

Translations from Armenian into Serbian, 1991 to date

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conducted by Babken Simonyan¹ and translated from Armenian into English by Eva Mesropyan
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¹ Babken Simonyan is an author and translator.

ARMENIAN TRANSLATION LITERATURE IN SERBIA

The cultural relations between Serbia and Armenia have a history of more than 750 years. The author of this article has been close to these relations from 1975. These relations include not only literature, but also culture, science, politics and various issues related to the Serbian-Armenian diaspora.

Armenians, indeed, have a great contribution in the history, literature and culture, as well as in all the other areas of public life of the Serbian nation. Armenians were mentioned in the Serbian history in the 13th century for the first time. Later, after the destruction of Ani, separate groups of Armenians moved to Europe, the Crimea and later to Poland from where to Serbia. Separate groups of Armenians were formed in Serbia in the 16th century. In that period the known Armenians in Belgrade were from Ani, from the Apoyan family, who were well-known and had the nickname “Belgradian” added to their names. There were many well-known people among the members of the Apoyan family: traders, statesmen, artists, also translators, who attached importance to the written speech and books. The Serbian-Armenian diaspora, however, lived an active life in the 18-19th centuries. The clergymen of Mekhitarist Congregation of Venice were conducting a pastoral mission in Belgrade from 1717 to 1739 while at the same time the clergymen of Mekhitarist Congregation of Vienna were conducting a mission in Novi Sad. They were also excellent publishers devoted to writing and books and had greatly contributed to the development and promotion of publishing of Serbian literature.

In terms of the development of Serbian literature the 19th century was exceptionally productive. Many Serbian writers and scientific figures and particularly the founder of the new Serbian language Vuk Karadžić published their books in the publishing house of the Mekhitarist Congregation of Vienna and established close relations with them. In 1804, after the first Serbian rebellion Vuk had to move to Vienna, as the situation in Serbia was tense, and it was impossible to indulge in the literal-cultural activities. In 1811, after the foundation of the Mekhitarist Congregation, having established good relations with its representatives, Vuk also



started a close collaboration with the monks. The well-known “Serbian dictionary” (1818) by V. Karadžić was published in the Mekhitarist printing house. The year of 1847, however, was particularly significant for the Serbian literature. In that year the Mekhitarists printed the “New Testament” (1847) in Karadžić’s translation, the wonderful poem “Mountain Wreath” by Montenegrin Prince-Bishop and poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, the book of poems by Branko Radichevich (1847), the collection of Serbian national fairy-tales (1853) collected by Karadžić and many other books making their contribution in the development of cultural relations between the Serbian and Armenian nations.

It should also be mentioned in a couple of words what contributions have Armenians had in the sphere of construction of Serbian religious buildings. There are studies that scientifically prove the impact of Armenian architecture on Serbian monuments of the Middle Ages. Tens of manuscripts were destroyed as a result of numerous wars and disasters, but there still exist relics that are preserved to date which witness the undeniable fact of the existence of Armenian diaspora in Serbia and the cultural legacy created by the Serbian-Armenians. There also used to exist Armenian churches in Belgrade and other places in Serbia, which were destroyed later, in the 18th century by the Turkish invaders, particularly in 1739. Those churches were also centers of writing, where Armenian manuscripts were written, as the Armenian writing traditionally continued in churches. The “Hymnary” written in Belgrade in 1688 is now at the national library of Nurnberg. That “Hymnary” and many other valuable manuscripts were transferred from Belgrade to Austria by the soldiers of Austrian general Maximilian II Elector of Bavaria in 1688. Many similar manuscripts and books were written which were completely destroyed by the hands of invaders. There are many valuable documents, letters and memoranda preserved in the courts of the Mekhitarist Cougregation where I have had the opportunity to work and do a research, which serve as the undeniable proofs of Serbian-Armenian culture.

In order to collect documents concerning the Armenian diaspora in Serbia Babken Simonyan has made multiple researches also in the archives of “Novi Sad” in Belgrade and found exquisite relics of Armenian spiritual culture, such as manuscripts, books, records, which are eloquent witnesses of cohabitation of the two nations.



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The Serbian-Armenian diaspora has always been small in numbers throughout its history. There were no Armenian writers living and working there who could contribute to the development of translation of the literature of the Serbian and Armenian people. The life of the Serbian- Armenian diaspora found reflection in the letters of monks of Mekhitarist Cougregation of Vienna and Venice conducting pastoral mission in Serbia, and these letters and memoranda are a valuable material for publishing and translation activities.

There were no translators in Armenia or Serbia that would translate directly (not through a third language), but the translations done from Russian have served as a foundation in translating and representing the works of Armenian and Serbian writers to the reader. This was mainly being done during the Soviet era. Translating from Russian was something that could not be fully-fledged, as it is a truth universally known that during translation through an intermediary language the true value of the original work is lost. Anyway, the work of those translators who represented separate works of the Serbian literature to the Armenian readers and of those Serbian translators who represented the works of Armenian writers to Serbian readers during the Soviet era is highly appreciated.

In the axis of Babken Simonyan's literal and cultural activity lies the approach from the perspective of Cultural Studies, as it is the only way of creating valuable and lasting works. This approach is a complete system of studies of history, literature, translation art, the life of the Serbian-Armenians, decipherment of old records and a study of spiritual values. Every time when translating a new work, apart from the language skills he also makes use of his knowledge in the field of history, culture, traditions and national peculiarities of Serbia, which help in securing the high quality of the translations.

Apart from the books that were written by Babken Simonyan, many separate books of other Armenian writers were published in Serbia in translation. Here are some of them: "Fairy-tales", "The Great Armenian Genocide", "The Armenian Sun" (children's literature) by Hovhannes Toumanyan, "Devotion" by Silva Kapoutikyan. All these books have had a positive response in Serbia.

A few words should be added about the works of foreign and diaspora Armenian writers, whose

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books (originally written in languages other than Armenia) were translated into Serbian from other languages. In 1937 the novel “The Forty Days of Musa Dagh” by Franz Werfel was published for the first time in Serbian in two volumes in Stevan Milović’s translation from German. This book was republished in Armenia already in one book on the occasion of the 1700 anniversary of Christianity in Armenia with Babken Simonyan’s professional editing and afterword. The following books by William Saroyan were translated from English into Serbian: “My Heart’s in the Highlands”, “Papa, You’re Crazy”, “My Name is Aram” and “The Burning Tigris” by Peter Balakian. This process continues, and it is planned to publish new books in the coming future.

Several words about the cooperation with the Serbian publishers and about publishing policy in Serbia. Serbian publishers have always had a positive disposition towards Armenian writers and Armenian literature. The publishing of the above-mentioned books is the proof of it. The studies show that Serbian publishers in terms of genre give preference to historic, belles-lettres and youth literature (in prose, verse, oration). Some books of Armenian writers were published by state support, some of them through benefactors due to the financial-economic crisis, as due to its geographic-political situation Serbia appeared in a difficult financial-economic situation in the 90ies of the previous century. Nevertheless, with the sponsorship of some benefactors the printing of some books became possible, which were presented to a large group of readers and received positive feedback in Serbia. Here are some of them: “The Fragrance of Homeland”, “Through the Balkan Fires”, “Armenian Sun”, “From Ararat to Kosovo”, “The great Armenian Genocide” and others. All of these books have been published with the help of the benefactors. Indeed, books are being published in Serbia by state support, but these means are mainly received by the state publishing houses (Nolit, Prosveta, Serbian Literary Association and other), while private publishers, which are larger in number, have to rely on their own financial means or seek benefactors to regulate their publishing activities.

Here is also one more interesting review: the studies show that from the region of Transcaucasia (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan) Armenian literature in translation is the most presented in Serbia. We can say that Armenian writers are presented and known to the Serbian readers as

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much as Ukrainian writers are. So this naturally has been greatly contributed to by the active steps of the author of this article owing to which the Armenian literature became available to the Serbian readers.

Apart from the published books, the works of many Armenian writers and poets were published in the Serbian literary press and anthologies. Those works have had a great response among the Serbian readers; Serbian mass media and literary critics have referred to it many times. Let us remember and honour those Armenian writers and thinkers (from early Christianity to date) whose works have been presented to the Serbian readers in translation- Mesrop Mashtots, Grigor Narekatsi (Gregory of Narek), Nahapet Qouchak, Nerses Shnorhali, Sayat-Nova, Mkhitar Gosh, Vardan Aygektsi, Ghevond Alishan, Khachatur Abovyan, Mikael Nalbandyan, Misak Metsarents, Daniel Varuzhan, Petros Duryan, Mkrtych Peshiktashlyan, Grigor Zohrap, Nar-Dos, Hovhannes Toumanyanyan, Avetik Isahakyan, Vahan Teryan, Eghishe Charents, Aksel Bakunts, Stepan Zoryan, Nairi Zaryan, Gourgen Mahari, Maro Margaryan, Hovhannes Shiraz, Silva Kapoutikyan, Vahagn Davtyan, Paruyr Sevak, Hrant Matevosyan, Vardges Petrosyan and many other known writers.

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