

The artistry and revolutionary spirit of Soviet Armenian poet Yeghishe Charents

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There is no online English-language repository of Yeghishe Charents' work, and the majority of his writings are only available in Armenian or Russian. This article includes links to a document compiled by this writer with some of his poems, or selected stanzas, that are available in English.

Part I: 1917—A “lifesaving, life giving hurricane” that “washed our mountainous land like a running river in spring”

Soviet Armenian poet, novelist, essayist and translator Yeghishe Charents is little known outside Armenia and the former USSR, and even in the latter, not universally. Despite his obscurity today, he was hailed during the Soviet era as a great artist. Born in 1897 and executed in 1937, his life spanned the decisive events of the 20th century's first half. He was a revolutionist, a socialist and a master of the written form.

Yeghishe Charents (born Yeghishe Soghomonyan) grew up in Kars, today a city in northeastern Turkey. For hundreds of years, the Ottoman and Russian empires fought for domination over the region. Once home to many Armenians, it was cleansed of this population during the 1915-1916 genocide and subsequent consolidation of Turkish control. Charents' parents—merchants—had migrated to Kars from an Armenian area in Azerbaijani Iran. “In my soul the sun of Iran shone endless,” Charents once wrote.[1]

Charents' childhood was, in his own words, the “greyest of greys.”[2] In a 1930 poem, he relates an incident from his youth during which, having donned a new shirt, he is doused in urine by the landlord's son from the balcony above. Hardship propelled him toward beauty. His first published poem, “The Flowers Gently Bend,” dates from 1911.[3] “The shivering wind touches each upturned petal mouth to whisper of love in the distant west and south,” Charents wrote at age 14.

Two years later, another work, “I Conjure Up that Distant Past,”[4] captures the poet's developing, lustful style. “Let there be no you nor me there but an immaterial pair...transformed, miracle again in the crucible called sun.” The tenderness and want expressed here remained a feature of Charents' life's work.

In 1915, the 18-year-old Charents volunteered for the Armenian regiment fighting under the Russian flag in World War I and was sent into the Armenian city Van shortly after Turkish troops laid waste to it.

Out of this experience came the terrifying and devastating poem “Dantesque Legend.”[5] The 1915-1916 autobiographical work begins with the “souls buoyant” of young soldiers “delighted by the glint of weapons” to whom “everything seemed innocent of finality or death as in a blue and childish dream.” By the end, they have become “dead men burying their consciences.”

The following year, Charents wrote “Atila,”[6] also a response to the imperialist powers' mad dreams of world domination. In it, the barbarous

Hun ruler comes back to life, rampages across the land, and declares that he is crushing the false hopes of all those who thought his reign over.

But while World War I was devastating for Charents, it did not eradicate his poetic tenderness, which shows itself in “The Incandescent Girl,”[7] from 1917, a love poem to a “glowing madonna-eyed” woman.

There are few details in English about the poet's life from 1915-1917. Commentators agree, however, that World War I propelled Charents toward socialism. The 1917 Russian Revolution was, in his own words, a “lifesaving, life giving hurricane” that “washed our mountainous land like a running river in spring.”[8]

Charents supported the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October, joined the Communist Party in 1918, volunteered that same year for the Red Army, and served Soviet Russia in the civil war. In 1921[9], he was part of the Bolshevik force that put down an anti-communist uprising in Armenia, of which he wrote a year later, “What happened in 1921, will nail my soul to the future.”[10]

During the early 1920s, Charents moved between Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924), Moscow, and Yerevan and began working for the Soviet Armenian state publishing house.

The late teens and early 20s in Soviet Russia were a harsh, demanding period. In a civil war that spanned the country, the revolutionary government fought off imperialist armies colluding with monarchist and pro-capitalist forces. Hunger was widespread. The state exercised full control over industry and requisitioned agricultural goods.

Charents' correspondence from this period reveals a man pressed by material want and loneliness. But the revolutionary impulse of 1917 fortified him, as it did an entire generation of artists, who, despite immense difficulties and personal pressures, fought to grasp the revolution through art, and to train their focus on the future.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Isaac Babel, Sergei Esenin, Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pilnyak, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Blok and Anna Akhmatova are some of the better-known names of those whose creative powers, despite their complex and shifting attitudes toward the revolution, were unleashed by October 1917. Charents, who often wrote in Armenian, was part of this generation, but his role and prominence were impacted by the fact that his poetry was not always in Russian.

His first book came out in Moscow in 1922. His poems dealt with the drama and hardship of the revolution, and paid tribute to it. They honored the workers of the world. Some reflected on his own story and the tortured experiences of Armenia. Others addressed what he thought to be the dead-end of earlier Armenian poets.

Charents wrote about grief, love, distance, desire, sex, poverty, rations, broken people raising their heads, Lenin, internationalism and more. His language was futuristic, defiant of previous styles, at times hymn-like, at times bawdy, angry and provocative, often highly personal.

Between 1918 and 1922, he penned “Soma,” “Do You Remember,” “Charents-Nameh,” “Loveless Romance,” “I Love the Sun Sweet Taste of Armenia,” and dozens of other works. His most famous poem of this

era was “The Frenzied Masses,”[11] from 1918, which describes a Soviet battalion storming enemy-held ground. “In this savage twilight of life and death, to the blazing souls—Salute! Salute!” he writes.

Charents identified with the futurist movement and artistic currents grouped around Vladimir Mayakovsky and the journal LEF (Left Front of the Arts). In broad strokes, these layers advocated a break with the bourgeois art of the past and the construction of new aesthetics in order to realize and advance the proletarian revolution.

Charents was also hostile to the “proletarian art” current of the time, which characterized LEF and the work of futurists as bourgeois excess dressed up with “ultra-leftism,” inaccessible to the masses and divorced from its class interests. The “proletarian artists” shared, however, one thing with those they criticized; they too were hostile to what they termed “bourgeois art” and characterized the work of previous ages as the ruling classes’ ideological excrement.

The literary debates of this period were highly political. Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution and opponent of Joseph Stalin, along with other leading Marxists, criticized those who dismissed past artistic achievements. They insisted that rather than liberating the oppressed masses, the advocates of a wholly “new art,” whether futurists or “proletarian artists,” were accommodating themselves to the heritage of Russian backwardness and cultural poverty. Those who advocated a “pock-marked” art, “but our own,” Trotsky argued in 1924, were “imbued to a considerable extent with contempt for the masses.”[12]

“Our bourgeoisie laid its hand on literature, and did this very quickly at the time when it was growing rich,” he also wrote. “The proletariat will be able to prepare the formation of a new, that is, a Socialist culture and literature, not by the laboratory method on the basis of our present-day poverty, want and illiteracy, but by large social, economic, and cultural means. ... It is fundamentally incorrect to contrast bourgeois culture and bourgeois art with proletarian culture and proletarian art. The latter will never exist, because the proletarian regime is temporary and transient. The historical significance and the moral grandeur of the proletarian revolution consists in the fact that it is laying the foundations of a culture that is above classes and which will be the first culture that is truly human.”[13]

Despite his differences with the proletarian artists, Charents was, like them, swept along by hostility to art of the past. In a 1922 declaration, he pronounced Armenian poetry to be “tubercular and inescapably doomed to die.”[14]

Still, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers and its Armenian affiliate attacked Charents’ work. His 1922 “Loveless Romance,” for instance, was denounced as scandalous for its “vulgarity, political and artistic ‘ultra-leftism,’ linguistic decadence, and obscenity.”[15]

But notably, Charents’ writings often went beyond his own denunciations of bourgeois art. In 1923, he wrote a letter, later titled “On the Boundary of Two Worlds,”[16] that situated Armenia’s great poets within their historical and artistic eras. Charents’ admiration for their contributions is delivered in vivid, dramatic style.

As Charents contended with the revolution both as a political and an aesthetic reality, the national question loomed large. Imperialism oppressed not just all those who labored, but thousands of ethno-linguistic national groups, which it treated as inferior, fit for service and due for violence. Socialists, therefore, had to combat not just class domination, but also the brutal treatment of “lesser peoples” by the Great Powers.

The oppression of Armenians, the desperate situation the population confronted in World War I, the violent class and political schisms that racked Armenian society—“Nayirian grief” as Charents described it—were an inescapable, immediate reality for him. The beauty of Armenia was a part of his being. Hatred of national oppression mingled with and nourished in him dedication to the socialist revolution.

Penned in 1922, Charents’ autobiographical “Charents-Nameh”[17] takes the reader on a journey through the Russian

revolution as *his* revolution and *the* revolution for Armenia. “Accept, take me now, Moscow of the red igniting fires, my golden Iran and my distant, distant Nayiri,” he declares.

Charents was hostile to those within Armenian society that linked the defense of his beleaguered people to nation-building in collusion with the capitalist great powers. In his 1924 novel *Erkir Nayiri (Land of Nayiri)*, Charents presents the tsar’s Armenian generals, oozing with fealty to the Russian Emperor, as utter failures. Their groveling before Russian imperialism ends in disaster, with their people left starving, “trampling and crawling over each other” to get to trains that will carry them out of the way of World War I’s advancing Turkish troops.[18]

In 1924, Charents toured Europe, visiting Turkey, Greece, France, Germany and Italy. He was deeply impacted by his travels across “the boundless kingdom of the gilded bourgeoisie.” “It is necessary,” he wrote in a 1925 letter, “to acknowledge that this corpulent degenerate, the international bourgeoisie, required hundreds of years to develop such a material culture; if we were able to separate that creature, now a parasite, from the body, life would become a paradise...”[19]

While Charents was in Europe, Aleksandr Miasnikyan (Myasnikov), the Soviet-Armenian Bolshevik leader who had secured Charents’ trip abroad and with whom he maintained a correspondence, died in a plane crash. Trotsky, who spoke at Miasnikyan’s memorial, suspected Stalin’s hand.

In response, Charents wrote “The Communards Wall in Paris,” and dedicated it to Miasnikyan. “Paris. Fear and mist. Me. A poet. A Leninist Bolshevik leaning against the wall. Listening to their voices. Their whispers,” he declares.[20]

Charents’ time in Europe transformed his views on art. He broke with futurism, which he now characterized as “turning real workers into lifeless caricatures” with “little connection to man himself.”

“We thought we could dominate the world with placards and pitiful polemical plays, whose impact can hardly exceed that of transitory advertisements,” he lamented in a 1925 letter. He now advocated a “proletarian viewpoint” in literature, with the artist “drenched, baked, and burnt with class psychology.”[21]

What exactly Charents meant by imbuing art with proletarian ideology is not entirely clear. Charents himself likely had not fully worked out his ideas. Many different artistic conceptions were swirling about at the time, and poets are not always known for their clarity of perspective. Notably, as he was insisting on the need for an absolutely “proletarian viewpoint” in literature, Charents abandoned his position that the art of earlier epochs bore no value.

According to G.M. Goshgarian, Charents now argued that great art had a “universal character”—“in other words ... art can rise above specific historical conditions to a level on which all people are essentially alike.” G.M. Goshgarian states that in finding his path out of futurism, Charents was animated by Trotsky’s argument that a new art could only be built by laying hold of humanity’s previous cultural conquests.

“Trotsky’s insight sheds light on the direction of Soviet Armenian culture. Unable to grow and develop, revolutionary poetics quickly degenerated into a new and constructive dogma. By the mid-twenties, the choice confronting Armenian writers was beginning to emerge with full clarity: either persist in seeking a radical break with literary tradition despite the ‘cultural poverty’ of the period, or else look to that tradition itself for the means with which to reform literature. Charents ultimately turned back to that tradition.”[22]

In a conversation with this writer, British-Armenian scholar Eddie Arnavoudian explained that Charents’ break with futurism was rooted in his “commitment to the progressive role of literature and the educational role of literature amongst the masses and the need to develop the traditions which existed by absorbing and appropriating them in the development of culture and literature under socialism.”

“He was not,” noted Arnavoudian, “forced by bureaucratic shackles and

repression to abandon futurism.” The point is put well in his “Ode ‘to the builders’ of cities.” He says, “the ashes of the dead make the strongest cement.”

In the mid-to-late 1920s, Soviet society confronted new difficulties. While the 1921 New Economic Policy had improved the country’s overall economic situation, the party-state bureaucracy and inequality were growing. A deep schism had opened inside the Communist Party between Trotsky’s Left Opposition and Stalin. At its core was the most central question of the Russian Revolution—was it the opening shot of the world socialist revolution, which “begins on the national arena, ... unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena”[23]—or was it possible to construct socialism within the confines of the Soviet Union? The Stalinist bureaucracy pursued a version of “nationalist socialism,” ultimately sacrificing world revolution and the international working class to protect the interests of the rising bureaucracy.

In the arts, as part of the nationalist argument that socialism could be built in one country and did not require world revolution, the Stalinists demanded ever more fealty to a rigidly defined “proletarian” artistic perspective. Art was to be cleansed of criticism of Soviet reality and only positive portrayals of the USSR’s allegedly socialist society allowed.

In order to secure the bureaucracy’s position, the ruling clique strangled inner-party democracy and persecuted opponents, all the while proclaiming socialism to have been achieved and doubters to be petty-bourgeois agents. In October 1926, Trotsky was driven out of the party’s leading body, the Politburo, as part of Stalin’s efforts to crush the Left Opposition.

For honest artists, the pressures of this era were immense.

In September 1926, Charents, in a moment of lunacy, shot a woman on the street in Yerevan. She had rebuffed his advances. According to friends, he was also debilitated by insomnia and nightmares, which he treated with alcohol. It is difficult to view this episode apart from the confusion and disorientation that Stalinism was introducing into every facet of life.

The poet was sentenced to eight years’ solitary confinement, which was then reduced to three. The authorities released him after just a few months, as the death of his wife in childbirth had precipitated in him another mental breakdown.

Charents’ time in prison yielded a brilliant short memoir, *Yerevan’s House of Corrections*. The poet navigates cell life, the guards at mealtime, the prison hallways, the “peasants, bums, and former civil servants,” the barbershop, the bravado and craziness of the convicted, his wife’s visits, his hooligan friends, death, the music played by prisoner Meno at “cultural” meetings.

The year after his release, Charents was made the head of the fiction department of Bet Hrat. It was a position of stature; one whose existence was only possible because of the Soviet Union’s unprecedented literacy campaign. In Armenia the percentage of the population that could neither read nor write fell from 73.7 percent among 8 to 44-year-olds in 1922 to 6.3 percent in 1934.[24]

Charents’ capacities were remarkable, according to Artur Avagyan, the curator of a recent exhibit of book art from the Charents era. The poet, “like an expert, knew the history of painting, and perceived perfectly the expressive language of individual types and genres of fine arts. ... Colleagues recalled that he could give an impromptu lecture on any direction or type of art, holding the listener’s attention for hours.”[25]

The recently published exhibition catalog contains selections from this period, during which Charents collaborated with artist Martiros Sarian. The Armenian script blends seamlessly into drawings that slope and curve, rendering historical tales, legends, social relationships.

The political atmosphere, however, was becoming ever more repressive. Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party in November 1927, exiled to Central Asia in January 1928 and then banished to the Turkish

island of Prinkipo in 1929. His supporters in party organizations, factories, workplaces, the military and universities were hounded, stripped of their positions, arrested and sent to labor camps.

In the arts, “socialist realism” gathered steam, becoming official doctrine in the early 1930s. Art now had to uncritically portray the Soviet Union, hail Stalin as a hero, denounce Trotsky and romanticize the country’s allegedly liberated proletariat and peasantry. The history of the Russian Revolution was falsified.

One poem from the period, “Pastoral,” evinces Charents’ disgust with the liars and the lies.

Visit the Revolutionary Museum
Do not miss our director’s office.
He will be deep in conversation,
fiercely plotting the past. And worriless.[26]

In 1928, Stalin began violently collectivizing the country’s peasantry. Armenia, with a majority agricultural population, fell victim. One scholar estimated that as many as 25,000 Armenian peasants were arrested or deported.[27] At the same time, Stalin steered state policy away from previous efforts to elevate the oppressed nationalities and their cultures. The bureaucracy now identified the perceived nationalism of the non-Russian population as a grave threat. Great Russian chauvinism, a disease with a long pedigree, surged. Charents was disparaged as an Armenian nationalist.

The poet became embroiled at this time in a battle over official cultural policy. According to Arnavoudian, Charents and others were attempting to cope with the ever more deadening official approach to art.

In a discussion with this writer, Arnavoudian noted:

Charents and a stratum within the trans-USSR literary discussion were raising a problem with the concept of socialist realism, which was based on an abstract notion of the working class and the peasantry, devoid of national characteristics, devoid of particular provincial characters.

It was about opposition to the emerging Armenian bureaucracy, which was trying to lay down the law of how you should write, how you should represent the working class, how you should represent the peasantry. It was an attempt to overcome the abstractness of socialist realism as it developed under the Stalinist regime, where literature became a propaganda tool, where you had ideal party members who were flawless in every simple way, no moral weaknesses, no problems at all.

He was trying to enrich, as it were, the official dogmas, to make them something genuine and authentic in literary discussion.

Charents was accused of nationalism because of his insistence that Armenian poetry had to deal with Armenian realities. But at the same time, Charents took up a very powerful poetic polemic against Armenian nationalism. His largest poem on this theme, “Vision of Death,” is a fierce denunciation in the most Gothic manner. The entire nationalist movement is depicted as a procession to reach a mountaintop where you have some surreal figure holding the Armenian bourgeois state’s national flag. There’s a huge holocaust of fire and brimstone, and they’re all walking into it.

There were plenty of “convolutions and Aesopian forms”[28] in Charents’ work during the rise of Stalinism. He wrote many poor poems,

ones that hailed Stalin and adapted to official dogma. The twists and turns, efforts to accommodate, deluded poetics, were undoubtedly driven by the increasingly oppressive political environment, in which lies about history, principles, basic facts and people abounded. The oxygen was being squeezed out of the room. Charents was, like so many others, fighting for air.

A thorough study of his work may determine that he was pulled at the time in the direction of some sort of nationally themed art. But to characterize him as a nationalist, particularly given that Soviet artists were confronting a grotesque outpouring of Russian nationalism in which to be Soviet increasingly meant to be “Russian” and “Russian” was increasingly defined as exclusively Slavic, would be false.

Charents’ entire body of work testifies to his persistent spirit of internationalism. As one scholar put it, his writing “dialogues with the whole history of poetry”[29]. More than 80 percent of his library was in Russian. Charents viewed the Soviet Union as an arena for “a kind of globalization of literature,” “insisted on the importance of translating from and into the various languages that made it up” and “called for mutual recognition and transparency among the various languages,” notes Marc Nichanian.[30]

Despite the difficulties of this era, Charents held fast to the revolution and human tenderness. “Midnight Sketches,” “Eulogy for Critic N.N.” and his sonnets to his first wife capture this. “Lenin, yes, Lenin. But not the rally. Not the drum. Not the placard,” he wrote in 1928-1929.[31]

Part II: “Achilles or Piero”—The Hero or the Clown

In 1929, Charents authored his most politically consequential poem, “Achilles or Piero”—the hero or the clown. He attempted to publish it in his 1933 *Book of the Road*. This 47-page poem has never been translated into English, and according to Arnavoudian, is not generally available in Armenian popular anthologies or selected works. During our conversation, the British-Armenian scholar explained its content and significance.

AP: Achilles vs. Piero is a dramatic tract? The poem unfolds as a play, and the author of that play is a dramatist who’s now dead?

EA: Yes, you have the theater Director, and he’s just performed the three acts of a play, the first two of which were written by the Great Author—here the Great Author being Lenin and the theater Director being Stalin.

The Great Author died and wasn’t able to finish the play, and the theater Director writes the third act to complete it. He is challenged by an Elderly Audience Member, who says the theater Director is distorting the reality. He’s hidden the manuscripts from view. He’s refused to let the particular passages be read by people, referring presumably to Lenin’s Last Testament. He’s forging a reality and falsifying the third act, which if the Great Author was there, he wouldn’t have written in that form.

The theater Director whips up mass hysteria against the Elderly Audience Member and anybody who agrees with him. In the midst of this, in a surreal turn, the Director, confident of himself, invites the Hero onto the stage, sure that he will be humiliated in debate. The Hero Achilles leaping from the pages of the first and second acts protests against the theater Director, to back up the Elderly Audience Member, and to say that the Director is distorting the true message that the Great Author was attempting to communicate. He is a surreal apparition, seemingly a character

from the Great Author’s unfinished work. That hero is unquestionably Trotsky in the form of the description, including the goatee beard.

It is at the end of Act 3 that the theater Director desperately seeks the audience’s affirmation that his variant follows absolutely and unquestionably upon the Great Author’s first two acts. The theater Director whips the audience into frenzied applause and acclamation, proclaiming that Act 3 is a work of genius and a most faithful succession to the Great Author’s first two acts.

The core of the dispute revolves around whether the Hero has any role in Act 3. The theater Director claims the Hero has no role whatsoever in the drafts left by the Great Author and that he, the Director, is absolutely sure of this as he worked for many years alongside the Great Author, unlike the Hero.

The Hero is Trotsky, but it is not a very savory sort of representation. Whilst the whole drama clearly represents the Director as Stalin, as a sort of brutal, invidious and unsavory character, there are elements in the Hero’s speech that portray him as egotistical, a petty bourgeois who believes in the dominant role of the individual in history, and who is protesting because he is being written out of history.

In the Hero’s speeches there is also contempt for the masses. He describes them, presumably the working class and the peasantry, as a herd of cattle and accuses the Director of elevating mediocrities. The Director responds, saying, “We’re living in a new age, and it’s the age of the masses.”

“Achilles or Piero” can’t be read as support for Trotsky’s opposition. But it is a courageous criticism of Stalin, a premonition and opposition to the rise of Stalinism and the rise of bureaucratic control of the Soviet Union’s cultural and literary life.

But I think in the end the poem fails artistically because of this false portrayal of Trotsky.

AP: I don’t think we can extract what Charents really thought of Trotsky from such a poem. Do you have any insights into what his attitude was towards the Left Opposition?

EA: It’s sort of a sort of dark area. There may be some evidence somewhere in some archive of what his views were.

Charents included “Achilles or Piero” in his 1933 *Book of the Road*, which he dedicated to his “priceless little ones” from “their ill-starred father.” As soon as the first copies were printed, they were seized. The Armenian Communist Party removed Charents from his post in Pethrat. The Central Committee declared the work to be a nationalist, “anti-revolutionary, Trotskyite libel against the Communist Party and the Party’s leader, Stalin,” “a fanatically idealistic interpretation of the history of the Armenian people.”

The party’s leading body demanded a “call to account the guilty individuals responsible for the publication of this book.”[32]

On December 1, 1933, Charents wrote a letter to a fellow writer and Communist Party member in Moscow, asking her to intercede with Stalin, begging her to save him, and describing the bureaucracy’s assault on Armenia’s past and present artists. It is a tragic document, in which Charents claims that his poem was misinterpreted and actually meant to be a tribute to Stalin.[33]

“There is a dramatic interlude,” he explains, “in which I use symbolic images from the world of theater to artistically show and prove that Comrade Stalin was the objective embodiment of the steady progress of the proletarian world revolution, and that Trotsky inevitably had to perish and, in the eyes of these masses, turn from a fake ‘hero’ into a ridiculous, pitiful figure...”

It is possible that Charents intended, as he claims, to demonstrate that

Stalin was the revolution's true heir and disparage Trotsky as a false hero. Certainly, the depiction of Trotsky as a power-hungry, selfish agent who hated the masses would have fit with the Stalinists' portrait of the revolutionist. It is not to Charents' credit that he latched onto this.

Charents may have thought that Trotsky was an egotistical self-promoter, he may have cast Trotsky's character in this manner because he believed that he had to, or it may have been some combination of the two. Stalinism clearly had a dispiriting and demoralizing impact on such a sensitive artist, as it did on many. And when he has Trotsky denounce the masses, Charents may have been putting into the revolutionist's mouth his own anger over what he viewed to be the treachery and idiocy of thousands who had previously declared their fealty to Marxism but were now hailing Stalin.

But when the Hero decries the reign of mediocrities, it is not an altogether inaccurate portrayal of the social forces unleashed by Stalin. The petty bourgeois, grasping layers who learned official "Marxism" by rote, recited mantras and did all sorts of dirty work were mediocrities raised to the heights of society. The issue is that, unlike what Charents seems to have implied in the poem, Trotsky did *not* think that the working masses were these mediocrities or that Stalinism reflected their will. And this is the source of the falsity—in artistic form and political content—of the poem.

With the support of Aghasi Khanjyan, head of the Armenian Communist Party, *Book of the Road* was reissued in 1934 with "Achilles or Piero" and other poems removed. Charents earned fulsome praise, but it was short-lived and peppered with political attacks. The secretary of the Armenian Writers' Union declared of the collection, "There are such jewels that make him [Charents] not only Armenia's greatest poet, surpassed by no one, but also the greatest writer of the Soviet Union as well. That notwithstanding, the book contains slips of an ideological nature." [34]

He soon came under assault at meetings of the Writers Union. His *Book of the Road* was "the vainglorious expression of Armenian nationalism" and "directed against the future of our people." He was accused of celebrating "Armenian nationalistic, reactionary-bourgeois ideology." [35]

"The state," Charents wrote in 1935, "with its entire apparatus ... has risen ... against a single poet." [36]

Charents had by this point become a morphine addict, the result of being prescribed opioids for a painful physical condition. He did not, however, collapse. His poems of the period show a man enraged, beleaguered, pained by betrayals, and yet still dedicated to the revolution whose unraveling he was witnessing. There is, for example, "Dawn Does Not Break in the West," [37] "There's So Much Spite in My Heart," [38] "Distichs," [39] and "The Monument." [40]

While the young writer was increasingly isolated, it was not as yet total isolation. The Stalinist regime confronted the problem that Charents was one of Soviet Armenia's most renowned poets and had an international reputation. William Saroyan, the Armenian-American Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist, visited Charents in 1934. "His voice had warmth, and his eyes were direct, swift and intelligent," he wrote of the poet. [41]

In an indication of Charents' importance as an artist, two of the country's leading Russian writers, Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, as well as Arseny Tarkovsky, the father of the future famous film director, translated his work. These relationships were hardly, however, some sort of political fortification, as these artists themselves faced repression.

In 1935, Charents was removed from his position in the state publishing house and again expelled from the Writers Union. Skilled at ordering monstrous crimes and then distancing himself from them when expedient, Stalin publicly feigned concern for the poet. [42]

In 1936, the Great Purges began. The first Moscow Show Trial took place in August. Leading Old Bolsheviks—Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Ivan Smirnov and Vagarshak Ter-Vaganyan (the latter an Armenian), and others—were tried and executed as Trotskyist conspirators.

The same year, Charents was called into meetings with Stalin's henchman, Lavrenti Beria. He emerged from these deeply shaken. Returning from Tbilisi, Georgia after one such event, Charents declared, "I am not a Judas and will not become one." [43]

In 1936, the head of the Armenian Communist Party, Aghasi Khanjyan was found shot in his apartment in Tbilisi. Proclaimed a cowardly suicide in the Soviet press, Khanjyan's death was an execution carried out by Beria personally, in his office, according to later testimony.

Charents wrote a series of works dedicated to the murdered leader, including one the very night of his death. [44]

After Khanjyan's death, "Dashnak-Trotskyites" were detained and charged, including an entire generation of Armenian intellectuals and artists. "The names of Charents' comrades, who were already arrested or imprisoned," wrote his daughter, "are preserved on tattered handwritten slips of paper." [45] This was part of a massive purge across the Soviet Union of artists, scientists and thinkers. Thousands were hounded, sent to labor camps, shot.

Charents' poetry expressed the terror engulfing him and Soviet society. There is "Requiem Afternam," "The Solemn Carousel," "Here I Stand Again," and the bluntly titled, "They Were Beheading Us." [46] In an unpublished poem written in 1936 or 1937, Charents observes, "Once more, the meal cooked by this master smells of blood." [47]

The attacks were unrelenting. Charents' work was dissected line by line for evidence of nationalism and anti-Soviet sympathies. He was accused of operating a secret terrorist group intent on killing a Central Committee secretary and waging a struggle against Stalin and Beria. The Writers Union claimed he was colluding with the Armenian diaspora "to detach Armenia from the Soviet Union." The basis for this accusation was his 1933-1934 poem "Message," in which the second letter of each line creates the sentence, "Oh, Armenian people, your only salvation is your collective strength." [48]

In September 1936, Charents was placed under house arrest. His addiction to morphine and alcohol deepened. He continued writing, however, and devoted himself to new translations of Goethe, Dante and Pushkin.

His final works blend ferocious anger with despair and efforts to honor the revolution. Among them is a tribute to poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who committed suicide in 1930. In another work, "Black Gallows," [49]

Charents mourns the revolution's murder and his own looming fate. Other works include love poems to his wife and devotions to his daughters.

Charents never bowed to the accusations against him or abandoned socialism. Eight months before his death, he wrote, "For there is no greater torture—and no blacker punishment—than to condemn a man for betraying the idea that was sacred to him, the only work of his whole life. And there is no way of showing, of convincing people that it is not true—that the only sacred thing for me is that which I am accused of sinning against." [50]

On July 26, 1937, Charents was imprisoned. According to a death certificate finally issued in 1955, he died November 27. He was 40 years old. The notice listed no cause of death and no grave site. To this date, it is unknown where he is buried. There are different accounts as to how he perished. Some say he was shot, others that he committed suicide, smashing his head against the prison wall, and others that he died due to the destruction of his health.

Charents' wife was exiled to Siberia for several years. Their daughters were placed in the care of orphanages, then relatives and friends.

In 1955, during the post-Stalin Thaw, Charents was officially rehabilitated. Studies of his life and work and publications of his poems followed. Efforts were made to harness the national themes in his work to the agenda of the Soviet bureaucracy. Thus, Charents' 80th birthday was celebrated not in 1977, the year it should have been, but in 1978, as this

coincided with the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Russo-Armenian relations. Still, many of Charents' writings continued to be suppressed, above all "Achilles or Piero."

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, during which the Stalinists destroyed all that remained of the conquests of the 1917 Russian Revolution, there were further attempts, now coming from the political right, to recast Charents as an Armenian nationalist, as well as a God-fearing anti-communist and even a poetic Freudian.

Today, Charents is widely honored in Armenia. One will find in or near Yerevan today the Arch of Charents, Charents Street, and a magnificent 60-foot-tall monument to the poet. The country's national museum of literature and art is named after him. Still, his revolutionary, socialist outlook is suppressed. One will find, for instance, little mention of it in the Charents House Museum, which lends its account of his life and work an incomprehensible quality.

Charents is best understood not through the nationalist, Stalinist and anti-communist distortions imposed on him, but through his 1933 poem "*Seven Pieces of Advice for Planters to Come*,"[51]—a favorite of this writer.

Sowers of the future, you who are going
to plant seeds from full hands,
into these fertile furrows that we plowed,
these painted by our sweat, blood, and songs.
O you who will walk with light hearts into
turquoise days that break like cymbals
of sun, may I, your distant brother, be allowed
to send you seven pieces of advice?

The first recommendation which I address
from these old bristling, burning days is this:
Let your first handful of seed
pave our fields with illusion and dreams.

Spread them like goodness which does not end
toward the birds and winds of our land.
Let their joy be limitless
the way our old suffering had no bounds.

Direct your second favor to the north,
the wide Steppes where
in this divided nation
the red hurricane turns to summer rain.

And throw the third handful of your seed
toward Mount Ararat. Let it fly
like condensed fever, in delirium
to pierce the snow-beaten mountain's chest.

Plant then a handful of wheat and imagination
bright and honest as your hopes.
Plant them in the old town of Nork
so that the new bud of song begins.

And let the fifth toss of your deep treasure
be a gift to our spirit
which in the distant past created song
and its nobler dream.

And the sixth handful, planters
address to the bones of the more recent past.
You will suddenly hear sighs and
voices from the depths of your land.

Then, only then, after those six,
fill your palms for the seventh time, then
with your open hand sow your future harvest
the endless furrow that stretches ahead.

This writer hopes that Charents will be rediscovered—the full body of his work published in Armenian, English and other languages, and a complete history of his life and work researched and written.

The revolution needs its poets.

[1] Arnavoudian, Eddie. "Yeghishe Charents: Poet of Life as Permanent Revolution, Part One." Armenian News Network / Groong, July 11, 2005. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 29.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 64-80.

[6] Ibid., 30-32.

[7] Ibid., 29.

[8] Arnavoudian, Eddie. "Yeghishe Charents: Poet of Life as Permanent Revolution, Part One." Armenian News Network / Groong, July 11, 2005. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[9] Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian, eds. and trans., "Charents-Nameh," in Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 29), 113.

[10] Diana Der Hovanessian, "Introduction" in Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. by Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian. (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 29), 12.

[11] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 39–55.

[12] Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, (London: RedWords, 1991), 233.

[13] Ibid., 46.

[14] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents* (Ashod Press, 1985), 55.

[15] Marc Nichanian, "Introduction: Poetry and Revolution," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 24.

[16] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., "On the Boundary of Two Worlds," in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents* (Ashod Press, 1985), 42–51

[17] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 99-114

[18] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., "Erkir Nayiri," in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents* (Ashod Press, 1985), 140-176.

[19] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., "Letters," in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents* (Ashod Press, 1985), 114.

[20] Original Translation by Eddie Arnavoudian from Yeghishe Charents, "The Communards Wall in Paris," Collected Works in 6 Volumes, Volume 2, 1963, pp 232-249

[21] Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, trans., "Letters," in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents* (Ashod Press, 1985), 116-119.

[22] G.G. Goshgarian, "Yeghishe Charents and the 'Modernization' of Soviet Armenian Literature," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 139.

[23] Trotsky, Leon. "Proletarian Culture and Proletarian Art." *Literature and Revolution*. 1924. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed November 11, 2025. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch06.htm

[24] Artur Avahyan, *Armenian Book Art of the Charents Era: 1928-1935* (Yerevan, Armenia: Anates Publishing House, 2024), 36.

[25] Ibid., 40.

[26] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, p. 139.

[27] Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 151.

[28] Arnavoudian, Eddie. "Yeghishe Charents: Poet of Life as Permanent Revolution." Armenian News Network / Groong, July 11, 2005. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[29] Krikor Beledian, "Yeghishe Charents, The Poet of Poetry," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 284.

[30] Marc Nichanian, "Introduction: Poetry and Revolution," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 35-36.

[31] Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian, eds. and trans., "Midnight Sketches," in Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 29), 188.

[32] Anahit Charents, "Yeghishe Charents's Final Years: His Life and Work from 1934 to 1937," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 70.

[33] ?????? ?????? ????????, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://charents.am/wp-content/uploads/???????-?????????.pdf>

[34] Anahit Charents, "Yeghishe Charents's Final Years: His Life and Work from 1934 to 1937," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 72.

[35] Ibid., 72.

[36] Ibid., 73.

[37] Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian, eds. and trans., "Dawn Does Not Break in the West," in Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 29), 202.

[38] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 177.

[39] Ibid., 178-179.

[40] Eghishe Charents, "Dawn Does not Break in the West," in *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1985), 218.

[41] William Saroyan, "Armenia and Charentz," in *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 273.

[42] Anahit Charents, "Yeghishe Charents's Final Years: His Life and Work from 1934 to 1937," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 85.

[43] James Russell, "The Armenian Counterculture that Never Was," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 158.

[44] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 211.

[45] Anahit Charents, "Yeghishe Charents's Final Years: His Life and Work from 1934 to 1937," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 87.

[46] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 247.

[47] Anahit Charents, "Yeghishe Charents's Final Years: His Life and Work from 1934 to 1937," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 73.

[48] Ibid., 97.

[49] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 261.

[50] Marc Nichanian, "Introduction: Poetry and Revolution," in *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, edited by Marc Nichanian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 17.

[51] Eghishe Charents, "Seven Pieces of Advice for Planters to Come," in *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1985), 216-217.



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