer Alexander Shirvanzade and other figures, departed for the front. The purpose of their trip to the theater of military operations was to meet with Armenian volunteers fighting at the front and to familiarize themselves with the general state of affairs. Tumanyan was in Van with a similar mission in June 1915 as well⁴.

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² For details, see: Zakaryan 2001: 99–129; Zakaryan 2002a.

³ Zakaryan 2002: 37.

⁴ Karapetyan 1992: 113–155.

A handwritten “interlinear” and “literal” translation of Tumanyan’s work “The Last Day” has reached us⁵. With a high degree of probability, it can be assumed that the translation was made either by A. Kulebyakin himself or at his request, as the text is located in a general folder of his materials, which the poet’s daughter, Tamar Tumanyan, donated to the Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum on June 20, 1986. On January 10, 1917, the commander presented Hovhannes Tumanyan with his book *Grebenichka in Captivity: Cossack Antiquity* (Vladikavkaz, 1913)⁶ with a dedicatory inscription: “To Hovhannes Tumanyan, the poet of Armenia, from the heart of the author Alexander Kulebyakin. 10/1 1917 Tiflis.”

A. Kulebyakin was apparently aware of everything happening in the socio-political and cultural life of Tiflis. This is evidenced, in particular, by his correspondence with Hovhannes Tumanyan. Thus, on January 29, 1917, in a letter to Hovhannes Tumanyan, the Russian general writes: “I would see you with pleasure, but, unfortunately, I cannot find the time yet. Tomorrow I want to go to the last evening of Igor Severyanin to have my own impression of him...⁷ It seems I will not be able to listen to V. Bryusov, which is a pity”⁸. On February 28 of the same year, he notes: “I regret that we had little chance to see each other. Today I am leaving for Igdir. The book of poems about Van will be out soon. I would like to personally meet V. Ya. Bryusov, but I don’t know if I will manage to come by Easter: it depends on our military affairs...”⁹.

During this same period, Kulebyakin wrote a six-part work titled “The Cross of Massis: Two Legends” with a dedication to the Armenian poet: “For a kind memory to the sincerely respected poet of Armenia Hovhannes Tadeyevich Tumanyan from the devoted author. A. Kulebyakin. 9. IV. 1917 Tiflis”¹⁰.

Having settled in Tiflis from mid-1917, A. Kulebyakin began to visit the great Armenian poet more frequently. Jalal Ter-Grigoryan (Sallumyan) left interesting memoirs of this period for future generations. In his memoirs, he wrote: “At Tumanyan’s, I also often saw Major General A. P. Kulebyakin, who was a division commander, then a corps commander, on the Caucasian front in the Van region. He was simultaneously a poet. He wrote the poem ‘Mher’s Door,’ a series of poems under the general title ‘Echoes of Van,’ which were published as a separate collection. He was often at Tumanyan’s, of course, not as a general, but as a poet. He highly valued our poet, treated him with warm respect, and dedicated his poem ‘Nane’ (‘The Akhlat Poem,’ which was printed in the collection *Jeyran* published in Batumi) to Tumanyan. Conversations with Alexander Kulebyakin were also of a purely literary nature. Once Tumanyan read his translation of ‘The Drowned Man,’ without mentioning that it was

⁵ AB No. 1073/2751.

⁶ AB No. 8/767. See also: *Personal Library* 1989, p. 380.

⁷ For details on the Tiflis “poetry-evenings” of I. Severyanin, see: Zakaryan 1984: 16–20.

⁸ AB No. 1072 / 2740.

⁹ AB No. 1072 / 2742.

¹⁰ AB No. 1072 / 2748.

Pushkin's 'The Drowned Man.' Kulebyakin, who did not know Armenian, after listening to 2–3 stanzas, immediately said: — This is Pushkin's 'The Drowned Man.' He, of course, understood this by the meter, rhythm, and corresponding pronunciation. Then the conversation continued around Pushkin. Tumanyan said that the Russians had not had a more talented poet than him until now. Kulebyakin agreed that Pushkin was indeed a great poet, but there was also one greater than him, and he seemed to wait for us to name a poet greater than Pushkin. We did not guess whom Kulebyakin was hinting at, and he pointed to the unknown author of the 12th-century poem "The Tale of Igor's Campaign". I forgot to say that Kulebyakin, for his part, masterfully declaimed a poem dedicated to the 'Kamarinskaya' or 'Trepak' dance, which in their rhythm and beat resembled the melody of that dance: while reading, through his facial expressions and movements, he seemed to be dancing while sitting"¹¹.

We also recall the testimony of the poet's daughter Nvard Tumanyan: "In the morning (January 13, 1919 – A.Z.), the French consul Paul Dubois and General Kulebyakin visited father"¹².

In February-March 1919, the 50th anniversary of Hovhannes Tumanyan's birth was solemnly celebrated¹³. A. Kulebyakin took a very active part in the festivities. The jubilee celebrations began on February 20. On that day, figures of literature and art, teachers, and students headed to the poet's apartment on Voznesenskaya Street. Among them was a delegation from the "Guild of Poets" (Tsekh Poetov in Russian - A.Z.) — S. Gorodetsky, A. Kulebyakin¹⁴, Yu. Danziger, and N. Bel-Kon-Lyubomirskaya, who presented the jubilee with a congratulatory address¹⁵.

On February 26, the 24th meeting of the "Guild of Poets" took place, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Hovhannes Tumanyan. A. Kulebyakin dedicated a touching poem to Tumanyan— "To Hovhannes Tumanyan. February 20, 1919. An Acrostic Sonnet." Addressing Tumanyan, Kulebyakin asks:

Why are you sad, pensive poet? In your eyes, we see a shadow of reproach.
Armenian bard! You are sad that not soon Will God send the peoples rest from woes.

The poem is permeated with faith in the future of the Armenian people:

¹¹ Memoirs of Contemporaries 1969: 409.

¹² Tumanyan 1987: 173.

¹³ See: Hovhannisyan 1998: 125–143.

¹⁴ A. Kulebyakin took an active part in the activities of the "Guild of Poets" created and headed by the famous Russian poet S. Gorodetsky, who lived in Tiflis in those years. The Guild was one of the branches of the "Artisterium" association created in late March 1918 at the journal *Ars*. Participants met every Wednesday. Interesting information about Tumanyan's participation has been preserved. The poetess R. Poghosyan writes about Kulebyakin: "During a regular meeting... the poet-general Alexander Kulebyakin—a very respected man—spoke with a reading of his poem about Armenia." For more on the Guild, see: Zakaryan 1982: 44–56.

¹⁵ *Zakavkazskoe Slovo*, February 22, 1919.

No! the sun of Hayastan shall not fade! — The horizon clears: do you see, Hovhannes? ... Do not fall silent: we need Tumanyan!!¹⁶

On March 4, at a literary and artistic evening organized by the Cultural Society of Armenian Students in the Artistic Club in honor of Tumanyan, S. Gorodetsky read his poem “The Angel of Armenia” and an ode by A. Kulebyakin dedicated to Tumanyan¹⁷.

Nvard Tumanyan wrote: “In the evening (December 24, 1919 – A.Z.) there were many guests—Prof. Totomyan, Lisitsyan, Gorodetsky with his wife, Kulebyakin, and others. That evening father read several of his new quatrains. The impression was strong; everyone liked it. Then he himself began to speak about the quatrains”¹⁸. It is possible that precisely such meetings and conversations of Kulebyakin with Tumanyan contributed to the manifestation of a sincere, genuine interest in small poetic forms—quatrains, the translation of which he later took up seriously¹⁹.

Under the editorship of S. Gorodetsky in 1919, the Batumi Armenian publishing house released the collection “Jeyran”, which included poems by Hovhannes Tumanyan (“To the Poets of Georgia”) and Daniel Varoujan (“The First Sin”) in translations by S. Gorodetsky, as well as A. Kulebyakin’s work “Nane (The Akhlat Poem),” dedicated to Hovhannes Tumanyan²⁰.

A. Kulebyakin was engaged not only in literary activities. He took a most active part in the work of the “Bureau for Establishing Armenian Losses from the World War,” formed at a general meeting of the Council of the Union of the Central Council of Armenian Compatriotic Unions on November 21, 1918, and headed by Hovhannes Tumanyan. The Bureau also collected materials on the participation of the Armenian people in the war. It had four departments. The second department—military-historical—was headed by Major General A. Kulebyakin. The heads of the other departments were famous Armenian socio-political figures: Leo (Historical-Political Department), T. Ioannisyan (Criminal-Investigative Department), and Khristapor Vermishyan, who was replaced by Ashot Atanasyan (Economic Department); the head of the office was Tigran Begzadyan²¹.

On January 22, 1919, a letter signed by the Bureau Chairman Hovhannes Tumanyan was sent to A. Kulebyakin: “The ‘BUREAU for Investigating Armenian Losses from the World War’ hereby informs you that, according to the decision of the named Bureau, you are entrusted with the leadership of the military-historical

¹⁶ AB No. 1072 / 2744; MLA, fund of Hovhannes Tumanyan, No. 1299.

¹⁷ Mshak, March 6, 1919; Zakavkazskoe Slovo, March 6, 1919; Haraj, March 8, 1919.

¹⁸ Tumanyan 1987: 216.

¹⁹ A. Kulebyakin was also active in translation. In the first issue of the monthly *Ars*, his translation of Niko Baratashvili’s poem “The Horse” was published, along with seven quatrains of Omar Khayyam (*Ars*, 1918, No. 1, pp. 30–31). It is interesting to note that Kulebyakin translated 66 quatrains of the Persian poet as early as 1917.

²⁰ *Jeyran* 1919: 13–31.

²¹ For details on the Bureau, see: Zakaryan 2002b: 271–304.

department for the preparation of an essay on the participation of Armenians in the World War. In the performance of your work, you are to be guided by the budget submitted by you and approved by the Bureau's decision. According to the decision, you invite three assistants and six employees at your discretion, with remuneration within the limits of the approved budget. Informing you of this, the BUREAU requests that you proceed to work immediately"²².

Both the Bureau as a whole and A. Kulebyakin performed an enormous amount of work. In the shortest time, Kulebyakin's department prepared material on the formation and combat operations of Armenian volunteer detachments and rifle battalions under the title "Participation of Armenians in the First World War of 1914–1918." Starting in January, wrote Hovhannes Tumanyan, among other materials, the BUREAU handed over to M. Papajanyan, a member of the Armenian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, "a part (314 pages) of that report prepared by the head of the military part of the commission, General Kulebyakin, on the participation of Armenians in the World War"²³. However, financial resources in general did not allow for the completion of the Bureau's planned work. Regarding the scarcity of material means, A. Kulebyakin writes in a letter to Hovhannes Tumanyan dated March 31, 1919: "I very much regret that I am troubling you again with a request for my historical commission. I wanted to talk personally but did not find you. Today Valadyan gave me a written refusal of further work from April 1 due to non-payment of money, and all the other employees are in the same position, which they urgently ask me to bring to your attention. The matter cannot continue like this. In fact, I am now left almost without employees... The money issue stalls all the work. I sincerely ask you to help us all in this regard as soon as possible, for my position is heavy both materially and even more morally, as I head the commission. Please do everything possible tomorrow and notify me through Lisitsyan; I will be waiting for an answer. Besides satisfying the employees, there are other no less urgent payments that suffer no delay. The situation is critical. Forgive the trouble caused, but your constant long-standing responsiveness gives me hope for success in your efforts for us. I know that other commissions are in the same position, but by my duty, I cannot fail to petition for my employees"²⁴.

Regarding the subsequent relationship between A. Kulebyakin and Hovhannes Tumanyan, the following is known. From a letter by A. Kulebyakin to Hovhannes Tumanyan dated May 11, 1921, the fate of the Russian general becomes clear. "You probably already know that I was arrested on April 28, 1920, in Baku," Kulebyakin writes to the Armenian poet, "and since October 24, I have been in Moscow. Until April 23, 1921, I sat in the Kozhukhov camp... Everyone promises release, but for now, I sit..."²⁵.

²² NAA, fund 428, inventory 1, file 38, leaf 3.

²³ Hovhannes Tumanyan 1999: 324.

²⁴ AB No. 1072 / 2743.

²⁵ MLA, fund of Hovhannes Tumanyan, No. 760.

After his release, the general left for Tiflis to his family, where he continued to live and create.

...It was precisely at this time that A. Kulebyakin “translated from Armenian” the quatrains of Hovhannes Tumanyan. On April 12, 1923, twenty days after the death of the Armenian poet, he presented it to Hovhannes Tumanyan’s family with the inscription: “For the kind memory of the family, dear to me, of the person I sincerely loved, the poet of Armenia Hovhannes Fadeyevich Tumanyan. A. Kulebyakin. 12/IV.1923, Tiflis”²⁶. It is also interesting that in the poem “To the Memory of Hovhannes Tumanyan,” the Russian poet-general “reproduces the image of the national poet who, processing the creations of the people in his poetic furnace, returns them to them, marked with the seal of his genius”²⁷.

The friendship of the illustrious commander, the poet-general A. Kulebyakin, and the great son of the Armenian people Hovhannes Tumanyan is a remarkable page in the chronicle of Russian-Armenian cultural ties at the beginning of the 20th century.

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²⁶ AB No. 1072 / 2750.

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