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## Evolution of the Image of the Armenian People in the Works of Vasily Nemirovich-Danchenko

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to analyze how the image of Armenians evolved over decades in the works of Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko (1845–1936). Using biographical and comparative methods, this study analyzes literary works and documentary essays, including poetry. The study draws on is Nemirovich-Danchenko’s lifetime publications, analyzed chronologically. The results showed that initially, the image emerged of the Armenian people, described through stereotypical features, emerges in Nemirovich-Danchenko’s works alongside other peoples (second half of the 19th century). Then, the writer attempts to understand the essence of Armenian culture and history more deeply (at the turn of the 20th century), and subsequently comes to identify his own destiny with that of Armenians. This study is the first to examine the image of the Armenian people in the works of this author not only in his poetry but also in his prose. The evolution of a distinct artistic image in this author’s work is also explored for the first time. The study concludes that Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko gradually, throughout his career, evolves from depicting Armenians through archetypal images created by popular culture to a characteristic image – an individual creation of the writer, formed through his creative exploration of existence.

**Keywords:** Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, artistic image of the Armenian people, Russian literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, evolution of artistic image

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## Эволюция образа армянского народа в творчестве Василия Немировича-Данченко

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**Аннотация.** Проанализировано, как в творчестве Василия Ивановича Немировича-Данченко (1845–1936) эволюционировал образ армян на протяжении десятилетий. С помощью биографического и сравнительно-сопоставительного методов сравниваются художественные произведения и документально-художественные очерки, в том числе поэтические сочинения. Результаты исследования показали, что вначале описанный через стереотипные черты образ армянского народа возникает у Вас.И. Немировича-Данченко наряду с другими народами (вторая половина XIX в.), затем писатель пытается глубже постичь суть армянской культуры и истории (на рубеже XIX–XX вв.) и впоследствии приходит к отождествлению своей судьбы и судьбы армян. Впервые образ армянского народа рассматривается не только в стихотворениях, но и в прозаических произведениях Немировича-Данченко, исследуется эволюция отдельного художественного образа в его творчестве. Сделан вывод о том, что Вас.И. Немирович-Данченко постепенно, на протяжении всего творчества, проходит путь от изображения армян с помощью образов-архетипов, созданных массовой культурой, к типическому образу – индивидуальному созданию писателя, сформированному посредством творческого освоения бытия.

**Ключевые слова:** Вас.И. Немирович-Данченко, художественный образ армянского народа, русская литература XIX–XX вв., эволюция художественного образа

**Вклад авторов.** Разработка идеи, сбор и анализ исследовательских данных, написание статьи – М.М. Глазова; научное редактирование – С.Ю. Николаева. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

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### Introduction

As a traveler and war correspondent, Vasily Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko (1845–1936) often described representatives of various peoples, their culture, and everyday life in his works. However, the image of the Armenian people occupies a special place in his work. This study aimed to analyze how the image of the Armenian people evolved over decades in the fiction and nonfiction works of Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko. The works are analyzed from lifetime editions (first publications, where possible) in chronological order, as an important objective of

the study was to trace the author's evolving attitude toward the topic, which is impossible to fully accomplish using edited texts.

The writer's connection to Armenia is blood-related – his mother, Alexandra Kasparovna Yagubyan, was Armenian. She lived to a ripe old age, died in 1914, and was buried in the Armenian cemetery in Moscow. Throughout his life, Nemirovich-Danchenko, through creativity and artistic imagery, mastered reality and realized his national identity. In this study, we approach the image, as Elena B. Borisova aptly notes, “as a living and integral organism, most capable of comprehending the full truth of existence” (2009, p. 20).

## Results and Discussion

The earliest mention of Armenians in the published works of Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko was found in his 1876 book of essays, *Militant Israel (A Week with Dagestani Jews)*. On the way to the Kai-Bulag Gap, a dukhan (tavern) appears before the traveler. The narrator is captivated by the exterior: “I didn't want to move – it seemed so nice and pleasant here. Especially since the dukhan was surrounded by a gloomy vista of barren mountains and rocky cliffs”<sup>1</sup>. The landscape is depicted in a romantic vein, characteristic of the writer's works (Azarov, 2022, pp. 136–137). He ponders who might own the dukhan: “Some Armenian must have migrated here from Temir-Khan-Shura or Kizlyar”<sup>2</sup>. This fragment highlights details that accompany the image of an Armenian home in the in the author's works: a “pleasant” house with a flat roof and a blooming garden next to it, bathed in sunlight. Subsequent fragments will also reveal the stereotypical trait that Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko was accustomed to noticing in Armenians: their inseparable entrepreneurship in trade and cunning (collections of essays *Kama and the Urals*, *Headlong*, *Caucasian Heroes. Essays on Life and War in Dagestan*, and *Azure Land*).

The image of an Armenian garden, which appears already in the first fragment, is typically associated in the works of Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko with the concepts of “home”, “life”, and “homeland”<sup>3</sup>. Based on the 1875 memoirs included in the collection *Kama and the Urals*, a traditional image of Armenian life emerges within the context of a local resident's narrative: “We went among the Armenians to look for work; they are a wonderful, sincere people, and they have work to do, but it is inconvenient for us: all over the gardens; that is why Armenians live by

<sup>1</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1876). *Militant Israel: a week among the Dagestani Jews. Delo*, (8). (In Russ.) [http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko\\_w\\_i/text\\_1876\\_israil\\_voinstvuyushiy.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko_w_i/text_1876_israil_voinstvuyushiy.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1876). *Militant Israel: a week among the Dagestani Jews. Delo*, (8). (In Russ.) [http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko\\_w\\_i/text\\_1876\\_israil\\_voinstvuyushiy.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko_w_i/text_1876_israil_voinstvuyushiy.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> The garden is traditionally associated with the home of the Armenian people, which is confirmed by the frequency of references to the image of a garden in works about Armenia: in the collection *Armenia in the Mirror of Russian Poetry*, the word “garden” and its derivatives appear 82 times on 554 pages, while “house” appears 72 times.

their gardens”<sup>4</sup>. Researchers also separately highlight the image of the pomegranate as a symbol of the fruit of paradise (Shafranskaya et al., 2024).

The next mention of Armenians concerns the events of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, during which Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko served as a war correspondent and also took direct part in the fighting (Gusev, 2017). Descriptions of the local population of Tiflis are given in Volume III of the collection *The Year of War*, published based on war correspondence. The writer makes no attempt to understand the local culture of the late 1870s and largely misunderstands the locals’ way of life. In shaping the image of the Armenian people in this work, a clear contrast is evident between the author’s familiar way of life and the local population’s way of life. The author treats their lives with great sympathy, but does not call Armenians allies: in his worldview, the population of the Ottoman Empire is divided into enemies (Turks, Muslims) and victims of the enemy (which includes Armenians). The ideological focus is clearly evident in the essays: the war correspondent’s goal is to denigrate the enemy, show the valor and dedication of Russian soldiers and officers, and demonstrate the plight and oppression of the local Christian population. Researchers S.F. Vititnev and A.V. Shmeleva note that the writer, “despite his rejection of war as such, [...] continues to serve the Motherland in word and deed” (2022, p. 40). For this reason, the image of the Armenian people in the collection is exaggerated, the reader is shown physically uncomfortable scenes, and an emphasis is placed on the lack of food, hygiene, and education. The author compares a poor Armenian village to a kishlak: “[in the house] instead of a stove there is a hole in the floor – tandyr; instead of a window – a hole in the ceiling; „Instead of a table there is a mat, instead of chairs there are blankets, and right there is a stable for buffalo”<sup>5</sup>. The fact that the local residents do not know Russian and are distrustful of Russians is a reproach to the Armenians. Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko emphasizes how difficult the situation of the Armenians in Asia Minor is: “If the Turkish military leaders do not stand on ceremony in taking the last things from their own Muslims, then Allah himself ordered to take the last rags from the Armenians and send them to the next world”<sup>6</sup>.

In contrast to the poor life of the Armenians of his time, the author recalls a formerly rich civilization: “Ani is the ruins of a city that was the capital of the Armenian state in ancient times; judging by the vastness and grandeur of the ruins, it was a very populous city. Now all this has crumbled, overgrown with grass”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1890). *Kama and the Urals: Essays and Impressions* (p. 50). Saint Petersburg: A.S. Suvorin Printing House. (In Russ.)

<sup>5</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1878–1879). *The Year of War (Diary of a Russian Correspondent), 1877–1878* (Vol. 3, book 2, p. 3). Saint Petersburg: V.I. Likhachev and A.S. Suvorin Printing House. (In Russ.)

<sup>6</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1878–1879). *The Year of War (Diary of a Russian Correspondent), 1877–1878* (Vol. 3, book 2, p. 13).

<sup>7</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1878–1879). *The Year of War (Diary of a Russian Correspondent), 1877–1878* (Vol. 3, book 2, p. 16).

Strengthening the effect of the discrepancy between the legendary past and the oppression of the present, the writer notes that the local Armenian inhabitants are not like those he met in other places: “the people are silent, serious, downtrodden; You will never see any life, any thought, or a carefree Russian smile on their gloomy faces: it is as if they are burying someone or are getting ready to go to the next world themselves...”<sup>8</sup>. A similar image of the oppressed Armenian people is not found in other works by Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko.

The next stage in the development of the image of the Armenian people occurred in the 1890s. In 1895, in the novel *The Forgotten Fortress*, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko developed stereotypes about wealthy Armenian houses, cunning merchants, and impressionable women. This image is further developed in the essay *Tiflis* (this area was native and familiar to Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko – he was born in this city). As is well known, at the beginning of the Caucasian War (1817–1864), the overwhelming majority of the population of Tiflis was Armenian, and by the end of the war, about half (Chkhetia, 1958, p. 163). The writer respectfully notes that the city owes its development to them: “Only Armenians began to build good houses outside the city; they were more capable and understood the benefits of the new state of affairs earlier than the Georgians”<sup>9</sup>. However, the leitmotif of the essay is the positive Russian influence in the region, and Nemirovich-Danchenko further asserts that this development would not have occurred without Russian intervention.

During the 1890s, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko began to become more familiar with Armenian culture and history. It is worth noting that ethnographic writing is a characteristic feature of the writer’s documentary and artistic works (Gasharova, 2019, p. 206). In this regard, his book of essays about Italy, *The Azure Land*, published in 1896, is indicative. The author is struck by the literacy and education of the monks of the Armenian Mekhitarist Monastery (“No matter what language you speak, you will be answered clearly and correctly”), their contribution to education, the local library, and the printing house. However, the first thing he sees is once again a magnificent garden, the likes of which cannot be found anywhere else in Venice. It is in this essay that Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko first speaks of preserving the national identity of the Armenian people. The monastery was attended by people from all areas where “the Armenian language is heard”<sup>10</sup>. Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s work began to formulate the image of the Armenian people as a people with an ancient history and a rich intangible cultural heritage

<sup>8</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1878–1879). *The Year of War (Diary of a Russian Correspondent), 1877–1878* (Vol. 3, book 2, p. 17). Saint Petersburg: V.I. Likhachev and A.S. Suvorin Printing House. (In Russ.)

<sup>9</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1895). *Forgotten Fortress: A Historical Novel from the Time of the Caucasian War* (Vol. II, p. 313). Saint Petersburg: E. Evdokimova Printing House, 1895. (In Russ.)

<sup>10</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1896). *Azure Land. Essays, impressions, mirages and memoirs* (Part 1). Saint Petersburg: Publishing House N.F. Mertz. (In Russ.) [http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko\\_w\\_i/text\\_1890\\_01\\_lazyrny\\_kray\\_oldorfo.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko_w_i/text_1890_01_lazyrny_kray_oldorfo.shtml)

(that is, a heritage that cannot be physically destroyed). The work is distinguished by the author's avoidance of the stereotypical images encountered previously.

In the early 1900s, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko revised his work on the history of the Caucasian War, and this time the image of the Armenian population was constructed in a different light. In his story *Free Shamkhar*, the writer speaks of a commonality of cultures: he emphasizes that, regardless of nationality, Christians do not betray each other and do not side with the Muslims under any circumstances. In this narrative of local residents are shown from a different perspective, and the theme of heroism emerges among a population unsuited to war – merchants and women: “The Armenians themselves went to fight: this, apparently, trading tribe, and only a trading tribe, in a moment of danger displays a courage that even true heroes might envy”<sup>11</sup>.

During this period, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko came closer to understanding the tragic fate of the Armenian people. As a journalist, he witnessed the extermination of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, which left an indelible mark on his work. He first addressed this topic in 1907 in the collection ...*Eternal Memory! From the Chronicles of the Liberation Movement*, which included the story *The Armenian Gayane*, imbued with a profound sense of empathy for the entire Armenian population, as portrayed by one young woman. Gayane's monologue finally crystallized the artistic image of Armenians, now called a “great people”. This image embodies a tragic combination of freedom and martyrdom, comparing the “great spirit of Armenia” to an eagle trapped in an iron cage. But this spirit, Gayane asserted, was unbroken: “...there are no chains for the soul. [...] While the song lives, the nation has not died”. The heroine assures that the people will survive if their culture survives: “Children who listened to the Armenian teacher at school know that they are a great nation and that it is in their hands to regain their freedom”<sup>12</sup>.

In the story, the image of the Armenian home is again linked to the garden. The home is elm, roofs, pomegranate flowers, birds. The soul of the people is in songs and fairy tales. Memories of home help Gayane to choose the martyr's path: to destroy her beauty in order to reunite with her family, console them in their final hour, and accept death with them. This is how she sums up her life, which has become a local legend: “Every heart of ours is her coffin! She is buried in the

<sup>11</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1903). *Free Shamkhar. A Novel from the Caucasian War*. Moscow: I.D. Sytin Company. (In Russ.) [http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko\\_w\\_i/text\\_1903\\_volny\\_shamhar\\_olderfo.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/n/nemirovichdanchenko_w_i/text_1903_volny_shamhar_olderfo.shtml) Compare with the quote about the behavior of Armenians during the Russo-Turkish War of 1878–1879: “The entire participation of the “Alexandropol residents” consisted of the fact that they began to trade at full speed and fleece their defenders in the city three times, and in the camp only four times... <...> not one took up arms, not one lifted a finger to win for themselves the freedom so dear to everyone” (Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1878–1879). *The Year of War (Diary of a Russian Correspondent), 1877–1878* (Vol. 3, book 2, p. 17)).

<sup>12</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1907). *Eternal Memory! From the Chronicles of the Liberation Movement. Mirages, Essays, Stories* (p. 48). Moscow: I.D. Sytin Company. (In Russ.)

memory of the people. With her suffering, we bought the right to happiness and freedom!”<sup>13</sup>.

The events of 1915 – the Armenian Genocide – forced Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko to revisit the fate of the Armenian people. In September 1915, he visited the Caucasian Front, where he encountered evidence of Turkish pogroms (see Akopyants, 2017). To better express his experiences, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko chose poetry. In 1916, the *Armenian Herald* began publication in Moscow with the aim of strengthening Russian society’s acquaintance with Armenia and Armenians. All proceeds from sales, as well as donations, were directed to victims of the genocide. Having recently returned from the French front, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko visited Moscow in early December and devoted a relatively large amount of time to the *Herald*, and also agreed to become its permanent contributor<sup>14</sup>. For the publication, he submitted *Little Poems (On the Banks of the Euphrates, Banner)*, the cycle *Songs of Turkish Armenia*, and the poem *For What?* dedicated to Suslov (Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko himself said that the episode with Suslov in Batumi insulted the entire Armenian people, and it was this that provoked the publication of the poems). Several poems were also published in the newspaper *Russkoye Slovo*. The first published poem consists of several fragments describing the life of the Armenian people in Turkey: with each episode, the peaceful image of a calm, happy life is further shattered. A unique structure, based on repetitions of verse form and the leitmotif “house on the banks of the Euphrates”, intensifies the sense of foreboding of impending catastrophe. Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko attempts to understand the feelings of a person whose home and family are being destroyed<sup>15</sup>.

Among the published poems, *The Prayer of an Emigrant*<sup>16</sup> stands out for its particularly tragic mood. Once again, the image of the region begins with the visualization of a “wonderful garden”. Now, recalling Armenia as a “beautiful earthly paradise”, the writer refers to it as “my Armenia”, “my native song”, “my distant homeland”, and “my ancestral land”. The peaceful scene gives way to horrific scenes of destruction and death. Armenia is compared to Golgotha, and the lyrical hero is prepared to bear the cross to perish with his homeland. Another work in the cycle, *In the Spring*, is written with a similar structure, based on memories of a 1914 trip<sup>17</sup>. The image of his native land is further enhanced by *From Songs about*

<sup>13</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1907). *Eternal Memory! From the Chronicles of the Liberation Movement. Mirages, Essays, Stories* (p. 58).

<sup>14</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1916). *For What? Armenian Herald*, (47), 14. Published by I.T. Amirov. (In Russ.)

<sup>15</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1916). *On the Banks of the Euphrates. Armenian Herald*, (45), 12–13. Published by I.T. Amirov. (In Russ.)

<sup>16</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1917). *The Prayer of an Emigrant. Armenian Herald*, (1), 9. (In Russ.)

<sup>17</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1917). *In the Spring. Armenian Herald*, (9), 12. Published by I.T. Amirov. (In Russ.)

*Armenia*, where it is enriched with emotionally charged details: “sun, happiness, and freedom”<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, in the *Armenian Herald*, signs his portrait for publication as follows: “...One of those who, by birth, belongs equally to both the Slavic and Armenian tribes”<sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusion

Vasily I. Nemirovich-Danchenko gradually, throughout his career, moves from depicting Armenians using archetypal images created by popular culture to a typical image – an individual creation of the writer, formed through a creative exploration of existence. The first image is superficial, based on common clichés, while the second, which took shape near the end of the writer’s life, represents a deeply personal experience of the tragic fate of Armenians, expressed verbally. This creative transformation is accompanied by changes in the writer’s personal attitude: a shift from a mediated perception of the people to an identification with their national identity and an alignment of his own fate with that of the Armenian people. External historical events, the most important of which is the Armenian Genocide, acted as a catalyst for these changes. Accordingly, the culmination of this image’s development occurs in works dedicated to the martyrdom of the Armenian people.

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<sup>18</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1917). From Songs about Armenia. *Armenian Herald*, (3), 9. Published by I.T. Amirov. (In Russ.)

<sup>19</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vas.I. (1916). On the Banks of the Euphrates. *Armenian Herald*, (47), 13. Published by I.T. Amirov. (In Russ.)

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