

# MEMORY POLITICS OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA: 30 YEARS IN REVIEW

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Over the years, the ever-expanding studies of memory have repeatedly recorded how the remembering [Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2006, Alexander, 2004, 2012; Eyerman 2004] and silencing/forgetting [Ankersmit, 2003; Connerton, 2009; Assmann, 2019; Эппле, 2020] policies have influenced the construction and transformation of national identities. These issues especially actualize at times of abrupt political upheavals and lead to processing the past. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet System left the newly independent republics to deal not only with the issue of constructing their future but also with the issue of constructing their past.

Memory politics and memory landscape in Armenia were largely based on the processes proceeding and leading to Armenia's independence, as well as the political ideology and rhetoric of consequent ruling parties, with their respective implications for identity construction and nation-building. While both bottom-up and top-down processes have fed the politics, the paper is structured mainly around top-down practices.

Generally, memory politics of the Republic of Armenia in 1991-2021 had the following features:

- Largely shaped by nation-state building based on national discourses and narratives put forward during the Karabakh Movement, and further molded by the developments around Karabakh conflict, it evolved around a single-perspective national narrative leaving little space for alternative memory.
- Genocide memory, re-shaped and woven into Karabakh conflict (Marutyan, 2009), has generally prevailed memory politics and memory landscape from monuments, memorials to education and beyond. Silenced in early Soviet period, Genocide memory survived as a latent memory, and since 1965, has been transformed into Collective and even Cultural Trauma (Eyerman, 2004, Alexander, 2004; Шароян, 2021). After the USSR collapse, it unfolded into Master narrative (cf. Alexander, 2004: 12-15) and influenced other memorial practices, and now it still is in the stage of routinizing/institutionalizing memory (Alexander, 2012).
- Relevant legislation and policies, including official Holiday Calendar, toponymy, monument and memorials, education curriculum, have been effectively utilized to impose the official narrative.
- Despite all these, there were grassroots initiatives that had some success in opposing official approach as well as creating alternative narratives.

Overall, minor and major shifts and changes in memory politics can be linked to the periods of Armenia's leaders Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991-1998), Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008), Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), and Nikol Pashinyan (2018-present).<sup>1</sup> Initially nour-

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1 Ter-Petrosyan, Kocharyan and Sargsyan were the presidents of Armenia, while Nikol Pashinyan is the Prime Minister, as after the recent constitutional reform Armenia became a Parliamentary republic with Prime Minister holding most executive power.

ished from the bottom, rooted in public decent silenced during the Soviets, Armenia's memory politics was then materialized in relevant legislation and policies, and the resulting actions.

In the following pages, we examine each of these phases looking at the following:

- (a) changing memory landscape, including place naming and re-naming practices, demolishing some old and putting new monuments, memorials and museums;
- (b) official commemoration days and holidays;
- (c) history education and public discourse.

# DENUNCIATION OF THE SOVIET PAST AND LAYING THE GROUND FOR NATION-BUILDING (1992-1998)

Launched in 1988 during Gorbachov's Perestroika, the Karabakh Movement paved the road for Armenia's independence and basically laid the ground for the construction of the Armenian nation-state. Growing into a popular democratic undertaking, Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM) became a political party that won the majority vote in 1990 parliament (The Supreme Council) elections and declared Armenia's independence from the USSR on August 23, 1990. These events were followed by a referendum for independence on September 21, 1991, and the consequent election of its leader, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, as the first president of Armenia. During the last years of USSR, the Movement was largely demanding the transfer of mostly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh oblast from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR. The works analyzing the Movement (Marutyan, 2009; Abrahamian, 2006) show how the events of the time (for example, Armenian pogroms in Sumgait city of Azerbaijan), awakened and brought into the play the memory of the Armenian Genocide. Marutyan argues that this memory helped people to get rid of paradigms of the Soviet present, abolish the bonds of Soviet propaganda and became the basis for revolutionary transformations leading to Armenia's independence.

The 1915 Armenian Genocide became a core pillar of memory politics since the very beginning of independence. The Declaration of Independence itself had a special provision, stating that "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia," thus establishing two most important pillars of the memory politics: Genocide and Western Armenia. In 1995, the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute was established. Consequently, the 1915 Genocide became a Master Narrative for the Armenian history (Shagoyan, 2016).

Due to the nature of Armenia's independence movement, including the intended breakout from the Soviet Union and the growing escalation of Karabakh conflict, the memory politics of early 1990s was largely directed towards erasing the manifestations of the Soviet past, as well as memory of Azerbaijani/Turkic presence in Armenia, including changing the toponymy, taking out some monuments,<sup>2</sup> creating non-inclusive narratives. At the same time, the new memory politics was restoring and memorializing the fragments of the Armenian history neglected and/or revised by the Soviets, thus putting the cornerstones and shaping the ideological basis for the new nation-building.

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2 An early example of this is the removal of Azerbaijani Bolshevik Meshadi Azizbekov's monument (1932) from the Azizbekov square as early as 1988, then renaming the square after Andrei Sakharov and erecting his monument on Azizbekov's place later (2001).

As with many other post-Soviet nations, the Armenian historiography of the time was presenting a picture, where the development of the Armenian nation was interrupted by Sovietization, after which the Armenian nation deviated from the righteous path and endangered its national identity. As a result, the ancient period received public attention and was at the center of public discussions. In October 1991, 1500th anniversary of Movses Khorenatsi's<sup>3</sup> "History of Armenia" was celebrated at the state level. President Ter-Petrosyan made a speech on that occasion, where he valued Khorenatsi's work from the perspective of the establishment of national historiography: "And it is not important to which noble family Khorenatsi attributes the mission to restore Armenia's independence. The important and main thing is that he does not imagine the existence of the Armenian people without the existence of a national state."<sup>4</sup>

The first landmark event to abolish the Soviet past was dismantling of Lenin's monument in the main square of Yerevan in February 1991, followed by similar actions elsewhere in Armenia. At the same time, the revision of toponymy was initiated. In Armenia, changing the place names, including renaming of urban and rural settlements, as well as the names of streets and places within a settlement, started as early as 1990, and included not only the toponyms imposed by the Communist ideology, but also non-Armenian, and mostly Turkic-Azerbaijani place names (Kharatyan, 2008). A good illustration of this is the re-naming of Yerevan's city center, which shows both the erasure of Communist past and the restoration of distant past.<sup>5</sup> A special Committee was established for this purpose, consisting of historians, ethnographers, linguists, etc. The concept suggested by the Committee, and adopted by the policy-makers, was based on the idea of re-constructing the Armenia's Golden Age (5<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>6</sup> in downtown Yerevan, thus symbolically re-establishing the connection with the most important and self-defining time of the Armenian history- the creation of the Armenian alphabet and the following era of national revival, when many books were translated and written in Armenian. Based on the suggested approach, the major streets named after important Communist leaders were renamed after Mashtots (the inventor of the Armenian alphabet) and his students,<sup>7</sup> symbolically establishing the ideological basis for the newly independent republic.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing the current names of administrative and other geographic units of Armenia, some researchers distinguish the following types of re-naming/naming practices: "reinstated," "revocalized," "calqued or translated," and "reconstructed" (Dabagyan,

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3 Movses Khoernatsi is a 5<sup>th</sup> century Armenian historian credited for the earliest known historiographical work on the history of Armenia. He is widely perceived as the "father of Armenian history" (patmahayr).

4 Levon Ter-Petrosyan's speech at the official session dedicated to the 1500th Anniversary of Khorenatsi's "History of Armenia" in 1991, URL: [bit.ly/3C11uD9](https://bit.ly/3C11uD9)

5 The information was provided by one of the Committee members, ethnographer Zaven Kharatyan.

6 In 405 Mesrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet. The alphabet became a powerful tool for preserving the Armenian identity, and its creation led to a new era in Armenian culture, science and literature. The following translations and independent literary heritage was so rich that the 5th century is considered the "Golden Age" in the history of Armenian culture.

7 Lenin avenue, which was the central/main avenue of Yerevan, was renamed to Mashtots, and all the other vertical streets with Communist names, were renamed after his students, including Kirov to Koryun, Marx to Khorenatsi, Sverdlov to Buzand, Ter-Gabrielyan to Koghbatsi, etc. Interestingly, Lenin avenues in many Armenian cities followed the example of Yerevan and were renamed to Mashtots.

8 Full list of renamed streets of Yerevan is available here: <https://www.yerevan.am/uploads/media/default/0001/29/8d73ca144990a63c4cda3afa2b2fe9740d6bf84a.pdf>

2011). An example of “reinstated” name is the case of second largest city of Armenia, Leninakan. It was renamed to Kumayri in 1990-1992, and then to Gyumri on March 13, 1992. Both Kumayri and Gyumri were old historical names linked to that settlement that were restored after the independence. Most Armenian names were preserved, and so were names of the settlements and/or streets that were associated with the Communists of Armenian origin, such as Stepanavan, named after the Communist leader of 26 Baku Commissars, Stepan Shahumyan.<sup>9</sup> Also, some names of former Azerbaijani settlements were simply translated into Armenian, while the others were just newly created. However, in most cases the bottom line was “Armenization” of the names, thus altering the memory landscape for the construction of the Armenian nation-state. In sum, most Soviet monuments, as well as Soviet and generally non-Armenian names were eliminated during this period.

This was also the period when almost all Soviet holidays and memorial days were demolished and new Calendar was adopted. Interestingly, liberation of Shushi<sup>10</sup> in 1992, a major event in Karabakh (Artsakh<sup>11</sup>) war, coincided with May 9, which was traditionally celebrated as the Soviet Victory Day over the Nazi Germany. So, while the date was kept in the Calendar, it received a new meaning and has been since celebrated as “Victory and Peace Day.”<sup>12</sup> The memorial language of post-Soviet countries often appealed to memorial Soviet practices associated with the memory of the Second World War, known and memorialized as the Great Patriotic War in the USSR.<sup>13</sup> This is not only an event that mobilized the population of the USSR during this war. The same narratives were widely replicated by both the Kremlin power and the republican authorities not only in Soviet times, but also in the post-Soviet era. The memory of this war was not only official one, but also a part of the family stories. This is one of the rare cases when the Russian authorities in 2015 easily appropriated and transformed a grassroots commemorative initiative in Tomsk in 2011 into a nationwide way of Victory Day celebration (the action of the “Immortal Regiment”) (Эппле, 2020: 260-261).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, May 9 was the only Soviet Holiday included in the new official Holiday Calendar of independent Armenia. There were only eight official non-working holidays/memorial

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9 The names of prominent Communists of Armenian origin were mostly preserved, in many cases with justifications that they were pro-Armenian and did many good things for the Armenians, which is another indication of nationalistic nature of re-naming.

10 “Liberation” is the term used by the Armenians.

11 Artsakh is the historical name of the 10<sup>th</sup> province of Greater Armenia (Mets Hayk, an ancient state on the territory of the Armenian Highlands, mentioned by ancient Greek and Roman, as well as medieval Armenian authors, existed until 428 A.D. ), which also included the territory of the Nagorno-Karabkh and is currently widely used by Armenians to refer to Nagorno Karabakh. In February 2017, the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was officially renamed to the “Republic of Artsakh” in the new constitution adopted by its Armenian population.

12 May 9 was perceived and called “triple holiday,” celebrating the Soviet Victory in WWII, liberation of Shushi and the establishment of Artsakh (Karabakh) Army.

13 In Soviet Union “Great Patriotic War” was the name of the war that the USSR fought against the Nazi Germany in 1941-45.

14 The same action was copied by Azerbaijani authorities a year after the 44-day Karabakh war on November 9 as the way of celebrating their Victory Day in this war. Besides, in the invitation to the ceremony of the Azerbaijani embassy in Moscow, this war was called “Patriotic”, which was widely discussed and condemned in Armenia as an attempt to shift the positions of the aggressor and those who were attacked. In terms of memorial politics, these references to the symbolism of “victory day” in the World War II indicate how deeply Soviet memorial practices have been absorbed, and, on the other hand, how strongly the memorial policy of nowadays Russia, which uses the memory of the Second World War as one of the bonds of national ideology today, still works as a common imperial memory, extending its influence to former socialist countries.



days of which three were related to independence, including May 28, the First Republic Day in memory of the First Armenian Republic announced on May 28, 1918; The Constitution Day, celebrated on July 5, the date when Armenia's new constitution was adopted; and the Independence Day on September 21, the date of 1991 referendum of independence. Two were remembrance days – April 24 in memory of the 1915 Genocide victims and December 7, in memory of the 1988 Earthquake victims. As March 8 was a very popular holiday in Soviet Union, generally celebrated as Women's Day, the new Armenian Government adopted a new holiday of "Motherhood and Beauty" for women, celebrated on April 7. As Aleida Assmann shows in her work, forgetting is an integral part of memory politics (Assmann, 2019), and the establishment of such holidays similar to Soviet holidays performs the function of palimpsest, when in order to erase the old text, a new one is superimposed on effaced earlier writing. In case of holidays, a new holiday is created to perform the functions of the old one.

However, while the Soviet legacy was being deliberately erased from the public space, the entire history and historiography was mostly based on the Soviet school of historiography. Moreover, as Zolyan and Zakaryan correctly noticed, "the national history narratives that became dominant in the post-Soviet states did not emerge "out of nowhere." In many cases, including Armenia, important features of national history narratives had already been formed in the pre-Soviet period. These narratives, or at least their separate elements, existed and were developing in the Soviet period as well, in spite of the fact that they had to "survive" under the conditions in which the official Soviet historical narrative was dominant" (Zolyan & Zakaryan, 2008). Under the USSR, the historical narratives of Soviet Republics were largely based on Stalin's Nationalities Policy, where each of the fifteen Soviet Republics had the opportunity to develop its "national history." The narratives resembled one another discursively: they would start with the ethno-genesis of the nation, followed by the development of national consciousness and national liberation struggle, leading to the development of a class consciousness that directed them toward communism as the better form of social organization (Bilmez et al, 2017). Basically, national history narratives developed under the Soviets, complemented with some other national narratives silenced at the time, became the basis for national awakening and also prevailed/directed much of the public discourse in late 1980s-early 1990s. They also became the basis for the formation of "nation-centred" history in textbooks, within a general context of the nationalisation of history in academia and in other spheres of public discourse in post-Soviet Armenia (Matosyan, 2013). While the first post-Soviet Armenian government tried to remove communist ideology from history teaching, production of history textbooks and their contents have been authorized by the government, and the new ideological criteria defining the content of textbooks fit into the general trend of "de-ideologisation" and "re-ideologisation" (or "nationalisation") observed across the whole post-Soviet space (Matosyan, 2013). This post-socialist trend of identity transformation in Armenia is somewhat different from the postcolonial mode of self-description in Eastern Europe and in most of the former Soviet republics, although they all tend to work towards creating nationally oriented identities tinged with romantic conservatism (cf. Kalinin 2021: 192). This resulted in most important sites of memory being rooted in national single-narrative history discourse, and nationalism gradually becoming the main pillar of memory politics already in early stages of Armenia's independence.

# FOCUSING ON KARABAKH (ARTSAKH) WAR, GREATER CHURCH PRESENCE IN MEMORY LANDSCAPE, AND SHAPING NATIONAL HISTORY EDUCATION (1998-2008)

By the end of ANM rule, most Soviet names and monuments have already disappeared from public space. However, while the changes in toponymy have been taking place since the very first days of independence, the RA Law on Geographical Names was adopted only in 1999. The Law stated that the names of geographical objects could be changed in the following cases:

- a. when restoring the historical names of individual objects;
- b. when removing foreign, unpleasant and repetitive names;
- c. when regulating geographical names.

The first two cases obviously continue the “Armenization” policy, as in prevailing majority the restored names are presumably the old Armenian names, while “foreign” and “unpleasant” names are also mostly changed with the Armenian ones.

In 2001, the 1996 Law on Holidays and Memorial Days was abolished and a new one was adopted. The new Law had more military and church presence, and also some reincarnation of Soviet holidays. This could be partially explained by the background of Armenia’s new leadership: Kocharyan and some of his team members came from Nagorno-Karabakh and were directly responsible for it during the war. In contrast to the ANM leadership and many members of Karabakh Committee, some of whom were Soviet dissidents, they have also been either Communist Party or Komsomol leaders/members during the Soviets. Thus, the new Calendar had March 8 back as women’s day, but the newly created April 7 was also kept in the calendar.<sup>15</sup> The May 1 Workers’ Day was also returned to the Calendar as a non-working holiday. Yet, more important is the fact that these two Soviet holidays were firmly entrenched in people’s calendars, March 8 due to the exchange of gifts performed on that date, which created a sense of responsibility for the exchanging parties, and May 1 was included in the Spring Holiday calendar and was so absorbed, that in some regions its celebration was followed by a traditional visit to cemeteries.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, these two holidays, even when left out from the Official

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15 Now March 8 is not a working day, while April 7 is a working day.

16 In the Armenian tradition, big Church holidays were usually followed by visits to cemeteries on the next day, to remember the dead family members. As Church holidays were banned during the Soviets, despite of which visiting the cemetery next day after the holidays haven’t been stopped since the Soviet times.

Calendar, continued being somehow celebrated, and thus the amendments brought the Law in line with the existing practice.

January 28 and May 8 were added to the Calendar, the first one being the Army Day and marked as non-working, and the second one as the day of Yerkrpah (the volunteers fighting in Karabakh (Artsakh) war) and marked as a working day. At the same time, while different monuments and memorials in memory of Karabakh (Artsakh) war fighters were being erected in Armenia from the very first days of the war, and this included both grassroots and state initiatives, and Yerablur national Pantheon-Memorial site for the fighters of Karabakh (Artsakh) war was established as early as 1992, generally the presence of Karabakh (Artsakh) war fighters, as well as the memorialization of Karabakh (Artsakh) war and Armenian national armed fight, became more visible in the public space from early 2000s, as days were added to the Calendar with special events/commemorations associated with the memorial sites.

Over time, Yerablur became the main memorial site not only for Karabakh (Artsakh) war Soldiers, but also for all major persons/events of the Armenian freedom fight of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2000, a memorial dedicated to the members of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA),<sup>17</sup> was opened in Yerablur. In the late 1990s, Armenia initiated repatriation of the remains of prominent members of the 20th century Armenian liberation movement who were buried abroad. First, in 1998, the body of Sose Mayrik<sup>18</sup> was brought to Armenia and buried in Yerablur. In 1999-2000, a state commission was set up to organize the transfer of Andranik Ozanyan, a key military figure of the Armenian national liberation movement of the late 19th – early 20th century and the commander of the first Armenian Volunteer Battalion within the Russian Army during the World War I. Headed by the Defense Minister, the committee negotiated the transfer of Andranik's remains from France with the French authorities, and eventually the remains arrived in Yerevan and were buried in Yerablur in 2000.

Generally, the Armenian Apostolic Church became more visible in the memory landscape during these years. While the previous Law only mentioned that some traditional and Church holidays and commemoration days could also be celebrated in the Republic of Armenia, the new Law explicitly listed some of those. Interestingly, Vardanants Day, dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Battle of Avarayr in the 5th century<sup>19</sup> was among those added to the list, thus uniting the military and church in one holiday. However, this unity speaks not so much about the post-Soviet increase in religiosity, but rather reflects the specific place of the Armenian Apostolic church in the Armenian national

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17 ASALA was an Armenian militant organization that operated from 1975 to 1990. Its stated goal was “to compel the Turkish Government to publicly acknowledge its responsibility for the Armenian Genocide of 1915.” To reach this goal, the organization carried out attacks and assassinations of Turkish diplomats in different countries of the world.

18 Sose Mayrik or Mayrig (1868-1953) was an Armenian fedayee (freedom fighter), the wife of famous fedayee leader Aghbyur Serob. She participated in many armed operations on the territory of Western Armenia (Turkey). From 1920 lived in Istanbul, then Alexandria, Egypt where she died and was buried in 1953.

19 Generally perceived as the major battle to defend Christian Faith in Armenia, the Battle of Avarayr is believed to take place on May 26, 451 between Christian Armenian Army and Sassanid Persia. It is seen as one of the most important/defining events of the Armenian history. The participants of the battle were called Vartanank after the leader of the Armenian Army, Vardan Mamikonyan, while the struggle itself is known as “Vardanants War.” The Battle of Avarayr was included in the official national calendar of holidays of the first Armenian republic in 1919 and reincluded in the “red calendar” of the Third republic in 2001. However according to this law, it is celebrated eight weeks before Easter as St. Vardanants holiday or a day of good deeds and national duty. So it is celebrated not on the day of the battle (May 26), but mainly from January 30 to March 4.

ideology, where the confession is perceived primarily as one of the institutions of nation-building (as a confession uniting ethnic Armenians for the long stateless period of history, and as an institution uniting diaspora Armenians from different countries). And it is not about of positing a distinctively religious form of nationalism, but rather about treating religion as part of nationalism with its specific modes of interpenetration and intertwining (cf. Brubaker, 2011). In 1999, Vardanants Chapel was opened in Yerablur. Moreover, the date of establishment of Yerablur is May 26, 1992, the date of Avarayr Battle, thus implying that the narrative of Vardanats was actually introduced as early as 1992, whereas in the Armenian diaspora it was and is being celebrated today by a wide variety of diaspora institutions (schools, political parties, clubs, churches).

In 2001, Armenia celebrated the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of adopting Christianity as a State religion. This was the major commemorative event of this period. For this anniversary a new Church of Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator), eventually the largest dominating Yerevan cityscape, was built in Yerevan.<sup>20</sup> Also, for the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2001 a big cross was erected on the pedestal of the demolished Lenin's statue in Yerevan's central square (Abrahamian, 2003, 2012).<sup>21</sup> This anniversary along with increasing the symbolic significance of the church triggers the new stage of tourism development in Armenia, targeting mostly the Armenian diaspora, whose visits to their homeland was heralded as a form of pilgrimage. Accordingly, the design of a new religious landscape was part of not only some kind of ideological shift towards religiosity, but also the result of the monetization of symbolic capital.

Generally, many new churches were built or initiated throughout Armenia during this period. From those, noteworthy is the case of Saint Anna Church and Yerevan patriarchal residence of the Armenian Catholicos. For the purpose of their construction, the Government handed over the building of Hrachya Acharyan Language Institute, built in 1938 in the place of St. Astvatsatsin Basilica demolished by the Soviets, to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in 2002. The demolition of the building began in 2007, and in 2015 the St. Anna church was opened. Thus, while the Soviets have demolished churches and constructed buildings of science, education and culture in their place, in this case we observe the return of the Church through demolishing Soviet heritage. This testifies not so much to the decreasing the role of language in the new national ideology, but rather to the institutional power of the church, and partly to their involvement in commercial projects.

At the same time, starting from 2002, the "History of Armenian Church" subject was introduced to the public schools in Armenia in cooperation with the Church. Since late 1990s, education reforms in Armenia have largely been driven through World Bank loan projects. The First WB loan, – "Education Financing and Management Reform Project" (1998-2002), envisaged that the history textbooks would be based on the existing curriculum, with the exception of removing Soviet ideology and reflecting Armenian culture. This was an interim solution to allow time for the development of policies on curriculum and methodology. The priority of those years was textbook production and supply, and in general little attention was paid to curriculum improvement (Bilmez et al, 2017).

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20 While the actual construction took place in 1996-2001, the decision about the 1700th anniversary, as well as the construction of the mentioned church, was made by the Church leadership back in 1989-1990.

21 While Lenin's statue was dismantled in 1991, the pedestal remained until 2006.

Finally, Kocharyan's years are also associated with the destruction of Yerevan's cultural heritage for the purposes of new, business-oriented development, that caused public discontent and protest, eventually leading to formation of active self-organized civic initiatives/groups aware and concerned with cultural heritage and memory. The work of these groups, however, brought some fruits only in later years.

# STRENGTHENING NATIONAL MEMORY CONSTRUCTION AND GREATER FOCUS ON GENOCIDE MEMORIALIZATION (2008-2018)

Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) was the main ruling party of the period. While it already dominated the Parliament and the Government during the previous 10 years, president Kocharyan did not belong to the Party. Since 2008, however, Armenia basically became a one-party state, as the united opposite opinion of all the other parties together could not influence the decision making. The platform of the RPA was clearly nationalistic and previous national tendencies became even more dominant during this period.

Overall, the politics of this period, as well as policies/actions deriving from it, continued in main directions laid during Kocharyan's years, with greater Church-state cooperation, as well as strengthened legal-regulatory basis for further advancement of national single-narrative memory construction. Thus, following the adoption of the Law on Public Education (2009), the state standards/outcomes of public education have been defined for all subject areas, including History. Introduced in 2009, the Subject Standards for the history (in force until 2020) mostly focused on the same national concepts and identity-construction (Kharatyan and Toqmajyan, 2018).

Interestingly, during the same period, church construction initiatives in the city center made the preservation of Soviet heritage an issue of public importance. As mentioned above, Kocharyan's urban development policies have caused major destruction of Yerevan's cultural heritage, which in its turn gave birth to several civic initiatives aimed at the protection of the heritage. In 2010, the Government has decided to take out the Summer Hall of Cinema Moscow from the List of Monuments protected by the state and allow church construction on its place. As in case of Acharyan Language Institute, Cinema Moscow was built on the place of Saint Poghos-Petros Church in 1935-36. The summer hall was added in 1960s. So, when the public learned about the decision to demolish the summer hall and build a church similar to Poghos-Petros on its place, a group of young architects and active citizens concerned about Yerevan's heritage, got self-organized, initiated different actions and petitioned to suspend the decision. In a short time, the initiative and its petition got over 24,000 supporters and eventually succeeded in saving the summer hall. This is an interesting case, as on one hand it heralded the first protest against religionization of public space and imposition of religious identity, and on the other hand the protection of Soviet modernist heritage. The revaluation of soviet architecture became the main counterbalance. At the same time, this was a defining event for voicing the issue of "sites of memory" in urban space, as well as formation of a new urban identity with sensitive attitude towards the city. This new identity eventually started to work not only towards preventing the destruction of old buildings, but also

towards the erection of new monuments to such “heroes” whose heroism was doubted by the public, i.e. there was no public consensus on that. One of such examples was the case with the construction of Anastas Mikoyan’s monument initiated by his heirs (Shagoyan, 2014). Not only was that attempt prevented, but the more complex issues of Soviet history, to which Mikoyan was involved, became the subject of heated public debate and criticism.

Yet, the most important event of this phase was the organization of 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2015. With the motto of “Remember and demand,” and the symbol of forget-me-not flower, which main message was “Remember,” as explained in the official statement of the State Committee on 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the entire commemoration was structured around remembrance. During the entire year the streets, roads and buildings throughout Armenia were flooded with posters and placards calling for remembrance. From Government officials to school teachers, people wore forget-me-not badges and pins. At the same time, the communities throughout the country that previously did not have a monument and/or memorial dedicated to the Genocide erected one. As local initiatives, sometimes coming from the municipalities of cities and villages, sometimes initiated by individuals not related to the government, cross-stones were erected as memorials to the victims of the Armenian genocide. This was the case when the memory politics from above and the grassroots initiative from below went along the same lines. Some of these memorials were copies of the cross-stones destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities in Nakhichevan (cemetery in Jugha), the last major destruction of thousands of memorials in 2005-2006. Usually, Armenian cross-stones do not copy each other, each of them is unique, this rule was followed as mandatory in the case of 50,000 such memorials (UNESCO, 2010). The only exception was made for the copies of the cross-stones from Jugha, which thereby became a double memorial, dedicated not only to the memory of the victims of the genocide, but also a monument to the destroyed monuments. Thus, in public discourse, not only the topic of pogroms in Sumgait, Kirovabad and Baku, etc. became a part of the genocidal narrative, but the destruction of the Armenian monuments in Azerbaijan was allocated to the same historical locus as the destruction of the Armenian cultural heritage in Turkey.

Groups of school children starting from the second year of primary school appeared at the Memorial Tsitsernakaberd to pay tribute to the victims of the Genocide weeks before the commemoration day of April 24. School iconography included new items; posters, installations and interior decorations created day-by-day to commemorate the 100th year of the Armenian Genocide with inclusion of the official forget-me-not flower and the slogan: “I remember and I demand” (Mkrtchyan, 2015). Schoolchildren were tasked to paint and or make paper forget-me-not flowers, which were then taken to Tsitsernakaberd.

# THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND THE 44-DAY KARABAKH (ARTSAKH) WAR: A ROLLER-COASTER IN SEARCH OF MEMORY POLITICS (2018-PRESENT)

The recent years (2018-2021) have two distinct phases in terms of memory politics: before the 2020 44-day Karabakh (Artsakh) war and after it.

## **Before the 2020 44-day Karabakh (Artsakh) War**

The Velvet Revolution of 2018 initially brought some changes to the memory politics. First, to commemorate the revolution and the success of civil struggle, a new holiday was added to the official Calendar, “The Day of the Citizen of the Republic of Armenia.” In order not to make this day an additional non-working day, it was decided to celebrate it on the last Sunday of April, thereby making it mobile as religious holidays usually are, and in some years it will inevitably coincide with April 24 (the day of Genocide commemoration). This decision was not very effective to fix this day in the holiday calendar and for popularization of the day concept. The new approach in way of celebrating of this day was a tendency to move the celebration of major holidays from the center, i.e. Yerevan or Yerevan’s central square, to communities and other centers, thus decentralizing the celebration and providing an opportunity to different groups to create new “sites of memory.” This trend of decentralization was further developed especially in the context of Covid-19 lockdown, when because of the pandemic limitations it was impossible to have public events. The first publicly commemorated date under pandemic lockdown (launched since March 14) had been April 24 – the day of Genocide commemoration. The authorities proposed a completely new way of commemoration, an alternative to the mass procession to the memorial. The presence of all citizens was delegated through representatives of all 10 administrative provinces of Armenia, and pan-Armenian people outside Armenia had been presented via an official, who coordinates the Diaspora affairs. The virtual presence was ensured by texting the names to a special cell. number, and these names were displayed on the walls of the memorial during the night from 24 to 25 of April. Another option was done by HyeID virtual platform to mark your location on interactive online map of Genocide memory and the next “forget-me-not flower” marked your “presence” on the commemorative map of “Marched for Justice”. In 2020 total 341423 “marched for Justice” from 198 Countries, from 1354 Regions, from 8784 cities.<sup>22</sup>

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22 The map worked in pandemic 2021 also <https://www.hyeid.org/en/april-24-march-for-justice/>



It was planned in this period to add one more landmark in the memorial landscape of Yerevan. It was decided to erect a monument for the victims of the 2008 March 1 events.<sup>23</sup> These initiatives were markers of a cautious shift from the national identity to civic identity. At the same time, the education standards and curriculum are being revised and according to the reform agenda, the History of the Armenian Church will not be taught as a separate subject anymore. Finally, there were ongoing debates around the draft History standards, where the traditional historians blamed the reformers for de-nationalizing history.

Interestingly, the new Government's policy towards cultural heritage did not change much. It continued business-driven city development planned by the old one, and active civic groups are now protecting buildings and vernacular districts of Yerevan from the destruction.<sup>24</sup> A new civic initiative, the Committee for the Protection of Yerevan's Heritage<sup>25</sup> came into play in the end of 2019. The initiative was concerned with the issues of urban development and Yerevan's heritage. There was an evolving memory discourse mostly involving people concerned with cultural heritage and memory loss due to its destruction. Some of these groups started organizing memory walks in Yerevan and other cities. The routes of these walks also include Soviet heritage, particularly modernist architecture, thus reevaluating the Soviet past. These grassroots initiatives signaled the growing debate around identity and urban space.

### After the 2020 44-Day Karabakh (Artsakh) War

While there were some signs of shifting to more multi-perspective memory construction after the 2018 revolution, and some steps were made towards more open and inclusive memory politics, the situation after the war has changed drastically, marking the return to the safe waters of familiar national narratives. The signs of this shift are visible in different areas. However, we would like to single out three important manifestations: (a) local and national initiatives aimed at memorialization of Karabakh war(s) and its heroes; (b) initiatives supporting the memory of "revenge"; (c) re-appearing narratives and discourses linking the Karabakh conflict to the Genocide and the issue of unresolved Armenian-Turkish relations. In addition, the historical fear of losing Armenia's sovereignty and memory related to it also appeared in public discourse, as well as manifested itself in the public space.

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23 A series of mass protests against electoral fraud were held in Armenia after presidential elections of February 19, 2008. The protests started on February 20 and lasted for 10 days. Those were mainly organized on Yerevan's Freedom square and involved tens of thousands people during the day and hundreds camping out at nights. After nine days of peaceful protests at the Freedom Square, the national police and military forces tried to forcefully disperse the protesters early morning on March 1. This caused mass anger and thousands gathered on March 1. Police and Army units were brought against protestors. Ten people were killed during skirmishes between police and crowd, and President Kocharyan declared a 20-day state of emergency. This was followed by mass arrests and purges of prominent members of the opposition, as well as a de facto ban on any further anti-government protests.

24 The most recent example is the case of Firdus district in the heart of the city, minutes' walk from the Republic square.

25 The Facebook page of the Committee for the Protection of Yerevan's Heritage // <https://www.facebook.com/OtherYerevan>

*(a) Local and national initiatives aimed at memorialization of Karabakh (Artsakh) War(s) and its heroes*

One of the very first public events initiated by Pashinyan's government after the war, was the visit to Yerablur on December 19, 2020, on the 40th day after the end of the 44-day-war. Three-day-mourning was announced in Armenia and Karabakh (Artsakh) in memory of the victims of the war on that day.<sup>26</sup> Even before that, Yerablur was the main symbol of the war. The photos of Yerablur with thousands of new/fresh graves with the Armenian three-colors waving over them, and mourning parents and family members of killed soldiers buried there flooded the Armenian media.

Shortly after the end of the war, several communities initiated different undertakings aimed at memorialization of Karabakh (Artsakh) War participants from their community. Such initiatives include street naming/renaming, installation of monuments/memorials (mostly khachkars), building "memory corners" at schools, the common way of the local memorialization was painting the portraits of perished soldiers on the building's walls like street art, etc. This form of remembrance seems to have come to replace the drinking fountains, which were often built in memory of the victims of the first Karabakh (Artsakh) war as local (also family, friend) memorialization initiatives.<sup>27</sup> One of the most illustrative examples of such initiatives is the naming of 13 streets in Akunk village of Gegharkunik Marz with the names of 13 Akunk residents "heroized in Karabakh (Artsakh) wars."<sup>28</sup> The official opening ceremony of the streets took place on April 8, 2021, with participation of local and regional authorities, representatives from the Church and the Military, and family members of the heroes.

While such local initiatives are mostly aimed at remembering/memorialization of local people, and such practices existed before the last war (2021), there are also initiatives at the national level, which are not always focused on particular/specific names and people, but are aimed at memorialization of the heroic "battle of Artsakh"<sup>29</sup> in general. One of such different/noteworthy grassroots initiatives is the appeal letter signed by several prominent civil society representatives/human rights activists addressed to the "heads of communities," whereas they suggested:

- Rename one (non-secondary) street in all regional centers after "Artsakh Heroes";
- In Yerevan, rename Tsitsernakaberd highway after Artsakh Heroes street (or highway), as well as consider the naming of the district (currently under construction) between Monte Melkonyan street and Tsitsernakaberd highway after Artsakh Heroes;
- Erect a memorial depicting the collective heroism of Artsakh Heroes on the Northern Avenue or any other central place in Yerevan.

The letter was published on September 18, 2021, a few days before the "30th anniversary of Armenia's independence, the 30th anniversary of Artsakh's independence,

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<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Yerablur became the center of clashes between the opposition, that was gathered in Yerablur, and the Government procession that walked to Yerablur from the Republic Square.

<sup>27</sup> The idea was developed by Amalia Dilanyan, a researcher of the Armenian street art, during an oral conversation.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on the event: <http://gegharkunik.mtad.am/news/item/2021/04/08/2/>

<sup>29</sup> In Armenian "Արցախյան հերոսամարտ", the name commonly used when referring to the 1991-2021 Karabakh (Artsakh) struggle and wars.

and de facto 30th anniversary of Karabakh (Artsakh) wars,” and suggested to “immortalize the individual and collective feats of those people conditionally named “Artsakh Heroes,”” by providing the following background/justification: “in the past 30 years, the protection of the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh from the enemy has cost more than ten thousand lives. Tens of thousands have suffered temporary, permanent, or lifelong loss of health. The number of people who suffered material, moral and psychological losses for the protection of the rights of the Armenians of Artsakh is innumerable.”<sup>30</sup> This initiative is interesting first, because it is written from human rights perspective, and because some signatories have been continuously labeled and attacked for their involvement in peacebuilding initiatives, as well as for their “liberal”, “pro-Turkish”, “anti-patriotic” [the labels used by the attackers] views. Another interesting thing in the letter is the fact, that the signatories suggest renaming Tsitsernakaberd highway after Artsakh Heroes. Tsitsernakaberd highway is the highway to Tsitsernakaberd, the main Genocide Memorial site in Yerevan. This hints to either conscious or subconscious desire to enlarge the Master narrative heavily dominated by the memory of Genocide, and a return to the first phase of Karabakh movement, which mobilized people based on the Genocide memory and identifying Azerbaijanis with Turks, which has got a new confirmation like the Erdogan-Aliyev concept on one nation and two states.

The third type of initiatives is the erection of crosses in memory of the war victims. Erecting big metal crosses became popular after the April War of 2016, especially in Karabakh and near the Armenian borders, and the initiators of such undertakings believe that the “crosses protect them from the enemy and the evil.”<sup>31</sup> However, the construction of a 44-meter metal cross in Yeranos village of Gegharkunik marz in memory of the victims of the 44-day war caused widespread criticism in social media<sup>32</sup>, including the interpretation that “Armenians put a cross on Armenia,” (in Armenian to put a cross on something, means to put an end to something, erase it, in this case, put an end to Armenia).<sup>33</sup>

This narrative of “putting an end to Armenia” is linked to the increasing feeling of diminishing sovereignty following the defeat, which found its symbolic manifestation in increasing number of national flags of Armenia and Karabakh (Artsakh) hanging from people’s windows and balconies, in the cars and elsewhere. The flags first appeared during the war, and then remained and continued to spread after its end.

On September 21, 2021, the day of the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armenia’s independence, Prime Minister Pashinyan announced the founding of the Park of Life, where trees will be planted in memory of killed in the Karabakh (Artsakh) wars: “We have been discussing for a long time how to immortalize the memory of killed in all Karabakh (Artsakh) wars. We decided to establish a Life Park in the Botanical Garden of Yerevan, where trees will be planted, symbolizing the life and presence of those who died in all the Karabakh (Artsakh) wars... It will not be a dead memorial, but a park where the children will play and make noise, young people will spend their free time,

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30 Full text of the appeal: [https://www.aravot.am/2021/09/18/1216540/?fbclid=IwAR3YohFk1DuP44Bv6c\\_BOory5D-2ZU2Z9yhLGwcNmZBA6ENyxljGgdO45S4I](https://www.aravot.am/2021/09/18/1216540/?fbclid=IwAR3YohFk1DuP44Bv6c_BOory5D-2ZU2Z9yhLGwcNmZBA6ENyxljGgdO45S4I)

31 Lusine Kharatyan, Ethnographic field material, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, 2017-2018.

32 <https://medialur.com/38427/>

33 For the discussion and/or criticism of the cross: <https://mamul.am/am/news/224754/>; <https://www.aravot.am/2021/11/11/1228364/>

and old people will walk... This park will be about the fact that in the name of the lives of these and other people in Armenia and Artsakh they died. The peaceful development of Armenia and Artsakh should be that victory, which they have reached...".<sup>34</sup> We think that the idea of the park appeared as a reaction to the "Trophy Park" in Baku, which was marked by many international organizations as xenophobic, and thus the "Park of Life" was also announced to highlight the difference between the peacekeeping memory politics in Armenia and the militarist one in Azerbaijan. The mirror-like rhetoric of politicians of Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the politics of memory, as components of national ideologies can be traced throughout the entire course of the Karabakh conflict. The "competition of parks" was now added to the war against the monuments of opposite side, especially fiercely carried out on the territory of Artsakh, which fell under the control of the Azerbaijani army and largely discussing in Armenia.

### *(b) Initiatives supporting the memory of "revenge"*

On September 14, 2021, Yerevan City Council has approved a motion on the erection of "Nemesis"<sup>35</sup> memorial dedicated to the "Knights of National Dignity," to "immortalize the memory of the heroic Armenians who did justice to the organizers of the Armenian Genocide," presented by the descendants of the avengers of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>36</sup> What makes this decision particularly interesting, is the fact that the motion has been originally filed in 2019 to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Marshal Court on Young Turks held in Istanbul, which found guilty the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Most war criminals were able to flee, and hence the Operation Nemesis was initiated to execute their death sentence.<sup>37</sup> However, the Yerevan City Council initially was not inclined to approve the motion, given that there were already several monuments/memorials dedicated to the memory of the avengers<sup>38</sup> in Yerevan's city space.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the decision to erect the memorial was made after the war and it is yet another indication of the overall shift in the memory politics. At the same time, it should be noted the City Council's decision met some criticism in media. For example, Mher Arshakyan, a prominent columnist, wrote in his widely circulated article on the City Council's decision: "we have no counsel to live after the war and here we offer to glorify the revenge that did its job in a unique period of history."<sup>40</sup>

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34 The speech of the RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during the main event in Yerevan's Republic Square: The official Youtube channel of the Government of Armenia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbVaV9Mekkc>

35 "Nemesis" was an operation carried out between 1920-1922 by a secret unit of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation aimed at assassination of the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Empire and Azerbaijani individuals responsible for the 1918 massacres of the Armenians in Baku and those Armenians who collaborated with the perpetrators.

36 <https://www.yerevan.am/am/news/erevanowm-kteghadrvi-nemesis-aspetnerin-nvirvats-aghbyowr-howshakot-ogh-kayats-el-e-erevani-avagano/>

37 The most famous assassination carried out under the operation Nemesis was Soghomon Tehleryan's assassination of Talat pasha in Berlin, Germany in 1918, he was one of the leaders of the Young Turks and main perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide.

38 Not only to Operation Nemesis, but also to ASALA.

39 The information is based on Lusine Kharatyan's discussions/exchange with some members of Yerevan City Council in 2019.

40 <https://www.aliqmedia.am/2021/09/15/29201/>

*(c) Re-appearing narratives and discourses linking the Karabakh conflict to the Genocide and the issue of unresolved Armenian-Turkish relations*

As we see from the examples above, in both cases, i.e. the first case with the memorialization of Karabakh (Artsakh) war, and the second case with the decision to erect a Nemesis memorial, there is a reference to Genocide and thus the Armenian mega narrative. In the first case, i.e. the renaming of Tsitsernakaberd highway, there is a conscious or subconscious palimpsest attempt to re-write the narrative, replace the traumatic memory of the Genocide with the newest pillar of national identity construction, which is more heroic and involves fighting and resistance and not just victimhood (cf. Մարտիրոսյան, 2015; 2021). The message of the second case, i.e. the opening of the Nemesis memorial, is again about the changing of the narrative from the victimhood and trauma to struggle and revenge.

At the same time, in the public discourse the theme of Turkey's involvement in Karabakh conflict is a major topic. It dominates the public arena with statements like "Turkish-Azerbaijani attack," "if not Turkey's help Azerbaijan would never win the war," "the life of Artsakh's Armenians is under the danger of another genocide," etc.

In sum, while the recent developments in the memorial culture suggest some changes in the narratives and growing dominance of Karabakh (Artsakh) war over the other identity construction elements, it is still too early to identify major flows and make conclusions.

# CONCLUSION

To conclude, we would like to note that overall the memory politics of the Republic of Armenia in 1991-2021 has been largely constructed around nation-state building and evolved around a grand national narrative, leaving little space for an alternative discourse. For the purposes of nation-building, both remembering and forgetting policies and practices have been utilized through changing official Holiday Calendar, memory landscape and education curriculum. Genocide memory has been the Master narrative that influenced most other memorial practices. Another cornerstone is the Karabakh (Artsakh) War, which is heavily intertwined with the Genocide narrative. This became particularly stronger after the 2021 44-day Karabakh (Artsakh) war. However, some grassroots initiatives and civil society projects aimed at creating alternative narratives and influencing the official policy have emerged since 2008, resulting in creation of spaces for a critical discourse over memory and memory politics.

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