Literary Production in Twentieth-Century Armenia: From Stifling State Control to the Uncertainties of Independence

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Introduction

Any chapter-length survey of the history of Eastern Armenian literature in the twentieth century can only touch upon some of the main problems and issues that affected the publications of this period.¹ Because political developments heavily influenced literary production throughout the century, this overview takes a chronological approach that uses historical markers in order to categorize developments in literature.

At the turn of the century, the spirit of the Russian Revolution brought new fervor to Armenian intellectual activity in the Caucasus, and the Armenians began to undergo a reawakening in terms of cultural and political thought. As a result of such developments throughout the empire, the tsarist government, in a feeble attempt to maintain its power, reversed some of the freedoms that the Russian Constitution of 1906 had granted. Thus, during this early period of the twentieth century, the demands of the tsarist state impacted the lives and activities of authors like Hovhannēs Tʿumanian (Yovhannēs Tʿumanean), Awetikʿ Isahakian (Awetikʿ Isahakean), and Nar-Dos. Nevertheless, Eastern Armenian literature in the two pre-Soviet decades of the century and the first decade of the Soviet era was not explicitly linked to the strictly defined ideological demands of any state.² In general, then, literature flourished organically until the late 1920s.

¹ While acknowledging Eastern Armenian writers throughout the Caucasus, especially in the early part of the century, this survey takes Eastern Armenia (the former Soviet Republic of Armenia and the present-day Republic of Armenia) as its primary geographic focus. At the same time, it makes note of some other publication centers, including the other republics of the Soviet Union, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, France, Egypt, and the United States. Due to the limited scope of the chapter, twentieth century writers who have worked or currently work outside Armenia, including Yakob Karapentsʿ (Yakob Karapencʿ), Khorēn Aramuni (Xorēn Aramuni), Karēn Karslyan (Karēn Karslean), Armēn Melikʿian (Armēn Melikʿean), and many others, fall outside its purview.

² Luckyj 1975, 1–2.
In contrast, starting in the late 1920s and continuing on until the end of the Soviet period, the state determined the course of a vast majority of Eastern Armenian literary production. For almost three quarters of the twentieth century, writers had to follow the changing demands of the Writers Union: throughout the years, the government exercised control on the development of literature, ranging from the imposition of the strictest restrictions on freedom of expression to the allowance of a modicum of freedom to, in the later years, greater tolerance for art that was ideologically independent and even subversive. Despite the fluctuations in the limitations authors faced, state censorship remained an active part of literary life throughout the entire Soviet period. Nevertheless, and however paradoxically, state control of literary production did have a singular beneficial outcome: state funding facilitated an abundance of publications. An overwhelming number of authors published their work prolifically, and the average print run for the most popular texts was in the thousands and often in the tens of thousands. In this regard, *Grakan telekatu* [A Reference Guide to Literature] serves as a vital resource: it documents all of the Armenian language literature published in Soviet Armenia from 1934 to 1974. State funding also made the frequent translation of Armenian literature into Russian and the other languages of the USSR possible. However, these gains are almost negligible when the entire picture is taken into account. Overall, the quality of literature suffered immeasurably, especially when it absolutely had to serve an ideological purpose. Generally, experimentation in art was stifled, and, during the worst years of the Stalinist purges a “new genocide” took place. In addition, when dealing with any Soviet-era text the politics of publication must be borne in mind. For example, none of the complete works of authors published during the period really include the given author’s complete oeuvre. To compound matters further, many texts were lost or suppressed, and authors were often compelled to publish edited versions of their work in order to ensure publication.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenia’s emergence as an independent nation-state in 1991 marked the beginning of a new era: the state no longer directly controlled what could and could not be published and read. Authors had the freedom to experiment aesthetically, stylistically, and thematically. They began to broach formerly taboo subjects in literature, like eroticism and

3 Bardakjian lists some of the twentieth century translators of Armenian literature into Russian: Sergey Gorodetsky, Samuil Marshak, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Nikolai Tikhonov, Mikhail Svetlov, Arseny Tarkovsky, Ilya Selvinsky, Naum Grebnev, Evgeny Evtushenko, Vera Zvyagintseva, Maria Petrovykh, Valery Bruisov, and Maxim Gorky.

4 Gabriélean 2006, 48.