

Reframing the Armenian-Azerbaijani Past: What Can Scholars Do?

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Our profession, the study of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, their past and present, has been hijacked. The narrative of the past, discourse on *history*, has been captured by political interests and transformed into political ideology. In the context of Armenian-Azerbaijani history, and specifically the eruption and evolution of the Karabakh conflict, academic inquiry has been politicized, even transformed into aggressive determinism, and a rationale to justify mass violence.

The narratives of the past that dominate in Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, and the national identities associated with them, are incompatible with scientific rigour and intellectual curiosity. Any professional historian, anthropologist, sociologist, political scientist, or even an archaeologist or linguist, would not recognize the dominant discourses as academic, scientific, or simply valid.

These discourses cannot, *a priori*, enable peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This fact was vividly on display at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, when an unprecedented opportunity for President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to debate pathways to peace dissolved into a contest of historicised narratives beginning in 1747 and 140 B.C.E. respectively.[\[1\]](#) The debate caused dismay among critical observers on both sides of the divide. Seven months later, the two nations were at war.

Challenging Soviet legacies

Contemporary scholarship on the Armenian-Azerbaijani past

still struggles with the burden of Soviet academic legacies. During the Soviet era, the history of the region was overwhelmingly politicized and instrumentalized, in order to implement Soviet nationalities policy and provide leverage in advancing the geopolitical interests of the Soviet authoritarian state. Two legacies in particular stand out.

The first is the indigenisation of the production of knowledge about culture, identity and nationhood. As all students of the Soviet Union know, the Soviet regime functioned through policies of *korenizatsiya* (*indigenisation*), establishing it as a unique example of what Terry Martin called an “affirmative action empire.”[\[2\]](#) While on the one hand the Soviet state, like other empires, punished certain groups with deportations, famine and other kinds of repression, unlike traditional empires it also promoted the cultures of its constituent peoples and elevated local elites. A key role in this system was the formation of cultural intelligentsias who effectively *owned* the right to produce knowledge and culture about *their* national group. The result was the ethnicization of knowledge, which produced what was referred to as *orthodox nationalism*. As a result, successive efforts to write collective histories of the South Caucasus in the late Soviet decades foundered because of what we would call today *methodological nationalism* deriving from these policies.[\[3\]](#)

The second legacy was the embedding of *primordialist* understandings of national identity. Soviet approaches to identity and nationhood varied over time, taking a more constructivist view of national identity in the 1920s, but shifting after the 1930s to a more conservative view of national identity as organic, quasi-genetic and consistent over time—what contemporary nationalism studies refer to as *primordialism*. This resulted in quests to backdate contemporary understandings and categories of nation and nationality to the ancient past. Because such backdating justified claims to national territory, by implication, other national groups had to have arrived in certain territories

later, resulting in a ferocious politicisation of historical migration, a particularly ironic tragedy for a region like the South Caucasus that had always been a zone of movement and ethnic diversity. By the 1970s primordialism became a key toxin poisoning debates among historians of Soviet Transcaucasia, and its influence can still be felt in history textbooks across the region.[\[4\]](#)

These debates played out in academic journals, scholarly feuds and maps through the 1970s and 1980s, while the wider public space was still dominated by official Soviet internationalism. But these legacies shaped what was to come in the febrile, nationalistic atmosphere of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this period, debates and feuds that had before been limited to scholars and academic publications went mainstream. Categories that were previously exclusively academic became loaded with new public meanings: non-indigenes became *ungrateful guests*, titular groups long-suffering *hosts*.[\[5\]](#) The competitive ethnic scholarship of the 1960s-70s gave a scholarly imprimatur to exclusive nationalist visions and a putatively legitimate basis for practices of ethnic cleansing that ravaged both nations.

Yet as a result of armed conflicts, most of the intellectuals who had led national revivals and movements lost control to the strongmen who emerged from the wars of the 1990s. Across the South Caucasus many of the scholars and academics who had led national movements, such as Abulfaz Elchibey, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Levon Ter-Petrosian and Artur Mkrtchyan, were sooner or later replaced by leaders from different backgrounds (in most cases, from the communist party hierarchy). Only Vladislav Ardzinba remained to rule as president of Abkhazia as a result of the national movement he had previously led as an intellectual. From the mid-1990s, there was a *de-intellectualisation* of South Caucasus conflicts, and their intellectual trajectories diverged. This was because of the dominance of realist perspectives, which respond to outcomes of victory and defeat, the prioritisation of state-building,

and the collapse of the academic profession in the face of severe economic hardship.

Academic censorship today

The political intervention and shaping of humanities and social sciences consequently have a long legacy that both Armenia and Azerbaijan share. The Stalinist inheritance – including its scholarly legacies in universities and academic institutions – has yet to be fully studied, deconstructed, and criticised. Yet, there is a longer history of ideologizing the past that goes back to the formation of the secular intelligentsias in the second half of the nineteenth century that contributed to the development of explicitly national narratives. The national and the totalitarian coexisted in the Soviet system, and when the Soviet Union collapsed, the national smoothly emerged to dominate. Only by deconstructing this past heritage, which is found in university systems as well, can we liberate academia from these diverse pressures.

Otherwise, the price of this self-imposed (in contrast with colonial or neo-colonial) deformation is very high. When propaganda replaces the intellectual and scientific quest for knowledge, societies can become alienated from collective memory. Propaganda imposed via censorship can survive for a while, but reality always catches up, with societies paying a high price for their ignorance. Part of that price is continuous censorship. Armenian and Azerbaijani societies are different, however, the practice of censorship takes different forms.

In Azerbaijan the collapse of the Soviet Union failed to bring academic integrity and freedoms to state-controlled social sciences and humanities. On the contrary, among other factors, the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry further fuelled the weaponization of history for political purposes. Simply stated, in a practice reminiscent of Soviet precedents state officials started openly interfering in the work of academic

institutions and directing historians what to write and how to interpret the past. Academic freedoms and integrity were sacrificed to unreasonably interpreted national interests. As one of the leading representatives of the Institute of History within the Azerbaijani National Academy Sciences, Professor Yaqub Mahmudov, once said, historians became soldiers of the head of state.^[6] In Azerbaijan's centralised politics, it is the head of state who intervenes in person to *correct* museum curators, mapmakers, editors of encyclopaedias, and so on. The state defines what kinds of discourses should be developed and distributed, with the past changing all the time based on contemporary political agendas' immediate needs. Under these circumstances, throughout the past three decades the contribution of scholars to the rivalry between two nations was not benign, to say the least. Listened to and accepted by the wider public as authorities in their field, historians, as well as other intellectuals, fueled national conflict, to the deep detriment of the quality of research and overall scholarly ethics.

In Armenia, there is a broader pluralism in the public sector, and also production of knowledge is decentralized because of the existence of a diaspora active in university centres in North America, the Middle East, and Europe. The act of censorship is consequently enacted differently, through self-proclaimed gatekeepers of the historical past. Censorship takes place through the denial of academic discussion and by labelling dissenters as *traitors* or *agents* of foreign states, a practice routinized in the age of social media. In rare cases this could take the form of physical aggression, for example, by forcibly ejecting a colleague from a scientific conference. In most cases censorship takes place through acts of silencing, ignoring, and denying the value of other scientific works. Censorship also involves silence on inconvenient realities of conflict settings. For example, in Armenia, no intellectual has challenged the use of the term *liberated territories* in reference to those around Nagorno-

Karabakh that had never formed part of the Karabakh dispute but were occupied in 1992-1994. Likewise, there has never been any analysis or critique by Armenian scholars in the country addressing the harmful impacts of the occupation on Armenian domestic politics.

A new kind of debate

We propose to foster a safe space addressing the problem identified above, that can be protected from political interventions and ideological bias through adherence to academic rules and rigour. Universities everywhere should provide such an environment, and they should do so in Armenia and in Azerbaijan too. Therefore, we need to create islands of academic liberty that with time, we hope, will expand. Moreover, we need a collaborative space where we can collectively discuss the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict within accepted academic parameters, rather than keeping discussions firmly isolated within *national histories*. Only by way of critical, academic collaboration and methodological challenge can we expand the boundaries of knowledge.

We are consequently pursuing a humble attempt to bring a new kind of conversation about the Armenian-Azerbaijani past into being, one that avoids the problems above through commitments to academic freedom and integrity, and true scholarship. We believe that sincere discussions and the exchange of ideas based on these principles can help us to find new understandings and interpretations of many contested topics that currently face a rhetorical impasse. Most importantly, we believe that these interactions will help us to deliver to Armenian and Azerbaijani societies the message that evaluating contested historical topics as academic questions is more mutually beneficial than weaponizing them as an instrument for rivalry.

A first meeting of Armenian, Azerbaijani and international scholars held at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in

February boosted our hopes in the overall effectiveness and future expansion of the initiative. Dozens of scholars, including numerous younger scholars, presented papers encouraging active and fruitful debates. Issues which usually cause rifts and heated disputes were not avoided, but were debated in a calm and scholarly atmosphere. While this space is still young and fragile, this first meeting offered a good start in an inspiring atmosphere. We hope that the next meeting will attract even more interest and contribute to a widening academic discussion of the historical questions that divide Armenians and Azerbaijanis today.

We live in an age of hegemonic propaganda, imposing its partiality, selectivity and subjectivity. What scholars can do is to bring history back in, with its aspirations to rigour, multivocality and comprehensiveness.

References

[1] 'Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev Hold Public Debate in Munich', 20 February 2020, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_V2cafAhug

[2] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[3] Methodological nationalism privileges nations or nation-states as the sole or primary actor and unit of analysis in social and historical processes.

[4] On late Soviet debates see Viktor A. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*, *Senri Ethnological Studies* 57 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001). On contemporary influences see Flora Ghazaryan and Mirkamran Huseynli, 'Armenian and Azerbaijani History Textbooks: Time for a Change', *Caucasus Edition*, 5, 1 (2022): 53-89.

[5] Thornike Gordadze, “La Géorgie et ses “hôtes ingrats,” *Critique internationale* 10, January (2001): 163–176.

[6] “Aprel döyüşləri böyük qələbənin uğurlu başlanğıcıdır” (“The April fighting augurs the beginning of a great victory”), Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, 6 April 2017, <https://science.gov.az/az/news/open/5359>