

In Which Year Was G.I. Gurdjieff Born?

Michael Benham

Abstract

Gurdjieff's date of birth is usually given as 28 December; but there is no agreement as to the year. The two most common conjectures are the widely disparate 1866 and 1877. The question is significant for its ramifications: if, as shall be suggested, Gurdjieff was indeed born in 1877, then his development into the founder of a significant current of Western Esotericism could fairly be described as prodigious, as by 1915 he was confidently presenting a fully developed mystic system uniting psychology and cosmology, with practical methods for working towards the mystic goal of what we might call transcendent unity.¹

Keywords: Gurdjieff, Western Esotericism, biography, official records, Armenia

Introduction: The Question

James Webb, in the first systematic study of Gurdjieff, observed that the following years had been proposed as those of his birth: 1866, 1872, 1873, and 1877.² Given Gurdjieff's death on 29 October 1949, he would have been anything between 72 and 83 years of age at his demise. In his final years, Gurdjieff himself indicated that he was 80 years or more, but practically all his official documents witness that he was born on 28 December 1877, while the few variations are minor, and consistent with the vagaries of civil administration in nineteenth century Asia Minor and Armenia. Yet, Webb opted for the year 1874 on the basis that Gurdjieff was none other than Ushe Narzunoff.³ For reasons which shall become apparent, that thesis must be abandoned. The year 1866 was first argued for by John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974), who said that when he met Gurdjieff in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1920, Gurdjieff had told him he was born in 1866. Bennett added that Gurdjieff's own sister later disputed this, affirming that he was born in 1877.⁴ This date was affirmed, with further reasons, by James Moore in *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*.⁵ It has all along been supported by three considerations: Gurdjieff's own comments, his physical appearance in the 1940s, and the conjectured improbability of his having developed his system by the time he is recorded teaching it in 1915.

Michael Benham is an independent researcher. He was, for many years, proprietor of an independent esoteric bookshop; and has long been a prominent figure in the Australian Gurdjieff work. This article is an edited and reformatted version of his study *G.I. Gurdjieff's Year of Birth (1877)*. The author thanks Joseph Azize for his assistance in producing this article for publication in *Literature & Aesthetics*.

¹ All internet sites referred to in either the footnotes or bibliography were accessed and verified between 8 and 10 June 2025. When accessed from the internet, no page references may be possible.

² James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: An Exploration of the Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and others* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 25.

³ Webb, *The Harmonious Circle*, pp. 26, 60-78.

⁴ J.G. Bennett, *Witness: The Story of a Search* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), p. 64.

⁵ James Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, (Dorset: Element, 1991), n. 1, pp. 339-340.

To anticipate, Gurdjieff's intersection with the lives of Avetik Isahakyan, Dean Borsh,⁶ and Sarkis Pogossian, excludes 1866 as the year of his birth. Further, a comparison of Gurdjieff's account of his early life in Alexandropol (now Gyumri), Kars, and Tiflis (Tbilisi) with the historical record points to 1877. It is not that there is no reason to doubt Gurdjieff's autobiographical statements, but the preponderance of evidence points to 1877. With the almost complete unanimity of official documents, the case for a birth date of 28 December 1877 with an age at death of 72 becomes persuasive, and one must conclude that Gurdjieff's claims to be eighty or more in the late 1940s were wrong, and that he appeared to be older than in fact he was.

In what follows, I have employed Armenian, Georgian, Russian and Turkish sources, supplemented by my own researches and visits to Kars and Ani in 2014, Gyumri in 2014 and 2017, and Tbilisi in 2014 and 2017. For the period from 1918 to 1949 I have availed myself of various English, American and European sources, and information generously shared by Walter Driscoll,⁷ James Moore,⁸ Serge Troude,⁹ Dushka Howarth,¹⁰ Paul Beekman Taylor,¹¹ and others.

I commence with the necessary background, his family; and then come to the events of his life. No matter what he said about his age or his life, the stubborn facts are that he was born, he had parents and relatives, and lived within the framework of history. Events in Asia Minor, especially the migrations of the regional Greeks, provide objective parameters for the evaluation of Gurdjieff's autobiographical comments. I proceed by first quoting Gurdjieff, where there is pertinent material; and then evaluate it.

Gurdjieff's Family

I shall discount the possibility that Gurdjieff was an illegitimate child, notwithstanding his own prowess in producing the same. Briefly, the evidence is clear that in Russia of the nineteenth century, illegitimate children were not allowed to use their father's name, and neither was he allowed to acknowledge them.¹² The evidence for Turkey is not relevant, as the available sources relate to Islamic law, and the institution of the *harem*. For Armenians, the only material known to me is for Armenians living in Europe, and this provides a picture as grim as that prevailing in Russia, if not more so.¹³ It seems that illegitimacy in the traditional world of nineteenth century Asia Minor was chiefly a phenomenon occurring either whether a master

⁶ The correct spelling is "Borshch." I have adopted Gurdjieff's spelling, "Borsh."

⁷ J. Walter Driscoll, (1944-2024), independent scholar, author of the *Annotated Gurdjieff Bibliography*.

⁸ James Moore (1929-2017), author of four Gurdjieff related books.

⁹ Serge Troude (b. 1948), President Fourth Way Institute, Paris.

¹⁰ Cynthia Ann ("Dushka") Howarth (1924-2010), daughter of Gurdjieff and Jessmin Howarth, founder of the Gurdjieff Heritage Society, New York, and author of the Gurdjieff compendium: Jessmin and Dushka Howarth, *It's Up to Ourselves: A Mother, A Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 1998).

¹¹ Paul Beekman Taylor (b.1930) scholar, author of seven books on the life and work of Gurdjieff, who knew Gurdjieff and whose sister Petey "Eve" Chevalier is the daughter of Gurdjieff and their mother Edith Taylor.

¹² Bernice Madison, 'Russia's Illegitimate Children Before and After the Revolution', *Slavic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1963), pp. 82-95, p. 82.

¹³ Franciszek Wasyl, *Armenians in Old Poland and Austrian Galicia: A Demographic and Historical Study*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), p. 166.

seduced a servant, or the couple concerned were desperately poor. Neither situation obtained in the Gurdjieff situation.

Alexandropol church records of November 1871 state that Gurdjieff's father, Ivan Ivanovich Kurchogli, age 23, an Orthodox Christian, married Eudokia Eleptherova, the daughter of Elepther Eleptheroff, Orthodox Christian, 18 years old.¹⁴ These details alone would render most unlikely the birth of a son to them in 1866.

That record of marriage accords with Alexandropol municipal records for 1907 which list Ivan Ivanovich Gurdjieff, born 1847, and two sons, Georgi born 1880 and Dmitri born 1883.¹⁵ Researchers assert that these latter years rested only on estimates of the appearance of the two brothers, which would suggest that they were present. One cannot be sure why 1880 is given, but the significant matters in these 1907 records are the date of the wedding of Gurdjieff's parents, and that he was born after that date. If Gurdjieff had been present in 1907, then he may have looked 27 when in fact he was 30, but it is hard to envisage that he might in fact have been 41.¹⁶ Evidently, the family name had changed over three generations from a Turkish form (Gurdji), to a Georgian one (Gurdji-ogli or Kurdji-ogli), and then a Russian (Gurdjieff).¹⁷

Some dispute that the couple recorded on the November 1871 marriage record are Gurdjieff's parents, as their ages do not match the ages at death on Gurdjieff's father's gravestone and on Gurdjieff's mother's French death record.¹⁸ However, the date on Gurdjieff's father's grave in the no. 1 Cemetery in Gyumri is based on Gurdjieff's assertion that his father was eighty-two in 1916.¹⁹ In fact, both the date of birth and the date of death are incorrect. The date of death (1917) should be 1918. The gravestone, which has the dates (1834-1917), is not the original 1918 grave marker, which had been a simple red brick.²⁰

A further difficulty with the theory of an 1866 birth is that contrary to what Gurdjieff stated, his father can only have removed to Armenia in or after 1867.²¹ Dr Manana Khomeriki concluded that two waves of Greeks settled in Georgia, the first of which spoke Greek, while the second spoke Turkish and were known as "Urums."²² That Gurdjieff's family was Turkish speaking is attested to by Gurdjieff's writing that the traditional bards known as *Ashokhs*, of whom his father was one, chiefly used what he called: "Turko-Tatar, which was then the

¹⁴ Manana Khomeriki, 'About the Origins of Gurdjieff and His Activities in Georgia', in *Gurdjieff in Tiflis*, eds Constance Jones and Levan Khetaguri (Tbilisi: Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film University, 2008), p. 30. See also <http://www.gurdjieff.am/library/1871-Marriage-Certificate.pdf>. Khomeriki is at the Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnography of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, Georgia.

¹⁵ Khomeriki, "About the Origins of Gurdjieff and His Activities in Georgia," p. 30.

¹⁶ Avetik Melik-Sargsyan, *George Gurdjieff's Armenian Identity in Spiritual Shirak: Historical Path and Modernity International Conference Dedicated to the 100th Anniversary of Shirak Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church* (Gyumri: November 17-18, 2020, in Armenian). At: <http://ablog.gratun.am/5795/uuqtunhp-ndilhp-uupquyan-qunpzhil-huy>.

¹⁷ Khomeriki, 'About the Origins of Gurdjieff and His Activities in Georgia', p. 28.

¹⁸ See <http://www.gurdjieff.am/library/1871-Marriage-Certificate.pdf> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:George_Gurdjieff.

¹⁹ G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1963), p. 45. The year is incorrect as Ouspensky records being with him and meeting his family in Alexandropol in 1917: P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 340-341.

²⁰ Vigen Gasparian, 'G. I. Gurdjieff's Father's Grave in Gyumri (Armenia)', *YouTube*, 12 November (2012). At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7At90F54E3E>.

²¹ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 40.

²² Khomeriki, 'About the Origins of Gurdjieff and His Activities in Georgia', p. 29.

accepted common language of the peoples of these localities, who spoke different dialects.”²³ In Alexandropol, the Urums formed their own district, and there built the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George.²⁴

According to French records, Gurdjieff’s brother Dmitri (1880-1937) was born on 1 September 1882 and died on 23 August 1937. The birth year does not match that on the 1931 French Census which gives his as 1880, and Gurdjieff’s as 1877; but the three years age difference is consistent with the Alexandropol municipal records of 1907. Again, if there is an error, it will be in the direction of Gurdjieff having been born after, not before, 1877.

The claims by Gurdjieff that his grandmother was over a hundred, that his father was thirteen years older than the fact, and his mother eleven years older than her probable age at death, are consistent with his claims to Bennett in 1920, and to his pupils in 1943 and 1949 that he himself was eighty or more.²⁵ This raises the question of why Gurdjieff would overstate his age by ten years. Was it to claim the authority of an elderly sage? The geneticist Zhores A. Medvedev was sceptical of the frequent claims of extreme old age being made in the Caucasus.²⁶ He contended that no internal passports and Soviet documents predated 1932, so before then, data collectors and census-takers had to rely upon oral interviews and not documentation, and there was a lengthy history of age overstatement in the area.²⁷

Then there is the fact that Gurdjieff married his wife, Julia Yussovna Ostrowsky (1889-1926), on 30 July 1910 in the Vladimir Cathedral of Saint Petersburg. The church records note the marriage of:

A townsman of the city of Alexandropol, Georgy Ivanov Gurdjieff, of the Orthodox faith, 31 years old and the daughter of a peasant from the village of Brizhev, Lyutsinsky district, Vitebsk province, Yulia Iosifovna Ostrovskaya, of the Roman Catholic faith, 22 years old.²⁸

When Julia entered the United States on 13 January 1924, her age was recorded as 35 and place of birth Petersboug (sic), which suggests she was born in 1888 as does her age of 22 in 1910. However, it appears that ages on passenger records were obtained by subtracting the year of birth shown from the year of arrival without regard to the day and month of birth.²⁹ It was believed that Julia was born on 23 April 1889.³⁰ Her age at death in 1926 was reported as

²³ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 33.

²⁴ *St George Greek Church in Gyumri*, 21 March (2019). At: <https://greeks.am/stgeorggyumri/> (in Armenian)

²⁵ For Gurdjieff’s claims of the age of his father, Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 342; Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 45; and for himself G.I. Gurdjieff, *Groupes de Paris: Tome 1, 1943*, (Bastia: Éditions Éolienne, 2020), p. 264; Solange Claustres, *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff* (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2005), p. 5; Bennett, *Witness*, 259. Conversely, implying a birthdate much later than 1866, in the 1927 draft of *Beelzebub’s Tales*, Gurdjieff asks: “What has this half a century of my life given me?” Paul Beekman Taylor, *G.I. Gurdjieff: A Life*, 2nd edition (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 2020), pp. 16-17. “Half century” may or may not be precise.

²⁶ Z. A. Medvedev, ‘Caucasus and Altay longevity: A biological or social problem?’, *Gerontologist*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1974), pp. 381-387.

²⁷ Lea Keil Garson, ‘The Centenarian Question: Old-Age Mortality in the Soviet Union, 1897 to 1970’, *Population Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 2 (1991), pp. 265-278.

²⁸ Parish registers of churches in St. Petersburg, The contents of inventory No 127 of collection No. 19 in the Central State Historical Archives of St. Petersburg. At: <https://spbarchives.ru/infres/-/archive/cgia/19/127>

²⁹ See records of Gurdjieff’s arrivals in the United States in subsection “Official Documentation” in this article.

³⁰ Taylor, *G.I. Gurdjieff: A Life*, p. 41.

thirty-seven in the probate tables, Seine-et-Marne archives Fontainebleau, and in the local papers, confirming she was born in 1889.

Sarkis Pogossian, one of the *dramatis personae* of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* was, Gurdjieff tells us, about the same age as himself.³¹ Their meeting in Tiflis can be dated to 1894 as Gurdjieff had met Pogossian two years earlier in Echmiadzin, the year Dean Borsh is known to have returned to Saint Petersburg, 1892.³² We can deduce that at the time of their meeting, in Tiflis Pogossian was about seventeen years of age, as he had recently graduated, ineluctably producing the inference that Gurdjieff, too, was then of that age. This follows from facts that students at the Armenian Seminary of Echmiadzin would finish their studies at about the age of seventeen, commencing school at eight, and taking nine years for studies; this was also the year that Gurdjieff says he worked on the survey of the Tiflis to Alexandropol section for the proposed new Tiflis-Alexandropol-Kars railway which was carried out in the spring of 1894.³³

The Armenian poet Avetik Isahakyan (1875-1957),³⁴ stated that he had been a childhood companion of Gurdjieff in Alexandropol, and was born on the same street and in the same year as Gurdjieff.³⁵ Avetik's son Vigen, recounts a weekend visit by his father and himself to Gurdjieff's Institute in France, at Gurdjieff's invitation.

Gurdjieff received my father very warmly and spoke to him in the Gyumrian dialect, then he ordered us to be assigned a room and said: "Avo (vocative of Avetik), get some rest, and at 7 o'clock come down to the dining room, all of us will be gathered there. We will eat together and you will see many interesting things."³⁶

This visit would have occurred in 1923 as they attended an evening in the Study House, the construction of which only began in November 1922. This is worth noting as the evidence of Isahakyan, an eye-witness to Gurdjieff's youth, would rule out 1866 as Gurdjieff's date of birth; the question being whether he was speaking literally in saying that they were both born in the same year. In conclusion, a consideration of the evidence touching the ages and birth dates of Gurdjieff's family and his friend Isahakyan are entirely consistent with his year of birth being 1877, but render 1866 problematic.

Gurdjieff's Early Life and Education in Kars

In this passage, Gurdjieff contradicts his previous statement that his father moved to Armenia when it was renamed Alexandropol:

³¹ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 84.

³² Archpriest Damian Amvrosievich Borsch (rector of the Admiralty Cathedral) *Church of Alexander Nevsky in Krasnoe Selo* (in Russian). At: https://mononews.ru/Церковь_Александра_Невского_в_Красном_Селе

³³ Gorets, *Railways of Georgia and Transcaucasia built in 1872-1913* 8 April (2013) (in Russian) <https://fai.org.ru/forum/topic/31238-zheleznyie-dorogi-gruzii-i-zakavkazya-postroennyie-v-1872-1913-gg/>.

³⁴ Avetik Isahakyan (1875-1957), Armenian lyric poet, writer and public activist.

³⁵ Vigen Isahakyan, *My Father* (Yerevan: Science Publishing House, 2000, in Armenian), p. 395. A German translation of the comments on Gurdjieff was commissioned by documentary filmmaker Lothar Mattner in 2001 and faxed to Dushka Howarth via Greg Loy. Email to Dushka Howarth from Gregory Loy, The Howarth Gurdjieff Archive, Gurdjieff Heritage Society Archive, English translation, pp. 395-403.

³⁶ Isahakyan, *My Father*, pp. 395-403.

A year or two after he (my father) had moved to Armenia, all this wealth that my father had inherited was lost ... A cattle plague came from Asia and spread all over Transcaucasia he not only lost all his own cattle by this misfortune, but was forced to sell almost all his remaining possessions to pay for the cattle belonging to others ... Our family then consisted of ... my father, my mother, my grandmother, who wished to end her days with her youngest son ... and myself, my brother and sister ... I was then about seven years old.³⁷

He adds that his father liquidated his lumber yard four years later before going to Kars.³⁸ Moore's case for Gurdjieff's birth date in 1866, and his subsequent chronology, are anchored to the year 1878 being that in which the family had moved to Kars, and when Dean Borsh undertook the management of Gurdjieff's education, finding four tutors from the Theological Seminary.³⁹ However, records which had been unavailable when Moore was writing, now show it was impossible for either of the move or the involvement of Borsh to have occurred in 1878. Moore also relies on evidence of a cattle plague in about 1873: however, there is no need to deal with that in detail, as the material he refers to relates to an area over 2,000 kilometres from Armenia.⁴⁰ Besides, it would mean that his father had removed to Armenia in around 1871, which fits the known facts even more seriously. Of his family's move to Kars, Gurdjieff writes:

Our family lived in the town of Alexandropol all this time, which happened to coincide with *the period of rapid reconstruction* (my italics) by the Russians of the near-by fortress-town of Kars which they had taken. The opening up of good prospects for making money in Kars, and the added persuasions of my uncle, who already had his business there, induced my father to transfer his workshop to Kars. He first went there alone, and later took his whole family.⁴¹

The reconstruction of Kars began only after the emigration of the Muslim population had ended in late 1882. The Russians set out to rebuild and modernise Kars in a European style. The "new city development plan" was approved in 1881. The construction was led by the "Kars Modernization Committee," which was established in 1882 and dissolved in 1903.⁴²

If Gurdjieff's statements about moving to Kars during the period of rapid reconstruction are accurate, then they accord with his statement that: "Having settled in Kars, my father first sent me to the Greek school, but very soon transferred me to the Russian municipal school."⁴³ The Greek school was not established before November 1881 when Greek refugees from the

³⁷ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, pp. 41-42.

³⁸ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 41.

³⁹ Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, p. 320.

⁴⁰ Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, p. 339. Likewise, Daly and Daly, the editors of Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, *Our Life with Mr Gurdjieff* (London: Penguin Arkana, 1983) pp. 260-262. Moore was referring to the memoirs of Colonel Frederick Gustavus Burnaby (1842-1885), *A Ride to Khiva*, 1876/77 (London, Century Hutchinson, 1983), p. 136.

⁴¹ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, 41.

⁴² Nese Gurallar, 'Russian Modernization in East Anatolia: The Case of Kars', *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World*, Vol. 37 (2020), pp. 247-264.

⁴³ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 42

Ottoman Empire began arriving in Kars.⁴⁴ The Russian Kars Urban School was opened on 8 November 1880,⁴⁵ for boys aged eight to eleven.⁴⁶ In addition, he states that at Kars he was selected as a chorister of the fortress cathedral, and was under the musical instruction of Dean Borsh.⁴⁷ As the restoration of the cathedral was not complete until 1886,⁴⁸ and Dean Borsh did not arrive in Kars until 1888, we have further checks on the accuracy – in these respects at least, of Gurdjieff's narrative in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Further, Gurdjieff states that Borsh was then 70 years of age, and as we shall see below, there is independent evidence he was born in 1819. If this is all a fiction, it is a comprehensive and elaborate one, spanning many years, even in his casual conversation, for in 1934 he told the twelve-year old Anna Durco,⁴⁹ that when living at Kars, at the age of eleven, he ran away with gypsies. He spoke with Durco, in a mix of Russian, English and other languages.⁵⁰ Bennett, to whom Durco told the story, observed Gurdjieff's family stated he was born in 1877, and so he perhaps began his search at the early age of eleven, in 1888.⁵¹ He added:

Such stories as these demonstrate his search began at a very early age. This would not be surprising in a society where schooling ended at eleven years of age and a boy of fourteen would expect to be independent of his family⁵²

From this time, we should date the anecdote of his earning money by drawing a monogram on a shield and having to include the year 1888,⁵³ for in its full context, he is presented as a schoolboy on holidays, not as a 21 or 22 year-old adult. Hence, Bennett concluded that Gurdjieff lived in Kars “from early childhood to the age of fourteen and frequently returned until his family moved back to Alexandropol when he was twenty.”⁵⁴

After the peace with the Ottoman Empire was concluded, the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasian Army, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich (brother of Czar Alexander II), ordered the restoration of the ancient Armenian Church of the Holy Apostles.⁵⁵ Rather than return the building to the Armenian Apostolic Church it was transferred to the Georgian exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and on 6 January 1879 consecrated according to the rite of the

⁴⁴ Socrates Angelides, ‘L'école grecque dans la région Kars’, *Balkan Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1998), pp. 55-70, p. 58.

⁴⁵ Timur A. Magsumov, Aleksey A. Korolev, Marina A. Ponomareva, and Teymur E. Zulfugarzade, ‘The System of Public Education in Kars Oblast in the period 1879-1917. Part 1’, *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2020), pp. 221-234; p. 225.

⁴⁶ Ashot A. Melkonyan, ‘The Kars Oblast, 1879-1918’, in *Armenian Kars and Ani*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011), p. 235.

⁴⁷ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, pp. 50; 67.

⁴⁸ ‘The Cathedral of Kars. Holy Apostles Church (*Surb Arak'elots*)’, *VirtualANI*. At: <http://www.virtualani.org/karscathedral/index.htm>

⁴⁹ Anna Durco (1924–2004) studied the Movements under Gurdjieff's direction and taught them at Bennett's Academy for two years in the early 1970s.

⁵⁰ J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff Making A New World* (London: Turnstone Books, 1973), pp. 20-21.

⁵¹ Bennett, *Gurdjieff Making A New World*, p. 14.

⁵² Bennett, *Gurdjieff Making A New World*, p. 21.

⁵³ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, pp. 61-65.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *Gurdjieff Making A New World*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ The derelict state of building in 1880 is shown in *People's Catalogue of Orthodox Architecture. Churches and Monasteries of Russia*. At: <https://sobory.ru/article/?object=36526&ysclid=m8tjruie4y245480237>

Orthodox Church.⁵⁶ The restoration was completed on 14 December 1886.⁵⁷ On 6 December 1888, Father Damian Ambrosievich Borsh (1819-1892) was posted there.⁵⁸ He was a member of the military clergy, as opposed to the regular clergy.⁵⁹

Under Czar Paul I, in 1800, regimental priests were removed from direct subordination to diocesan bishops. Before 1860, bishops had been interested in keeping the best priests at home. To encourage worthy clergy to join the ranks of the military, incentives were introduced, including more access to free medical treatment, and discounted train tickets. The, often heroic, service of the military clergy in war, living with, ministering to, and dying shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers, led to their enjoying great respect.⁶⁰ At the age of twenty-three, Borsh became a military priest. He was celebrated for his efforts at the siege of Sebastopol (1854-1855):

According to eyewitnesses, Father Damian, despite the mortal danger, behaved in battle with amazing composure. Now as a consoler, now as a brother of mercy, now as a spiritual father, he admonished the dying, provided first aid to the wounded, and carried them out from under fire. Sometimes, when the bandages ran out, he would tear his cassock, under-cassock, shirt, so that the wounded soldier would not bleed to death. On February 4, 1855, during a battle near the Chernaya River, the shell-shocked regiment commander, Colonel Nordenstreng, fell into the water and would have drowned, but Father Damian jumped into the river after him and saved him. He himself was repeatedly wounded and shell-shocked.⁶¹

Of the two hundred military priests who took part in the Crimean War, Dean Borsh was one of only five who were awarded the gold pectoral cross on the St. George ribbon.⁶² Other honours followed. Following the Crimean War (1856) he was transferred to prestigious positions. In the Ukraine he was noted for creating a church choir and opening a parish school for the poor.⁶³ Where what Gurdjieff wrote of Dean Borsh can be checked, it is accurate, even to the detail that “he was very well off and received a large allowance and the right to special quarters.”⁶⁴

⁵⁶ G. A. Tsitovich, *Temples of the Army and Navy* (Pyatigorsk: publisher unknown, 1913, in Russian). At: <https://ruskontur.com/kars-sobor-mihaila-arhangela/passim>.

⁵⁷ Gurallar, ‘Russian Modernization in East Anatolia’, p. 259.

⁵⁸ Elena Bloom, ‘Elena Gurdjieff Facebook Page’, *Facebook.com*, 26 April (2019). At: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=651628998616828&set=a.122943621485371>.

⁵⁹ For Borsh generally, see Elena Bloom, ‘In what year was Gurdjieff born?’, Gurdjieff International Conference, Gurdjieff Institute, Tbilisi, 10-13 October 2019. The English-language presentation can be viewed at 32 minutes at <https://www.facebook.com/GurdjieffIT/videos/504120090167207>. See Bloom’s Gurdjieff Facebook page, 12 January (2019). At:

<https://www.facebook.com/elena.about.gurdjieff/videos/596261314153597/>. Further material can be found in Konstantin Kaplov, *Memorial Book of Military and Naval Clergy* (Scientific Department of the Nikolo-Sobinsky Monastery of the Yaroslav Diocese, 2008). At: <https://centrletopis.ru/letopis.html>.

⁶⁰ S. V. Emel’yanov and V. V. Mikhaylov, ‘The Life and Service of the Russian Military Clergy in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries’, *Vestnik Severnogo (Arkticheskogo) federal’nogo universiteta. Ser.: Gumanitarnye i sotsial’nye nauki*, no. 4 (2017), pp. 16–27.

⁶¹ Archpriest Georgy Polyakov, *Military Clergy in Russia, Part 2* (Moscow: Creative Information and Publishing Centre, 2002, in Russian). At: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istorija_Tserkvi/voennoe-duhovenstvo-rossii-georgij-poljakov/2.

⁶² V. M. Kotlov, *Military Clergy of Russia* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2004, in Russian). At: https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istorija_Tserkvi/voennoe-duhovenstvo-rossii/.

⁶³ Alexander Kuotsov, *From the history of primary education in Glukhovshchina. Note 5*, 29 March (2019, in Russian). At: http://samlib.ru/k/kupcow_a_e/h9-3.shtml.

⁶⁴ Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p. 51.

The 1890 *Regulations on the Military Clergy* accorded to chief priests of districts, the status, pay and pension equivalent to that of a major general.⁶⁵

Official Documentation

Although their evidence is hearsay, a list of those extant official documents which give the year of Gurdjieff's birth, is of interest: their near-unanimity is remarkable, and the information must have been provided by Gurdjieff or someone from his inner circle. At Gurdjieff's death, possession of his personal papers passed to his nephew Valentin Anastasieff (1910-1998?),⁶⁶ and on his death, to his widow Sylvie de Lille (Mme Valentin).⁶⁷ In the last eighteen months of her life, Serge Troude lived with her as her 'secretary', and on her death came into the possession of Gurdjieff's personal papers.⁶⁸ Some are listed below:

1) Original document, in Russian, 20 May 1918, N° 2274, from the National Soviet of the Transcaucasia of Tiflis, to the effect that the person bearing this document, G.I. Gurdjieff, was a refugee of Alexandropol, 40 years old, and travelling with two men.

This is consistent with Gurdjieff being born in December 1877. The National Soviet of the Transcaucasia of Tiflis changed from the Gregorian calendar to the Julian calendar on 17 April 1918, followed by 1 May 1918. Thus, the document dated 20 May 1918 would be New Style date.

2) A passport issued by the Republic of Armenia (1918-1920), reading: "République d'Arménie Passeport No. 64 (in Armenian and French) issued Batumi, Georgia 29 June 1920, issued by the Consul General of the Republic of Armenia in Batum. Date of birth 28 December 1877, at Alexandropol."⁶⁹

3) A putative Nansen Passport, 1934. Nansen passports were issued to stateless persons between 1922 and 1938, by the League of Nations. James Moore stated that Gurdjieff had been issued one in Paris, bearing a birthdate of 1 January 1864.⁷⁰

4) In 1935, Gurdjieff left the United States of America, bearing a German Foreigners' passport or Fremdenpass, which read: "Deutsches Reich Allemagne Fremdenpass (Foreign Passport) ... Number 4229. Issued Deutsches General Konsulat in New York on 14 April 1935. Date of Birth 28 December 1877, Alexandropol."⁷¹

⁶⁵ Kotlov, *Military Clergy of Russia*.

⁶⁶ Valentin Anastasieff, born 28 July 1910 Alexandropol. Naturalised French 12 April 1947. *Journal officiel de la République française: Lois et décrets*, 13 April (1947).

⁶⁷ Howarth and Howarth, *It's up to Ourselves*, p. 241.

⁶⁸ Personal communication with Gert-Jan Blom, 15 June 2008.

⁶⁹ Personal communication with Paul Beckman Taylor, attaching copy of item of pages of the passport. See also https://www.facebook.com/gurdjieffensemble/photos/gurdjieffs-passportrepublic-of-armenia-no-64valid-till-29-june-192the-independen/1123144684382967/?_rdr.

⁷⁰ Moore, *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, p. 339.

⁷¹ Personal communication with Serge Troude, 29 June 2006 attaching copy of passport pages: <https://gurdjiefflegacy.org/40articles/whengurdjieffwasborn.htm>

The Armenian passport would no longer have been valid after the demise of the Republic. But if Gurdjieff had ever had a Nansen passport, and entered the United States on it, as Moore asserted, it is hard to understand why, if it bore a year of birth 1864, it was replaced with one bearing the year 1877. In December 2016, shortly before his death, I asked Moore about the passport but he could not recall where he had obtained this information. Subsequently his literary executor was unable to find any record of it.

Later identity documents all bear the date of birth 28 December 1877, unless specified otherwise, namely:

5) French Driver's License No. 77711 issued Seine-et-Marne 24 January 1936.⁷²

6) German Occupation of Paris Identity Document issued 14 December 1942.⁷³

7) The Bremen passenger list for the S.S. Europa to New York, dated 20 April 1934, listing his age as 56 (consistent with birth at the end of 1877).⁷⁴

8) United States Immigration Arrival Records (1924-1948), Record of Aliens and or Special Enquiry. United States Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival, New York; of 13 January 1924 (age 47); 23 January 1929 (age 52); 18 February 1930 (age 53); 11 November 1930 (age 53); 16 December 1931 (age 54); 25 April 1934 (age 56); 8 March 1939 (age 62); and 17 December 1948 (age 71).⁷⁵

9) United States Departing Passenger and Crew List, 12 February 1949, departing New York on the *Queen Mary* bound for Cherbourg (age 72).

It appears that the ages on these passenger records were obtained by simply subtracting the year of birth shown on his documents (1877) from the year of arrival. Gurdjieff was born four days from the end of the year (old style), thus in most cases the age given is one more than his actual age, as for example on his last departure from New York in 1949.

10) USA Census Records of 1930, stating his age as 57; which would give a year of birth in 1872/1873.

11) French Census Records of 1931 and 1936, both stating that he was born in 1877.

12) The record of the Mayor Avon on 24 October 1922 that Georges Gurdjieff, born 28 December 1877 had purchased the Prieuré des Basses-Loges.⁷⁶

13) A report of British Intelligence stating: "Behind Uspenskii is a certain Professor of Philosophy named Georges Gurdjieff, born at Alexandropol on 28.12.77. This Gurdjieff came under notice in the winter of 1921-1922 as an interesting and suspicious

⁷² <https://gurdjiefflegacy.org/40articles/whengurdjieffwasborn.htm>

⁷³ Personal communication with Walter Driscoll attaching copy of document.

⁷⁴ <http://www.passengerlists.de>

⁷⁵ <https://www.archives.gov/nyc/finding-aids/passenger-lists.html>

⁷⁶ Personal communication with Philippe Emmanuel Gueble, 6 July 2018.

character. He was then running an unusual type of dancing school in Constantinople, where he stated that he taught “the religious dances of the Buddhist monasteries of Afghanistan.”⁷⁷

14) Three French newspaper reports give his age such that he must have been born in 1877: *L'Informateur de Seine & Marne*, 23 March 1934,⁷⁸ *Le Libérateur de la région du Gâtinais*, 9 February 1949 reporting on a court case resulting from the car accident of 8 August 1948,⁷⁹ and *L'Aurore: organe de la résistance républicaine*, 3 November 1949 on his death and funeral.⁸⁰

15) Gurdjieff's Death Registration, giving his date of birth as 28 December 1877.⁸¹

16) The Probate Records, giving his age at death as 71 years.⁸²

Thus, there is a convergence of direct evidence about his family, especially the date of his parents' marriage and other related matters, which accords with the statements in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* about the movements of the family, and Gurdjieff's traces in the official documents.

Conclusion: Closing Questions

Other than Gurdjieff's stating that he was older than he would have been had he been born in 1877, the available evidence points to 28 December 1877 as the date of his birth. Nothing points to the 1866 date except, once more, his own say-so, and the fact that he appeared to be older than 1877 would have indicated. It is not that the official documents cannot have been wrong, especially Gurdjieff's own passports, marriage certificate, and others. After all, it is not known that they were based on reliable evidence, but they are *prima facie* evidence for the truth of the statements in them. Further, the 1877 date is consistent with almost every detail of the autobiographical details in *Meetings with Remarkable*.

Given the cumulative weight of the evidence, if it is established that Gurdjieff was indeed born at any point prior to 1871, then, as Taylor proposes he was probably not the son of his stated parents. To explain what happened to the “George Gurdjieff” born in 1877 according to records, and why his siblings were persuaded that he had been born in 1877, Taylor conjectures that the true George Ivanovich Gurdjieff died very young, a cousin some eleven years older was adopted, and the siblings never realised this.⁸³ The adoption of a cousin is not implausible in itself, but the substitution for the dead child, which would mean that they could not maintain a tomb, have liturgies said, and so on, and the siblings never suspect that this boy they were raised with was a full decade older than he should be, would require some probative evidence, and more than conjecture.

⁷⁷ Personal communication with Paul Taylor, 24 December 2011.

⁷⁸ *L'Informateur de Seine & Marne*, 23 March 1934, p. 5.

⁷⁹ *Le Libérateur de la région du Gâtinais*, 9 February 1949, p. 3.

⁸⁰ *L'Aurore: organe de la résistance républicaine*, 3 November 1949, p. 2.

⁸¹ Registration of Deaths Paris 17^{eme} Île de France

⁸² Probate Records tables of the Hauts-de-Seine Archives; p. 62; # 88.

⁸³ Taylor, *G. I. Gurdjieff: A New Life*, p. 277.

The notion that he was born on 13 January, of whatever year, appears to be an aligning of his date of birth with the date of the Russian New Year. That mystery, then, appears to be resolved. However, it still leaves the question: why did he apparently look older than his years? That is beyond our purview: first, the answer is necessarily subjective to some extent, and second, we do not know how events may have aged him. Yet, as we have seen, there does seem to have been a Caucasian culture of overstating one's age, a practice abetted by the lack of reliable documentation; and further, Gurdjieff boldly engaged in this patriotic pursuit on behalf of the family honour.

This then points to the eighteen odd years between 1892 and 1910 as those in which Gurdjieff undertook his journeys, at some point formulating his system of ideas and methods. He commenced his travels at the precocious age of eleven, and began teaching at about the age of thirty-three. Further research is being undertaken to identify his sources, or perhaps rather, his resources, for it does not seem that he cobbled together his system from a congeries of materials, so much as he devised an original and coherent whole, stimulated and prompted by diverse esoteric and mystic cultures.