

# A history of violence

## The concrete and metaphorical wars in the life narrative of G. I. Gurdjieff

<https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.84863>

HIPPO TAATILA



Research into the life and work of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, a Greek-Armenian spiritual teacher and one of the foundational figures of modern mysticism, remains an emergent field within the academic study of religion/s. While esotericists such as H. P. Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner have been thoroughly studied, international academic study of Gurdjieff is still scarce. Gurdjieff lived his early adulthood amidst a severe power struggle between the major powers of the Russian, British and Ottoman empires. He survived the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Russian Civil War of 1918-22 and two World Wars. In his writings, he states how after the turn of the twentieth century, he understood it to be his mission in life to help mankind stop wars from happening, and during his years as a teacher, the question of war was omnipresent because of the events surrounding him and his pupils. Despite all this, there is no previous academic research on the topic of Gurdjieff and war. In this article, I examine the role of wars and armed conflicts in Gurdjieff's personal life narrative according to his own writings, present his narrative in a military-historical context and analyse his narrational tools and motives as a first step towards a comprehensive study of a much larger subject.

### Introduction and definitions

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866/77–1949), a Greek-Armenian spiritual teacher and esotericist, is often mentioned as one of the foundational figures of modern 'secularized' mysticism, yet he is far less studied than other foundational figures of the field such as H. P. Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner (Cusack and Sutcliffe 2015: 109).

Gurdjieff came from an ethnically Greek family who had to escape Ottoman Turkey because of the fear of persecution. He lived his childhood in a historically Turkish area which had been recently conquered by the Russians. During his early years, high geopolitical tensions prevailed between the British, Russian and Ottoman empires. He began his public teaching career in Russia during the days of World War I, continued to teach during the days of the Russian Revolution and Russian Civil War,

and ending up in Paris, kept on teaching even through the World War II Nazi occupation of that city (Cusack 2011: 73–4).

My research objective in this article is to summarize what Gurdjieff says about wars and conflicts in the course of his life, according to his autobiographical texts, and present the military-historical context behind his writings. However, I use his texts as a narrative by analysing how and why they are presented, what is the underlying significance of his war stories and what does he want his followers to know about them. Therefore, even though the historical facts about the first decades of Gurdjieff's life are speculative, and his teaching is contested in terms of its sources as well as its proper scholarly classification (Cusack

2011: 72; Cusack and Sutcliffe 2015: 109), this is more or less a rule when approaching autobiographical writing. The 'truth' of the autobiographical storyteller is always a story of its own and in that sense, more fiction than fact (Kosonen 2016: 44) – or in the words of British sociologist Liz Stanley, the borders of fictional texts and autobiographical accounts are complex and shifting (Leskelä-Kärki 2008: 327).

Gurdjieff himself gives his readers instructions of interpretation by writing about his intention to give his autobiographical book, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963) a form as understandable as possible and accessible to all (Gurdjieff 2002: 6, 30). A major key to interpretation of the book is the speech of an 'intelligent, elderly Persian' in the introduction. The Persian rants about the woeful state of contemporary literature and refers to *A Thousand and One Nights* as a work of literature in the full sense of the word: 'fantasy corresponding to truth, even though composed of episodes which are quite improbable for the ordinary life of people' (p. 18). The nature of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* as a strategic method of teaching higher truths has been mentioned in several academic sources (see e.g. Cusack 2011: 78–83; Tamdgidi 2009: 13).

Despite the fantasy-filled content of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, the last chapter of the book, 'The Material Question', a reconstructed version of a talk Gurdjieff held in New York on his first trip to the United States in



G. I. Gurdjieff.  
Wikimedia Commons.

1925–6, refers to actual historical moments in Gurdjieff’s life that can be traced to other literary sources such as his escape from Russia from 1917 to 1919 as well as his days in Tiflis and Constantinople from 1919 to 1920. In ‘The Material Question’, the narrative of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* changes from tall tales to actual history, excluding the hyperbolic tale of Gurdjieff’s travelling workshop. The second major autobiographical source of Gurdjieff’s life narrative is his book *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am* (1975). The book consists mostly of talks and practical exercises, but also includes a story of three nearly fatal stray bullet wounds received at the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as the written form of his decision to become a teacher.

The concept of war is a rarity as a research subject in the field of the study of western esotericism, but not completely unheard of. Study of the esoteric and occult dimension of Nazism remains a well-researched area (e.g. Goodrick-Clarke 1992, 2002; Staudenmaier 2013: 25–58; Strube 2015: 336–47) while the subject is occasionally present in other studies, such as in Susan Rowland’s summary of C. G. Jung’s esoteric theory of the reasons behind the World Wars in a comparative study of the works of Shakespeare and Lindsay Clarke (Rowland 2007). However, thorough academic research of the concept of war in the teachings of major western esoteric thinkers such as G. I. Gurdjieff, H. P. Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner is relatively untouched and provides remarkable amount of research material for those interested. This article, too, is merely the starting point of a longer, more thorough research project. The sheer multitude and length of the writings of Gurdjieff’s followers concerning the subject warrants an article of its own; these writings cannot be examined sufficiently thoroughly in the context of this article alone.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines ‘war’ as a conflict among political groups involving hostilities of considerable duration and magnitude (Frankel 2017). In this article, I include the conflicts Gurdjieff himself labelled wars such as the Russian Civil War, World War I and the Greco-Turkish War, but also take into consideration the several pre- and post-war political tensions of the time of his life narrative such as The Great Game or the creeping expansion of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century.

## Early years: a migrant boy on the outskirts of the Russian Empire

Even when first mentioning his family background, Gurdjieff describes wars and persecutions: he is the son of an ethnically Greek father whose ancestors had to escape persecution by the Turks in Byzantium following the conquest of Constantinople (Gurdjieff 2002: 40). The family settled in the heart of Turkey, but then moved to the environs of present day Gümüşhane. Still later, ‘not long before the last big Russo-Turkish war’ (1877–8),<sup>1</sup> the repeated persecutions by the Turks forced the family to move to Georgia (p. 40). From Georgia, Gurdjieff’s father moved to Armenia and the town of Alexandropol, formerly the Turkish town of Gumri.<sup>2</sup> George Ivanovich Gurdjieff was born there, the first of his parents’ children (pp. 40–1).

By the time Gurdjieff was seven, his family consisted of his father, his mother, his grandmother and three children – himself, his brother and his sister. His father was the richest cattle owner of the district, employed several shepherds and held in his charge the cattle of poorer families in exchange for butter and cheese. Gurdjieff doesn’t describe the daily life of his mother in his writings, but considering his father’s wealth and position, his mother most likely stayed at home and ran the household (Gurdjieff 2002: 40–1). However, his father lost all his fortune in the aftermath of a cattle plague and since the maintenance of a family – ‘which until then had been pampered by a life of wealth’ – cost a good deal, he had to open a lumber yard and a carpenter’s shop. This coincided with a period of reconstruction by the Russians of the nearby fortress town of Kars.<sup>3</sup> Because of newly arising opportunities, Gurdjieff’s father took his workshop to Kars and eventually moved his whole family there. By that time, three more daughters had been born into the family (p. 41).

- 1 Gurdjieff is most likely referring to the latest conflict (1877–8) in a series of conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire fought in the Balkans, the Crimea, and the Caucasus for political domination of those territories, starting from 1806 (Wright 2007).
- 2 Known as Kumayri in antiquity, and later called Gyumri, the city was named Alexandropol (commonly spelled Alexandropol) by the Russians in 1837, in honour of Czar Nicholas I’s wife. Russians occupied the city in 1804 and a Russian army base was established in 1837, when Nicholas I visited the town (Adalian 2010: 352).
- 3 Kars was handed over to Russian troops in the Treaty of San Stefano in the aftermath of Russo-Turkish war of 1877–8 (La Boda 2013: 359).

The first striking attribute of Gurdjieff's stories about his childhood is the multi-ethnicity of his environs. Children of all colours and different races – Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Tartars, Yezidis, and so forth – were constantly playing with each other (Gurdjieff 2002: 65). The description of his childhood takes place in a pre-industrialized world: his father was a shepherd and a carpenter and widely known among the inhabitants of Transcaucasia and Asia Minor as a poet and a storyteller (pp. 32–4). He constantly refers to the presence of Russian soldiers in the environs of Kars and Alexandropol, which makes sense, since the area was located at the border of Russian and Ottoman empires.

Dean Borsh, the highest spiritual authority of the region, hand-picked Gurdjieff to be a pupil of Kars Military Cathedral, which Gurdjieff describes as a far better seat of learning than the Kars municipal school which he had previously attended. At the Military Cathedral, Gurdjieff was able to learn subjects such as geography, Russian language, scripture, anatomy, physiology and mathematics (Gurdjieff 2002: 50–1, 53). Studies at Kars Military Cathedral were also a gateway to a higher social standing, since the town elite consisted of Russian military men. Gurdjieff mentions a few of them by name, such as the army engineer Vseslavsky, artillery officer Kouzmin, artillery officer Artemin, captain Terentiev and company commander Gorbakoun (pp. 59, 63, 67).

Gurdjieff seems to have been fond of weapons as a child and youngster. As a six-year-old he took his father's rifle without permission and fell in love with shooting. After his father confiscated the rifle, he made a customized gun out of old cartridge shells and became his own 'gunsmith', selling toy firearms to his comrades. Later, he was accidentally shot in the leg during a duck hunt with his friends (Gurdjieff 2002: 63–4). Yet another incident in his youth involving lethal weapons happened when he sneaked into the artillery range with his friend, Piotr Karpenko, during artillery firing. Even though Karpenko was wounded and lost a lot of blood, both young men survived (pp. 201–7).

Gurdjieff doesn't seem to have been bothered about the omnipresence of the military – it was apprehensible in rural borderlands between two empires and nothing to be concerned about. He even seems to consider the Russian army to be an entity which brought a sense of civilization and stability to the region while his studies at Kars Military Cathedral opened him up to possibilities he would have never thought of. It's also worth mentioning that even though Gurdjieff's ancestors suffered from persecution by the Turks,

he writes about Turks in a neutral way, as if he understood the grand scheme of things: there was ‘nothing personal’ about the persecution; human beings tend to act that way.

### Young adulthood: ‘Seekers of Truth’

From Kars, Gurdjieff moved to Tiflis and worked there as a stoker for the local railway station. Soon after, the engineer Vasiliev, who came to town to survey the route of a proposed railway between Tiflis and Kars, offered him a job. Gurdjieff spent the next three months as an overseer and interpreter in the villages along the proposed railroad (Gurdjieff 2002: 86–7). Here, Gurdjieff positions himself in the middle of the major power politics of the turn of the twentieth century: the Russian Empire wanted its new territories to be linked to the old ones as soon as possible. The railway route from Tiflis to Kars through Alexandropol was initiated in the spring of 1894 and completed in December 1899. Historical sources mention Russian sectarians such as Doukhobors and Molokans living in the villages between Kars and Alexandropol and refers to them as the basis of support of the Russian administration in the newly acquired territory (Mirzoyan and Badem 2013: 19–21).

After the railroad episode, the chronological character of Gurdjieff’s tales begins to disappear as he introduces his reader to various – factual or fictional – companions of his and describes many adventures and journeys. He refers several times to a group named ‘Seekers of Truth’, a club composed of Gurdjieff and his companions which sought for traces of ancient wisdom in places such as the Gobi Desert, Africa, the Himalayas, Asia, Mecca and Medina (Gurdjieff 2002: 164–5, 209–11, 227). He and his companions seem to be able to roam from one country to another rather freely, but despite the long distances, this cannot be claimed to be unrealistic: the nation states were still a new invention, and especially the more extensive borders must have been virtually impossible to monitor. Also, in a pre-unionized and mostly pre-industrialized world, the movement of the workforce was easier than it is today.

While Gurdjieff’s tales are not in a chronological form, nor can their historical accuracy be confirmed, there are several sequences which can be placed in a military-historical context. In Alexandropol, Gurdjieff and his friend Sarkis Pogossian are keen on getting to the current-day Iraqi city of Mosul, where they have been told they will find traces of a mystical Sarmoung



Andranik Ozanian, one of the historical military figures mentioned in Gurdjieff's writings, 1918. Wikimedia Commons.

Brotherhood. This takes place during a great nationalist movement among the Armenians, at a time when the Armenians are being persecuted by all the other races: 'a violent political explosion was taking place, such as recurs from time to time in Armenia, with the usual train of consequences' (Gurdjieff 2002:92). Gurdjieff and Pogossian join the Armenian committee of Alexandropol on a special mission which they use as a cover for their departure for Mosul (Gurdjieff 2002: 90–5). These events have a historical background. In the nineteenth century, the well-educated and cosmopolitan Armenian elite in Istanbul and other Ottoman port cities became a source of suspicion among the Muslim majority and were considered a

foreign element within the Ottoman Empire. Young Armenian activists formed various revolutionary parties, trying to ignite Armenian nationalistic fervour amongst their countrymen in Turkey. While the movements didn't gain wide support among Turkish Armenians, their actions evoked anti-Armenian feelings which erupted into mass violence several times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed in the so-called Hamidian massacres of 1894–6 (Suny 2019). A revolutionary character specifically mentioned by Gurdjieff is 'young Andronik, who later became a national hero' (Gurdjieff 2002: 92). This refers to Andranik Ozanian, an Armenian military commander and statesman, who joined the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in 1892 and defended the Armenian villages of Mush and Sasun from attacks by the Turks and Kurdish units during the Hamidian massacres (Walker 1990: 411).

The adventures of Gurdjieff in his young adulthood also take place in a highly militarized world. This can be deduced, for example, from the way he describes his companions; almost all of them were involved with the military in one way or another. Abram Yelov prepared to enter the Cadet

school (Gurdjieff 2002: 109–10), Ekim Bey studied at a military school in Germany (pp. 145–6) and Soloviev spent his first weeks in military service in the railway battalion in charge of the Trans-Caspian Railway, and was then sent to ‘what was called the Kushka Line’<sup>4</sup> (pp. 145–6). Gurdjieff encounters the Russian military even in virtually deserted regions. This is also logical: the Russian Empire expanded rapidly into Asia throughout the entire nineteenth century (‘Map of acquisitions of the Russian Empire, 1553–1894’). The Russian Empire needed its military to maintain order and stability in her newly-acquired frontier regions. A brilliant example of this is Gurdjieff’s tale about travelling through Pamirs and finding out that the headquarters of the surveyors from the Turkestan Military Topographic Department is in one of the valleys near this peak (Gurdjieff 2002: 211).<sup>5</sup>

Since Gurdjieff claims to have roamed all over Asia, it is more than apposite to find that he came across British soldiers several times. He reminisces how he and Pogossian helped a bunch of British sailors in bar fight in the Turkish town of Smyrna and as a favour in return, they were accepted on board a British warship sailing to Alexandria, Egypt (Gurdjieff 2002: 102–6). British troops are also mentioned when another companion of his, Professor Skridlov, has to take an Afghan holy relic across the river Amu Darya, which is being watched over by the Afghan guards and by British soldiers, who ‘for some reason or other, were there at that time in great numbers’ (pp. 116–17). Here, Gurdjieff again locates himself at a remarkable historical turning point, since on 10 September 1895, The Great Game – a political and diplomatic, cold-war-like confrontation between the British and Russian Empires over Afghanistan and Central and Southern Asia – ended with the signing of Pamir Boundary Commission protocols, where

- 4 The Kushka line is also something with great military-historical value; a highly secret railroad branch built in 1897–8, which began from the city of Merv in present day Turkmenistan and terminated 313 kilometres later at Kushkinski Post, the southernmost point of the Russian Empire after its founding in the 1890s. Due to the Kushka line, Russian army could move troops from Caucasus to the Afghan border in eight days (Alikuzai 2013: 898).
- 5 ‘Turkestan’ is referred to as the geographical entity of Russian Turkestan, which began to form in 1865, when Russian forces took over the city of Tashkent, the capital of present-day Uzbekistan (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019b). The entity known as Turkestan Military District was created alongside other Russian military districts by count Dmitry Milyutin in 1862–4 as a part of a programme of Russian military reform (Bellamy 2001).

it was agreed that the Amu Darya would form the official border between Afghanistan, which was closely monitored by the British, and the Russian Empire (Rowe 2010: 64).

The military is present everywhere in Gurdjieff's early adulthood. Both the expansion of the Russian Empire and the tensions of The Great Game are detectable in his stories. In several cases, Gurdjieff pinpoints himself in the middle of most notable historical occurrences; while there might be glimpses of truth in many of his tales, one might think he uses well-known historical events and currents as a background so that his contemporary readers can more easily identify with his stories. Gurdjieff's description of the 'political explosion' in Armenia is especially interesting, since it is written in a very objective sense. He describes the Turks rather neutrally despite their deeds and even claims that political upheavals recur in Armenia 'from time to time', putting some blame on the minority, despite his maternal Armenian background.

### The three gunshot wounds

The third and final book of Gurdjieff's 'All and Everything' trilogy, *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am*, consists of a prologue, an introduction, five talks and a final chapter, which all process Gurdjieff's idea of the inner world of man. The book was intended by Gurdjieff to be written in a much more polished form, but because of the passing of Gurdjieff in 1949, his followers published the preliminary draft he had written (Anastasieff 1999: 9).

While the book consists mostly of practical issues concerning the inner world of man, Gurdjieff also tells the story of 'the three gunshot wounds', the story behind his decision to settle down and teach in Russia. According to the story, Gurdjieff had a desire to investigate and understand the significance and purpose of the life of man; because of this 'sole aim' of his 'inner world', he explains he had the tendency to place himself wherever 'sharp, energetic events' such as civil wars and revolutions occur (Gurdjieff 1999: 26–7). The first stray bullet hit him in 1896 on the island of Crete a year before the Greco-Turkish War (p. 7), the second one in 1902 in the mountains of Tibet a year before the Anglo-Tibetan War (p. 9) and the third one in 1904 near Chiatura tunnel in Georgia during a battle between a branch of the Russian Cossack army and the local 'Gourian' troops (p. 9). Here, Gurdjieff places himself again at a military historical crossroads.

In 1896, the island of Crete was a part of the Ottoman Empire despite most of its population being Greek. While the Cretan Greeks longed for union with Greece, Ottoman Turkey decided not to give them the status of autonomy, resulting in deteriorating relations between Greeks and Turks. An outbreak of rebellion in 1896 appeared to give Greece an opportunity to annex the island, but they were met by Ottoman reinforcements, setting up the Greco-Turkish War of 1897. This is most likely the historical background of Gurdjieff's first gunshot wound (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2016). Gurdjieff doesn't present details of the incident.

The second stray bullet hit Gurdjieff in 1902 in the mountains of Tibet a year before the Anglo-Tibetan War. This chapter in history is yet another example of power play between British and Russian empires in Asia. The British Viceroy of India was obsessed with Russia's advance into Central Asia and feared an invasion. This was provoked even further when Tibet's spiritual leader the Dalai Lama declined to meet the British government of India and decided to concentrate on having good relations with Russians. When the rumours concerning a secret agreement about handing over Tibet to Russia began to circulate, the British prepared an expedition to take over Tibet, tried to provoke the Tibetans into a confrontation and in the end, pressed deep into Tibetan territories in early December 1903 (Allen 2015: 1–2, 28, 31). Once again, Gurdjieff decides not to give his reader any details about the incident.

The third stray bullet hit Gurdjieff in the end of 1904 in the Transcaucasian region, in the vicinity of the Chiatura tunnel. This time, Gurdjieff explains how the bullet was 'plunked' into him by a representative of either group of people; the Russian army, which consisted of chiefly Cossacks, or the so-called 'Gourians' (Gurdjieff 1999: 9). The term 'Gourians' refers to the peasant protest movement in the western Georgian region of Guria, which culminated in creating the self-governed Gurian Republic in 1902. During the Russian Revolution of 1905, the mining town of Chiatura was the only Bolshevik stronghold in mostly Menshevik Georgia, while the 'Chiatura Tunnel' most likely refers to the large mining complex near the town. The Gurian Republic collapsed in 1906 when the area was devastated by the Cossacks (Jones 2005: 131–2).

After struggling 'between life and death for two weeks' in a cave in the mountains near Chiatura tunnel (Gurdjieff 1999: 10–11), Gurdjieff reminisces about terrors he has witnessed, mentions previous conversations with revolutionaries in Italy, Switzerland and Transcaucasia, and finally tells the

reader what was his motivation in becoming a teacher: he must ‘discover, at all costs, some manner or means for destroying in people the predilection for suggestibility which causes them to fall easily under the influence of mass hypnosis’ (p. 27).

While the story of three gunshot wounds might be based on factual occasions in the life of Gurdjieff or his companions, it is interesting to see how he caught a bullet and was able to escape death three times. The number three is highly significant in several world religions; for example Christianity (the Holy Trinity, three temptations of Jesus), Buddhism (the three jewels), Judaism (three daily prayers) or Taoism (the three treasures), not forgetting the Triple Greatness of Hermes Trismegistus. The way Gurdjieff describes the aim which crystallized in him emanates a sense of holiness; through suffering, he found himself an ‘apostle’s mission’ which eventually led him to become a teacher – in this context, the underlined use of the trinity or number three couldn’t have been a mere incident. Also, as on previous occasions, Gurdjieff places himself in the middle of conflicts well known to his contemporaries in exotic geographical locations and stirs the pot even more by mentioning Switzerland and Italy, most likely to help his words resonate in the minds of people from all over the world.

### The Material Question and ‘Madame Russian Revolution’

In the last chapter of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, entitled ‘The Material Question’, Gurdjieff gradually changes the tone: while the first third of the chapter is vivid, extravagant and humorous, he begins writing down history, describing in great detail some events before, during and after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Here, Gurdjieff’s life moves from the mode of an epic legendary past to written history, since the earliest follower’s descriptions of Gurdjieff’s life and teaching come from mid-1910s, when the philosopher and writer P. D. Ouspensky was introduced to him and wrote the earliest and most systematic version of his teaching, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949). The last thirty-five years of Gurdjieff’s life are well documented by his pupils and contemporaries (Cusack 2011: 74).

Gurdjieff tells how after gathering money for four or five years, he went to Moscow near the end of 1913 to ‘begin to actualize in practice’ what he had taken upon himself as ‘a sacred task’: to establish an institute in which a man would be ‘continually reminded of the sense and aim of his existence by an unavoidable friction between his conscience and the automatic

manifestations of his nature' (Gurdjieff 2002: 270). The same period in Gurdjieff's life is described in *Life Is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'*, but is placed one year earlier: he claims to have arrived in Moscow in 1912, where he began to establish the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man (Gurdjieff 1999: 28). However, the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the beginning of the Russian Civil War in 1918 forced Gurdjieff to change his plans. He describes, how after two years of constant, intense work, his institute was nearing completion when war broke out. While Gurdjieff was able to adapt to the wartime conditions, 'very s-l-o-w-l-y and very u-n-o-b-t-r-u-s-i-v-e-l-y there emerged Madame Russian Revolution' (pp. 28–9). By this time, Gurdjieff had spent half the capital he had collected on the preparatory organization (Gurdjieff 2002: 271).

As hope of an early peace began to grow fainter, Gurdjieff was compelled to leave Moscow and settle in Essentuki at the base of Caucasus Mountains to wait until the conditions were stable enough for him to return. When Gurdjieff decided to establish his institute in Essentuki instead of waiting for return to Moscow, the district of Mineral Waters (*Mineralnye Vody*) became one of the centres of the Russian Civil War. The control of towns in the area passed from the Bolsheviks to the Cossacks and the White Army or other parties while about twenty of Gurdjieff's pupils lived in fear of being conscripted (Gurdjieff 2002: 271–2). In addition to this, Gurdjieff – who was already hosting eighty-five followers of his ideas, as well as relatives of his in Essentuki and another sixty in Piatigorsk – had to accommodate twenty-eight refugees from Alexandropol, which had been attacked by the Turks two months before (pp. 277–8).

To escape the situation, Gurdjieff framed a scientific expedition to the Caucasus Mountains. While he was factually interested in ancient Caucasian stone monuments called 'the dolmens', he also used the expedition as an excuse to escape. He emphasizes selecting conscription-age males for the expedition so that they would not have to join the rival armies and fight for them. Eventually, Gurdjieff split his expedition group into two parties which were supposed to meet at an agreed place (Gurdjieff 2002: 272–3). The party Gurdjieff was a part of intended to proceed to Mount Indur close to the Black Sea coastal town of Tuapse and begin searching for monuments in a south-easterly direction. However, the party was only able to travel to Maikop, 140 kilometres northeast from Tuapse, because a rebel army which

called themselves ‘the Greens’<sup>6</sup> had destroyed the railway. Therefore, they had to proceed on foot and by cart towards an area known as the White River Pass<sup>7</sup>. On their journey, they had to cross the Bolshevik and White Army lines ‘no fewer than five times’ (pp. 272–4). After great difficulties, the party made it through devastated Cossack villages to Kumichki<sup>8</sup>, the last inhabited place before the Caucasus Mountains, and proceeded to the coastal town of Sochi. From Sochi, they travelled by ordinary roads all the way to Tiflis in Georgia. At the time of their arrival in Tiflis, four years had passed from the beginning of the organization of the institute in Moscow (pp. 275–7).

Tiflis was somehow living according to its old ways, even during the war. Therefore, Gurdjieff was able to earn money through trade and established his institute there. However, once the Bolsheviks advanced into Georgia, the difficulties of daily living increased, and Gurdjieff decided to emigrate beyond Russia. He took thirty pupils with him and proceeded to Constantinople through Batum so that one day he could reach a European country where he could finally settle with his institute (Gurdjieff 2002: 279–81).

Despite being wealthy when settling in Moscow, Gurdjieff lost a huge majority of his wealth during wartime. He spent half of his money establishing the institute in Moscow and St. Petersburg and a notable portion of his wealth was lost during their escape from Maikop. Further still, when fleeing from Georgia, he had to pay extra duties and taxes (Gurdjieff 2002: 271, 279–81). Gurdjieff underlines his financial difficulties also in his first personally written but subsequently withdrawn book *The Herald of Coming Good* (1933), where he laments how ‘unexpected and catastrophic events

- 6 ‘In a broad sense, the Green armies were spontaneous manifestations of peasant discontent rather than any specific ideology. ... While these groups primarily opposed the Bolsheviks, they often did so without a plan or alternative form of government in mind; rather, they simply wanted to rid the countryside of Bolshevik influence by any means necessary’ (Figs 1989: 319–20).
- 7 Geographically, this must mean the same Belaya River which flows through the city of Maikop. There are several Belaya Rivers in Russia (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2018).
- 8 Since there is no locality called Kumichki in Russian Caucasus, Gurdjieff most likely means the village of Khamyshki south of Maikop upon Belaya River (Google Maps 2019).



Pera in 1919–20 when Gurdjieff was active in the area. [ouspenskytoday.org](http://ouspenskytoday.org).

of the World War’ destroyed his institute in Russia at the very height of its activities, including enormous material and other loss (p. 16).

In Constantinople, Gurdjieff rented large premises in Pera, the European quarter of the city. He arranged several public demonstrations,<sup>9</sup> lectures and open courses to raise interest on his teachings and to earn money. Alas, Gurdjieff and his pupils couldn’t find peace in Turkey, either. After only a year in Constantinople, ‘the wisecracking of Young Turks<sup>10</sup> began to have a

9 On this occasion, Gurdjieff tells the first time of organizing public demonstrations or ‘movements’ (Gurdjieff 2002: 282–3), sacred dances of great importance in Gurdjieff’s system, which have been widely researched within Gurdjieff studies (see e.g. Petsche 2013).

10 The Young Turks were a coalition of reform groups that led to a revolutionary movement against the regime of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, finally culminating in the establishment of constitutional government in 1908. However, the Young Turks were also extremely nationalistic and responsible for the Armenian Genocide, the execution or deportation of a million Armenians in 1915, only a few years before Gurdjieff’s stay in Constantinople (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2015). In addition, Gurdjieff’s time in Constantinople coincides with dissolution of the Ottoman Empire which triggered fierce national resistance led by Mustafa Kemal, the future president of new Republic of Turkey (Wright 2006).

particular smell', so Gurdjieff decided to get away with his people as quickly as possible and leave for Germany (Gurdjieff 2002: 281–4).

The end of the book moves on from wartime to describe the interwar period: how Gurdjieff establishes his institute south of Paris in Château du Prieuré, moves in there with fifty pupils on October 1922 and earns money by different means, such as running a restaurant in Montmartre and providing treatment for alcoholics and drug addicts, so that he can arrange a tour around Europe and North America to introduce the fundamental ideas of his institute to the public (Gurdjieff 2002: 284–8, 291). In 'The Material Question', Gurdjieff especially mentions sitting in a Childs restaurant in New York on 10 January (pp. 295–7, 302). According to Paul Beekman Taylor, Gurdjieff's first trip to America took place in the winter of 1925–6 (Taylor 2004: 103).

An important fact here is that Gurdjieff published only one autobiographical text during his lifetime: *The Herald of Coming Good* which he eventually withdrew from circulation and didn't include in his official *All and Everything* trilogy (Cusack 2011: 78; Cusack 2017: 2), Gurdjieff's personally-written life story ended with 'The Material Question', leaving the last 23 years of his life – including his time in Nazi-occupied World War II era Paris – for his followers to write down.<sup>11</sup>

### Sidenotes: a fallen companion, a Russian refugee, a late father, an old mother and the role of pupils

In the chapters of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* preceding 'The Material Question', Gurdjieff on two occasions refers to things that happened during or after wartime. In the first occasion, he laments how Professor Skridlov, a member of Seekers of Truth, disappeared without a trace 'at the time of the great agitation of minds in Russia', referring to World War I, the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War (Gurdjieff 2002: 225). He also describes how after moving to Germany he saw a beggar dressed like a German soldier along Kurfürstendamm in Berlin and recognized the

11 A brilliant companion to the writings of Gurdjieff's followers and pupils is J. Walter Driscoll's (2004) article: 'Gurdjieff. The secondary literature: a selective bibliography'.

man as a former Russian officer who was evacuated with Wrangel's army<sup>12</sup> from Crimea to Europe (pp. 216–17).

The fate of Gurdjieff's father is also bound to the times of war. In the beginning of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff explains that his father died one year after 1916 at the time of the Turkish attack on Alexandropol (Gurdjieff 2002: 45).<sup>13</sup> While Gurdjieff doesn't write too much about his mother, at the end of 'The Material Question' he explains that his 'old mother in Alexandropol' came to live with him in Essentuki during Russian Civil War. A while later, a while before departing for the



Pyotr Wrangel, a White Army commander in Russian Civil War who eventually had to retreat with his army to Crimea. Unknown author, about 1920. Wikimedia Commons.

Caucasus Mountains, Gurdjieff entrusts her to his followers who remain in Essentuki. The circle closes years later, when Gurdjieff's mother moves with him at the institute at Château du Prieuré in France (pp. 293–5).

On these occasions, Gurdjieff underlines the effects of war on many kinds of human destinies. The war ended the lives of many regardless of age, conviction or nationality and forced millions of people, such as his mother and her sister with her six children, to relocate from their homes. Meanwhile, the tale of the former Russian officer seems to remind the reader of the fact that in war, the courses of the lives of human beings can change dramatically in a

- 12 Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel was a White Army commander in the Russian Civil War who launched an offensive against the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine in June 1920 and who eventually had to retreat with his army to Crimea. General Wrangel's army was evacuated to Constantinople in November 1920 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019a).
- 13 After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Russian troops withdrew from South Caucasus, creating a power vacuum. Encouraged by this, Ottoman forces regrouped and captured the city of Alexandropol on 11 May 1918 (Allen and Muratoff 2010: 457–69).

short period of time: respectable officers can become beggars on the streets in a toss of a coin.

Beginning from P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, Gurdjieff's deeds and teachings during wartime are well documented, from World War I to the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War. In addition to Ouspensky's aforementioned book, *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (1964) by Thomas and Olga de Hartmann includes first-hand material of Gurdjieff's wartime teachings and a description of Gurdjieff's escape from Russia during the civil war. While Gurdjieff didn't include in his trilogy any details about his nearly three decades in France, several pupils of his wrote about these years from the founding of the institute to the years of Nazi occupation – some examples are *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (1964) by Fritz Peters, *Undiscovered Country* (1966) by Kathryn Hulme and *Idiots in Paris* (1949) by Elizabeth and John Bennett. At the same time, the chronology of Gurdjieff's life has been reconstructed in academic discourse in James Moore's *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (1991), James Webb's *The Harmonious Circle* (1980) and Paul Beekman Taylor's *G. I. Gurdjieff: A New Life* (2008). These first-hand writings and academic studies provide the material for additional analysis of Gurdjieff's wartime deeds and teachings.

### Concluding remarks: the storyteller's burden

Despite all the realistic elements or factual history behind G. I. Gurdjieff's life story, it is, in a sense, a classic autobiography – the writer realizes he has been writing a truth in an experiential sense; a narrative and a myth. Instead of merely listing facts, he has created a myth around himself to underline the grand meaning of his mission (see Kosonen 2016). Gurdjieff primarily wanted to capture the minds of his two target audiences: the people seeking for truth as well as the wealthy individuals interested in financing his institute in Europe and North America. In this context, it is more than understandable that Gurdjieff uses well-known historical elements (Armenian revolutionary parties, Young Turks, Wrangel's Army), exotic places (the Kushka line, Tibet, the Chiatura tunnel) and colourful, occasionally almost archetypal characters (Professor Skridlov, Pogossian, Soloviev) to capture the interest of the reader or listener. In the course of his lifetime, he assured himself about the 'mission' he had embarked on; to awaken people from their sleep and help mankind stop wars and violence from happening (Gurdjieff 1999: 27).

Gurdjieff's tales about his childhood and youth are very believable. At the same time, whatever happened during his last 35 years or so – including the Russian Revolution, World War I and the Russian Civil War – can be mostly verified from the writings of his followers. His description of the conditions of the Caucasus during The Great Game seem believable, as well. At the same time, the approximately two decades between his young adulthood and his arrival in Russia seems to be purposely presented as a great, picaresque adventure. It seems believable he at least had heard tales about the adventures claimed to be his own and, as a storyteller, he knew how to weave different stories together by placing himself as the mythical central character; the wise narrator in a mad world who wants to awaken his students from slumber, make them aware of the 'terror of the situation' and point out to them that another kind of world is possible. All the tales of Gurdjieff – both tall tales and historical facts – seem to construct a 'textual web' which point in this same direction (see Leskelä-Kärki 2008).

The natural next step of charting the role of war in Gurdjieff's life and teachings is to go through the writings of his pupils about the times of World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War and the Nazi occupation of Paris. This will both complement the historical study of Gurdjieff's deeds during wartime and present the researcher with an opportunity to compare Gurdjieff's personal narrative with those of his pupils. After this ground work, it would be possible to research the overall role of war in Gurdjieff's philosophy and teachings such as: what is war, why and how do wars occur, can they be prevented, or what is the role of an individual during wartime? Eventually, Gurdjieff's teachings about war can be compared and reflected with teachings about war in the philosophies of other twentieth-century esoteric figures of the West such as Rudolf Steiner and C. G. Jung.

**Hippo Taatila** is a professional author from Helsinki, Finland and a postgraduate student at the Department of Study of Religion at the University of Turku. Taatila specializes in themes of war and end of the world in teachings of major figures in Western esotericism. He has translated G. I. Gurdjieff's autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men* into Finnish.

## List of references

### Maps

- Google Maps 2019. 'Khamyshki', Google Maps, <<https://goo.gl/maps/RW1ZUQ4TDCNS6sNSA>> (accessed 29.8.2019)
- 'Map of acquisitions of the Russian Empire, 1553–1894', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://cdn.britannica.com/50/3850-050-01023ADD/Russian-expansion-Asia.jpg>> (accessed 26.8.2019)

### Literature

- Adalian, Rouben Paul, 2010. 'Gyumri / Gumri', in *Historical Dictionary of Armenia*, 2nd edn (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth, Scarecrow Press), pp. 352–3
- Alikuzai, Hamid Wahed, 2013. *A Concise History of Afghanistan in 25 Volumes*, vol. 14 (Bloomington IN, Trafford Publishing)
- Allen, Charles, 2015. *Duel in the Snows: The True Story of the Younghusband Mission to Lhasa* (London, Hodder & Stoughton)
- Allen, William E. D., and Paul Muratoff, 2010 (1953). *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border 1828–1921* (Cambridge University Press)
- Anastasieff, Valentin, 1999 (1975). 'Prefatory note', in G. I. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'* (England, Arkana), pp. 8
- Bellamy, Chris, 2001. 'Russian army', in *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford University Press), <<https://www.oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.utu.fi/view/10.1093/acref/9780198606963.001.0001/acref-9780198606963-e-1101>> (accessed 30.8.2019)
- Bennett, Elizabeth, and J. G. Bennett, 2010 (1949). *Idiots in Paris: Diaries of Elizabeth Bennett* (Santa Fe NM, Bennett Books)
- Cusack, Carole, 2011. 'An enlightened life in text and image: G.I. Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963) and Peter Brook's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979)', *Literature & Aesthetics*, 21(1), June, pp. 72–97
- 2017. 'G.I. Gurdjieff, the arts and the production of culture', *Religion and the Arts*, 21, pp. 1–9
- Cusack, Carole M., and Steven J. Sutcliffe, 2015. 'G.I. Gurdjieff and the study of religion/s', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, 6(2), pp. 109–15
- Driscoll, J. Walter, 2004. 'Gurdjieff. The Secondary Literature: A Selective Bibliography', <[www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com](http://www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com)> (accessed 22.8.2019)
- Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2015. 'Young Turks. Turkish Nationalistic Movement', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Young-Turks-Turkish-nationalist-movement>> (accessed 29.8.2019)

- 2016. 'Greco-Turkish wars', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <[www.britannica.com/event/Greco-Turkish-wars](http://www.britannica.com/event/Greco-Turkish-wars)> (accessed 29.8.2019)
- 2018. 'Maikop', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Maikop>> (accessed 26.8.2019)
- 2019a. 'Pyotr Nikolayevich, Baron Wrangel', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pyotr-Nikolayevich-Baron-Wrangel>> (accessed 29.8.2019)
- 2019b. 'Tashkent', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Tashkent>> (accessed 27.8.2019)
- Figes, Orlando, 1989. *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution* (New York, Oxford University Press)
- Frankel, Joseph, 2017. 'War', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/war>> (accessed 12.8.2019)
- Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas, 1992. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York University Press)
- 2002. *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York University Press)
- Gurdjieff, G. I., 1933. *The Herald of Coming Good* (Paris)
- 1999 (1975). *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am* (England, Arkana)
- 2002 (1963). *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London and New York, Compass)
- Hulme, Kathryn, 1972. *Undiscovered Country: A Spiritual Adventure* (Boston, Atlantic-Little and Brown)
- Jones, Stephen F., 2005. *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883–1917* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press)
- Kosonen, Päivi, 2016. 'Moderni omaelämäkerrallisuus & itsen kertomisen muodo', *Niin & Näin*, 3, pp. 43–9, <<https://netn.fi/sites/www.netn.fi/files/netn163-11.pdf>> (accessed 29.1.2020)
- La Boda, Sharon, 2013. 'Kars', in *International Dictionary of Historic Places*, vol. 3: *Southern Europe* (Chicago and London, Fitzroy Dearborn), pp. 357–60
- Leskelä-Kärki, Maarit, 2008. 'Narrating life stories in between the fictional and the autobiographical', *Qualitative Research*, 8, pp. 325–32, <<http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/8/3/325>> (accessed 31.1.2020)
- Mirzoyam, Sonya, and Candan Badem, 2013. *The Construction of the Tiflis–Aleksandropol–Kars Railway, 1895–1899* (Cape Town, Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation)
- Moore, James, 1991. *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth. A Biography* (Shaftsbury, Dorset, Element)
- Peters, Fritz, 1964. *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore, Penguin Metaphysical Library)
- Petsche, Johanna J. M., 2013. 'Gurdjieff and de Hartmann's music for movements', *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, 4(1), pp. 92–121

- Rowe, William C., 2010. 'Chapter 4, The Wakhan Corridor: the endgame of The Great Game', in *Borderlines and Borderland: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-state*, eds. Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen (Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 53–68
- Rowland, Susan, 2007. 'Writing about war: Jung, Much Ado About Nothing, and the Troy novels of Lindsay Clarke', *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies*, 3(1), <<https://jungianjournal.ca/index.php/jjss/article/view/74/67>> (accessed 28.1.2020)
- Staudenmaier, Peter, 2013. 'Nazi perceptions of esotericism: the occult as fascination and menace', in *The Threat and Allure of the Magical*, ed. Ashwin Manthripragada (Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 25–58
- Strube, Julian, 2015. 'Nazism and the occult', in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 336–47
- Suny, Ronald Grigor, 2019. 'Armenian genocide', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Armenian-Genocide>> (accessed 28.8.2019)
- Tamdgidi, Mohammad H., 2009. *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis: A Hermeneutic Study* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan)
- Taylor, Paul Beekman, 2004. *Gurdjieff's America: Mediating the Miraculous* (Light-house Editions)
- 2008: *G.I. Gurdjieff: A New Life* (Utrecht, Eureka Editions)
- Walker, Christopher J., 1990. *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (London, Croom Helm)
- Webb, James, 1980. *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (London, Thames and Hudson)
- Wright, Edmund, 2006. 'Turkey', in *A Dictionary of World History*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press), doi: <10.1093/acref/9780192807007.001.001>
- 2007. 'Russo-Turkish wars', in *A Dictionary of World History*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press), doi: <10.1093/acref/9780192807007.001.001>