

# LITERARY AND CULTURAL ENRICHMENT IN SOVIET ARMENIA: EXPLORING RUSSIAN-MEDIATED TRANSLATION TRADITIONS IN THE SOVIET ERA

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to underline the pivotal role the Russian language played in nurturing a rich educational and cultural atmosphere in Soviet Armenia. In fact, Russian greatly contributed to the shaping of the educational environment exerting immense influence on the academic progress and intellectual growth. It aims to provide insight into the translation traditions prevalent in the Soviet era where Russian assumed the crucial role of a cultural facilitator. In fact, it served as an intermediary language for not only Armenia, but also other Soviet republics making the large body of foreign literature accessible for Soviet readers. Yet, following the abolition of the Soviet regime, translation practices and methodologies experienced a sudden transformation guaranteeing the rapid transition from translations mediated by Russian to direct translation approaches. We believe this study will help shed light on the interplay of language and culture in the context of Armenian's historic journey from the Soviet era to the present day.

**Keywords:** literary and cultural enrichment; Soviet Armenia; Russian as an intermediary language; mediated translation; direct translation

## 1. Introduction

When in 1922 Armenia officially joined the Soviet Union, Armenian cultural environment experienced a sudden transformation fostered by the immense influence of Russian culture and language. It was an important milestone in the history of the country, which was instrumental in shaping the political, cultural, academic and intellectual environment in the country. The education system was aligned with Soviet ideologies and Russian became the predominant language of instruction in multiple schools and higher education institutions in Soviet Armenia. Despite the fact that Armenian remained the official language of the country, hence an essential subject in school programmes, Russian served as medium through which Soviet nations could communicate and collaborate (Smolentseva et al. 2018).

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There was a swift shift to bilingualism with most Armenian students being proficient in both Armenian and Russian. The latter ensured access to the vast resources available in Russian as well as afforded a chance to establish collaborative ties between Soviet academic institutions.

The access to vast amount of literature in Russian as well as to the achievements in many fields of science broadened the intellectual horizons of Armenians as a result of Soviet Armenia gave birth to many prominent scholars.

This cultural exchange produced a synthesis of Armenian and Russian literary elements contributing to the evolution of a unique Armenian literary identity.

As we mentioned above Russian served as a cultural mediator, contributing significantly to the introduction of world literature into Armenian culture.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the sphere of translation, the Russian language always served as an intermediary between a number of European languages and the Armenian language, exerting a certain influence upon Armenian translated literature. Starting from the Soviet era, for decades, numerous masterpieces of world literature as well as scientific works have been accessible to the Armenian reader with the help of Russian.

However, currently, many reputable works of world literature are translated exceptionally from the original. Even the books translated from Russian during the Soviet times are now revised to match the original. However, a question arises: Are all translations done from the original more successful? The answer is definitely not a firm “yes.” Translations done from Russian as an intermediary language are by no means of inferior quality and should be valued highly. This is largely owing to the Russian translation school, which is certainly deemed one of the best in the world. However, our objective is not merely to conduct a comparative analysis of works translated via Russian as an intermediary language, assessing their fidelity to the original text. Rather, it is to acknowledge and honor the invaluable literary legacy of those translators who contributed significantly to the advancement of Armenian literature.

## **2. Russian Influence on the Linguistic Mindset of Soviet Armenians**

The influence of Russian in Soviet republics was extensive and multifaceted. Russian served as the official language of the Soviet Union significantly influencing almost all facets of Armenian society, culture, and governance as well. As claimed by Grenoble, “the net impact of Soviet language policy on the Armenian language was minimal” (Grenoble 2003: 123), however, as contradicted by Irina Marchesini, “the sovietization wave, however, did introduce critical changes in linguistic, cultural and even political terms” (Marchesini 2017: 178).

Russian played a crucial role in both the education system and media environment of Soviet Armenia. In the Soviet era, instruction was closely aligned with the standards set by the Soviet education model, i.e. total state control over academic programmes and methodologies, which were tailored to align with broader social aspects such as politics, culture and economy.

At any rate since Soviet Armenia was one of the 15 Soviet republics, which were independent at least *de jure*, the education system there relatively had its national bias.

It cannot be denied that the Russian language held a dominant position in those times, yet, in Soviet Armenia Armenian was the only official language.

Interestingly, the Soviet authorities attempted to impose Russian as the only state language in the Transcaucasian region. However mass protests started in Georgia regarding the Soviet proposals and these demonstrations forced the Soviet authorities in Moscow to give Georgian the status of a state language. Frightened by the mass actions in Georgia, Soviet authorities also decided to declare Armenian a state language at the republican level (Abrahamyan 1998: 10).

It is the other side of the coin that, Russian without being the official language in Soviet Armenia, was widely in use. It comes to prove the fact that alongside Armenian, people could easily communicate in Russian in all state institutions.

In Soviet Armenia education, culture and science developed at an unprecedented speed, which, of course, had to comply with the Soviet standards and norms. Having said that, we should acknowledge that it was a more preferable option for the destitute, ruined, displaced people. As a result of this all, in Soviet Armenia the National Academy of Sciences was founded with its various research centers/institutes.

Due to the funds allocated to education, science and culture, the Public Radio and Television of Armenia, A. Spendiaryan Opera and Ballet National Academic Theatre, many drama theatres, the Fundamental Scientific Library of the NAS as well as the National Library were established, many newspapers and magazines and publishing houses were founded. This comes to prove that a new chapter of educational, scientific and cultural development was opened in Soviet Armenia and over a dozen of newspapers and journals were issued mostly in Armenian, despite the fact that there were also such that would come out in Russian. All of them had a different bias: political, scientific, educational, etc.

The Armenian television and radio prospered too and the official language of them was Armenian. News reports and information in general were delivered to the public solely in Armenian. The same can be said about the national radio.

In spite of this all, depending on the specificity of the programme, Russian could be used on TV and the radio as well. All state institutions existing during the Soviet times had their official names alongside which, of course, their Russian equivalents existed. The same goes for street names.

Taking all this into account, it can be inferred that although there were no actual barriers prohibiting the use of Armenian, Russian was still used as it was the official language of the Soviet Union. Naturally, a large number of people living in Armenia freely used Russian as most of them would receive their higher education in Moscow, Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg) and in many other Russian cities as the knowledge of Russian was obligatory for getting education in any other city of the Soviet Union.

We find it important to pay special attention to the issue of education. The first secondary schools established in Soviet Armenia were Armenian. Schooling in Soviet Armenia lasted for 10 years. However, after a short while, Russian schools started to open as well. This took place starting from the end of the 1930s. Thereafter, Russian

kindergartens, schools were opened over time where instruction was conducted in Russian. Those kids would speak two languages at a time, namely Armenian and Russian.

Despite the Russian schools functioning in Armenia where all subjects were taught in Russian except Armenian Language and where the textbooks were the same as those used at schools in Russia, Russian was taught in Armenian schools as well. The same was true for universities.

There were higher education institutions such as the Institute of Foreign Languages named after V. Brusov where instruction was carried out in Russian alongside other foreign languages. In public schools there was a canon of compulsory reading both for Russian and Armenian literature. It goes without saying that in Russian schools the list of Russian authors was much more extensive than that of Armenian ones and vice versa.

In Armenian schools Armenian literature was taught profoundly and in detail and of course there was a compulsory list of literature which the students of public schools had to necessarily read. Literature was taught starting from the earliest period dwelling upon Old Armenian then transitioning to the medieval period touching upon the philosophers of the time till our times.

Starting from school years people would have a chance to get acquainted with Russian alongside Armenian (Karakhanyan 2018). This provided today's older generation with an opportunity to be bilingual and side by side with their native tongue to have a solid grasp on the Russian language.

### **3. Enrichment of Literary Traditions in Soviet Armenia**

It has already been stated that during the Soviet times Armenian literature thrived in full swing and in this regard, of particular importance is the period starting from the 1940s when one after another illustrious poets and writers emerged.

It was the time when Armenian-language literature prospered. The word is about both prose, playwriting and poetry. The books would be published in a large number of copies because there was a big demand back then. Works of classic and contemporary Armenian playwrights were staged in theatres. It was the time when such eminent poets emerged as Hovhannes Shiraz, Hamo Sahyan, Silva Kaputikyan, Paruyr Sevak, Vahagn Davtyan. It became the imperative of time to translate the works of Armenian writers. It was necessary to introduce foreign readers to Armenian culture, notably to Armenian literature. It should be reminded that Soviet Armenia was part of the Soviet Union and being part of a colossal country it followed the very strategies that were elaborated on for the whole of the union, i.e. friendship between peoples, exchange of cultures in a wide variety of fields.

In this regard, Armenian literature was translated not only into Russian but also into the languages of those nations that were part of it. Due to this, Armenian writers enjoyed popularity among Russians and other nations. Armenian prose was translated into Russian mostly by Armenian translators that had received Russian education. As regards poetry, most translations were literal interlinear such as Nahapet Kuchak's

*hayrens* the Russian literal interlinear translations of which was produced by Levon Mkrtchyan, then they were rendered into English by various hands and perfected and transformed into English poems by Ewald Osers (Osers in Kuchak 1979: 28-29) Thus, poems would be literally rendered into a foreign language by such poets that created in that particular language. Naturally, Armenian readers should have also familiarized themselves with Russian authors.

It is worth mentioning that the Armenian school of translation has very old traditions. After Armenians adopted Christianity as a state religion in 302 AD, Mesrop Mashtots took on the sacred mission to create an alphabet for the Armenian nation so that they could promote literacy among Armenians. Thus many schools and higher education institutions were established where people could get acquainted with their own and foreign cultures, history as well as study science. It was also the time when the foundation of the Armenian school of translation was laid and the Holy Bible was the first book that was translated into Armenian. Many prominent intellectuals have lavished praise on the Armenian translation of the Bible as one of the best. Armenians are the only nation that celebrate the Feast of the Holy Translators with Mesrop Mashtots, Gregory of Narek, Movses Khorenatsi, Yeghishe, David the Invincible and Nerses IV the Gracious among them (Ter-Petrosyan 1984).

Armenians throughout their age-old history have always attached great importance to the crucial mission that translators perform and that tradition has been preserved and passed on to today's generation.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century world-renowned masterpieces have been translated into Armenian among which the creations of celebrated Russian authors hold their unique place.

However, translating from European languages posed some difficulties since there was a paucity of translators mastering European languages. Oftentimes translation would be done through an intermediary language, namely Russian. Of course, there were some exceptions among which the most important one was the Armenian translation of Shakespeare's works done by Hovhannes Khan Masehyan who was a diplomat by profession serving as the ambassador of Persia in Berlin (Isahakyan 2015: 329). He was well-known as the translator of Shakespeare's and Byron's works into Armenian and Persian.

The process of translating Russian literature started back in the 1920s and many eminent Armenian authors such as Hovhannes Tumanyan set out to translate the works of Russian classics.

In the 1930s the first big publishing house was founded - «HayPetHrat» (Armenian State Publishing House). Here the creations of both Armenian authors as well as the Armenian translation of foreign literature were published.

During those years the works of such Russian classics came out as I. Krylov, A. Pushkin, M. Lermontov, A. Griboyedov, L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky, A. Chekhov, M. Gorky, N. Gogol and others.

In Soviet Armenia many other publishing houses were established one after another. Those publishing houses mainly published in Armenian. Books by Russian classics and contemporary writers were published as well. Since the 1970s the development of translated literature has been prioritized. The assumption that

translation is a form of art and not craft should be by no means questioned. It is through translation that the readers are acquainted with the world literature, form an idea about foreign literary pieces with the help of the interpretation that the translators do. It is the reason why since the 1970s issues relating to translation have become an object of heated and serious discussions in public.

It was back then that Russian was ousted as an intermediary language and foreign books were translated from the original. Literary censorship of both Armenian books and their translated versions started to develop noticeably.

As mentioned before, the Armenian nation has old translation traditions. Yet, regardless of the older generation's efforts to Armenianize the world-renowned pieces of foreign literature, the translation process had never been as systematized as it was during the Soviet period. It was not accidental in 1958 a Board for Fiction Translation was established in the "HayPetHrat" publishing house.

The drastic increase in the development of the translated literature brought about the need to systematize that work in order to create conditions for abolishing dilettantism. The board was required to introduce to the Armenian reader a certain number of the most valued works of Russian classics and contemporary authors as well as those of other SSSR republics and socialist states.

During the Soviet era, the Writers' Union was created by Maxim Gorky in the 1930s. As a matter of fact, the function of the Writers' Union was more ideological because it propagated the Soviet ideology. In Armenia as well, its mission was the same, yet, after a short while, starting from the 1970s, when the need for translated literature was highly prioritized, a separate section in the Writers' Union was established aimed at familiarizing the wider audience with Armenian translators as well as tackling the problems relating to the quality of fiction translation.

Such people would become a member of the Writers' Union who had their solid share of investment in and contribution to the Armenian school of translation and whose translations carried weight in terms of quality.

Thus, it can be stated that being one of the republics of the Soviet Union and living under the Soviet regime and experiencing the "side effects" of the Soviet ideology, the Armenian language held a strong position despite the widespread dominance of Russian in Soviet Armenia. In Armenian as well as Russian schools, the Armenian language was taught based on the textbooks composed by Armenian scholars. The same goes for the textbooks of Armenian literature and Armenian History. Yet, the same cannot be said about some other republics of the Soviet Union. For instance in Tajikistan the grammar of the Tajiki language was adjusted to conform to the rules of Russian grammar, leaving out of account the fact that Tajiki had an entirely different grammatical structure (Sobirov 2021: 6). In Kazakhstan as well, Russian has always held a dominant position and been regarded as an official language. Furthermore, given the growing influence of Russian at the state level, in 1936 it became imperative to replace the system of characters previously used in Kazakhstan by the Russian alphabet (Alpatov 2000: 87-89). In this case, it can be inferred that in the Soviet years, the Armenian language, literature, art and culture in general survived with minimal losses.

#### **4. Translation Traditions in Armenia during the Soviet Era**

Despite the longstanding translation traditions in Armenia and the significant literary legacy of our intellectuals in making countless pieces of world literature accessible to Armenian readers, never had there been a translation policy as rigid as it was during the Soviet times.

It is not accidental that in 1958, a literary translation and editorial section was established within the premises of the “HayPetHrat” Publishing House. The translation policy during that time aimed to carefully select works for translation and publication, recognizing that translating literature served a crucial purpose. It’s widely understood that translated literature plays a pivotal role in fostering cultural development, refining tastes, and elevating people’s level of intellect. This, in turn, fosters the advancement of national literature as a whole. Throughout history, the progression of literature and art has followed a similar trajectory (Yesayan 1975: 81).

So, translation started developing in full swing during the Soviet era when a systematic science policy was formed in the Soviet Union in the 3rd decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was when the phenomenon of intermediary translation came into view with a large body of world literature being translated into the languages of the former Soviet republics through Russian. The explanation is very simple. There was a paucity of specialists who could translate from the original. It was imperative to make most chefs-d'oeuvre of world literature accessible to the Armenian reader even if it was to be done through mediated translation.

Armenians either had to await until translators proficient in European languages would emerge to produce translations in Armenian, or resort to indirect translations from Russian for those pieces allowing Armenian readers to access a wider range of foreign works thereby expanding their horizons and enriching their literary experience despite the limitations imposed by the Soviet system.

The translation efforts undertaken by renowned Armenians, such as the prolific writer Hovhannes Tumanyan, represent a significant chapter in the cultural history of Armenia. Tumanyan’s deep understanding of the importance of education and cultural enrichment led him to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the task of introducing Armenian readers to the vast wealth of world literature. Recognizing the power of literature to enlighten and inspire, Tumanyan embarked on the ambitious journey of translating works from various eminent writers. Using Russian as an intermediary language, he brought masterpieces from diverse literary traditions into the Armenian language, thus broadening the intellectual horizons of his fellow Armenians. Among the luminaries whose works Tumanyan translated are towering figures like Lord Byron, whose romantic poetry captured the imagination of generations; Robert Burns, the beloved Scottish bard celebrated for his poignant verses; Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose radical ideas and lyrical prowess continue to captivate readers; Eugène Pottier, the French poet whose words became the anthem of international solidarity, the “Internationale”; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German polymath whose literary genius spanned multiple genres; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the American poet whose verses resonated with themes of love, hope, and humanity; Friedrich Schiller, the German playwright and philosopher whose works explored the depths of human

experience; and Heinrich Heine, the German poet whose poignant lyricism and biting satire left an indelible mark on European literature. Through Tumanyan's translations, Armenian readers were exposed to an array of ideas, emotions, and cultural perspectives from around the world. His tireless efforts not only enriched the literary traditions of Armenia but also fostered a deeper sense of connection and understanding between different cultures and peoples. Tumanyan's legacy as a translator and cultural ambassador endures as a testament to the enduring power of literature to transcend borders and unite humanity in shared experiences and aspirations.

During his lifetime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Toumanian translated numerous fairy tales from Russian, Persian, and European sources into Armenian

Hovhannes Tumanyan translated a variety of fairy tales from Russian, Persian, and European sources into Armenian, often using Russian as an intermediary language. Some of the Russian fairy tales he translated include "Vasilisa the Beautiful," "The Firebird," a classic Russian folk tale, "The Humpbacked Horse," another well-known Russian fairy tale. From Persian sources, Tumanyan translated such tales as "Rostam and Sohrab," "The Seven Princesses," etc.

From European sources, Tumanyan likely translated various fairy tales, although specific titles may not be readily available. European folklore includes a vast array of tales such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Perrault, and others, which could have been among the ones Tumanyan translated.

These translations played a crucial role in introducing Armenian readers to the rich diversity of world folklore and literature, contributing to the cultural enrichment of Armenia.

Another prolific translator of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Harutyun Harutyunyan whose contribution to literary translation, particularly of Russian and European authors, is indeed notable. His translations have enriched Armenian literature and provided readers with access to a wide range of literary works from different cultural backgrounds. Translating over 100 literary pieces is a significant feat that demonstrates his dedication to bridging cultural and linguistic gaps through literature. Harutyunyan's work has likely played a crucial role in introducing Armenian readers to diverse literary traditions and expanding their understanding of world literature.

Harutyun Harutyunyan's extensive translation work, encompassing both Russian and European authors, reflects his dedication to making a wide array of literary works accessible to Armenian readers. By translating works from authors such as Victor Hugo, Daniel Defoe, Lion Feuchtwanger, Bolesław Prus and others, he provided Armenian audiences with the opportunity to engage with diverse literary traditions and explore different cultural perspectives. Furthermore, his translations of fairy tales from authors like Wilhelm Hauff, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen likely added to the richness of Armenian folklore and children's literature.

Using Russian as an intermediary language demonstrates his linguistic skill and adaptability, allowing him to bridge the gap between multiple languages and cultures to bring these stories to Armenian audiences.

Another significant figure in the world of translation during the Soviet era is Dora Yesayan. Her dedication to bringing European literature to Armenian readers, despite the challenges of the time, is commendable. By translating works from French authors



directly and from European literature via Russian, she expanded the literary horizons of Armenian audiences.

Starting her career at “HayPetHrat,” one of the major publishing houses of Armenia in that era, Yesayan laid the groundwork for her lifelong commitment to translation. Later, at the “Nairi” Publishing House, where she headed the Department of Fiction Translation, she continued her mission with even greater influence.

Yesayan’s selection of authors to translate demonstrates her diverse taste and her understanding of what would resonate with Armenian readers. By introducing writers like Branislav Nušić, Agatha Christie, Martti Larni, Theodore Dreiser, Heinrich Böll and Bolesław Prus, she enriched Armenian literary landscape with a variety of voices and perspectives.

In the 1960s, the selection of authors for translation held paramount significance, particularly in mediated translations. With an extensive array of world literature already available in Russian translation, the meticulous selection of translated works became imperative. Armenian readers were introduced to the celebrated masterpieces of Western and European classics, enriching their literary background.

As we mentioned above our aim extends beyond the mere comparison of works translated through Russian as an intermediary language, evaluating their faithfulness to the original text. Instead, we recognize the profound literary heritage bestowed upon us by translators who played a significant role in the enrichment of Armenian literature.

In my own experience, there have been many chances to scrutinize translations done through Russian as an intermediary language, endeavoring to bridge any gaps existing between the translated text and its source. Interestingly, despite certain unavoidable omissions caused during the Soviet era due to imposed sanctions on translators and publishers, as well as ideological constraints, I am inclined to believe that these translations resonate more with the original source material than with the intermediary Russian rendition.

This observation underscores a fundamental truth: whether translated directly from the original text or mediated through an intermediary language, the success of a translation depends largely upon the translator’s skill and talent as well as the environment in which the translation is produced.

## **5. Conclusion**

During the Soviet era, there were all prerogatives for the literary and cultural enrichment of Armenia. This can be attributed to several factors. First, most Armenians were bilingual which enabled accessing the vast body of literary works, newspapers, magazines, and scholarly literature available in Russian. Second, the Soviet government supported the establishment of cultural institutions in Armenia to promote cultures and literatures of other Soviet republics. This facilitated cross-cultural exchange and collaboration between Soviet artists, writers and intellectuals.

Translation during the Soviet era in Armenia was a complex phenomenon influenced by ideological, cultural and political factors. Despite the challenges posed by censorship and ideological control from Moscow, translation played a crucial role in

shaping translation traditions in Armenia exerting some influence on Armenia literature. The role of Russian as an intermediary language in facilitating the translation of Western and European literature into Armenian due to a shortage of specialists proficient in other foreign languages was indeed significant. This practice allowed Armenian readers access to a wealth of literary classics from across the world. Moreover, the intellectual and cultural milieu in Soviet Armenia fostered the emergence of talented translators who were able to produce high-quality translations enriching the literary traditions in the country.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.