“Real Armenia”: Pashinyan’s Peaceful Revanche over Azerbaijan?

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Nietzsche’s warning and the turning tides of history

In 1873, Nietzsche wrote a fierce critique of the triumphant atmosphere in Germany following victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War. “[A] great victory is a great danger”, he warned, because it threatened to breed hubris and complacency. Nietzsche argued that the German people have mistakenly conflated their military victory with national-cultural superiority over France. He feared, presciently as it turned out, that nationalism would subordinate German cultural identity to state-centrist ideology and consequently replace intellectual independence and critical self-examination with self-congratulatory complacency.

The warning that victory has the power to corrupt the victor and cloud his judgement has been voiced by numerous intellectuals after the Franco-Prussian War and since then. Alas, this warning has more often been ignored than heeded.

The Armenian nation missed her chance to heed Nietzsche’s warning after the First Karabakh War. The outcome of that war instilled in the Armenian collective mindset a deeply ingrained image of superiority over Azerbaijanis. Ethno-nationalist and expansionist ideologies, such as the officially endorsed *Tsekhakronism* and *Hay Dat* (Armenian Cause), gripped the Armenian national imagination. It was this mindset that proclaimed “ethnic incompatibility” between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, vowed “to cede not an inch of land” back to Azerbaijan, and attempted to deny the very legitimacy of distinct Azerbaijani national existence by mocking multi-national Azerbaijan as a “mini-empire” and

Azerbaijanis as “artificial constructs” destined to fall apart. And it was also this mindset that spurred Armenia’s prime minister Nikol Pashinyan to lead the crowds chanting “Miatsum!” in Khankendi’s central square in August 2019, a fateful event that effectively began the countdown to a new war.

The tide of history turned in 2020 with Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War. Now, it is Azerbaijanis’ turn to hark to Nietzsche’s warning. Will Azerbaijan squander its victory and risk another round of confrontation, as France did after recovering Alsace-Lorraine at the end of World War I?

In post-2020 Azerbaijan, victory over Armenia has become a new national myth. The old “blood memory” (*qan yaddaşı*) charts prominently displayed in every school to commemorate the dates when major settlements were occupied during the First Karabakh War, have now been replaced by new timelines celebrating their liberation during the Second Karabakh War. Victory has become the main political narrative to which the authorities appeal for legitimacy and popular support. While Azerbaijani leadership should be credited for taking proactive steps to make peace with Armenia, we also often hear dismissive messages about Armenians and even calls from prominent public figures to “return Zangezur”.

Azerbaijanis have every reason to take pride in their victory in the Second Karabakh War. As a Karabakh Azerbaijani myself, I share this sentiment wholeheartedly. But we also need to look beyond self-righteous and self-congratulatory narratives that frame our victory simply as an evident and preordained triumph of justice without making an effort to critically examine the complex circumstances that made it possible. We should be careful not to let our legitimate pride in victory turn into the same hubris we witnessed in our former foes after the First Karabakh War.

Defeat empathy

In his book *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch offers the term "defeat empathy" (or "empathetic philosophy of defeat") to refer to a psychological and intellectual perspective that seeks to understand the significance and long-term impact of military defeat on both the vanquished and the victor. This perspective goes beyond typical self-serving narratives that treat defeat as a deserved downfall of the enemy. Instead, it looks at how the vanquished use the trauma and humiliation from defeat to rebuild a new society that reasserts its superiority (military, economic or cultural) through a national regeneration effort built around new myth-making and selective emulation of the victor's methods.

Schivelbusch distinguishes between two types of defeat empathy: the "interested" reflections of the vanquished themselves; and the "disinterested" observations of others and "[m]ost prominently…[of] the minority within the victorious nation who recognize the danger of hubris" to their own society.

Disinterested defeat empathy does not necessarily imply solidarity, or even sympathy for the defeated. Rather, it involves reflecting on the broader consequences of defeat and victory and how they shape the post-war trajectories of the societies involved. For disinterested minority observers within the victorious nation, this reflection serves primarily as a form of self-critique. Their ultimate concern is with how victory may breed hubris, complacency, political, moral or cultural decline in their own society.

Schivelbusch's concept offers a valuable intellectual framework for Azerbaijani scholars, experts and policymakers dealing with the legacy of the conflict and the challenges of building a lasting peace with Armenia. The underlying assumption is that just as Armenians have lessons to learn from Azerbaijani victory, Azerbaijanis have at least as much

to learn from Armenian defeat.

Defeat as deliverance for Armenia

One of Schivelbusch's most illuminating insights is that a catastrophic defeat can also be experienced as a form of liberation.

Curiously, this is the process that we are currently witnessing in Armenia. Defeat in the 2020 war, followed by the complete eradication of the separatist regime in 2023 and the exodus of the Armenian population from Karabakh, was a profoundly traumatic experience for the Armenian people. But in a peculiar way, it was also a deliverance for Armenia.

The pre-2020 Armenian political order, under all its leaders regardless of their political stripes and colors, rested on a nationalist-expansionist ideology. This order, in Pashinyan's words, "was founded from the very first day on the logic of conflict and confrontation." This confrontational logic bred dependency, and again, to use Pashinyan's own characterization, the Karabakh issue was used by external powers – and particularly by Russia – as a "noose around [Armenia's] neck," just as it was used as a hammer over Azerbaijan's head. Finally, this logic of confrontation and external dependency could only be sustained through a corrupt system of oligarchic rule that had a vested interest in keeping people enslaved to the politics of victimhood and vindictiveness.

All three pillars of this old regime are now being dismantled. Pashinyan, having learned from bitter experience of defeat, now proffers the Armenian nation a new vision of "Real Armenia." He rejects the nationalist-expansionist ideology of *Hay Dat* (Armenian Cause) as a foundation for Armenia's future and now urges Armenians to "stop searching for a homeland outside" the internationally recognized borders of their state. For him, getting rid of mythical expansionist vision of "historical Armenia" is a historical necessity. He describes

the irredentist Karabakh movement that shaped Armenian politics since independence, as a "fatal mistake". He also acknowledges the corrosive effect of territorial ambitions on Armenia's sense of national belonging by proclaiming, "Those territories [i.e. Karabakh] not only did not belong to us, but they were also used to weaken, weaken and weaken [sic] our sense of ownership and belonging within our internationally recognized territories."

Pashinyan asks Armenians to choose whether they want Armenia to remain a "foothold" for external powers or become a state for its citizens' well-being. "The conceptual dilemma being discussed in our country today," he wrote in Sept 2024, "is as follows: What is the Republic of Armenia for? Is it a 'frontline outpost,' a foothold, meant to serve as part of a larger state (the concept of Historical Armenia)? Or is it a mechanism for ensuring the well-being of its citizens within its internationally recognized borders (the concept of Real Armenia)?" French-Armenian scholar Gaidz Minassian concurs with this assessment: "celestial [i.e. historical] Armenia is nothing more than the Armenian façade of Russian imperialism, weaponized against the very idea of an independent Armenian state."

Pashinyan calls on Armenians to abandon attempts "to reproduce the past" and break free from the vicious cycle of victimhood and vindictiveness. He challenges Armenians to rethink their deeply internalized "nation-martyr" identity, which has been weaponized to serve nationalist territorial ambitions. Thus, speaking in parliament in October 2025, Pashinyan said that Armenians and Azerbaijanis had been trapped in mirrored stereotypes inherited from Soviet times. He went on to call on Armenians to "free ourselves from the worldview that was shaped for us by KGB agents." In March 2026, Pashinyan was asked whether he considered Azerbaijan's military actions in Karabakh in Sept 2023 to be ethnic cleansing. "I consider that term to be harmful," Pashinyan replied, "because we may call it ethnic cleansing and, in response, receive mirrored

accusations from them [Azerbaijan] of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and so on. That would mean entering a path of conflict…The more we chase 'historical justice,' the more we will encounter new historical injustices." Speaking in April 2026, Pashinyan recounted a recent conversation with Pope Francis. When the Pontiff referred to Armenians as a "nation-martyr," Pashinyan responded: "No, today we do not want to be a nation-martyr. We want to live and build a state. And our task is to turn that martyrdom into victory. Because victory is not only a military victory. Victory is when you can live on your own land freely, peacefully, and in prosperity."

This kind of political discourse would have been unthinkable in Armenia before 2020. Pashinyan's consistent messaging demonstrates that this discourse is not performative and aims at changing the Armenian collective identity at its core in an effort to chart a new course for the nation.

"Real Armenia": Pashinyan's Peaceful Revanche?

As seen from the discussion above, Pashinyan speaks of Real Armenia precisely as a kind of national liberation. In almost biblical-messianic terms, he preaches the Republic of Armenia within its internationally recognized borders as a "Promised Land bestowed by God" upon the Armenian people. He calls on Armenians to define their future not in terms of what they lost beyond their internationally recognized borders, but in terms of building a more sovereign, democratic, and prosperous state that better serves its citizens. To borrow Schivelbusch's description of the vanquished search for meaning, Pashinyan describes the world from which defeat has freed Armenia "much like a convert recalling his former life of sin."

Pashinyan's message does not fall on deaf ears. "[T]here is a growing consensus," Armenian historian Mikayel Zolyan writes, "that the policies pursued by previous governments were a major factor in the tragedy of 2020-2023." Following in

Pashinyan's footsteps, Armenian authors, including those from the diaspora, have begun challenging the concept of "historical Armenia". Gaidz Minassian openly calls the idea of historical Armenia a national "pathology" and a "cult of fear". He writes, "celestial [i.e. historical] Armenia promotes a worldview rooted in exile and victimhood, whereas a sovereign Armenian state must be grounded in citizenship and accountability."

This idea of building a new political culture grounded in service to its citizens is crucial to understanding Armenia's strategic trajectory.

The Real Armenia doctrine, published in February 2025 calls for a new social contract in which the individual's well-being and self-realization become the foundation of collective prosperity and national strength. "Building one's own well-being and happiness is the primary contribution of the individual to ensuring the well-being and happiness of the state," the document boldly proclaims. It further adds, "By providing conditions for his own happiness, the individual also creates an environment for the happiness of other individuals and the society." The document further promulgates the principle "Get rich and make rich", meaning that wealth should be pursued and used as a means of creating public and individual welfare, with both citizens and the state working to enrich each other within a fair and productive environment.

Real Armenia thus envisages a mutually reinforcing relationship between individual citizen and the state, in which the national regeneration and national strength depends on the enhancement of rights, freedoms and personal well-being of its citizens.

It is the long-term economic and cultural ramifications of this political transformation that, I believe, many observers in Azerbaijan may not fully appreciate. It is easy to get distracted by Pashinyan's somewhat parochial political antics

and the bitter confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition, which occasionally descends into comical fistfights among deputies in parliament. But these political spectacles should not obscure the broader picture. And the broader picture is that Armenia has maintained a strong economic outlook, is rapidly diversifying her international partnerships and has made impressive technological advancements, as seen in the emergence of major AI ventures, such as Firebird AI, and homegrown unicorn-status startups — developments I mention fleetingly, since they go beyond the scope of the present essay.

Some Azerbaijani observers suspect that Pashinyan's discourse is merely a tactical detour, intended to buy time until Armenia can pursue a military revanche. While this suspicion cannot be completely dismissed, it risks overlooking another more likely possibility. Revanche may indeed figure in Pashinyan's mind, but his conception of revanche probably differs from what many Azerbaijani skeptics fear. I have come to believe that Pashinyan sees the building of a secure, democratic and economically prosperous Armenia as a form of symbolic victory over Azerbaijan, a peaceful revanche of sorts. The more Armenia distinguishes itself from Azerbaijan, or outperforms it, in democratic development, economic performance, cultural and scientific achievements, and above all else, the well-being of its citizens, the more Pashinyan and his followers will regard the Real Armenia doctrine as their symbolic triumph.