STUDIES 1-15

The Emergence of the Idea of National Sovereignty in Alexandropol (1869–1875)

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Ayvazyan, Gevorg – Akopov, Arkadi – Hayrapetyan, Armen: The Emergence of the Idea of National Sovereignty in Alexandropol (1869–1875)

Following the Russo-Persian wars of 1804–1813 and 1826–1828, the Russian Empire annexed Eastern Armenia, thereby transforming the political and social conditions of the Armenian population. Although Armenians under Russian rule gained certain freedoms, they remained subject to administrative control, cultural assimilation, and restrictions on national expression. Rather than seeking merely to replace one imperial authority with another, Armenian intellectual circles increasingly articulated aspirations towards national self-determination. The study applies historical-comparative and historical-critical methods, drawing on archival police records, periodicals, diplomatic correspondence, memoirs, and internal organisational documents. In this context, particular attention is devoted to the Charitable Society, founded in 1869 in Alexandropol (modern Gyumri), as one of the earliest forms of organised Armenian civic activity. The analysis demonstrates that the Charitable Society cannot be regarded solely as a philanthropic association. Rather, it functioned as an early platform for the articulation of national-democratic ideas and contained implicit elements of an anti-tsarist political orientation. Its activity reflects the emergence of new forms of Armenian political thought and contributes to a broader understanding of the development of national movements within the Russian imperial context.

Keywords: *Alexandropol; Tsarist Policy; Gendarme; Protest; School; Russification; Armenian National Movement*

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Introduction

In historiography, the national-democratic ideological orientation of the Charitable Society (founded in 1869 in Alexandropol – modern Gyumri), as well as its support for the aspirations of Western Armenians to attain autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, have generally been assessed with sufficient accuracy.[1] However, the anti-tsarist dimension of

[1] PARSAMYAN, Vardan: *Arajin zhandarmakan gortsy Aleksandrapolum* [The First Gendarmerie Case in Alexandropol]. Yerevan 1936; IDEM: *Hay azatagrakan sharzhumneri patmutyunits* [From the History of Armenian Liberation Movements]. Yerevan 1958; NERSISYAN, Mkrtich: *Hay zhoghovrdi azatagrakan paykary turkakan brnapetutyan dem (1850–1870 tt.)* [The National-Liberation Struggle of the Armenian People against the

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the society's activity within the broader framework of the Eastern Question has received comparatively little scholarly attention. It is precisely this aspect that constitutes the primary focus of the present study.

The problem of the Armenian Question, and in particular the fate of Western Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, has been examined in modern scholarship within a wider international context, including the policies of the Great Powers and the practice of so-called "humanitarian interventions" in the nineteenth century (e.g. Davide Rodogno).[2] At the same time, a number of studies have addressed the specific features of imperial governance and national policy in the Russian Empire (e.g. Andreas Kappeler, Ronald G. Suny), thereby providing an essential comparative framework for understanding the development of Armenian political thought.[3]

Methodologically, the present study is based on a historical-comparative approach, combined with elements of intellectual history and discourse analysis. The research relies on the critical examination of a range of primary sources, including the periodical press, archival documents, and memoir literature, as well as relevant historiographical works. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of socio-political terminology and the articulation of the concept of national sovereignty within the Armenian milieu of Alexandropol in the late nineteenth century.

In addition, the study adopts a microhistorical perspective, focusing on the Charitable Society as a case study through which broader processes of ideological formation and civic organisation can be observed. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between local initiatives and wider imperial and international dynamics. From this perspective, the ideology of the Charitable Society may be understood not only within the political realities of its time, but also as part of a longer trajectory in the development of Armenian political thought. Its activity reflects early attempts to formulate concepts of national dignity, political autonomy, and civic responsibility, which would later play a significant role in the formation of Armenian national-liberation ideology. The present study argues that the Charitable Society should be reconsidered not merely as a cultural or philanthropic initiative, but as an early manifestation of politically oriented, anti-tsarist Armenian activism within the Russian imperial context.

Turkish Despotism]. Yerevan 1955; BARSEGHYAN, Khikar: *Marksizmi taratsumy Hayastanum* (1880–1904) [The Spread of Marxism in Armenia], I. Yerevan 1967; SAHAKYAN, Yeghishe: *Revoliutsionnye dvizheniia molodezhi v Armenii i v Zakavkaz'e v kontse XIX – nachale XX vv.* [Revolutionary Youth Movements in Armenia and the Transcaucasus]. Yerevan 1987; DANIELYAN, Karlen: *Hay gyugagirner* [Armenian Village Writers]. Yerevan 1973.

[2] RODOGNO, Davide: *Against Massacre : Humanitarian Intervention in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914.* Princeton 2012; DEGOEV, Vladimir: *Kavkazskii vopros v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniiakh 30–60-kh gg. XIX v.* [The Caucasian Question in International Relations in the 1830s–1860s]. Vladikavkaz 1992; IDEM: *Vneshniaia politika Rossii i mezhdunarodnye sistemy, 1700–1918 gg.* [Russian Foreign Policy and International Systems, 1700–1918]. Moscow 2004; LIEVEN, Dominic (ed.): *The Cambridge History of Russia*, II : *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*. Cambridge 2006; TUMANYAN, Tigran: Vostochnyi vopros v rossiiskoi publitsistike : ot filosofii k politike [The Eastern Question in Russian Publicism : From Philosophy to Politics]. *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta : Filosofiia i konfliktologiia* 34, 2018, no. 4, pp. 543–555; FIGES, Orlando: *The Crimean War : A History*. New York 2010.

[3] KAPPELER, Andreas: *Rossiia : mnogonatsional'naia imperiia* [Russia : A Multinational Empire]. Moscow 2000; SUNY, Ronald Grigor: *The Revenge of the Past : Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford 1993; SMIRNOV, Nikolay: *Politika Rossii na Kavkaze v XVI–XIX vekakh* [Russian Policy in the Caucasus in the 16th–19th Centuries]. Moscow 1958; DIAKIN, Viktor: *Natsional'nyi vopros vo vnutrennei politike tsarizma (XIX – nachalo XX vv.)* [The National Question in the Internal Policy of Tsarism]. Saint Petersburg 1998.

Armenia and the Armenians in the Crucible of Geopolitical Relations

Beginning in the 1830s, the Armenians found themselves at the intersection of competing geopolitical interests pursued by Britain, the Ottoman Empire, France, and Russia. The incorporation of Eastern Armenia into the Russian Empire in 1828 carried substantial economic and strategic significance for St. Petersburg: it enabled Russia to isolate Britain and to secure a dominant position in the markets of Persia.[4] Britain, for its part, sought to constrain Russia's advance towards the Middle East and Central Asia.[5] Within this contest and in the context of the dual colonial strategies implemented by both powers[6], the vision of a "free Armenia" promised by the tsarist regime was relegated to a secondary position. As contemporary commentary observed: *The Armenian, having voluntarily left the Asiatic barbarians, found himself in the hands of the Russian Christian barbarian. At first, he believed that through the Russians his cherished hopes would be realised, that he too would gain an independent political existence in his homeland. All this vanished... the Russian promises remained mere promises.*[7]

An autonomous Armenian polity would have hindered Russia's ambitions to reach the Mediterranean and would have deprived it of the opportunity to consolidate control over the eastern regions of Asia Minor.[8]By the 1830s–1850s, tsarist administrative circles increasingly interpreted Armenian aspirations for political autonomy as potential manifestations of disloyalty. Russian officials attributed Armenian loyalty primarily to material considerations and gradually curtailed their privileges, thus eroding the foundations of communal autonomy: *In Russia, the Armenian nation possesses only a moral life and fellowship for itself; the civic and national spheres, according to local and imperial law, are Russian.*[9] For this reason, and with confidence in the positive significance of the reform edict adopted in 1839, Armenians made attempts to reorient themselves towards

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[4] CHOBURYAN, Yervand: Rusastan ew haykakan khndiry (1700–1878 tt.) [Russia and the Armenian Question, 1700–1878]. *Hay Ashkharh* 1919, no. 2, p. 30; SKLYAROVA, Elena: "Armianskii vopros" v parlamente Velikobritanii i ego vliianie na vneshniuiu politiku pravitel'stva v epokhu korolevy Viktorii ["The Armenian Question" in the UK Parliament and Its Influence on the Foreign Policy of the Government in the Era of Queen Victoria]. *Scientific Thought of Caucasus* 2024, no. 4, pp. 51–58.

[5] TATOYAN, Robert: Britanakan divanagitutyuny ew Arevmtyan Hayastani azgabanakchutyan etnikakan kazmi harcery (1878–1882 tt.) [British Diplomacy and the Number of Western Armenians, and Issues Related to the Ethnic Composition of Western Armenia between 1878 and 1882]. *Haigazian Armenian Studies* 45, 2025, no. 1, p. 170.

[6] LIEVEN, D.: The Cambridge History, p. 557.

[7] DIMAKSYAN, Hmayak: Mer antsyalits ew nerkaits [From Our Past and Present]. *Young Armenia* 1903, no. 4, p. 30; KAPPELER, A.: Rossiia, p. 129.

[8] OGANESYAN, Eduard: *Vek bor'by : ocherk 100-letnei istorii dashnakskoi partii i natsional'no-osvoboditel'noi bor'by armianskogo naroda* [A Century of Struggle : A Survey of the Hundred-Year History of the Dashnak Party and the National-Liberation Struggle of the Armenian People], I. Munich – Moscow 1991, p. 38; LIEVEN, D.: The Cambridge History, p. 555.

[9] AGHABEKYAN, Markos: *Khndir Katoghikosutyan Amenayn Hayots : Knnutyun 1836-i sahmanadrutyan (Polozhenie)* [The Issue of the Catholicosate of All Armenians : Examination of the Constitution (Polozhenie) of 1836]. Constantinople 1865; HAMBARDZUMYAN, Rafael: *Hay-rusakan haraberutyunneri nenkapokhvats patmutyan srbagrumner (1720–2015 tt.)* [Corrections to the Falsified History of Armenian-Russian Relations]. Yerevan 2016, p. 9; HOVHANNISYAN, Rafik: *Arevmtahay azgayin-azatagrakan sharzhumnery ew Karini "Pashtpan Hayrenyats'" kazmakerputyune (1870–1880-akan tt.)* [Western Armenian National-Liberation Movements and the "Defense of the Fatherland" Organisation of Karin]. Yerevan 1965; KAPPELER, A.: Rossiia, pp. 130, 197; HAYRAPETYAN, Armen – AKOPOV, Arkadi: Russian Peasants in the Alexandropol District : Emergence, Organisation of Communal Life, and Forms of Land Tenure from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century. *Istrazivanja : Journal of Historical Researches* 35, 2024, pp. 165–179, doi: 10.19090/i.2024. 35. 165-179.

the Ottoman Empire. Great Britain and France, capitalising on their political and moral authority among the Armenians, encouraged such tendencies.[10]

Article 9 of the 1856 Treaty of Paris formally prohibited the European powers, particularly Russia, from *collectively or individually interfering in the relations of His Majesty the Sultan with his subjects and in the internal administration of his empire*.[11] Yet soon thereafter, Emperor Napoleon III (1852–1870), with the consent of Britain and Russia, deployed military forces to Lebanon following the massacres of Christians and compelled the Ottoman authorities to punish the perpetrators. In 1861, under the patronage of the Great Powers, Lebanon was granted autonomy.[12] This episode demonstrated the structural inconsistency and strategic ambiguity of European policy regarding ethnic and national questions. It is noteworthy, however, that unlike Western Armenia and the Armenian-inhabited provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon possessed a relatively homogeneous demographic composition.

Inspired by Napoleon III's intervention, the inhabitants of Zeytun rose in revolt in 1862 and dispatched a delegation to France requesting protection. The Ottoman Porte responded by sending a large military force to the region. After a second Armenian appeal to the French government, Sultan Abdulaziz (1861–1876) lifted the siege. A settlement was reached on the condition that imperial authority be formally acknowledged. The roots of the transformation of the Armenian Question into an international issue in 1878 are to be found in the very origins of this development.[13] The rise of national sentiment in Zeytun was influenced by a combination of regional and international developments. The establishment of the autonomous entity of Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate in 1861, as well as the process of the unification of the Danubian Principalities, which culminated in the formation of the independent state of Romania, exerted a significant impact.

At a time when the five European Great Powers – the Russian Empire, the United Kingdom, France, the Austrian Empire, and the Kingdom of Prussia – were reassessing their policies towards the Ottoman Empire,[14] Armenian public figures sought to exploit the evolving situation by raising their concerns within international arenas. Within certain influential European circles, the view prevailed that the Christian peoples of the Ottoman Empire had not yet demonstrated sufficient readiness for full independence. This position was also articulated by the French ambassador in Constantinople, Charles de La Valette, who noted that the attainment of autonomy might represent a more realistic objective.[15] In this particular context, the events in Zeytun can be interpreted as a manifestation of limited autonomy. A similar perception was also fostered by the *Armenian National Constitution*, which, to a certain extent, created an illusion of autonomy,[16] yet in reality did not ensure full sovereignty.

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10 PAPAZHYANTS, Stepan-Poghos: *Dasagirk azgayin patmutyan* [Textbook of National History]. Constantinople 1866, p. 219.

11 *La traité de Paris du 30 mars :* Étudié *dans ses causes et ses effets : Par Le correspondant diplomatique du constitutionnel*. Paris 1856, p. 416.

12 COLLELO, Thomas (ed.): *Lebanon : A Country Study*. Washington, D.C. 1989, p. 16.

13 LEO: *Turkahay heghapokhutyan gaghaparabanutyune* [The Ideology of the Ottoman-Armenian Revolution], I. Paris 1934, pp. 30–31.

14 RODOGNO, D.: Against Massacre, p. 24; TUMANYAN, T.: Vostochnyi vopros, p. 544.

15 RODOGNO, D.: Against Massacre, p. 25.

16 SARUKHAN, Alexander: *Haykakan khndirn ew Azgayin Sahmanadrutyuny Turkiayum (1860–1910)* [The Armenian Question and the National Constitution in Turkey]. Tiflis 1912, p. B.

The process of drafting a document regulating the internal social and administrative life of Western Armenians began as early as 1854, at the initiative of Nahapet Rusinian, Nikoghayos Balyan, and Grigor Odian. The proposed statute was intended to regulate communal affairs, but also encompassed broader ideological dimensions influenced by the constitutional developments in the revolutions of 1848 and the constitution adopted in France thereafter. However, given the nature of the Ottoman administrative system, this approach proved largely unrealistic.[17]

In 1857, the draft underwent a process of revision, and in May 1860 it was formally adopted by the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Sarkis III Kuyumjian (1860–1861). This adoption was the result of a recommendation made by Nahapet Rusinian, who suggested that it should be designated as the *National Constitution*. Subsequently, in March 1863, the document was ratified by the Sultan, albeit in a significantly abridged and more conservative form. This circumstance served to limit its practical impact on the life of Western Armenians.

The *National Constitution* is best understood as a statute of internal governance. This is further supported by its Ottoman Turkish designation, *Nizâmnâme* (*regulation*).[18] Nonetheless, the document played a substantial role in the development of Western Armenian socio-political thought, the strengthening of national consciousness, and the dissemination of democratic ideas.

The Armenian intelligentsia gradually came to recognise that without sustained organisational work, autonomous initiative, education, and deliberate efforts to cultivate international sympathy, national liberation would remain unattainable: *Gone are the days when two men constituted a nation while the people slept. Whoever now, for personal gain or other considerations or out of fear, dares to trample and sacrifice national rights and honour will not be accepted*.[19] Accordingly, various centres of Armenian political thought formulated programmes of national emancipation and devised strategies for their implementation.

Alexandropol in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

In the 1860s and 1870s, Alexandropol emerged as one such centre of regional intellectual and civic life. The settlement received city status in 1837[20] by decree of Emperor Nicholas I (1825–1855) and subsequently became one of the most important military strongholds of the Russian Empire in the South Caucasus, controlling the strategic route linking Erzurum and Tiflis. Within a relatively short period, it evolved into a significant hub of trade, crafts, and services. Parallel to this economic revival, the city experienced notable growth in its cultural and educational spheres.

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17 HAKOBYAN, Ararat: *Arevmtahayots azgayin sahmanadrutyuny hayots petakanutyan gaghapari holovuytum (1860–1863 tt.)* [The Western Armenian National Constitution in the Development of the Idea of Armenian Statehood]. Yerevan 2023, pp. 53–54.

18 *Azkayin sahmanadrut'iwn hayots: Nizamnāme-i millet-i Ermeniyān* [Armenian National Constitution]. Constantinople 1863.

19 PAPAZHYANTS, Stepan-Poghos: *Dasagirk azgayin patmutyan* [Textbook of National History]. Constantinople 1866, p. 237.

20 LAPIN, Vladimir: Krepost Aleksandropol – prostranstvo imperskoi integratsii : Simvolicheskii aspekt [The Fortress of Alexandropol — A Space of Imperial Integration]. *Petersburg Historical Journal* 2025, no. 3, p. 162, doi: 10.51255/2311–603X_2025_3_161.

The theatre, albeit functioning irregularly, played a considerable role in shaping the city's intellectual landscape. In 1865, the Tbilisi-based actors G. Chmshkian, S. Mandinyan, and M. Amerikyan toured Alexandropol, staging historical dramas such as *Shushanik*, *Vardan Mamikonyan*, *Samvel*, and others with great enthusiasm.[21] These performances, which served as instruments of civic awakening, contributed to the articulation of national consciousness and the dissemination of educational ideals among local youth.

Substantial progress was likewise achieved in the field of education, largely through the activities of the educational and printing commissions established in Holy Etchmiadzin at the initiative of Catholicos of All Armenians Gevorg IV Keresteghyan (1866–1882).[22] While only 99 pupils were enrolled in Alexandropol's district school in 1860,[23] by the early 1870s the number of students attending various schools in the city had already surpassed 800.[24] The efforts of religious institutions, girls' schools, and private educational initiatives enjoyed wide support from local philanthropists. The city's teaching corps included prominent intellectuals such as Sargis Beknazarian, Ghazaros Agayan, Hayrapet Ghukasian, Gabriel Ter-Hovhannisian, and others, many of whom were deeply influenced by the ideas of the eminent Armenian poet, anti-tsarist thinker, and symbol of revolutionary struggle,[25] Mikael Nalbandian (1829–1866). School boards, educational institutions, and more than a dozen charitable societies functioned[26] as active centres of intellectual exchange and social engagement.

The social milieu of Alexandropol thus responded rapidly and sensitively to the broader socio-political transformations occurring within the Russian Empire, demonstrating increasing levels of civic maturity and ideological awareness.

The First Eastern Armenian Liberation Circle: The Charitable Society

The first Eastern Armenian liberation circle, known as the Charitable Society, was founded in Alexandropol in April 1869. According to the statute of the Charitable Society published in the Tiflis weekly *Meghu Hayastani (Bee of Armenia)*, the organisation was founded by Alexander Isahakyan, Arshak Khan-Anushyan, and Astvatsatur Isahakyan, with the collaboration of Hovhannes Khalatyan and Konstantin Melik-Adamyan. The first

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[21] CHMSHKYAN, Gevorg: *Im hishatakarane* [My Memoir]. Yerevan 1953, p. 44.

[22] ABEGHYAN, Manuk: *Gevorg D: Metsagorts katoghikos Amenayn Hayots* [Gevorg D: The Great Catholicos of All Armenians]. Vagharshapat 1899, pp. 54–56, 60.

[23] TAVAKALYAN, Nikolay: The State of Educational Work among Eastern Armenians, 1830–1870. *Bulletin of the Archives of Armenia* 1987, no. 1, pp. 138–140.

[24] YERITSYANTS, Srbouhi: *Tomar yntanekan (1874–1875 tt.)* [Family Calendar for 1874–1875], I. Tiflis 1874, pp. 108–110.

[25] NALBANDYAN, Mikayel: *Liakatar erker* [Complete Works], I. Yerevan 1979, p. 5.

[26] ARABAJYAN, Mkrtich: Mi qani teghekutyunner Aleksandrapoli Hayots usumnarani, yntercranotsi ew baregortsakan ynkerutyunneri masin [Several Notes on the Armenian Seminary, Reading Room, and Charitable Organisations of Alexandropol]. *Ararat* 1869, no. E, pp. 112–118; Matenadaran (Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts), Catholicosal Chancery Fonds, Folder 222, Document 8, Case concerning the establishment in the city of Alexandropol of an association named "Society for the Care of Orphans" and the opening of a bookshop in the name and for the benefit of the local theological seminary, 12 September 1872 – 25 February 1874; ibidem, Folder 224, Document 3, Case of the Chancery of His Holiness, Catholicos of All Armenians Gevorg IV, concerning the opening of a separate reading room in the city of Alexandropol for the clergy and lower servants, 30 April 1872 – 3 April 1875; Yeghishe Charents Museum of Literature and Art, K. Kostanyan Collection, Document 450, Societies and charitable initiatives in the 19th century, undated.

point of the twenty-four-article document stated: *As is evident from its title, the purpose and ultimate goal of the Charitable Society is to serve the moral improvement of our Armenian civic community.*[27]

The society maintained a treasurer, a librarian with assistants, and a five-member commission. Armenians from other localities could also join upon paying a weekly membership fee of five silver kopecks.[28] All members were obligated to contribute to the growth of the society's financial resources through initiative and personal participation – whether by engaging in interest-bearing transactions, trade, or other enterprises: *Each member is obliged to think and labour so as to increase the capital of the society by any possible means – by lending at interest, engaging in commerce, or pursuing any profitable undertaking.*[29]

The society planned to establish a reading room where members could gather for Sunday reading. Religious disputes were prohibited, and each member had the *right and obligation* to remain there for no more than one hour. General assemblies were to be convened annually, and the treasurer was required to submit a monthly report on income and expenditures.[30]

Reports of the employees of the Yerevan Police Administration show that the statute of the society was amended in 1871. Among the active members of that period was Arsen Kritian, a teacher at a private school in Alexandropol, along with seven of his colleagues.

This is indirectly confirmed by Mkrtich Arabajyan, a pedagogue based in Alexandropol, who wrote: *A number of young men, inspired by a spirit of inquiry and eager to demonstrate their activity, undertook to establish yet another society, with a weekly contribution of five kopecks each. Although this society initially seemed to have no purpose, it was assumed that whatever the nation needed in the future, the society's accumulated funds would be directed towards it, and thus it would eventually acquire its proper name.*[31]

An anonymous contributor to the newspaper *Bee of Armenia* wrote in 1873 in this regard: *Three years ago several Armenian youths established a society called the Charitable Society, whose aim was to create a reading room and a theatre. Unfortunately, these young men were unable to continue the work as required, and it ceased. The society's books and the money collected from the weekly three-kopeck fees and from performances (32 roubles 50 kopecks)*[32] *remain in unknown hands, having served no useful purpose.*[33]

According to the new statute, the society set as its primary goal the service of the interests of the Armenian people, while also emphasising the importance of establishing a local theatre. The number of members was limited and was not to exceed fifty; they were to be educated young individuals well acquainted with national life. Members were expected to serve as an example to their community through their conduct and activities, and to fulfil their responsibilities conscientiously.

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27 HAYKAZUNI, Petros: Hargeli khmbagir "Megu Hayastani" [Dear Editor of "Bee of Armenia"]. *Meghu Hayastani* [Bee of Armenia] 1869, no. 33, pp. 257–259.

28 This is equivalent to approximately 500 roubles (4.5 euros) in present-day terms. GAKOV, Viktor: *Zhizn udalas? : Kak zhili, skolko i na chem zarabatyvali, skolko i na chto tratili «staryye» russkie* [Did Life Turn Out Well? : How the "old" Russians lived, how much they earned and from what, and how much they spent and on what]. Moscow 2007, p. 256.

29 HAYKAZUNI, P.: Hargeli khmbagir, pp. 257–259.

30 Ibidem.

31 ARABAJYAN, M.: Mi qani teghekutyunner, p. 118.

32 This is equivalent to approximately 3,000 euros in present-day terms.

33 NALBANDYAN, Louise: *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement : The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century*. Los Angeles – London 1963, p. 134.

The society had a designated meeting place, where gatherings were held on Sundays to discuss ways of improving the condition of the Armenian people. In a visible part of this space, a sign was displayed bearing the name of the society and reflecting its statutory principles. The ideas and proposals expressed during these discussions were recorded by Kritian, who enjoyed considerable authority in Alexandropol.

The society also maintained a register entitled *Crown of Glory*, in which donations were recorded. Penalties were prescribed for violations of the rules. Unfortunately, further details concerning the activities of the Charitable Society have not survived.

Arsen Kritian (1850–1910), a deacon of the Armenian Apostolic Church, descended from the influential Kurdents family, which had resettled from Kars to Gyumri following the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829. Born in Alexandropol, he studied at the local Seminary and later at the District School. After completing his education, he opened a private primary school with approximately thirty pupils, where he taught Armenian, Russian, national history, natural science, and arithmetic. Kritian possessed thorough knowledge of the literary and journalistic production of his era, as well as of the historical past of the Armenian people – its heroic and liberation traditions and its spiritual-cultural heritage.

In a speech delivered on the occasion of the founding of the Charitable Society on 1 August 1869 – preserved in police records – Kritian invoked the deeds of illustrious ancestors and urged his compatriots to emancipate themselves from the influence of Russia and the Ottoman Empire: *Are we not Armenians? Are we not the descendants of Armenians? Does patriotic, national blood not course through our veins – the very blood through which alone the nation may be saved* [...]?[34] He authored the patriotic-liberation poem *Desire* and translated a novella dedicated to the *studious maidens of Alexandropol*,[35] where exhortations towards piety, mercy, diligence, meekness, and mutual assistance are interwoven with ideals of valour and freedom. In the novella, the protagonist, the knight Theobald, assuring a widow seeking protection from brigands, declares: *I warned them that I would be compelled to use force if they persisted in their ignoble demands. But rest assured – I thwarted their malicious designs. No stranger shall reap the harvest of your field, no one shall dare to hunt in your forests, and none shall presume to cut even a single piece of wood.*[36]

A thinker closely aligned with Kritian's ideas was the dramatist and writer Karapet Hovhanjanyan, who wrote under the pseudonym *Krpe* for various periodicals (*Bee of Armenia*, *Mshak*, *New Century*, *Echo*, *Pharos of Armenia*, *New Life*, *Ethnographic Bulletin*, *Luma*, *Taraz*, and others). Hovhanjanyan was an erudite scholar of Armenian history, and his works are permeated with historical reflection: *Even in childhood, sitting at my school desk, I was enchanted by the magnificent tales of several Armenian warrior-kings. Above all, I vividly remember the act of vengeance carried out by King Abas, son of Smbat, against Ber, the King of Abkhazia, who wished to consecrate the newly built church in the capital, Kars, according to the Georgian rite.*[37]

The literary figures he created constantly summon the Armenian people to arms. Through his characters, he expresses bewilderment as to how a nation that produced Aram, Artashes, Tigran, and Trdat could fear its enemy *and, like a feeble woman, shed*

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[34] PARSAMYAN, V.: Hay azatagrakan sharzhumneri patmutyunits, p. 193.

[35] Ibidem, pp. 126–127.

[36] KRITYANTS, Arsenik: *Aghavnyak : yerekhayakan vipasanut'yun* [Aghavnyak : Children's Epic Storytelling]. Rostov-on-Don 1875, p. 24.

[37] HOVHANJANYAN, Karapet: *Abas : tatergutyun chors araratsov* [Abas : A Play in Four Acts]. Venice 1920, p. 5.

naught but bitter tears.[38] Krpe was convinced that *before the force of patriotism and sincere unity, every power shall bend and collapse*.[39]

This evidence clearly demonstrates that the Charitable Society cannot be regarded merely as a philanthropic or cultural association, but rather as an early form of a politically oriented organisation, whose activity contained implicit elements of anti-tsarist and national-liberation ideology.

Office of Love for the Fatherland as a Branch of the Charitable Society

Expanding its activities, the Charitable Society established a branch on 20 June 1874 in one of the major settlements of the Alexandropol district – Great Karakilisa (present-day Vanadzor). This fact is corroborated by a number of circumstances: the local figures involved in the branch's activities were predominantly of Alexandropol origin, while H. Hovhanjanyan, a close associate of A. Kritian, personally coordinated the work of the structure, ensuring its organisational and ideological continuity.[40]

The members of the society – Aleksandr and Mkrtich Lazaryan, Baghdasar Charkhchyan, Hambardzum Balasanyan, and others – under the leadership of the founder Gevorg Khosrovyan, undertook to assemble jointly three times a week – on Mondays, Thursdays, and Sundays – from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., and again from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. During these meetings, they would read national newspapers, study literature on Armenian history, and discuss issues of concern to the nation.[41] They could maintain contact with the Office either in person or by correspondence, undertaking to pay an annual fee of three silver roubles.[42] There were also covert attempts to establish branches in Yerevan, in the Surmalu district, and in Kars.

The activities of the Office of Love for the Fatherland circle lasted for less than a year. On 8 April 1875, Major Zolotovsky, head of the gendarmerie administration of the Alexandropol district, uncovered the organisation and reported it to the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Chancellery. In this *strictly confidential* report, Zolotovsky provided a detailed account of the organisation's members, listing their names and occupations, as well as their authority and standing within society. The major informed the head of the Third Section that he had forwarded these documents to the local district prosecutors and the Tiflis Judicial Chamber. On 30 April, the latter proposed initiating an investigation and conducting searches. It was at this stage that the Charitable Society of Alexandropol was also discovered, and the head of the gendarmerie administration submitted a more detailed report on this organisation. In the office, Major Zolotovsky found patriotic poems written by Vagharshak Balasanyan, brother of H. Balasanyan and a student at the Alexandropol Theological School. Many students of the theological school wrote such poems and used them as a means of communicating with the people.

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38 Ibidem, pp. 10–11.

39 Ibidem, p. 28.

40 *Meghu Hayastani* 8 March 1875, no. 9, p. 2.

41 PARSAMYAN, V.: Hay azatagrakan sharzhumneri patmutyunits, pp. 186–187; Matenadaran (Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts), Archive of Archbishop Gyut Ter-Ghazaryan, Folder 1, Document 19, On the private school teacher of Alexandropol, Arsen Kritian, and others, 31 December 1875; National Archives of Armenia, Fonds 19 (Directorate of Public Schools of the Erivan Province), inv. no. 1 (Decisions, protocols, petitions, lists, reports, etc., 1843–1918), File 5, On the private school teacher of Alexandropol Arsen Kritiants and other persons accused of a state crime, 19 July 1874 – 16 February 1876.

42 This is equivalent to approximately 90 euros in present-day terms.

As the investigation progressed (April 1875–July 1876), the case was transferred to Alexandropol, where the inquiry was facilitated by Archimandrite Martiros Tonakanyan. Based on his report, a *secret notebook* was discovered in the home of Arsen Kritian, listing the members of the society and indicating that the organisation collected regular fees intended to accumulate funds for a *future secret purpose*. The archimandrite's name also appeared in the list; he claimed that he had registered solely to uncover the society's intentions. Kritian was immediately arrested, and searches were conducted in the homes of individuals listed in the notebook, as well as their relatives. A. Kritian operated a private school with official authorisation, entirely independent of ecclesiastical authority. During the search, among the notebooks of one man's son – himself a pupil of the local theological seminary – a poem entitled *Nationhood* was discovered. Archimandrite Martiros further alleged that this seminary adhered to an orientation wholly opposed to the Empire, and that it cultivated among the children a profound and dangerous hatred towards the state.[43] The gendarme interrogated him as well. When the governor-general entered Alexandropol, he was immediately informed that extensive preparations for an uprising against the Empire had supposedly begun among the Armenians of the city.[44]

Particularly noteworthy for the abundance of factual material is the letter of 26 December 1875, addressed to the Minister of Justice and signed by the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich of Russia, and the acting head of the Main Administration (a senator). The document concerns individuals accused of a *state crime* and contains detailed information on the materials confiscated from them,[45] the forty-three persons mentioned in the *Crown of Glory* register, and the results of their interrogations.

From the founder of the society, A. Kritian, and his associates, patriotic appeals were confiscated, along with books that had not been authorised by the censorship committee and had been obtained through illegal means. It was established that, at the request of Petros Haykazuni, a contributor to the weekly *Bee of Armenia*, Hovhannes Esayan had acquired abroad and delivered to Kritian the 1862 Paris edition of Mikael Nalbandian's *Agriculture as the Direct Path* as well as the *History* by Bishop Ukhtanes. It was also discovered that Kritian distributed foreign editions of the *History of Armenia* among his students. In his home, authorities seized a seal reading *Kritian's School*, an image of Hayk Nahapet, periodicals, handwritten notes documenting the society's activities, several copies of its statute, and a letter to an unknown bishop describing the society's achievements.[46]

During the interrogations, the majority of the forty-three individuals listed in the *Crown of Glory* register denied their membership in the society and were subsequently released. Active members of the society – H. Balasanyan, Melik Chmshkyan, Gevorg Ghasabyan, Ohajan Goroyan, and three others – were issued a strict warning not to attempt, without governmental permission, to found or join any organisation in the future, while A. Kritian was imprisoned.

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43 Mi tsavali goyzh kam matnich vardapet [A Painful Incident, or the Traitor Monk]. *Luys* [Light] 1875, no. 10, pp. 152–154.

44 Matenadaran (Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts), Chronicle of Archbishop Vahan Bastamyan, Manuscript no. 8899, Sheet 66.

45 PARSAMYAN, V.: Hay azatagrakan sharzhumneri patmutyunits, pp. 208–212.

46 Ibidem, p. 220.

The Ministry of Justice charged him with establishing a society without official authorisation and giving it an anti-government (i.e. anti-tsarist) orientation.[47] On 26 February 1876, following the conclusion of the trial, it was decreed that A. Kritian was to remain in prison for an indefinite period until a supreme order for the termination of the case would be issued, after which he would remain incarcerated for an additional six months. Upon his release, A. Kritian, regarded as *an exceptionally dangerous individual*, was placed under indefinite police surveillance and deprived of the right to teach.

The Charitable Society effectively ceased to exist as early as 1875. From the mid-1880s onwards, its members no longer engaged in notable socio-political activities either in Alexandropol or beyond. In essence, the authorities succeeded in dismantling the group.

The rapid suppression of the organisation by the imperial authorities further confirms that its activity was perceived not as a harmless civic initiative, but as a potential political threat within the framework of imperial security concerns.

The Subsequent Activities of the Members of the Charitable Society

Some of the society's members – among them the teacher Sargis Beknazaryan, as well as the spouses Hayk Matakyan and Gayane Hovhannisyan – continued their socio-national activities in a new environment between 1882 and 1884, becoming involved in the work of the Union of Patriots established in Moscow and the Hayaser–Azgaser circle formed in Yerevan. Although no direct sources attesting to programmatic continuity between these three organisations have survived, clear similarities in their ideological orientation may be observed, indicating a degree of intellectual influence and continuity.

At the beginning of 1882, the Hayaser and Azgaser (Patriot and Nation-Loving) circle was formed in Yerevan. According to gendarmerie data, it had around forty members, including eight teachers and fourteen employees of state and private institutions, tutors at educational establishments, legal professionals, individuals engaged in literary activity, and others. The majority of the members were young people aged between twenty and thirty. Ten possessed higher education, twenty-two had complete or incomplete secondary education, while the rest had only primary education.[48] Among its prominent members were the editor of the Yerevan newspaper *Psak*, Vasak Papajanyan, private attorneys Ruben Jalalyan and Vasil Yeghiazaryan, assistant court secretary Hovhannes Ter-Zakaryan, physician Levon Tigranyan, teachers Sargis Beknazaryan, Gayane Hovhannisyan, and Aram Melyan, court clerk Hayk Matakyan, notary Trdat Vardanyan, trustee Tovmas Mheryan, and others. As stated in contemporary documents, the Yerevan circle aimed to disseminate patriotic and national-liberation ideas among the population – particularly among the youth – to resist national oppression and to promote and defend Armenian culture.[49]

On 19 March 1883, in the Yerevan city park, T. Mheryan slapped the gymnasium inspector, the Great-Power chauvinist Brazhnikov, for calling him an *armyashka*. Mheryan was imprisoned, and his act was interpreted as a coordinated political action.[50] Searches were conducted in the homes of H. Ter-Zakaryan, V. Papajanyan, R. Jalalyan, L. Tigranyan,

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47 Ibidem, pp. 229–230.

48 PARSAMYAN, V.: Nor pastatghter Yerevani azatagrakan khmbaki veraberyal (1882–1883 tt.) [New Documents on the Yerevan Liberation Circle]. *Bulletin of Armenian Archives* 1987, no. 3, pp. 79–91, 97.

49 Ibidem, pp. 76–78.

50 Ibidem, pp. 92–94.

G. Hovhannisyan, and others, during which the proclamation of the Moscow Union of Patriots and prohibited literature were discovered. The head of the gendarmerie administration reported that the confiscated proclamation called upon the Armenian people *to participate in the popular movement and to shed blood for the freedom of Armenia*.[51]

Although the gendarmerie succeeded in obtaining certain information about the members of the Yerevan Hayaser–Azgaser circle, it failed to initiate a formal court case. It was therefore decided to punish them administratively: some members were exiled from the city, others were dismissed from their positions and placed under surveillance. The objectives of the circle combined national liberation, social justice, the organisation of youth, and the coordination of a broad, ideologically grounded struggle directed against Ottoman despotism.

In the spring of 1882, through the efforts of Armenian students in Moscow, the Union of Patriots was established, aiming to support the liberation of their compatriots suffering under Ottoman rule. The organisation operated under the strong influence of Narodnik ideology. Its leaders believed that the liberation of Western Armenians could be achieved through revolutionary means, following the Balkan model. The founding group consisted of five young individuals involved in the Narodnik movement or influenced by nationalist ideas: Nerses Abelyan, Margar Artemyan, Mikayel Zalyan, Davit Nersisyan, and Karapet Ter-Khachaturyan.[52] The organisation's symbols were a dagger and a pistol, and its printed organ, *The Herald of Freedom*, began publication in 1884. The Union established close ties with liberation circles operating in Transcaucasia, particularly with the Hayaser–Azgaser group. One of its members, the Moscow University student Srapion Ter-Grigoryan, was also affiliated with the Yerevan organisation, seeking to coordinate their programmes of activity. The Union of Patriots was disrupted in 1884, when the Russian government uncovered evidence confirming its activities. Many of its members continued their struggle by joining Armenian national political parties.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the Charitable Society should not be viewed as an isolated or short-lived initiative, but rather as an early link in a broader chain of emerging Armenian political organisations within the Russian Empire. Despite the absence of direct institutional continuity, the ideological parallels and overlapping membership indicate a process of intellectual transmission and gradual consolidation of national-political activism. In this sense, the experience of the Charitable Society anticipated the formation of more structured movements and contributed to the shaping of a new generation of politically conscious Armenian actors.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the formation of Armenian political activity in the second half of the nineteenth century was shaped by a combination of interrelated regional and international factors. The incorporation of Eastern Armenia into the Russian Empire in 1828 did not fulfil Armenian expectations of autonomy and instead revealed the imperial nature of tsarist policy, while the involvement of European powers – particularly France

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[51] DANIELYAN, Mher: Nor nyuter Hayrenaserneri miutyan masin [New Materials on the Union of Patriots]. *Historical-Philological Journal* 1990, no. 3, pp. 181–183.

[52] BARKHUDARYAN, Vladimir: *Moskvayi ew Peterburgi haykakan gaghutneri patmutyuns (XVIII d. kes – XX d. skizb)* [History of the Armenian Colonies of Moscow and St. Petersburg]. Yerevan 2010, pp. 135–136.

and Great Britain – in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire created a political environment in which the idea of "limited autonomy" could be articulated and advanced. The case of the Zeytun uprising further illustrates that Armenian political thought increasingly operated with consideration of international dynamics.

Developments within Western Armenian society indicate that the deepening of national self-consciousness and the emergence of ideas of administrative self-governance initially took shape at the communal level. The *Armenian National Constitution* of the 1860s, even in its reduced form, reinforced the concept of autonomy and contributed to the democratisation of communal life. Within this context, the Charitable Society may be regarded as an important structure representing an early stage of national-political self-organisation in Eastern Armenian society. The study shows that this association, initially established within an educational and philanthropic framework, gradually acquired organisational and ideological features indicative of the politicisation of social activity. It functioned as an intermediate platform in which the social and intellectual preconditions for later political organisations were formed.

An examination of the socio-cultural environment of Alexandropol allows us to conclude that the emergence of such initiatives was conditioned by internal social dynamics, particularly the formation of an educated and socially active stratum. At the same time, the activities of the Charitable Society were shaped by the constraints of Russian imperial governance, whereby even non-explicitly political initiatives acquired political significance.

A comparative analysis with other Armenian circles of the same period demonstrates that the Charitable Society was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a component of a continuous process in the development of the national movement. The ideological and structural similarities point to a phased development in which such organisations functioned as intermediary links, transforming social self-organisation into organised political activity.

The principal conclusion of the study is that the Charitable Society can be viewed as a model example of how national movements emerge within the context of multiethnic empires. It shows that the process of political organisation often originates not in explicitly political structures, but in diverse social initiatives that gradually acquire political significance.

Thus, the Charitable Society should be understood as a transitional link between national self-consciousness and political organisation, reflecting the structural transformations of Eastern Armenian society. Its study is important not only for the analysis of a specific historical phenomenon, but also for understanding the mechanisms of the formation of national movements within a broader comparative historical framework. This perspective invites further comparative research into similar early civic initiatives across the imperial periphery.

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