

# A TOOL OF PROPAGANDA: THIRTY YEARS OF MEMORY POLITICS IN INDEPENDENT AZERBAIJAN

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Photo on the cover: Shahidlyar Khiyabany (Alley of Martyrs), Baku, 2015. Photo by Sevil Huseynova

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## INTRODUCTION

In the “Sculptor’s Notes” published in the year of Stalin’s death, Dmitry Merkurov, who, for many years firmly held the title of “Outstanding Master of Soviet Monumental Sculpture”, claimed that: “The monument is a powerful instrument of propaganda and ideological education of the people. Its importance in our state is particularly great” (Merkurov 1950: 50). Of course, Merkurov was referring to the Soviet Union, but this sentence is also relevant for modern Azerbaijan. Revenues from the oil and gas trade are not only spent on large-scale construction and reconstruction of infrastructure, the maintenance of a huge bureaucratic apparatus, the police, and the army. This same revenue source is used to finance the installation of numerous monuments throughout the country. After a short pause in the 1990s, when more monuments were dismantled than were opened, by the 2000s, the country experienced a new wave of memorial construction. This was undertaken in the context of a new stage in the nationalization of public spaces and the legitimization of the Aliyev political regime. As a result, numerous public political monuments again became “propaganda tools” and visual symbols of power (Michalski 1998: 107).

# 1990-2020: KEY EVENTS AND IMAGES

The two key events behind the memory politics of independent Azerbaijan are the following: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the establishment of the Aliyev hereditary political regime in 1993. (Waal 2003; Ottaway 2003; Rumyantsev 2017). One of the main characteristics of memory politics is that the rigid authoritarian regime, claiming to be the only political actor with the power to determine the past, seeks to fully control all public spaces and to marginalize all its opponents.

Aleida Assman, through a successful metaphor of the “long shadow of the past”, points to “the aspect of the unfreedom of subsequent generations from the traumatic past and the impossibility to deal with it at will” (Assman 2006: 16). The memory of 1918-1920, the events of the collapse of the Russian Empire, and attempts to create the first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) (Swietochowski 1985), was not always a convenient past for the ruling regime. The memory of the traumatic events of the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 1992-1994 and the ongoing conflict is also not always possible to manage on their own.

Among the main strategies of mastering the past, as Michalski would probably say, are *the industry of production of political public monuments*, as well as the organization of collective/ mass ceremonies and rituals under the patronage and control of the authorities. Several relevant questions to be answered can be found by following Aleida Assman: “who remains outside the cultural memory? What are the principles of inclusion and exclusion? These questions are necessarily related to questions of acquiring and maintaining power, which means that the change in power relations will also produce a change in the structure of cultural memory” (Assman 2009: 35).

# COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC IN THE MUSLIM EAST

Political figures from the beginning of the 20th century – “founding fathers” of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) 1918-1920 – lost in the competition with the cult of Heydar Aliyev. In the official historical narrative, Aliyev Sr. is given the role of main creator of independent statehood, and it is to him that numerous monuments are installed. As in other national republics of the USSR, this period of history and the characters associated with it acquired new relevance in the late 1980s, when the process of reconstruction of the historical narrative began. When nationalists from the Popular Front (PFA) came to power during the short-lived presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993), the figures of the “first republic” became a textbook example of true patriots<sup>1</sup>. The role of the main character fell to Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh, the leader of Musavat (Equality), the most influential party, created by the “founding fathers” in 1911 (see Balayev 2018 for details on his biography).

A group of PFA activists led by historian Isa Gambar created the new Musavat party in 1992, representing this event as a “restoration” of a party that had not existed for many years. In 2011, the modern Musavat celebrated its 100th anniversary. The authorities have done everything possible to ensure that the majority of the population does not notice this anniversary. However, Azerbaijan’s independence itself was interpreted as “restored”, and the leaders of the PFA and Musavat drew legitimacy from the symbolic continuity of the ADR. The most important symbols of statehood – the flag, coat of arms, and anthem – were borrowed from the same era. Independence Day, 28 May 1918, became a public holiday and was called Republic Day. From then on, the genealogy of all the most important official institutions (the parliament, the prosecutor’s office, the army, the first university, etc.) also originated in the ADR. Within the framework of the dominant retrospective discourse, ADR should only have been spoken of as the first republic in the entire Muslim East, whose founding fathers, “passed on to the descendants the ideology of democracy, human rights, equality of all before the law, electoral rights, gender equality” and much more (The opposition celebrated Republic Day in 2017).

In these first years of independence, the country’s main university in the capital was named after M.A. Rasulzadeh. In 1993, a granite monument was erected in the Absheron village of Novkhany, his birthplace, in the best traditions of Soviet monumentalism. The new government planned to erect another monument in front of the university and, the most grandiose one, in the heart of one of Baku’s parks. Omar Eldarov, one of the

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1 The first attempts to create new versions of history textbooks date back to the 1990s. In these first versions, ADR figures received considerable attention. In the 2000s, a new narrative was created which, with smaller upgrades, is still in use today. In this second version, ADR and Heydar Aliyev have also received a lot of attention. But it is the image of the late president, whose portrait and “aphorisms” are accompanied by every textbook, is certainly central and dominant

most famous Azerbaijani sculptors, prepared a sketch and a model of the monument. But all these plans were not destined to come true. In 2019, when the opposition celebrated the 135th anniversary of Rasolzadeh, Isa Gambar was outraged by the fact that: “This monument has been under arrest for 25 years now. The authorities have found a place to erect hundreds monuments but are unable to find a place for the monument to the founder of independent Azerbaijan” (Azerbaijani Opposition, 2019).

The “inability” of the authorities is explained by the specifics of Heydar Aliyev’s government, under which Rasolzade becomes an inconvenient competitor for the status of “father of the nation”. Under Aliyev Sr., the political and symbolic legacy of the ADR had been inevitably revised. The orientalist discourse of the “first republic in the whole East” remains popular, as does the myth of the direct succession of institutions of power. All symbols of independent statehood have also been preserved, but no funds have been allocated to install the Rasolzadeh monument, despite Omar Eldarov’s willingness to work on it for free (Kakim budet pamyatnik Rasolzade? 2013). The university was renamed, and the status of “founding fathers” was changed to “fighters for independence”. They did a lot of things, but unlike Heydar Aliyev, they never succeeded, and “the first democratic state of Azerbaijan [...] failed” (Aliyev 1998).

During his rise to power, Aliyev Jr., whose legitimacy was based on inheriting power from the “great leader”, the status of the “fighters for independence” and the memory of the first republic declined dramatically again. During the first lengthy speech given by the new president on Republic Day, only a few introductory phrases were dedicated to the person responsible for the celebration. Most of it referred to the “true” founding father, the “national leader” Aliyev Sr. The president’s son, unlike his father, rarely mentioned the names of the ADR leaders in his official speeches. A new view of the status of the first republic and its leaders is also reflected in a very modest monument – the obelisk (2007), the location of which does not suggest holding mass events. The centenary anniversary of the ADR was also celebrated very modestly. In the now traditional manner, following a few catchphrases about the first republic, there was a detailed account of the activity of “the great leader” Heydar Aliyev and the invariable internal and external successes of the ruling party. Almost no one remembered the ADR itself. The Aliyev government did not succeed in completely pushing ADR figures beyond the borders of cultural memory. But historical figures who, in the eyes of Aliyev Jr., can compete with the image of Heydar Aliyev as a “great leader”, and the creator of independent statehood (and above all, Rasolzadeh), are being pushed to the periphery of the discourse of memory.



# MARCH GENOCIDE OF 1918 AND BLACK JANUARY OF 1990

Another event from 1918 has acquired new relevance in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. One can observe the rare unity of interpretations among not only the authorities and the opposition, but also almost the entire population of the country. In late March and early April 1918, there were clashes in Baku between Muslims led by the Musavat party, on the one hand, and the Bolsheviks in alliance with Armenian national military units led by members of the Armenian nationalist party Dashnaksutyun, on the other. For the Muslim population of the city, these clashes ended in terrible pogroms and massacres. No precise data is available, but the death toll alone may have reached upwards of 8,000 (Swietochowski 1985: 135-139; Baberowski 2003: 132-141).

These events were remembered again in January 1990, when the struggle for power between the PFA and the Soviet administration began in Baku, resulting in Armenian pogroms and military operations. As a result of the pogroms dozens of Baku Armenians died, many hundreds were wounded, thousands lost their property and became refugees (Waal 2003: 89-95). On the night of 19 to 20 January, the Soviet authorities launched a military operation to regain control over the republic. As a consequence, over 100 people were killed and hundreds more wounded. While the Armenian pogroms remained beyond the borders of national memory, the military action was immediately designated as “Black” or “Bloody January”, became a key site of memory in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The funeral for the city residents who died as a result of the military invasion (the Armenians who died in the pogroms were not counted among them) turned into a mass action of grief and protest, on January 22 (Azerinform 1990). These martyred heroes, who at one point were proclaimed *shahids*, were buried on the site of the old Chamberekent cemetery, where many of the victims of the March 1918 massacre were buried. It was on this site that Kirov Nagorny Park was built in the mid-1930s. In the same January in 1990, the reconstruction of the park began in *Shahidlyar Khiyabany* (Alley of Martyrs).

The high status given to these events was determined for many reasons. The events of Black January (as in March 1918) formed the basis of the national myth about the heroic struggle of the Azerbaijanis for Independence. The Shahids of January (as well as March) became the patriots and sacred victims whose blood should be used, paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, to water the tree of freedom from time to time.

“The heroism of our sons and daughters who gave their lives for their homeland has become a legend. After all, they opened the first path on the road to freedom. It is the shahids we owe first and foremost to the restoration of state independence, our free life” (Azertaj 2019).

The events of January have also become an important component of Heydar Aliyev’s official biography, giving him a heroic halo. At that time, the future “national leader”,



who was dismissed in 1987, lived in Moscow as a pensioner. The January events were an important occasion to remind about himself. Immediately after the event, Aliyev appeared at the representative office of the Azerbaijan SSR in Moscow and publicly (in front of cameras), “putting his life in danger”, condemned the military operation. “This step of the great leader gave our people energy and strength, [and became a source] of support and comfort” (ibid). The January events were an occasion for Heydar Aliyev to return to politics. In the official biography of the “great leader”, written and published much later, the January performance was an important element of his heroic image. This event highlighted the fact that it was because of his absence that the republic was mired in chaos and violence.

Both events also fit into the context of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the confrontation with the “historical enemy”. In 1998, Heydar Aliyev signed a decree “On genocide of Azerbaijanis”. This is a detailed document listing the numerous “atrocities of Armenians” committed throughout the twentieth century. By this decree, 31 March is declared the “Day of the Genocide of Azerbaijanis”. Thus, the historization of modern conflict is declared as the official policy of the Azerbaijani authorities. The main memorial complex was created in the city of Guba (north of Azerbaijan), where a mass grave was accidentally discovered in 2007. It was identified as the remains of the victims of the 1918 genocide. Speaking at the opening ceremony, the president stated that: “More than 50,000 of our fellow citizens became victims of Armenian fascism in a matter of five months” (Aliyev 2013). Thus, the commemoration of the 1918 events, the constructions of enemies (the collective image of Armenians) and their victims (Azerbaijanis) are discursively linked to the events of World War II and the Holocaust. In turn, the Shahidlyar Khiyabany, had become a multifunctional memorial complex, including the memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Since the early 1990s, the complex has included a cemetery where soldiers who died during the war (1992-1994) and were awarded the title of national heroes (Milli gəhrəmanlar) are buried.

# COMMEMORATION OF THE LONG-LASTING CONFLICT: BEFORE AND AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

In the context of memory politics, many events of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were given permanent relevance. The longstanding commemoration of the ongoing conflict also led to more and more traumatic and, to a lesser extent, triumphant events every year (Akhundov 2017). The ranks of shahids are also constantly expanding. April 2016 and July 2020 were marked by escalations that resulted in the deaths of dozens of soldiers. But even without escalations, not only do military personnel die amid the line of fire, but civilians as well. Given the length and intensity of the conflict, these events remain part of the living memory for all generations among the country's population (Akhundov 2020).

One of the most important commemorative events is the massacre that took place in the small town of Khojaly in February 1992, where hundreds of its inhabitants (including the elderly, women, and children) were shot dead, captured or became refugees (Waal 169-172). In 1998, after Heydar Aliyev's decree, this event was officially called the Genocide in Azerbaijan. The authorities have invested considerable resources in the commemoration of the Khojaly tragedy, and this is exactly the case when these efforts were fully understood and supported in all strata of Azerbaijani society.

Thus, within the framework of the victims' discourse, these are acts of genocide committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis. Separate memorial days are dedicated to each of these acts: 31 March for 1918 and 26 February to commemorate the Khojaly Genocide. At the same time, these and a number of other events are represented as the entire 20th century genocide against Azerbaijanis.

Over the years, several theatrical productions have been created and staged (*The Call of Khojaly*, *When Almonds Bloom*, *Khojaly - It Was*, etc.). In addition, documentary and feature films have been produced, including *We Will Return*, *Nabat*, *Running Away from Darkness*, and others. Many Azerbaijani and some foreign composers have created symphonies dedicated to this event (Mammad Guliyev, Tofik Bakikhanov, Azer Dadashov, Pierre Tilua, Alexander Tchaikovsky, etc.). The Azerbaijani and foreign writers have created novels and stories – *The Captive*, by Meyhosh Abdullah; *Pain*, by Amir Gut and Arye Gut, and *Black Snowdrops* by Efim Abramov. Nazim Mammadov, the author of the first cartoon shot at the Azerbaijan Film Studio, reflected this event in a painting. The small sculpture entitled *Mother's Scream*, erected in Baku in 1993 by the family of sculptors Aslan, Mahmud, and Teymur Rustamovs, was reconstructed into a nearly nine-meter monument in 2008. The monument became an endpoint for a collective

memorial ritual. For several years now, mass public marches have been organized by the Azeri authorities, culminating in the laying of flowers at the monument. Years of investment in creating multiple forms of public memorial culture have contributed to the fact that every resident of the country takes part in one form or another in the Khojaly commemoration.

On 27 September 2020, the Second Karabakh War, known as the '44-day war', began. As a result of the confrontation, practically all the districts occupied outside the former Autonomous Nagorno Karabakh region and part of the territory of the region itself came under Azerbaijani control. In November of that year the Azerbaijani military and the president personally, as commander-in-chief, declared themselves victorious.

The results of the war radically shifted the focus from trauma to triumph, and the commemoration began, in effect, even before the end of the armed confrontation. Immediately after the end of hostilities by early December 2020, presidential decrees made September 27 a day of commemoration for the nearly three thousand citizens who had died in the war. November 10 became a holiday - "Victory Day". The President promised to erect numerous monuments across the country, the most important of which should be the grandiose memorial in Baku.

There was also no delay with the new open-air museum. Already in April 2021, a "Military Trophy Park" was opened in the capital; visits by families with children, even after several months, remain one of the country's favourite attractions. Victory is presented in a very straightforward manner at the museum. Visitors can walk under a camouflage tunnel, the most important element of which are the helmets of fallen Armenian soldiers. Mannequins designed to represent frightened, waiting for the near death opponents of the Azerbaijani army are also an essential element of the composition. Every effort was made to reproduce the stereotypical images of ethnic Armenians.

The victory served as a new and very powerful additional incentive for artists. In the year since the war, poems have been written, songs were sung, and numerous music videos made. Composers, novelists and artists have all pledged to contribute to the commemoration. They began preparing a series of carpets to commemorate the victory. A documentary film about the war and the role of the commander-in-chief was also produced for the anniversary. It is easy to assume that this is only the beginning, and that the number of works will multiply rapidly every year.

The practices of victory commemoration are discursively, ritually and aesthetically borrowed from the May 9 victory celebration. The victory parade held one month after the end of the war and the militarised version of the "immortal regiment" parade held in Baku on the first anniversary of the start of the war are only the most obvious examples of such borrowings. Even the holiday itself is named by analogy with the Soviet one.

It is also important to understand that all works dedicated to the conflict and created before the second Karabakh war will also retain their relevance. Furthermore, despite such a radical change of vector from trauma to triumph, the discourse of sacrifice and genocide will remain relevant, as a crucial practice of dehumanising the opposing side. With the end of the second war, the conflict was not over.

# THE BIRTH OF A GREAT LEADER

The Khojaly events were used by Heydar Aliyev to marginalize his political opponents. Despite the tragedy occurring before he came to power, it has provided him many opportunities to harshly criticize his predecessors who had allowed the massacre of civilians to take place. However, it was not only the military defeats but also the failures of his predecessors in all spheres (the economy, the establishment of all state institutions during the country's fledgling independence, the degradation of the social sphere and education) that have served Aliyev to create an ideal image of a political figure and born leader. As part of the official discourse, such failures did not occur under his authority.

The specifics of the personalized authoritarian government created by Aliyev meant that control of power was exercised by one person – the leader, alone, with the help of subordinates loyal to him. Aliyev's cult was already created during his lifetime. In this leader cult, one can find many aesthetic elements borrowed from the Soviet tradition of representing the sole leader of the country. But there are also some similarities with Atatürk's cult, specifically where the creator of the new Turkish nation emphasized the role of the nation's father and his Europeanness. Like Atatürk, Heydar Aliyev posed in a smocking for one of the most popular photographs, which was distributed throughout the country through numerous posters. Sometimes the "national leader" of Azerbaijan was also awarded the title of "father of the state" (Azertaj 2003; Huseynova 2005: 178).

After his death, Aliyev had already become a "national" and "great" leader. In the context of widespread loyalist discourses, it is thanks to Heydar Aliyev's "genius", his "political talent [...], wisdom and foresight, and strategic thinking" that Azerbaijan has maintained its independence and has not fallen into civil war.

The president's son, who inherited not only the post but also the specifics of the regime, did not have sufficient resources nor the charisma to claim a similar role as a born leader. İlham Aliyev draws his legitimacy from his father's cult because "he is a worthy successor to Aliyev in the course of the 21st century" (Andriyanov and Miralamov 2007: 10). Therefore, during his son's presidency, considerable resources are spent on creating and maintaining the cult. The most visible element of the cult in public space is its numerous monuments. The genre of the monuments is not distinguished by diversity - the late president stands up, sometimes with his hand raised, and looks deep. All the new granite and marble Heydar Aliyevs are usually surrounded by parks named after him. On the contrary, the Heydar Aliyev Center, created by Zaha Hadid and opened in Baku in 2012, was and is the most interesting modern architectural structure in the capital.

Numerous officials, businessmen, cultural and educational figures, employees of institutes of the Academy of Sciences and universities, have actively been involved in creating and supporting the cult. Such eagerness and active initiative from below should not be surprising. The installation of new monuments and busts, a variety of images, the invention of new public rituals, and the contribution to the development of discourses about the "great leader" and the "brilliant personality" have become mandatory practices for expressing loyalty to the ruling regime.

# FUTURE PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

In any country, power plays an important role in shaping memory politics. However, in countries with democratic governments, a wide variety of independent agents are allowed into this field. The key specificity of memory politics in Azerbaijan is that the political regime exercises the greatest possible control over it. It is the authorities who, guided by their own goals (primarily, by increasing their legitimacy), control all public spaces in the republic.

Since the establishment of the Aliyev regime in 1993, the process of suppressing political opposition and civil society has been continuous and has intensified with each passing year. In the same context, the state's control over the politics of memory and historical politics has been constantly increasing.

On the one hand, this control by the authorities has been quite common since Soviet times. On the other hand, the increasing control is justified by the need to produce a unified and solidary position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The logic of the mobilization discourse is based on the fact that in the face of the treacherous "historical enemy", the Azerbaijanis must be united. This logic has also been successfully applied to suppress political opposition and civil society. In this context, any criticism of the authorities is labelled as a "pro-Armenian" or "anti-Azerbaijani" position.

Not only are military personnel but historians are also actively involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as exclusive rights to this or that territory are justified through myths about autochthony. The authorities control almost all universities and research institutes and do not allow for dissent. But even without this control, most historians and social researchers are unable to go beyond the boundaries of an influential patriotic discourse in which they are willing to voluntarily demonstrate their solidarity in confronting Azerbaijan's historic enemy.

Control over history and memory increases as Heydar Aliyev enters the political arena. In the context of the cult of the "great leader", his activity as Head of the KGB of the Republic and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1967-1982) was aimed at creating the conditions for future independence, which took place after his return to power in 1993. Numerous monuments and museums are intended to confirm this myth in public space. The Heydar Aliyev cult can flourish only under conditions of hereditary power and an authoritarian regime that does not allow alternative versions of history to enter the public space. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the authorities take controlling the past very seriously.

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