

LITTLE-KNOWN RUSSIAN LITERARY FIGURES ON THE ARMENIAN QUESTION AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (1910s)

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Abstract

The article introduces several little-known Russian literary figures who, after visiting Western Armenia and Transcaucasia, expressed their civil position regarding the Armenian question and the Genocide. Among these authors are A. Berezovsky-Olginsky, A.Kulebyakin. A.Tirkova S. Rafalovich, and P.Sibirtsev.

Keywords: Russian literary figures, Armenian genocide

The goal of this article is to introduce Russian literary figures, who are little-known to the general public and who, after visiting Western Armenia and Transcaucasia, reflected the plight of the Armenian people quite deeply, comprehensively and figuratively, expressed their civil position regarding the Armenian question and the Genocide.

At the beginning of 1913, Antoine Berezovsky-Olginsky (pen name - T. Olgenin), who was a well-known publicist at the time, visited six vilayets of Western Armenia (Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Tigranakert, Sebastia, Kharberd), where he thoroughly studied the socio-economic and political situation of Western Armenians. Soon, the Turkish authorities, seriously concerned about T. Olgenin's activities, accused him of anti-Turkish propaganda and raised the issue of his expulsion from the country. Returning from Western Armenia, Olgenin gave lectures on the topic "Disappearing Armenia" first in Tiflis and then in Baku. He noted that Armenia played an extremely important role for Russia, therefore, "Russia should take the initiative to resolve the Armenian question. This is required by its state interests, as well as moral duty. Russia must correct the mistakes of its past: if the Armenian question is not resolved today, the Russian state will be in great danger in the future ... Delay in this issue will be a fatal blow for both Russia and Armenians"¹. The lectures found a wide response in the public and were covered in detail in the press. T. Olgenin's trip to Western Armenia, his articles and public speeches on the eve of the First World War reawakened the interest of the Russian public towards Armenia and the Armenian question.

"Poet-General" Alexander Parfenovich Kulebyakin (1871-?) was one of the prominent military leaders of the Russian army who participated in the fighting on the Caucasian front in Western Armenia. On February 26, 1919, the Committee for the investigation of violent actions against Armenians during the World War interrogated A.

¹ Bakvi dzayn, 15, VI, 1913.

Kulebyakin as a witness in Tiflis, and he testified: "On October 20, 1914, I crossed the Russian-Turkish border with Russian troops and I was at the stage of military operations until November 1917. I successively held different positions - from regiment commander to division chief inclusive, and in 1917, for 5 months I temporarily commanded the Caucasian corps.

In Turkish Armenia I personally visited the Van vilayet, I was in Mush, Surb Karapet, Kop, Akhlat, Ardanush, Bayazet, Karakilisa of Alashkert, Erzurum and the Passinskaya valley.

In many places I personally saw traces of debacle and massacre of Armenians. As far as I remember, these atrocities were perpetrated mainly by the Kurds, and on the part of the Turks, as a matter of course, there was connivance. I saw many corpses of women and children, who were beaten, as the local Armenians told me, by the Kurds. Thus, in the village of Soluk, behind the bridge across the Euphrates, near the city of Mush, there is a spacious building, in which there were up to a hundred human bones. According to all the signs they were remains of women and children. As Cossacks-Labinians told me, when we captured Mush, many Armenian women and children took refuge here, and the Turkish troops killed them here. The photographs of this scene were taken by Parokhodov, the photographer of the Fourth Corps. In addition, in the autumn of 1915 I saw many corpses of Armenians in the gorge of the river Bendimahu, south of Begri-Kala. I depicted this scene in the poem "Bendimahu", included in the collection "Echoes of Van". As I was told by local Armenians, as well as by Russian officers, the Armenians fled here from Van after the July retreat of Russian troops in 1915 and, being chased by the Kurds, everyone was killed. Part of the Armenians who fled along this road, were killed by the Kurds near the village of Gyuli, between Van and Panz, on the shores of Lake Van. In 1915 and 1916 I visited the Monastery of Varag, all the Armenian churches of the city of Van, the Akhtamar monastery and Surb-Karapet. All these churches were completely destroyed and robbed. I encountered a particularly wild scene of the most barbaric destruction in the Monastery of Surb Karapet and the Monastery of Varag. Everything there was completely taken away and badly destroyed. I expressed my impressions in the poems "Old Van", "Defense of Van", "Death of Van", "Avants", "Akhtamar" and others, included in the collection "Echoes of Van". In general, all the Armenian churches that I visited bore traces of destruction. I found the cities of Mush, Van, Karakilisa, Akhlat, Kop, Melazgert in a state of complete destruction. In Melazgert there were literally only stones left. Being busy with combat missions, I personally did not carry out any investigations of atrocities against Armenians and was not an eyewitness of the atrocities. I have four photographs of the destruction: two photographs of the Monastery of Surb Karapet and two photographs of the Monastery of Akhtamar, which I keep for my literary work about Armenia. These pictures were taken by Parokhodov, the photographer of the Fourth Corps, who has many other photos"².

² NAA, f. 200, f.1, l.199, p. 151 and reverse. See also f. 221, l. 1, f. 8, p. 4-5 and reverse. Original manuscript.

After the war, living in Tiflis, in his poetic works A. Kulebyakin time and again turned to the shrines of Armenia and the Armenian people - Masis and Araks. He wrote the poem "The Cross of Masis. Two Legends" (1917) and the poem "Araks" (1919). The poet turns to the historical past of the Armenian people, whose tragic pages were witnessed by Araks:

And sometimes the stones seem to cry,
And the waves seem to pour blood.

In 1915, Ariadna Tirkova (pen name - A. Vergezhsy), a literary and public figure, a correspondent for central Russian newspapers, was also on the Caucasian front, in Western Armenia. On November 5, 1915, returning from the front, at the initiative of the Public Club she read a report on the topic "War and the Woman" in the hall of the Tiflis Musical School. In 1916 A. Tirkova published the book "Old Turkey and the Young Turks. A Year in Constantinople", which depicts Turkish reality - the political situation in the country and various aspects of Turkish life. Speaking about the politics of the Young Turks, she wrote: "The unprecedented extermination of the Armenian people showed that despite the programs and slogans borrowed from Europe, the Young Turks, in essence, are no different from the old Turks"³. In a separate chapter, she depicted the portraits of Young Turks, including the "executioner of the Armenian people" – Tala'at Bey. Tyrkova believed that the history of the extermination of Armenians was "a verdict for the Young Turks written in bloody letters". A separate chapter is devoted to the Armenians in the book, which reflects the author's love and respect for the Armenian people. The activity of the Dashnaktsutyun party in Turkey is especially warmly spoken of. The author wrote the following about the *pogroms*: "The description of the Armenian *pogroms* reminds of the terrible chronicles of ancient exterminations, when the victors killed, tortured, raped and robbed the defeated with such unruliness, of which only a human is capable of all the animals. In 1896, in the very Constantinople, about 10,000 Armenians were killed within three days, not to mention tens of thousands killed, wounded and ravaged in large and small provincial towns. After the overthrow of Abdul Hamid, immediately after the announcement of the constitution, there was a *pogrom* in Adana"⁴.

In 1918-1920, the writer and playwright Sergey Rafalovich took an active part in the literary and social life of Transcaucasia (Baku, Tiflis). He was an eyewitness to the September events in Baku in 1918, when about 30 thousand Armenians were exterminated. In the article "The Truth about the Baku Events" Rafalovich wrote: "My testimony should be perceived as the testimony of a completely objective eyewitness, prompted by solely an indignant sense of justice and truth to give real and impartial coverage of facts distorted with unacceptable ... frivolity"⁵.

³ Tirkova 1916: 7.

⁴ Tirkova 1916: 62-63.

⁵ Kavkazskoe slovo, 3, XII. 1918.

On March 3 and 8, 1919, in Tiflis, the Committee for the Investigation of violent actions against Armenians during the World War interrogated S. Rafalovich as a witness to the *pogrom* of the Armenian population of Baku.

The article and protocol of the interrogation of S. Rafalovich once again confirm the fact that after the fall of the Baku commune, the capture of Baku by Turkish troops and the establishment of the Musavat government, a deliberate *pogrom* and massacre of the Armenian population were carried out.

In the article "Freedom for the Dead (Pro Armenia)", Rafalovich exposed the policy of the great powers towards the Armenian people, urged them to turn words into deeds and save the nation, which was on the brink of destruction: "Europe bears a grave sin before many small peoples, among which the Armenian people occupy one of the most important places in terms of the suffering they have endured. And if until now complex political relations and combinations, the notorious European equilibrium prevented the present winners from turning words into deeds and forced them to confine themselves to good wishes and exhortations, now, finally, the time has come to atone for their sins and take advantage of the new political situation, primarily in order to correct the centuries-old injustices and save the dying"⁶.

Pyotr Sibirtsev, a Russian literary figure, took part in military operations as part of the regiment of Andranik, the legendary hero of the national liberation movement. In the summer of 1918, after the cessation of hostilities, Sibirtsev returned to Tiflis. There he read articles in defense of the Armenian people, their just cause and rights. Particularly interesting is the article "Pro Armenia", where he wrote: "On all the roads - highways, country roads and mountain roads, on mountains and along the banks of rivers, I met caravans of refugees everywhere; and everywhere I came across the same pictures of hunger, cold and dirtiness. Thus, on the mountains and roads the Armenian nation, the Armenian people were dying and are dying, people innocent of political enmity are dying, and they must be rescued. It is the duty of all mankind"⁷.

P. Sibirtsev wrote down Armenian folk tales and fables, wrote poems dedicated to the Armenian people and Armenia. In one of them - "Armenia" - the poet with sincere compassion and philanthropy listed the trials that had fallen to the lot of the Armenians. In the lines he wrote one can hear the voice of protest and faith in the bright future.

Addressing the fate of the Armenian people, speaking in their defense, Russian literary figures contributed to the spread of the truth about Armenia. They revealed to the Russian public the essence of the Armenian question, the real causes of the Genocide, responded with wrath to the *pogroms* of Armenians, exposed the vile goals pursued by the great powers in the Armenian Question, calling on them to help the people who had found themselves on the brink of destruction.

⁶ Zakavkazskoe slovo, 8. II. 1919.

⁷ Kavkazskoe slovo, 4. VII. 1918.

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