

RINGING UNDER CONTROL: THE SOVIET TRANSLATION OF PARUYR SEVAK'S *THE UNSILENCEABLE BELFRY*

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Abstract: The article offers a comparative study of the 1982 Russian translation of Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* by Harold Registan, examining it in relation to the Armenian original published in 1959. It primarily focuses on the mechanisms of Soviet censorship at the level of translation. Although the poem addresses the life of Komitas Vardapet, it is profoundly rooted in the memory of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, a subject that remained politically sensitive throughout much of the Soviet period. The study argues that the significant delay in translating the poem into Russian reflects the ideological caution surrounding genocide discourse and national memory within the Soviet Union. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates how the translation systematically softens or reframes elements considered ideologically problematic. Ethnic references are generalized, religious symbolism is secularized and direct accusatory language, particularly the explicit use of the term "genocide," is either mitigated or carefully repositioned. Entire sections that foreground independent national resilience or religious continuity are omitted. These interventions do not obscure the central theme of the poem but shift its semantic and ideological emphasis. The study suggests that translation functioned as both a means of disseminating national literature across the Soviet Union and a mechanism of ideological control. By mediating Armenian historical memory through Russian, Soviet authorities were able to influence how that memory circulated and how explicitly it could be articulated. The case of *The Unsilenceable Belfry* is a vivid example of how translation practices operated within the ideological framework of the late Soviet period.

Keywords: The Unsilenceable Belfry; Komitas Vardapet; genocide discourse; Soviet censorship; ideological control; translation shifts; historical memory; political sensitivity

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1. Introduction

In examining translation, one can often discern the historical period in which a text was produced. Translators, whether consciously or not, cannot detach themselves from the socio-political environment of their time, which inevitably shapes their intellectual horizon, value system and interpretive stance. Translation is therefore never created in a vacuum. It is embedded in the cultural and institutional frameworks that define what is acceptable, desirable or even permissible. The strategies adopted, the omissions made, the tone selected and the terminology preferred frequently reflect broader ideological currents and dominant discourses of the era.

Viewed from a broader perspective, this observation aligns with the understanding that intercultural exchange of any kind takes place within a specific social context structured by complex relations of power. Such exchange involves agents who are conditioned by these power structures or at least deeply entangled in them and who may attempt to strategically exploit them in pursuit of individual or collective aims. These structures encompass not only political and economic authority but also various forms of cultural authority and symbolic power operating within the sphere of cultural production. Faced with multiple possibilities, agents must make choices and decisions about how to act within these constraints (Hermans 1996: 27).

The translator is precisely one such agent. This becomes particularly visible when we turn to concrete examples. For instance, numerous prominent translators have rendered Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Russian¹ and a comparison of these versions clearly reveals the ideological and temporal imprint of their respective periods. A striking case is the Russian translation of *Hamlet* by Boris Pasternak. Pasternak reshaped the tragedy under Soviet pressure. By employing the political language of his time and presenting a more restrained and controlled version of *Hamlet*, he ensured that the translation conformed to the expectations of the Soviet censorship apparatus. Yet, this adaptation does not necessarily imply full ideological compliance. Within the political climate of that period, adjusting a text could function as a strategy of survival while still allowing room for personal expression. The translation can thus be read both as a response to ideological constraints and as a subtle reflection of Pasternak's own inner position (Gallagher 2009: 129).

Russian readers value this version because they recognize that Pasternak presented a deeply human Hamlet, reshaped in a way that reflected the fears and inner tensions people experienced during the Stalinist era (Leighton 1991: 199). As Brian Baer puts it, "translation — not only the practice of translation but also commentary on translation — became a site of resistance to official Soviet culture and values. Through the selection of texts for translation, the various choices made in the course of translation and commentary on translation in the form of footnotes, prefaces and reviews, literary translators in the Soviet period became adept at encoding resistance for a select

¹ Beginning in 1748, twenty-two translations were produced directly from the original *Hamlet*, alongside numerous additional Russian renditions derived from it. Yet, within the broader history of Russian literature, only four of these versions — those by Mikhail Vronchenko (1828), Nikolay Polevoy (1837), Mikhail Lozinsky (1933), and Boris Pasternak (1940) — attained canonical status in their respective historical periods (Semenenko 2007).

intelligentsia audience. Moreover, the successful decoding of subversive content automatically constructed the reader as more insightful, if not more intelligent” (Baer 2006: 537).

Following the October Revolution, an instinctive fear gradually evolved into a deep-rooted, almost hereditary anxiety within the Soviet society and *intelligentsia* in particular. Given the strict censorship apparatus of *Glavlit*, which supervised every sphere of literary life in the Soviet Union, many writers and translators practiced self-censorship, excessively revising their works at the expense of the literary value to conform to the communist ideology. Any foreign literary piece would be heavily censored during the translation process to fully fit the expectations of the Soviet regime. Anything that was likely to go against the norm had to be modified or even eliminated.

During the Stalinist purges, what was perhaps even more hideous than the physical repression was the psychological destruction of human beings. This trauma inevitably left its imprint on the writers and artists of the time. The ideological terror had reached such an extreme that an author could be arrested and executed for a single poem. In her memoirs, Anna Akhmatova recalls conversations with Osip Mandelstam about the talented poet Nikolai Klyuev, who was arrested for one poem entitled *To the Revilers of Art* (Хулителям искусства). Any poem that was deemed ideologically dissenting could become a death sentence. Writers of that period lived under tremendous psychological pressure, expecting arrest and death at any moment. Akhmatova recounts one haunting episode regarding Mandelstam: “We were walking along Prechistenka Street (February 1934). What were we talking about? I do not remember. We turned onto Gogol Boulevard, and Osip said: ‘I am ready for death.’ Twenty-eight years have passed and I remember that moment every time I walk by that place” (Akhmatova 1983: 323).

However, the Khrushchev Thaw, which began in the mid-1950s after Stalin’s totalitarian rule (1927–1953), allowed a brief moment of liberalization. This period witnessed the emergence of more independent thinkers and translation practices began to flourish again. The relative abundance and diversity of translated literature from the Western world constituted one of the defining hallmarks of the cultural vitality and intellectual excitement that marked the early post-Stalin years (Friedberg 1977: 1).

The Thaw became a time of permissions and returns from oblivion. Many works of literature — both national and foreign — that had previously been banned were published or gradually brought back into circulation. For instance, a collection of works by Isaac Babel was published shortly after his rehabilitation in 1954 and Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* appeared in 1966 (in a samizdat version) in the journal *Moskva*. Among the most popular newly permitted foreign writers were Erich Maria Remarque and Ernest Hemingway (Culture.ru 2026).

This ideological approach to foreign literature had already been articulated in the 1930s. In his speech at the First Congress of the Writers’ Union in 1934, Karl Radek drew a clear distinction between foreign authors who could serve the Soviet cause and those who stood against it. Literature was assessed not only for its artistic value but for its political usefulness (Sherry 2015: 73).

Foreign works were expected to support Soviet discourse, especially in portraying imperialism and fascism as common enemies. In this light, later translation choices of foreign authors appear far from accidental. In fact, they were influenced not solely by literary taste but also by censorship and ideology. Erich Maria Remarque was known for his anti-fascist views. After the Nazis came to power, he was persecuted, his books were banned and they were publicly burned in Germany. In the Soviet context, presenting or translating Remarque helped show that the fight against fascism was not only a Soviet struggle but part of a broader international resistance. It suggested that even well-known Western writers opposed fascism, placing the Soviet war against Nazi Germany within a wider global movement.

Ernest Hemingway, although an American writer, had a strong connection to Cuba. After the Cuban Revolution, Soviet discourse described Cuba as an “island of freedom.” Hemingway’s well-known attachment to Cuba could therefore be used in a way that supported this image. For the Soviet Union, emphasizing Cuba as a symbol of resistance to Western capitalism was politically useful, especially given the close alliance between the USSR and Cuba and the presence of Soviet military bases there. In this way, translating Remarque and Hemingway was not simply a literary act but could also serve broader political and ideological aims.

During those years, literature from abroad began to occupy more and more shelves in Soviet apartments. Many of the *shestidesyatniki* (the Sixtiers)² recall these years as the best period not only of their own lives but also in the history of the Soviet Union. The brief period of the Thaw — just twelve years, from 1956 to 1968 — changed virtually everything. It was a remarkable time of freedom within an unfree country — a freedom that was, of course, relative, yet immensely fruitful (Culture.ru 2026).

Yet this liberalization had clear limits. Glavlit continued to exert significant influence, carefully monitoring which authors could be published and, crucially, which could be translated into the languages of the Soviet republics. National literatures, many of which had historically developed through translation, suffered as a consequence of this selective openness. While certain rehabilitated or ideologically acceptable works were permitted, others remained strictly prohibited. Major works such as Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* in its full uncensored form, Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Cancer Ward*, as well as later works by Aksyonov, Voinovich and Iskander were banned from publication and translation alike.

This restrictive policy extended to the non-Russian republics, which, despite their formal federal status, functioned in many respects within a colonial cultural framework. Authorities feared that translating system-critical literature into Armenian,

² The Sixtiers (*shestidesyatniki*) were a generation of Soviet intellectuals, writers, poets and urban cultural figures who emerged during the Khrushchev Thaw of the late 1950s and 1960s. They are often described as Westernizers, though this characterization is not entirely accurate. Rather, they were drawn to the idea of openness to the world, the rejection of boundaries and an orientation toward goodwill. Among their most prominent representatives were Bella Akhmadulina, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. While often remembered above all for these major poetic figures, the term more broadly refers to an urban milieu shaped by cautious optimism about change within the Soviet system (Bykov 2019).

Georgian, Lithuanian or other republican languages might nurture dissenting, anticolonial and freedom-seeking sentiments beyond the Russian-speaking center. Thus, even during the Thaw, translation remained an instrument of ideological management, revealing that the celebrated liberalization operated within carefully guarded boundaries.

Many Armenian authors encountered similar restrictions when their works touched upon sensitive historical or national themes. Such authors as Paruyr Sevak, Hrant Matevosyan, Hovhannes Shiraz, Guren Mahari were similarly silenced.

Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* was banned by *Glavlit* for condemning the Armenian Genocide, an act that, by affirming national identity, defied the colonial order of Soviet Armenia. By bringing historical memory and national continuity to the forefront, the poem ran counter to the official Soviet narrative, which required particular national tragedies to be absorbed into the broader story of socialist unity.

The censorship of Sevak's work was therefore not only a matter of political ideology in a narrow sense. It was part of a broader system designed to prevent literature from becoming a means of independent national self-expression.

Against this background, this article focuses on Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* — one of the significant works in Armenian literature. By examining the fate of this particular text, the study moves from general observations about censorship to a concrete case. Through the example and analysis of Sevak's poem, we seek to demonstrate how censorship functioned in practice, how editorial intervention, omission and ideological reframing operated not only at the level of policy but within the text itself. In doing so, the article shows how the mechanisms of control discussed above were implemented in the cultural life of Soviet Armenia and how literature became a site of negotiation between national memory and imperial authority.

2. Ideological Control of Historical Memory and National Voice in Sevak's Poem

*The Unsilenceable Belfry*³ (Arm. «Անլռելի զանգակատուն» [*Anlreli zangakatun*]) was published in 1959, when Sevak was thirty-five. The poem is dedicated to the life of Armenian priest and musicologist Komitas Vardapet⁴, yet at the basis of the poem lies the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Interestingly, Sevak wrote *The Unsilenceable Belfry* during his studies in Moscow (1951–1959), at the height of the Khrushchev Thaw. The metropolitan environment provided Sevak with intellectual and creative possibilities

³ An English translation of Paruyr Sevak's poem by Svetlana Vardanian has been published under the title *The Incessant Bell-Tower* (2015). In the present study, however, we use the title *The Unsilenceable Belfry*, which more closely reflects the literal meaning of the Armenian original and, in our view, more effectively conveys the poem's thematic content. Vardanian also provides English renderings of the poem's structural divisions. While we retain the term *Peals* for the poem's six major sections, we depart from her translation of the forty-six subdivisions and designate them as *Rings*.

⁴ Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935), born Soghomon Soghomonyan, was an Armenian composer, musicologist, singer, and clergyman and a major figure in Armenian musical culture. His extensive work collecting, studying, arranging, and performing Armenian folk songs played an important role in the preservation and development of Armenian national musical traditions (Gasparyan 1961).

that would have been far more constrained in Soviet Armenia. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the atmosphere of the *shestidesyatniki* influenced the conception of the poem in ways that may not have been possible if he had remained in Armenia at the time.

The topic of the 1915 ethnic cleansing remained largely taboo in Soviet Armenia and the public discussion of those atrocities was restricted. Needless to say, awareness of these events was even more limited in other Soviet republics, where the subject was virtually absent from official discourse and public knowledge.

While studying in Moscow, Sevak experienced firsthand the gradual changes brought about by the Khrushchev Thaw. After the Stalin Purge, the country seemed to be breathing again and it was those currents and new breath of freedom that inspired him to write about this tragic chapter in the history of the Armenian nation. The poem was published in 1959 by HayPetHrat — the state-sponsored publishing house in Soviet Armenia.

Yet, it should be underlined that the developments in the Soviet Union's foreign policy played a crucial role in bringing the Armenian Genocide into the spotlight in 1965 amid ongoing tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States as well as NATO. Ultimately, the international recognition of the Genocide functioned as a political lever through which pressure could be exerted on Turkey, a key NATO member that bordered not only the Soviet Union but also Armenia. By assuming a new resonance, the poem was republished in 1965 with the addition of a new section entitled *Heroic Ring* (*Դոճալիճ հերոսալիճ*). In 1965, the Soviet Union officially commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and a memorial was erected in Armenia in remembrance of the victims. Although Khrushchev resigned in 1964, the effect of the Thaw continued for some time.

In the years after Khrushchev's rule, when Brezhnev took power, the boundaries of freedom grew narrower. During the Brezhnev era, many translated literary works published in *Novyi mir* — a Russian-language monthly literary magazine — addressed themes aligned with the Soviet ideological position, as numerous Western writers of the time were themselves critical of their own social and political systems (Lygo 2015). This approach was widely fostered throughout the Soviet period even during the years of the Khrushchev Thaw with the translation of Remarque's and Hemingway's works as mentioned above bearing testimony to this.

A gradual control was exercised over all spheres, particularly the ideological sphere and the first target was literature and art. Naturally, Stalin's totalitarian repressive methods could no longer be relevant and applied, yet, the control continued being strict notably over literature.

The link between Soviet republics and Western countries was limited. Publishing houses, editorial boards of journals could not publish any literary piece, nor its translation without Glavlit's *dobro* (approval). The translation of *The Unspeakable Belfry* is a vivid example of this, which was done only 24 years later in 1982. The gap is clearly huge. Although genocide-related topics could function as a political lever for bringing the issue into the public spotlight, they also had a significant downside linked to the internal condition of the Soviet Union. Such topics had the potential to stimulate nationalist and patriotic sentiments among the population posing a risk to internal

stability. Mobilization of these sentiments in one republic could easily trigger similar reactions in others, such as Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic republics. For this reason, genocide-related discourse was treated as politically sensitive and subject to strict control, which explains why the translation of the poem was repeatedly postponed. The Novocherkassk massacre⁵ in 1962 serves as a vivid example of the ruthless suppression of worker unrest by the Soviet government, highlighting the willingness of the regime to use deadly force against its own citizens to maintain social order and ideological control.

The poem was translated into Russian by Harold Registan who was the son of Gabriel El-Registan — the co-author of the lyrics of the State Anthem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics along with Sergey Mikhalkov who was a staunch propagandist of Soviet ideologies. It is not a coincidence that the translation was done by El-Registan's son who was born and raised in Soviet Uzbekistan. Presumably, the translation was entrusted to him not merely because he was originally Armenian, but also because he was expected to produce a version that would remain fully compliant with the ideological principles cherished and propagated by the Soviet Union. As a figure closely associated with the Soviet cultural establishment, he could be relied upon to subject the poem to ideological censorship at the translation stage. The resulting text would not challenge the colonial order of Soviet Armenia, while any patriotic sentiment capable of strengthening Armenian national consciousness would be effectively nipped in the bud. Although he did not attain the high-ranking status enjoyed by his father, he remained a staunch Soviet patriot and a loyal representative of its ideological values. Thus, supposedly, much of his professional advancement was closely tied to the prestige and influence of his family background.

Interestingly, Harold Registan provides a noticeably vague and generalized account in the preface to the Russian edition. When referring to Komitas's deportation and psychological collapse, Registan writes that Komitas was "taken away among the first condemned and miraculously saved" and that "he lost his sanity after what he had witnessed" (Sevak 1982), yet he avoids explicitly naming the Armenian Genocide at this point. Instead, he formulates the event in broader and less specific terms, stating that "in Turkey, more than a million Armenians were brutally killed within a short period of time." The historical catastrophe is thus acknowledged, but it is framed in a generalized manner that distances it from direct and explicit designation from the very outset. Only later does he briefly mention "the most terrible tragedy of [the nation's] centuries-long history, the genocide," (ibid.) but here the formulation is immediately reframed through a comparison to Hitler and fascism, noting that the atrocity was one that "only Hitler's fascists were later able to surpass" (ibid.). This rhetorical move shifts the emphasis toward a familiar and ideologically sanctioned Soviet narrative, thereby aligning the Armenian tragedy with the broader anti-fascist discourse central to

⁵ The Novocherkassk massacre refers to the violent suppression of a workers' strike and demonstration in Novocherkassk on June 1–3, 1962. The protests began amid reductions in wage rates and increases in the prices of essential foodstuffs and developed into a broader workers' mobilization. Soviet forces opened fire on the demonstrators, killing 24 people and seriously wounding 69; 114 participants were subsequently tried, seven of whom were executed (Mandel 2012: 3).

Soviet political culture. Before concluding his remarks, Registan turns to a positive and ideologically safe generalization, describing the poem as a work that demonstrates how an unbreakable bond with the people gives rise to and sustains genius. The preface therefore does not engage directly with the historical details or the full moral gravity of the Armenian Genocide. Yet the poem itself centers precisely on the inhumane massacres of the Armenian nation, with Komitas functioning as a symbolic figure through whom this collective trauma is articulated. Registan's cautious framing can therefore be understood in the context of the strict censorship of the period, which limited direct discussion of the genocide and encouraged its reinterpretation within acceptable Soviet ideological narratives.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet policy underwent certain changes and the signs of confrontation with Turkey became less evident. The Soviet Union thus sought to distance Turkey from NATO as much as possible by exploring new pathways of cooperation. This shift required the removal of the most sensitive issues for Turkey from the political and ideological agenda, foremost among them the Armenian Genocide, which Soviet policy had previously treated as a means of exerting pressure on Turkey.

The long-awaited translation of *The Unsilenceable Belfry* in 1982 coincided with that shift in foreign policy and Brezhnev's death, a point when the structures of his long-standing system of stagnation were beginning to crack. The poem, being one of the literary treasures of the Armenian nation, condemned the genocide committed by the Young Turk government against Armenians, framing it as a crime against humanity that went beyond the mass killing of a nation and regarded it as a crime threatening humankind as a whole. It was not merely a literary work but a manifesto against crimes against humanity and the aim of Armenians and the Armenian diaspora was for it, like the genocide perpetrated against the Jews during the Second World War, to be acknowledged and made accessible to the peoples of the Soviet republics in line with official cultural policy. This policy was directed at making the national treasures of the Soviet republics available to everyone.

Russian served as a lingua franca for these nations and it was therefore logical that the literatures of the Soviet republics were translated into Russian. This was also due to the fact that the Russian school of translation was unmatched in its capacities compared with that of the other republics and capable of fully conveying the ideological nuances inherent in such works. Although the poem was translated into Russian, the task of the translator was nevertheless to smooth out all pointed corners, particularly those concerning Turkey:

Armenian	Russian
Կրակը վառվեց ծեր աչքերի մեջ՝ Հենց նոր սկսվող ժպիտը հանգավ: Առաջի՛կ անգամ,	И вспыхнул гнев В глубинах старых глаз, Мгновенную улыбку погасив, —

⁶ Extracts from the Armenian original of Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* are cited from *Collection of Works in 6 Volumes: Volume 4* (1973), published in Yerevan. The Russian translations are taken from Sevak's *Selected Works* (1983), published in Moscow. Both editions are listed in the references and the page numbers provided next to the excerpts correspond to the respective volumes.

Առաջի՛ն անգամ

Ա՛ստ՝ Վեհարանի հին պատերի մեջ,

Սրբապղծորեն թուրք երգ է մխում...

Ա՛ստ՝ հայոց հոտի այս սուրբ

փարախում,

Հովվապետն ինքը ականջ է կախում

Ինչ-որ մի մանկան անօրեն երգի...

Ա՛ստ, ուր հնչել են մեղեդիք ոսկի՝

«Հայր մեր», «Միայն սուրբ»,

«Արեգակն արդար

«Ով զարմանալի»

Կամ «Խորհուրդ խորին»,

Ուր գրաբարն է հնչել դարեդար,

Եվ շարականն է հուզել բոլորին,-

Ա՛ստ՝ Վեհարանի հին պատերի մեջ,

Առաջի՛ն անգամ, Առաջի՛ն անգամ

Սրբապղծության մանանեխ ընկավ... (p.

19)

В старинных стенах храма

В первый раз

Дымился святотатственный мотив...

В святом загоне паствы

пастырь сам

Внимает нечестивым словесам

Какого-то мальчишки, что поет

Греховные слова...

А этот свод

Лишь золотым мелодиям внимал —

Здесь «Отче наш», здесь «Лишь святой»

звучал,

Веками здесь грабар и шаракан,

Как гимны, волновали всех армян.

В покоех патриарших, где вокруг

Все свято,

В первый раз под чуждый звук

Здесь горечь святотатства пала вдруг... (p. 137-138)

A close comparison of the Armenian original and the Russian translation reveals a deliberate shift in the semantic focus and ideological framing. In the source text, the line *Սրբապղծորեն թուրք երգ է մխում* (lit.: A Turkish song is blaring sacrilegiously) explicitly invokes the presence of a historically antagonistic figure — of a Turk — within a sacred Armenian space. Furthermore, the tragedy is heightened by the fact that the song emerges from a Turkicised child's mouth, transforming innocence itself into a vehicle of desecration, a child who has been deprived of his parents, yet worse, of his mother tongue through slaughter and who sings in the language of those responsible. The writer has portrayed the tragedy of this fact with great artistic mastery. In the Russian translation, the word *թուրք* (Turk) disappears altogether and is replaced by the abstract phrase *дымился святотатственный мотив* (lit.: a sacrilegious motif smoldered), shifting the image from a historically specific act to a generalized sense of desecration. Here, the downfall from artistic heights and tragic drama is evident. This lexical substitution transforms an accusatory, historically anchored image into a depersonalized, clichéd one. While the Armenian text confronts the reader with a charged act of desecration tied to a specific historical adversary, the Russian version seems to neutralize this confrontation by dissolving its ethnic referent. Such a move exemplifies a broader translation strategy characteristic of the late Soviet period, whereby ideologically sensitive elements were not eliminated outright but reframed in a manner that retained poetic intensity while rendering the text politically acceptable. Also noteworthy is the repetition *Առաջի՛ն անգամ, Առաջի՛ն անգամ* (lit.: For the first time, for the first time!), which intensifies the tragic weight of the moment. The repetition foregrounds the sense of moral shock associated with the event. In the Russian translation, however, this repetition is lost resulting in a more descriptive rendering of the scene.

Armenian	Russian
Որսալ մեղեդին հույն-բյուզանդական, Հայոց խաղերում՝	А в тагах армянских напев византийский найти,
Թուրք-թաթարական բայաթի-շարքի-ն: (p. 64)	В армянских частушках турецкий размер баяти. (p. 170)

A similar tendency can be observed in another passage of the poem. In the Armenian original, the lines *Որսալ մեղեդին հույն-բյուզանդական, / Հայոց խաղերում՝ թուրք-թաթարական բայաթի-շարքի-ն* (lit.: “To capture the Greco-Byzantine melody, within Armenian songs — the Turkic-Tatar bayati mode) explicitly identify the cultural sources of musical influence, referring to both Greek-Byzantine and Turkish-Tatar traditions. The compound expression *թուրք-թաթարական* (Turkic-Tatar) is particularly significant as it points to the historical origins of the Turkish ethnos. Here the term ‘Tatar’ functions as a historical designation for the Turks. Yet, it carries sensitive implications in the Soviet context, where the term ‘Tatar’ is more likely to be understood by lay readers in its contemporary ethnic sense. Tatars constituted one of the largest ethnic groups within the Soviet Union and many members of the Soviet political and administrative elite were of Tatar descent. Obviously, linking Turks and Tatars in this way could produce ideological discomfort and tensions as it risked associating an internal Soviet population with an external political adversary⁷. In the Russian translation, this potential tension is mitigated by reducing the compound ethnic reference to the more neutral formulation *турецкий размер баяти* (lit.: the Turkish bayati meter), thereby preserving the musical reference while eliminating a politically sensitive ethnic conjunction.

Armenian	Russian
Բսկ ճեմարան՝ում...	А как в академии время питомца течет?.. (p. 140)
Թուրքախոս սանի կարոտ բերանում, (p. 23)	

The above said is also evident in the rendering of the line *Բսկ ճեմարան՝ում... Թուրքախոս սանի կարոտ բերանում* (lit.: And in the Seminary... the Turkish-speaking pupil with longing on his lips). In Armenian, *ճեմարան* clearly refers to the seminary, a term loaded with liturgical, ecclesiastical and cultural meaning. The phrase places the scene within a religious institution and reinforces the tension between sacred space and the presence of a Turkish-speaking pupil. In the Russian translation, however, *ճեմարան* is rendered as *академия* (academy), a secular and institutionally neutral term that removes the explicit religious dimension of the setting. As a result, the liturgical context is blurred and the scene is reframed as taking place in a general educational environment rather than a clerical one. This lexical shift weakens the

⁷ Contrary to many ideologically motivated views of Russian–Tatar friendship, the attitude toward Tatars among Russians is vividly reflected in Pushkin’s fairy tale *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights*: «Иль башку с широких плеч / У татарина отсечь» [lit.: Or else to chop off, from broad shoulders, a Tatar’s brute head] (Pushkin 1936: 14).

religious context of the original and contributes to a broader depersonalization and secularization of the poem's imagery.

Armenian	Russian
Սուրբան Համիդը, ի փառս ավսահի, Ի նշան ահի Ամեն մի հայի Եվ ի գիտություն	Во славу аллаха султан Гамид Решил — К устрашению Всех армян И к сведению
Իր երկար քթով ամեն տեղ մտնող Այդ Եվրոպայի, –	Старой Европы, Что длинный свой нос норовит
Սուրբան Համիդը տարավ ու բերեց Եվ – Ապտակի տեղ, Ապտակի նման – Շրը խկ՝	Засунуть в дела отдаленных стран, Не думая долго — султан не мудрил — Бац! — Вместо пощечины, Словно пощечину — Трах! —
«Հայաստան» բառը արգելեց, Լեզվից, քարտեզից, գրքերից քերեց. (p. 22)	И слово «Армения» он запретил, Стер с карты, из книг, С языка соскоблил — ... (p. 139)

The Russian translation introduces a shift by adding the epithet *старая* (old) to Europe, an attribute that is absent from the Armenian original. In the source text, Europe is characterized through irony *իր երկար քթով ամեն տեղ մտնող այդ Եվրոպայի* (lit.: that Europe which pokes its long nose everywhere), emphasizing interference rather than age or historical status. By contrast, the Russian phrase *Старой Европы* points to a familiar ideological cliché within Russian and Soviet discourse, where ‘Old Europe’ often functioned as a marker of moral exhaustion or political decline. This addition reframes Europe not merely as intrusive but as outdated and ideologically inferior, rendering the passage in accordance with the established Soviet rhetorical conventions.

In the Soviet Union, attitudes toward foreign cultures were often mixed and at times openly hostile and translated literature was therefore especially shaped by the dominant ideological climate. Fears about Western influence were central to how the Soviet state understood itself and played a key role in controlling how foreign ideas and voices entered the cultural space (David-Fox 2011).

Thus, the lexical adjustments observed in the Russian version seek to reinforce the oppositional stance of the Soviet Union towards Europe, more specifically present it in a negative light. A similar shift appears in the translation of *ամեն տեղ մտնող* (lit.: meddling everywhere) as *Засунуть в дела отдалённых стран* (lit.: meddling in the affairs of distant countries), which implicitly implies that idea that Europe interferes in the affairs of far-off countries, particularly the Soviet Union, where it has no legitimate place.

The chapter *Ring of Guard* (*Ղղաճ հսկման*) is entirely omitted from the Russian translation. In fact, it stands in clear tension with core Soviet ideologies. At the

center of this chapter is the idea of *khaz*, presented not as a technical system of musical notation but as the very “breath, soul and pulse of the nation” («Շն ինչը, հոգի ն, տրոն ինն ազգի»⁸). It can be assumed that this understanding runs counter to Soviet materialist and secular principles, which rejected metaphysical ideas of national essence and tended to view culture as a historical and social construct rather than as a form of sacred continuity⁸. In the poem, Armenian liturgical heritage is depicted as a living, almost organic system, whose paralysis is experienced as a kind of national suffocation. By giving religious tradition such an active role in shaping collective identity, the text challenges Soviet attempts to strip religion of its symbolic power and to subordinate national traditions to a unified socialist framework. The section is equally problematic in the way it treats loss. Loss is not portrayed as something settled in the past but as an ongoing condition that calls for responsibility and action in the present. Images of *sealed treasures*, *fossilized chants*, *unreadable manuscripts*, and “*dead*” *sermons* suggest that cultural heritage has been deliberately immobilized rather than simply rendered obsolete by time. The repeated call to search for the key, to decipher and to revive what has been silenced places responsibility on the present generation instead of safely relegating loss to history. In this way, the poem disrupts the Soviet narrative of linear progress and introduces an alternative logic centered on recovery and accountability.

The omission of the *Ring of Guard* chapter appears less a matter of poetic reduction than a deliberate act of ideological control and censorship aimed at suppressing ideas that could not be easily regulated.

Armenian	Russian
Խաչը վերստին դրոշակ տնկեց, Ճորտության գիրը կրկին հերքելով՝ «Սուր ու թուր, գնդակ ու հրացանը Մեր խաղալիքն է» խրոխտ երգելով: (p. 88)	Не крест, а знамена подняв над собой, Ты записи рабства пути преградил. «МЕЧ, САБЛЯ И ПУЛЯ, РУЖЕЙНЫЙ ПРИЦЕЛ — ВОТ НАШИ ИГРУШКИ», — врагу ты пропел. (p. 185)

In this passage from the *Heroic Ring*, we encounter another instance of censorship that alters the semantic and symbolic value of a religious image. The semantic transformation is not explicit at first glance but becomes apparent on closer examination. The Cross, which for centuries had been used by the Armenian Church as a means of enforcing obedience and which also functions as a marker of Armenian national identity, given Armenia’s status as the first Christian nation, is reinterpreted by Sevak as a symbol of rebellion. In Sevak’s text, the Cross undergoes a semantic shift and comes to function like a flag through which Armenians have ensured their historical continuity through struggle for survival. The Russian translator, however,

⁸ Grounded in Marxist-Leninist thought, Soviet secularism treated religion as both a remnant of earlier social orders and a challenge to the state’s claim to ideological authority. Unlike purely philosophical atheism, Soviet atheism functioned as an instrument of governance, aimed at dismantling religious institutions and replacing them with a materialist worldview through the promotion of “scientific atheism,” in service of building a socialist society (Luehrmann et al. 2021).

sets the Cross in direct opposition to the flag: *He կրест, а знамена* (lit.: not the Cross, but flags). By stating this so explicitly, the translation does more than replace a religious symbol with a secular one. It changes the meaning of the passage. In Sevak's text, the Cross is used metaphorically as a kind of flag under which the Armenian people have survived and maintained their continuity. In the Russian version, this metaphor is removed. The Cross no longer carries this meaning and the idea of survival is instead attached directly to the flag. As a result, the Cross loses its symbolic force since in the Soviet context it was not acceptable for a text to present Christian faith as a unifying or guiding principle.

Another clear case of softening appears in the translation of the chapter title *Ring of Massacre* (*Ղողանջ կոտորածի*) as *Звон злодеяния* (lit.: Ring of an Evil Deed). In Armenian, 'կոտորած' directly names a massacre and leaves no doubt about the scale of the violence. The Russian word 'злодеяние,' however, is more general and abstract, referring to an evil deed rather than slaughter of the Armenian nation. As a result, a concrete and historically charged event is turned into a vague moral notion and the tragic force of the original is noticeably reduced.

A similar pattern can be observed in the chapter *Ring of Carnage* (*Ղողանջ նախաճիքի*), where the Armenian original explicitly uses the word *եղեռն* ("genocide"). In the phrase *Եղեռնի դասեր*, the term functions as a direct accusation. It presents Europe as a force that, without shame, passes on the experience and knowledge of genocide to the descendants of the Bloody Sultan.

Armenian	Russian
Հիմա լուսավոր այդ նույն Եվրոպան Առանց շիկնանքի այնտեղ էր հասել, Որ ժառանգներին Կարմիր սուլթանի Դասեր էր տալիս՝ Եղեռնի դասեր, Դասեր նախաճիքի՝ բարբարոսությամբ, Իրեն պահելով... դերը բոգության: (p. 181)	И та же Европа — культуры оплот! — Уже не краснея, уроки дает Султана Кровавого внукам сама — Как сделать, чтоб разум окутала тьма, Как лучше убить, как усилить разбой, А сводницы роль бережет за собой! (p. 256)

In the Russian translation, however, this term is avoided and replaced with *разбой*, a word that refers to robbery or violent criminal behavior. While *разбой* implies brutality, it does not denote mass extermination or systematic violence against a people. By avoiding the word *genocide*, the translation mitigates the accusatory tone. The crime is no longer presented as a planned and collective act but as a form of generalized violence that can be attributed to individual wrongdoing. The translator's decision to omit the word *genocide* is closely linked to its political implications. Using this term would have amounted to an explicit condemnation of Turkey, since *եղեռն* in the Armenian context directly refers to the Armenian Genocide.

The title *Ղողանջ եղեռնակալան* (*Ring of Genocide*) is translated literally as *Звон геноцида*, which may at first glance seem to contradict the observations made above, since the translator does use the word *genocide* in this case. However, this choice does not undermine the overall pattern identified in the text itself. The use of the word 'genocide' in the title functions in a different semantic and discursive register than its

use would within the body of the poem. Detached from the textual context, the term ‘genocide’ in the title does not carry the same intensity and direct accusatory tone as it does within the poem itself. The same tendency can be seen in the *Ring of Exile* (*Ղողանջ արքայի*), where *էղենակաւ ալի զարնաւ* (lit.: of that genocidal spring), is translated as *Вихрь злодеяния роковой / В Константинополе весной* (lit.: The fatal whirlwind of atrocity / In Constantinople that spring). Here the lexeme with a clear genocidal connotation in the Armenian original is replaced in Russian by a more generalized term denoting evildoing.

The omission of a lengthy excerpt from the *Ring of Rebirth* (*Ղողանջ վերածննան*) is particularly significant. This is in fact one of the most significant chapters in the poem since it presents the rebirth of the Armenian nation as rooted in the strength of its unbreakable national spirit. Recalling the 1915 massacres that the Armenian people endured, the poet emphasizes their survival and the preservation of their historical continuity and national identity. Although he briefly invokes the image of the phoenix, he immediately rejects the comparison, insisting that Armenians did not rise like a phoenix but like Armenians - «Եվ... ո՛չ որպէս փյունիկ թռչուն, Այլ... հայի՛ պէս...» (lit.: “And... not like a phoenix, But... like an Armenian!”). This idea, repeated throughout the chapter in the formula «ո՛չ որպէս... Այլ... հայի՛ պէս...» (“not like ... but like an Armenian”), underscores that the resilience of the Armenian nation is self-defined rather than borrowed from myth. At the same time, a closer reading of the second half of the chapter reveals a shift in tone. Here, the poem begins to echo Soviet ideological discourse, suggesting that Armenian revival became possible within the framework of the Soviet Union, metaphorically portrayed as ‘a powerful family’:

Արցունքն՝ աչքին,
Վերքը՝ կրծքին,
Պատառ-պատառ ո, ծվատ թեպետ,
Քո ժողովուրդը, Վարդապէ՛տ,
Զնդանումիդ քսան տարում
Զանազ ասել մնաս բարև
Ամեն բանտի ու զնդանի,
Մտալ հզոր մի ընտանիք,
Ուր հույսը նույն
Դարձել էր պուն,
Նույն երազը՝ ծածկող տանիք... (p. 221)

It should also be noted that alongside the censorship mechanisms imposed by the Soviet regime, the author himself appears to have exercised a degree of self-censorship. The episode related to the heroic struggle for survival is conveyed only through indirect references and Sevak avoids mentioning specific historical events or naming particular heroes. As a result, the narrative leaves open the question of whom this survival should be attributed to, allowing the interpretation to remain somehow ambiguous.

It is not by chance that the first part of the chapter, which highlights the resilience of the Armenian nation and presents it as self-reliant and not dependent on any broader political framework, is omitted in the Russian translation. This omission provides strong grounds to assume that this emphasis on autonomous national strength was precisely what made the passage problematic. Registan chose to translate only the section in which national histories are interpreted within a broader narrative of communist development and collective unity. The absence of the earlier part may therefore reflect sensitivity to the poem's reference to independent national continuity. In fact, the translator has omitted the section devoted to the Armenian heroic struggle, thereby creating a more direct link between Armenian survival and the Soviet regime.

Such examples are numerous, yet discussing each of them would deviate from our primary objective, which is to demonstrate the functional mechanisms and aim of Soviet censorship. This study is methodologically challenging, as it is a first attempt to examine the poem through the lens of translation. It therefore cannot entirely avoid elements of subjectivity or interpretations that may not be fully substantiated. The analysis presented here reflects a particular text and a specific episode extracted from the Soviet censorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A more comprehensive investigation of Soviet censorship in translation would require a broader chronological scope and a more multifaceted approach, including a wider range of authors and texts. Accordingly, the present study does not claim to offer definitive conclusions. Rather, through the analysis of a single literary work, it seeks to provide a glimpse into how Soviet censorship operated in practice.

3. Conclusion

The comparative analysis conducted between the Armenian original of Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* and its 1982 Russian translation by Registan shows that Soviet censorship did not fully silence a text but transformed it from within. The most sensitive elements, particularly explicit references to Turks, the direct use of the word "genocide," the religious symbolism of *the Cross* and passages highlighting independent national resilience, were either softened, obscured or eliminated. What remains is still recognizably Sevak's poem, yet its tone, intensity and historical resonance are carefully diminished. The Russian translation of the poem is representative of the broader mechanism of Soviet cultural policy. Russian functioned as a lingua franca through which the literary heritage of the republics was made accessible across the Union. However, this mediation also meant ideological and political supervision.

Translating into Russian a literary work that recounted the dark chapters of Armenian history allowed it to reach a wider audience, yet it also gave the authorities the power to keep a close eye on how that history was presented. Translation thus became both a bridge and a boundary.

It is worth remembering that the poem was written in 1959 but translated into Russian only in 1982. This considerable delay highlights the political sensitivity surrounding genocide discourse and suggests that the subject remained tightly

controlled for decades. Although references to the Armenian Genocide could at times serve Soviet foreign policy interests, especially in relation to Turkey, they also carried the risk of awakening strong national feelings within Armenian and beyond. For that reason, the accusatory force of the poem had to be restrained. Religious imagery was secularized, ethnic identity obscured and the idea of independent national continuity excluded. These changes made to the text witness that the Soviet authorities constantly tried to prevent art and literature in our case, from awakening feelings or instilling ideas that could challenge communist ideological unity.

At the same time, the case is not entirely reduced to censorship alone. Sevak himself appears to have written within the limits of his time, occasionally leaving room for ambiguity. Likewise, even in its altered form, the Russian translation did not completely erase the historical trauma at the heart of the poem. The bell still rings, but its sound is controlled, its resonance adjusted to fit the ideological climate of the late Soviet period.

This study does not claim to offer final conclusions about Soviet censorship as a whole. Rather, by examining one major literary work and its translation, it seeks to show how ideological control could operate subtly, at the level of words, images and structure. *The Unsilenceable Belfry* thus becomes an important example of how translation functioned as a site where literature, politics, and historical memory came together and where meaning was not completely silenced but carefully reshaped.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.