



*Translations from Armenian into French, 1991 to date*

a study by Next Page Foundation in the framework of the Book Platform project

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September 2012

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## I. Introduction

### *Forewords*

Given that the vast majority of the published books (be it novels, poetry or fairy tales) that come out in France in any given year are translated by French-Armenians, and that not all of the translation from Armenian into French come from books published in the Republic of Armenia, it would make sense to talk about the atypical situation of the Armenian culture in France as well as in the diaspora. This point will be further analyzed in section III. “The unique case of the Armenian diaspora’s in publishing and translating”.

When discussing current situation and trends in the field of translation from Armenian into French, there are several points that need to be kept in mind:

- given the history and the geopolitical background of the Armenians, translations from Armenian to French have a long history, way before current Armenia’s independence in 1991
- as the Armenian language is divided into two separate branches - eastern and western Armenian, translations have been done in both dialects, that is partly from books published in the diaspora
- there are two distinct markets in France for books translated from Armenians - the diaspora market and the French global market
- although the relative and absolute numbers of translated works remain small compared to other languages, the interest is growing - especially among the younger generation of French-Armenian Diaspora
- there has been a very important event in France over the past few years that has boosted the publishing and translation market in France - “Arménie, mon amie” (“Armenia my friend” which was a full year dedicated to Armenian culture in France)



- existing translations - especially historical novels and story tales for children - have been very popular among the readers.

### *Brief historical background*

In the past, France has played a great role as a literary and cultural center of the Armenian diaspora.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the capital of Western Armenian intellectual life went from Constantinople to Paris. During the Ottoman period of social reforms in the mid-19th century, it was customary among wealthy Armenian families to send their son - and, exceptionally, their daughters - to Paris to complete their studies. These young Armenians would in general return to the Ottoman Empire after graduation, hoping to make good use of their knowledge and skills in order to help improve the social and political life of their community. At the turn of the last century, a small but influential group of about 3000 Armenians had already settled in Paris. These Armenians were often writers and activists who were threatened by the increasingly authoritarian regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. They chose to seek refuge abroad, where they could express themselves more freely, without fear of being imprisoned or being constantly monitored.

Among the small community of Armenians in Paris at the end of the century, one of its most remarkable and respected was Archag Tchobanian. Born in Constantinople in 1872, he was a pupil at the Lycée Tchobanian Guétronagan - reputed to have produced some of the Armenian literary most accomplished masterminds - and began to write and translate Armenian into French at an early age. At the age of 23, he founded the literary magazine *Dzaghig* (Flower, in Armenian) and, shortly after, leaving Constantinople to Paris, where he became a key figure in the French-Armenian intellectual life for over a quarter century.

Famous as an ambassador of Armenian letters in France, poet, writer, translator and editor, Arshag Tchobanian not only gained the respect of his fellow Armenians, but also many French writers and politicians, the most eminent of his time. Through his



contacts with personalities such as Anatole France and Georges Clemenceau, Tchobanian made aware of the suffering of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire and drew the support of the French public opinion to its cause.

Nevertheless, Tchobanian was worried about the danger to presenting the Armenians as only victims, so he worked hard to promote examples of their literary and cultural heritage with a view of the French newcomer in the field. He regularly published translations of Armenian folk tales in French literary journals, organized cultural events - including inviting Komitas to perform in Paris in 1906 - and setting up seminars and conferences on Armenian history and literature.

Over the years, the Armenian diaspora in France starts to organize itself and thanks to its newly established institutions (schools, churches, associations and newspapers), translations from Armenian into French become more frequent and more widespread. Some good examples are Haratch daily newspaper that launches a weekly French literary edition with success, France-Arménie monthly magazine who starts its publication in Lyon, or Samuelian oriental bookshop that opens in Paris in August 1930.

### *Present days...*

The situation regarding translators has not changed much: with limited possibility to study Armenian in France, the investment seems too great and without good prospects for work, too risky.

However, even though the relative and absolute numbers of translated works remain small, the relative number is quite important and the interest is growing - especially in the younger generation of French-Armenian Diaspora, so we can expect consistent (and hopefully growing) presence of contemporary Armenian literature in France. Some publishers I contacted are beginning to see Armenian literature (child stories in particular) as something interesting and marketable and therefore follow what is happening in the field, so it is expected that the trend will continue.



## II. Publishing and translations market in France - an overview

### *The publishing market*

As Bernard Fixot, owner and publisher of XO, a small publishing house dedicated to churning out best sellers, says “There are two things you don’t throw out in France – bread and books.” Indeed, according to the statistics compiled by the Ministry of Culture and Communication of France in their latest report called “*Économie du Livre*” published in March 2012, with a turnover of €4.19 billion, 67,278 titles published in 2010, 70,109 titles published in 2011 and a promising outcome for 2012, the book publishing market in France is a structured and dynamic sector. On average, from 2003 to 2011 book sales in France increased by 6.5 percent. However, these developments are already being affected by the arrival of digital books. As for the e-books, as of July 2011, the Syndicat National de l’Edition (SNE) claims an e-book market share of 1.8 percent of the general consumer publishing market in France, or sales of €54 million for the preceding year, a pity performance compared with the 6.4 percent in the United States. Recently, an agreement that Google announced this month with the French Publishers Association and the Société des Gens de Lettres, an authors’ group, should allow publishers to offer digital versions of their works for Google to sell. Until now sales of e-books have lagged in France and much of the rest of Europe in part because of disputes over rights.

The French have a centuries-old reverence for the printed page. In fact, the history of books in France cannot be told without mentioning the role played by certain ‘historic’ publishing houses which gave a real boost to the cultural scene: Hachette (1826), Calmann-Levy (1836), Fayard (1857), Flammarion (1876), Albin Michel (1900), Grasset (1907) Gallimard (1911), le Seuil (1935) and so forth. Some of these publishing houses are today among the biggest in Europe.

Nor can we overlook the special status accorded to books in French culture culminating in State intervention with the Lang law stipulating that the editor fix a single price and a 5% discount margin. Thanks to this measure, the book industry remains a dynamic sector of the French economy.



Moreover, books on religion saw their first upward trend in several years, possibly due to events in the Catholic Church (i.e. a new pope). Dictionaries and encyclopedias also saw increased sales. Scholarly books saw an increase for the first time in the last three years. On the other hand, fiction was in decline for the first time in years.

Last but not least, with special regard to comic books, both France and Belgium are unique in that many comic books, or “bandes dessinées”, are popular among both children and adults. These can cover many topics, ranging from the traditional cartoon-type character to historical and science fiction. Comic books are very mainstream and are not limited to special-interest groups or collectors. For 2011, they posted revenue of more than 170 million euros (USD 218.5m), a full 6% of the total revenue pulled in from book sales in France. The growth in revenue was the second largest in the sector, after that of youth books.

### *The translation market*

After falling by 9% in value between 2008 and 2009, the French translation and interpreting industry grew by 3.5% between 2009 and 2010 accumulating a global revenue of 205 million euros, this turnover remains below the 220 million estimated in 2008.

This increase has particularly benefitted large organizations that consolidate their turnover and lead the way up; while middle-sized or small translation agencies have tended to see their revenues shrink. The majority of those within the industry are still suffering from reduction in backlogs. The sentiment is shared amongst freelancers as a general decline in rates has been noted.

It is worth noting also the 200 companies whose turnover exceeds 200 K€ compared to 210 in 2009, proof of the instability surrounding the market. Atenao translation agency on the other hand, has enjoyed an increase in revenue by 27.33%, making it one of the five fastest growing agencies around.

With a growing number of titles (9,088 titles in 2009, 9,406 in 2011 and 10,226 in 2012), the translation market in France remains a structured and dynamic sector too.



Today, it represents 15,9% of the publishing market in France (source : Livres Hebdo/Electre). However, it is interesting to note that the great majority of the translations come from English (6,130 titles in 2011, which represents 65,17% of the total translations), followed by Japanese (898 titles in 2011 - 9,54%) and German (669 titles in 2011 - 7,11%). Comparing to this figures and considering the speakers of English, German and Japanese languages, the works translated from Armenian in relatively important.

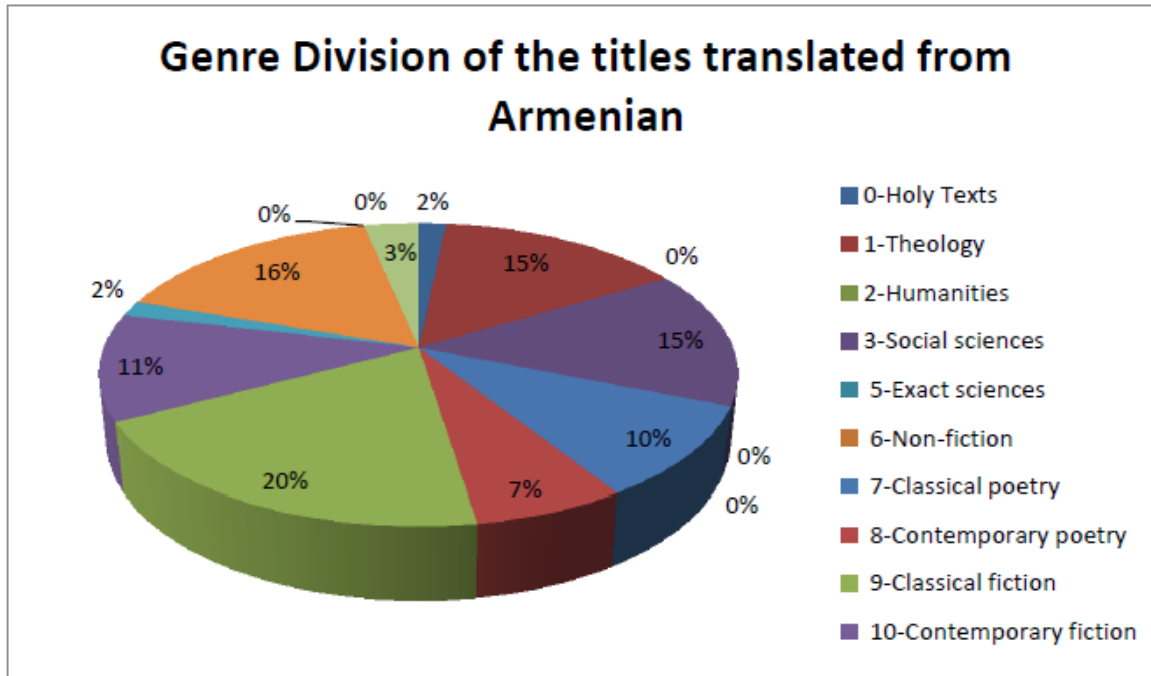
### *General statistics and genre division*

Translations from Armenian to French are mostly literary texts: a series of well-known Armenian fairy tales, poetry published in literary magazines, and a series of novels, all published after the independence of the Republic of Armenia (1991). The only exception to the genre was the masterpiece work of Grigor Narekatsi, translated by several people over the past years.

However, there was always enough interest among the publishers of children's literature and children's magazines to publish either Armenian folk tales or the stories of Hovhannes Tumanyan. Unfortunately, this only holds true for what could be described as “classical” children’s literature; no contemporary children’s literature has been translated, and no such translations are planned in short term.

Here is a graph that shows the genre division of the titles translated from Armenian:





### *The Publishing Houses – an overview*

Here is an overview of the main publishing houses that publish - or have published - translations from Armenian into French. Several other publishing houses such as Gallimard, La Pensée Universelle, Editions de la difference, l'Harmattan and Editions du Cert have also published a few translations over the past decade.

- Editions PARENTHESES

Éditions Parentheses publishing house was established in Marseille in 1978 by Varoujan Arzoumanian and Patrick Bardou. In its early days, the house was focusing on books about architecture and urban planning, although very soon they started publishing of different interests, ranging from various collections of music, photography and traditional art. They have also published two collections since 1979, related to works on the history, culture and literature of Armenia. A first collection called *Arménies* wanted to show the diversity lived and written in Soviet Armenia and in the Diaspora prior to the independence year of the 1990s.





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Since then, a new collection called *Diasporales* was created around the motto "Because all authenticity is an exile," gathering autobiographies and metaphorical novels about roots and origins, rooting and uprooting. Over the years, the collection has been enriched by publications such as the collection of texts on the childhoods of writers and artists (*Terres d'enfances*), an anthology of contemporary poetry Armenian (*Avis de recherche*), works on the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov or unpublished testimonies translation (*Journal de déportation* by Yervant Odian).

- Editions SIGEST

Sigest company was founded in 1975 in Alfortville with activities related in photography and computing. The publishing department opened in 2004. Directed by Jean Sirapian, SIGEST publishing house published quite a few number of books since incorporation: comic books, novels, picture books, photo-reportage, magazines, historical and geopolitical papers, and dictionaries.

Being an independent house, the Year of Armenia in France in 2006-2007 was seen as a great opportunity to translate the world-known Tintin albums in Armenian, through an exclusive contract signed with the Casterman publishing house. These publications gave visibility to the Sigest house. In October 2008, the house was one of the co-founders of the festival of comics in Yerevan, Armenia.

Sigest books are distributed to bookstores in France and in Europe thanks to "La Générale du Livre-Librest" and "La Maison du dictionnaire". They are also available to the general public on sites like Amazon.fr, Fnac.com, Decitre.fr, and Chapitre.com.

- Editions Le Cercle d'écrits caucasiens

Le Cercle d'écrits caucasiens in a publishing house founded in 1999 and based in Paris. Since its early days, it has published books - mainly historical novels, as well as translations of books to help better understand what happened in 1915. According to them, during the period of 1915, the authors of these books have been direct witnesses of the events, making it even more relevant to understand the tragedy of

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the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire. “By reading these stories, it will give you the basics on the Armenian genocide”, says Hratch Bedrossian, the Director of the publishing house. In addition to that, one can discover though historical novels that the history of the Armenians did not start in one morning of April 1915. Writers were able through their writings, tracing the history of the Armenian people.

- Editions Sources d’Arménie

Sources d’Arménie is a relatively small publishing house founded in 1996 in Lyons. Their main source of interest is the History of Armenia and Armenian Christianity. They haven’t published any books translated from Armenian yet.

- Editions EDIPOL

Edipol is a publishing house founded in 1985. Its portfolio contains many titles categorized mainly in three collections: measuring and automatic, energy, environment. A fourth collection is entirely devoted to Armenia and Armenians, although none have been translations from Armenia into French.

### III. The unique case of the Armenian Diasporans' Publication/Translation

#### *Background*

Armenian communities have been present in different parts of Europe, the Middle-east or Asia for a long time, mainly because persecutions within Byzantine, Arabic, Persian and Turkish Ottoman empire. However, the modern Armenian diaspora was formed largely after the World War I as a result of the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman government. The extensive dispersion of Armenians, with its patterns of migration and the reconstruction of communities, marks the very terrain of transnational literature, which coincides with current debates of world literature as a world literary system. In our case of translations, it is even more important to see that this has resulted in a transnational character of the Armenian culture.



### *Translations from Armenian in France - outside of Armenia*

In fact, the case of Lebanon is interesting. Having a great number of French speakers, the Armenian community got naturally involved in some translations from Armenian to French. Today, the main Armenian-French dictionaries used in Armenian schools in France were published in Lebanon for instance. Some other translation works carried by the Armenians in Lebanon are the religious books.

It is also very important to note that not all the books translated from Armenian to French come from the actual Republic of Armenia. An increasing number of books (literature, children literature and poetry) are being translated into French from western Armenian - namely books from the countries like Syria, Turkey or Lebanon. According to the Armenian Association ACAM based in France, which is referencing all the books translated from Armenian to French, no less than 30 books have been translated from Western Armenian originals. The authors of these books live generally in Middle Eastern countries and produce in Armenian, the translation being done in France.

However, during the past two decades, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a singular narrative of the literary history of the Armenian diaspora. Armenia's independence in 1991 and the formation of a state that provides an official home for a national literature, the shifting profile of diasporan communities where multiple forms of dialects coexist, and the ever-increasing leverage of English as a "global" language not only shattered any notion of singularity in the diaspora, but raised questions about the possibility of continuity for Armenian-language production outside of Armenia. This phenomenon has a direct impact on the number of the current translations being carried out from Western Armenian into French.

## **VI. Mediators**

As we saw earlier in the study, as opposed to other languages, the mediators of the translations from Armenian to French and those actors that actively contribute to the translation and dissemination of translations into France are usually the members of



the Armenian community. Indeed, be it the translators, or the publishers, or even the readers, the mediators of the market are in the vast majority of Armenian descent. This leads to two very distinct markets, one for the Armenian community in France and the second one, for the non-Armenian locals.

Furthermore, we must not overlook the importance of the community magazines. They have been important in introducing Armenian literature (especially novels) in France, and still maintain this role today.

Last but not least, over the past few years we have seen a growing number of successful book-fairs, book festivals and public readings organized yearly by the Armenian cultural NGOs throughout France - mainly in the heavily Armenian populated areas of Paris, Lyons and Marseilles. Some good examples of this are the Christmas market organized by Chênes NGO in Paris every year since 10 years now, or the recently organized book fair - Armen'Livres - by an Armenian cultural NGO based in Alfortville.

## **V. Translators from Armenian - working conditions and training**

The situation of translators from Armenian (or other non-European languages for that matter) doesn't differ much from the conditions of the rest of the translators. Since literary translation is not a profitable activity and a translator can't earn his living just by translating fiction, almost all translators of non-Western literatures (and a majority of other translators as well) have other professions (commercial translating, editing, teaching etc.) and translate fiction only in their free time.

## **VI. Reception**

As previously mentioned in this study, the Armenian community has played a major role spreading the Armenian culture via literature throughout France. The vast majority of the audience has been the community itself. However, an important event that occurred in between September 2006 and July 2007 - the "Arménie, mon amie"



festival - had a positive impact and boosted the interest beyond the diaspora to a wider audience.

### *Beyond the Diaspora*

Every year, CulturesFrance organizes a foreign cultural season that gathers several hundred events spread all over the country. Between September 2006 and July 2007, the festival entitled “Arménie, mon amie” took place in France. This festival was a great occasion to introduce the Armenian culture to a wider French audience. The 400 events planned during that period presented all facets of Armenia, from ancient traditions to contemporary works from the diaspora. Major museums, such as the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, and many Armenian cultural institutions, contributed to the exhibitions and the events of the festival. The French public was able to get acquainted with khachkars, these typically Armenian stone crosses, with some manuscripts from the Matenadaran (one of the oldest libraries in the world), with works from the famous American painter Arshile Gorky and even with disturbing films of the Canadian director Atom Egoyan, both of Armenian origin. Overall, the reception was good with quite a high number of attendances to the different events. As a result of this, we saw some well-known French publishing houses (i.e. Editions Gallimard, Editions l’Harmattan) publish translated works from Armenian classical literature (see bibliography). Parallel to the events that were organized in France in autumn 2006, the French Festival was organized in Armenia, and was a good occasion to strengthen the ties between the two countries.

### *Armenian Community*

As for the “Armenian market” within France, the reception has generally been very good and positive. Thanks to the media and many book fair organized within the Armenian community in France, it has been quite successful so far. Indeed, many Armenian schools have opened and developed recently and therefore the number of Armenian speakers has increased over the years. The demand in translated works is growing.



## Appendix

*A comprehensive bibliography of translations:* available in the searchable [translations database](#) of Book Platform website.

### *The total number of translations*

The total number of translated editions into French since 1991 - directly from Armenia, is 62. However, this number does not take into account the books translated from Western Armenian (outside of Armenia) discussed in page 10.

### *Bibliographic sources*

- The two main sources for the bibliography were:
- The Index Translationum: <http://www.unesco.org/xtrans>
- Association Culturelle Arménienne de Marne-la-Vallée : <http://www.acam-france.org>

### *Other sources included:*

- The National Library of Armenia
- The National Library of France (BNF)
- The Nubarian Armenian Library in Paris
- The University Library of Oriental Studies in Paris (INALCO/BULAC)
- Some famous Armenian Publishing House in France (Paranthèses, Sigest, Edipol, Cercles
- Caucasiens, ...)

