



The Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict

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The Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict

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Abstract

Did the 1915 genocide of the Ottoman Armenians play a role in the genesis of the Karabakh war? In the early phase of the conflict, many Armenian activists and politicians drew parallels between the evolving struggles of the present and the traumatic events of 1915. This essay explores the ways in which Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey have referred to the events of 1915 to formulate their policies towards the conflict. The essay argues that the largely suppressed past trauma was present in the mass psychology of the conflicting parties, although in radically different ways, and that it shaped developing events. After depoliticising genocide commemorations in the early years of its independence, Armenia has recently witnessed an increase in references to the genocide in political discourse. The same also applies, somewhat paradoxically, to Azerbaijan, which has developed its own state-sponsored discourse of genocide, vehemently denying that the genocide took place while portraying Azerbaijan as a victim of genocide itself. This exchange of roles clearly needs further explanation.

THE LITERATURE CONTEXTUALISING THE KARABAKH CONFLICT IS exclusively based on the Soviet legacy. The arguments presented in a growing body of publications point to the Soviet policy of ethno-territorial division as leading to territorial disputes that produced local tensions. For some authors, the conflict's origins can be traced to Stalin's decision to place Nagorno-Karabakh, together with its ethnic Armenian majority population, under Azerbaijani control as part of a policy of 'divide and rule' (Chorbajian *et al.* 1994; Hunter 2006, p. 113). Others claim that the conflict was the result of the oppression of Armenians carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities in Baku (Zürcher 2007, p. 154; Rasizade 2011, pp. 215–31), while some have argued that the conflict was the outcome of the resentment generated by the contradictions in Soviet nationalities policy, whereby territories were attributed to 'titular nations' with certain minorities being given various degrees of autonomous status (Suny 1993b). Some scholars have also examined the impact of Caspian oil development deals on the territorial conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Cheterian 1997; Kaldor 2007).

What is clearly absent from this literature on the causes of the Karabakh conflict is consideration of the Ottoman and Young Turk legacy. The conflict in Karabakh, just like the conflicts in Abkhazia, Chechnya or Moldova, have been considered as part of Soviet history and the legacy of Soviet policies (Smith 2013). As a result, the pre-Sovietisation period and its impact have largely been left out of scholarly studies. Moreover, the conflict was seen

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as a result of nationalism and ethno-territorial conflict, disregarding the religious dimension of the Armenian–Azeri antagonism (Tonoyan 2018). The few studies of the conflict that do give space to the Hamidian massacres (1894–1896) and the Turkish genocide of the Ottoman Armenians (1915–1923) present them as background events without questioning if and how they could have influenced future developments (Walker 1991). Most books on the Karabakh conflict (Malkasian 1996; Croissant 1998; Cornell 2001) remain silent on the 1915 genocide and on the refusal of successive Turkish regimes to accept that such an event ever took place; they do not consider the possible impact those events had on the genesis of the Karabakh conflict. This is especially surprising because of the proliferation of scholarly works on the Armenian genocide since the 1990s (Dadrian 1995; Akçam 2006; Kévorkian 2006; Shirinian 2016), including its consequences for and impact on world events (Hovannisian 1999; Marchand & Perrier 2013, pp. 163–64; Ihrig 2014, 2016; Cheterian 2015). This neglect contrasts with various studies on other conflicts in the Caucasus region that do consider past events, including nineteenth-century wars, massacres and deportations, as important preludes that need to be considered in order to understand post-Soviet violence. Studies on the roots of the Russo–Chechen wars of 1994–1996 and 1999–2009, for example, usually discuss the nineteenth-century Caucasian wars and the rebellion led by Imam Shamil, as well as the traumatic impact of Soviet repression, especially the deportation of the entire Chechen population to Siberia and Central Asia (Broxup 1996, pp. 1–17; Gammer 2006; Cheterian 2008). That being the case, how is it possible to disregard the possible historic links and continuities, as well as the breaks and discontinuities, between the mass violence exercised during World War I in the six Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus in the late 1980s? In this respect, attention also has to be given to the long history of genocide denial in the Turkish Republic and the ways in which this influenced the emergence of the Karabakh conflict.

Studies analysing the background and contextualising the history of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict have little to say about the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians. Svante Cornell's (2001) research on conflicts in the Caucasus, for instance, provides historic background ranging from the nineteenth century to the Ottoman invasion of Transcaucasia in 1918, yet he does not even mention the 1915 genocide. Although he does refer elsewhere to an 'alleged genocide', he describes this as a propaganda campaign launched by the Armenian diaspora to 'discredit Turkey' (Cornell 1998, pp. 60, 65). Other studies do not discuss the possible relationship between the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians and the emergence of the Karabakh conflict. The most complete study of the Karabakh conflict is that of Thomas de Waal (2003), but his position on the possible links between the past genocide and the contemporary ethno-territorial conflict is both curious and revealing: while his work is much more nuanced when compared with that of Cornell, he lets the protagonists express themselves, presenting both 'Armenian' and 'Azerbaijani' perspectives as being equally reliable; manifestly lacking is de Waal's own critical analysis of the respective positions. Only a few studies have mentioned the importance of the genocide for understanding the contemporary conflict, yet without going further to produce an integrated analysis of the two historic events (Zürcher 2007, pp. 156, 159–60; Cheterian 2008, pp. 31, 301–8; Geukjian 2012, pp. 47–51).

This essay argues that the Karabakh conflict can and should be studied as the double legacy of Stalinism and the genocide previously committed against Armenians in the Ottoman

Empire by the Committee of Union and Progress (*Ittihadists*—CUP).¹ The essay argues that it is not possible to understand the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan without integrating the discourse of genocide denial produced in Turkey and adopted by Azerbaijan. Since the conflict erupted, both parties to the conflict, as well as Turkey, have made numerous references to the impact of the unresolved question of the 1915 genocide and the way it continues to affect current perceptions and policies. By incorporating the historic Ottoman background and bringing it into our interpretation of the genesis of the Karabakh conflict, the essay opens up new possibilities for understanding the impact of Turkish–Armenian antagonism on the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. Moreover, when looking at the possible links between the 1915 genocide and nationalism, it is actually the Azerbaijani side that has drawn a direct link between the genocidal past and the contemporary conflict. To explain this apparent anomaly, as well as the silence in the scholarly research on the possible links between the genocide of 1915 and contemporary conflict in the South Caucasus, the essay argues that we have to look at the policies of genocide denial and the narratives that have emerged following the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Links between the 1915 genocide and the Karabakh conflict

The scene is from Yerevan, April 1992: thousands of people were marching the long-winding road leading towards the Armenian Genocide Memorial at Tsitsernagaberd. It was the 77th commemoration of the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, observed every year in Yerevan and in other cities with a substantial Armenian population. There were families with their children wearing their Sunday best, groups of young people carrying flowers, and peasants with rough faces burnt by the sun who had come from villages in neighbouring Ararat Valley. There were also groups of bearded young men, wearing military fatigues, walking with carnations in hand. The fighters stopped at the entrance of the monument and placed the flowers at the foot of four tombs of young men who had fallen fighting their Azerbaijani adversaries in Yerashkavan, near the northern border of Nakhichevan.² Here, two symbols were superimposed, communicating continuity: the contemporary struggle with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which was seen as part of the Armenians' struggle for existence, as was the case during the genocide, and the symbol of the current-day adversary, which presented the same existential danger as the threat of annihilation of 1915.

At the time, as a newspaper reporter working on a conflict away from my hometown, I opposed such an interpretation of the events. In 1992, the leaders of Azerbaijan were not the equivalent of the *Ittihadists* of 1915, I argued. The Karabakh war was the result of the Soviet collapse, and I believed that the conflict could have been managed in a manner other than war. I feared that, by superimposing the two images, that of 1915 on top of the Karabakh conflict, we would create an atmosphere where the two sides saw each other as 'eternal

¹The Committee of Union and Progress, or *Ittihadists*, was an Ottoman political formation that came to power after a coup in 1908 and was responsible for organising the deportations and massacres of the Armenians during World War I.

²One of the Armenian militants buried at Tsitsernagaberd is Movses Gorgisyan, an activist and intellectual who was the editor of the *samizdat* magazine *Glasnost*, and one of the active orators of the Karabakh movement. He was 28 years old when he was killed in clashes near northern Nakhichevan—an Azerbaijani exclave that borders Armenia, Iran and Turkey—in early 1990.

enemies', leading to a search for military solutions instead of understanding the conflict within the context of the rapid disintegration of the Soviet state and the numerous problems it created, thereby excluding the possibility of diplomacy and a negotiated solution. Suggesting a link between the unfolding events and the 1915 genocide would have made any possible compromise hard to attain.

Now, looking back at the events that shaped this region a quarter of a century later, I see the issue in a different way, as the 1915 genocide has influenced the thinking of the conflict parties to a far greater extent than I thought was possible back in 1992 (Görgülü 2008). Politicians increasingly refer to the unresolved problem of 1915 as an obstacle to positive developments today.³ With hindsight, the unresolved historic legacy of the 1915 genocide can be seen to have influenced the emergence of the Karabakh conflict back in the late 1980s, and it continues to pose an important obstacle both to the resolution of the conflict and to the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia. Instead of the memory of past atrocities playing a positive role by warning the neighbouring peoples of the Caucasus of the dangers of mass violence, the memory of the 1915 genocide plays a negative role by perpetuating a destructive legacy and by creating images of eternal enemies, where the ultimate crime itself continues to serve simultaneously as a model and as a threat, as well as a source of existential fear.

One would expect Armenian political leaders to leverage the memory of the 1915 genocide for political purposes, both at home and internationally. Yet, surprisingly, in the years immediately following its independence in 1991, Armenia sought to separate the issue of genocide recognition from the contemporary conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. This was largely because the leadership of Armenia under presidents Levon Ter-Petrosian, Robert Kocharyan and Serge Sargsyan aimed at separating the Karabakh conflict from the historic problem of the 1915 genocide and Armenia's complex relationship with Turkey. Even Kocharyan, who pushed for international recognition of the Armenian genocide, was in favour of normalising Armenian–Turkish relations without any preconditions, in other words, dropping the Armenian demand that Turkey recognise the 1915 events as genocide.⁴ While Armenia's political leaders and public opinion at large felt that there was a strong link between the unrecognised genocide of 1915 and events such as the 1988 Sumgait pogrom in Azerbaijan (Shahmuratian 1990), they nevertheless opted, for reasons of political expediency, to separate the normalisation of Armenian–Turkish relations from the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Yet the same does not apply to the leadership of Azerbaijan, which increasingly refers to the significance of the 1915 genocide in the current conflict, as we will see below.

Armenia: normalisation of relations without forgetting the past

The scene that I described above at the Tsitsernagaberd memorial in 1992 is deceptive. April 1992 was the height of the war in Karabakh: the Soviet Union had collapsed, which in turn led to a total war between Armenia and Azerbaijan to define once and for all who was the

³See, for example, the statement of the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the 69th session of the United Nations, 24 September 2014, available at: <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2014/09/24/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-New-York-speech/>, accessed 8 June 2018.

⁴See, for example, the letter sent by Robert Kocharyan to Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 25 April 2005, 'ID: 05YEREVAN769_a', WikiLeaks, 27 April 2005, available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05YEREVAN769_a.html, accessed 28 February 2018.

master of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast'* (NKAO). The dissolution of the USSR, the devastating earthquake of 1988, the thousands of refugees that poured into Armenia escaping the pogroms in various cities in Azerbaijan (MacFarlane & Minear 1997) and especially the uncertainties of the ongoing war, had created an almost apocalyptic atmosphere. In the meantime, the ethnic Azeri population of Armenia had also been driven from its ancestral homeland and taken refuge in neighbouring Azerbaijan. Hence, in order to understand the Armenian position on the relationship between the 1915 genocide and the articulation of contemporary politics, it is necessary to go back by at least four years, to early 1988, when the mass mobilisations in Karabakh and Armenia started, and study in detail the events and discourses surrounding the background to the broader history of the region.

That the Karabakh conflict would eventually become entangled with the deep Armenian–Turkish controversy was far from inevitable. The direct historic roots of the Karabakh conflict can be traced back to the conflict that emerged between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (referred to at the time in European literature as ‘Caucasian Tatars’ or as ‘Caucasian Muslims’) within the context of the 1905 Revolution, the fall of the Romanov dynasty in 1917 and the emergence of independent republics. Unlike in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians were not the target of state-sponsored massacres; they were instead part of what could be described as a communal conflict (Minassian 1984, pp. 42–9). Their active participation in this conflict would later enable them to obtain the status of a union republic within the Soviet framework (Kévorkian & Ternon 2014).⁵ The more recent Karabakh conflict that emerged in 1988 did not evolve within the political space of the Ottoman Empire or the Turkish Republic, which had only indirect influence or decision-making power over Soviet Azerbaijan.⁶ Instead, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was the result of Soviet failures and successes, specifically, the ethnic definition of territorial administration and the creation of a social hierarchy based on an official definition of ethnic identity. Such arrangements, complex in nature and mediated from the Soviet centre in Moscow, survived as long as the Soviet model existed; by definition, therefore, these arrangements became problematic as the leadership and authority of central Soviet power was contested.

In the late 1980s, two major political currents emerged among Soviet Armenians in the South Caucasus. The first was the ‘Karabakh Movement’ (*Gharapaghyan sharjhum*), a popular mobilisation which demanded the transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast'* from Soviet Azerbaijan to neighbouring Soviet Armenia. The second was a social and political revolution in Armenia against Soviet rule, as, within the wider framework of the Karabakh Movement, a large section of the Yerevan intelligentsia, frustrated at the stagnation of the late Soviet era, pushed for radical social change and democratisation. One can thus point to two mobilisations occurring simultaneously, with different agendas: one in Karabakh itself, which was struggling against decades-long ethnic discrimination while demanding independence

⁵Armenian deaths from the wars and pogroms that occurred in the Transcaucasus between the outbreak of the Russian Revolution and the start of Sovietisation in the 1920s are estimated to be as high as 200,000.

⁶Ottoman armies did take part in the interethnic conflict that erupted in the Transcaucasus following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Caucasus frontlines when they intervened in the South Caucasus and took part in anti-Armenian massacres. Also, Kemalist Turkey exerted a certain influence on decision-making in the early Soviet period, including over borders through the Treaty of Kars, signed in 1921, which defined not only the Soviet–Turkish border but also the internal Soviet division between the three South Caucasus union republics, and specifically defined the boundaries of current Nakhichevan as an autonomous republic within the Azerbaijan SSR.

from Azerbaijani rule; and a second in the Armenian SSR that saw its struggle as being against Soviet rule, with the aim of re-establishing Armenia's sovereignty. This second current questioned conventional Armenian political thinking about the eternal danger of Turkey and hence the need for Russian protection (Suny 1993a, p. 239).⁷ Mark Malkasian captured well the different social nature of the two mobilisations: the one in Karabakh was formed by factory managers and government officials, while the intelligentsia mainly led the other: 'whereas nationalism inspired Karabakh Armenians, democratisation was the touchstone for activism in Armenia' (Malkasian 1996, p. 4).

The democratisation current within the Karabakh Movement led Armenian intellectuals to revise the ideological basis of Soviet power in Armenia (Libaridian 1991, pp. 1–8). Most Soviet Armenians did not view their alliance with Moscow in a way that was consistent with Marxist–Leninist dogma—an alliance between workers and peasants within an internationalist movement—but rather as being necessary due to the persistent Turkish threat. In other words, Soviet Armenia exchanged loyalty to Moscow in return for Russian protection against Turkey. The 'Karabakh Committee' (*Gharapaghyan Komidé*) under the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Vazgen Manukyan wanted to end this subordination to Moscow, as well as the perpetual fear of Turkey.⁸ The Committee did not believe that Armenia needed a protector, nor did it exclude the possibility of living in peace with Turkey to its west and Azerbaijan to its east. This was a revolution in Armenian political thinking. The leaders of the new movement which later became the Pan-Armenian National Movement (*Hayots Hamazkayin Sharzhum*—ANM), were ready to fight for independence.

The new leadership of ANM foresaw the coming collapse of the USSR and viewed national sovereignty as a precondition to solve other problems, including the Karabakh issue. Manukyan, the ANM's principal ideologue, in an article initially published in 1990, clearly expressed the alienation from the idea—dominant in Armenia and among certain diaspora political parties—that Russia guaranteed Armenian security: 'the Russian army is not here for the protection of the Armenians but because Russian interest demands it. The Soviet Union is a disintegrating empire, and sooner or later its interest will demand its evacuation' (Manukyan 2002, p. 45). This acute understanding of the coming collapse of the USSR led the ANM leadership to realise that Moscow was neither capable of nor interested in solving problems in the peripheries; on the contrary, the Soviet leadership was solely interested in manipulating such tensions in order to preserve the union during the period of transition from the Soviet command economy to a market-based system. The ANM went further: while acknowledging that the crimes committed in 1915 had to be addressed in the future, it nevertheless aimed to develop normal commercial relations with Turkey: 'who are our neighbours? Turkey, Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. We can live in peace with all of them; we do not need mediators' (Manukyan 2002, p. 24).

It is true that the Karabakh conflict was the first massive popular mobilisation in the last years of Soviet history.⁹ But it was not the only one. The fall of the Soviet Union generated a series of tensions that would determine the new borders of the post-Soviet space. In the Caucasus alone, there were more than 30 ethno-territorial conflicts (Cheterian 2012,

⁷See also Lazyan (1991).

⁸The Karabakh Committee was formed in 1988 by dissident intellectuals, to lead the Karabakh Movement.

⁹The December 1986 Almaty riots following the dismissal of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Dinmukhamed Kunayev, an ethnic Kazakh, and the appointment of an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin, did not produce a sustained social movement.

pp. 1625–49). There were equally strong tensions all the way from Moldova and Ukraine to Tajikistan in Central Asia. However, not all political tensions led to violent conflicts. In Tatarstan, for example, a political solution in the quest for ‘sovereignty’ was found by defining the division of powers with the new authorities in Moscow. Yet, conversely, the same question led to two bloody wars in Chechnya.

The antagonism between Armenian and Azerbaijani does not have a particularly long history. It is the result of shifts of group identities and the definition of political communities in ailing empires. The antagonism goes back to the 1905 Armeno–Tatar war (as previously mentioned, Azerbaijanis were known as Caucasian Tatars in the European literature of the era) during the first Russian Revolution. Baku was an industrial centre, with oil production, tobacco and mining facilities, and a large working-class population. The social mobilisation of 1905 turned into interethnic violence and spread throughout the Transcaucasus, lasting until 1907. The next round of conflict followed the collapse of tsarist Russia and the emergence of independent Armenia and Azerbaijan. The two young republics fought each other to define their frontiers, struggling especially over the regions of Nakhichevan, Zangezur and Karabakh. Eventually, they succumbed to outside forces: first to the advancing Ottoman armies, and later to the conquering Soviets (Minassian 1989, pp. 1–23).¹⁰

The Karabakh dispute began as a political issue before rapidly evolving into a violent conflict. The Supreme Soviet of Karabakh unanimously declared its independence from Soviet Azerbaijan and its integration into Soviet Armenia on 20 February 1988. One week later, anti-Armenian pogroms erupted in Azerbaijan. On 27 February 1988, crowds of drunken youths armed with knives and clubs went from house to house searching for Armenians in Sumgait, an industrial city then comprising of 223,000 inhabitants, situated on the coast of the Caspian Sea north of Baku. People were beaten up and raped in their homes, and their belongings plundered. The attackers had lists of Armenian families and their addresses, information that was not easy to procure, suggesting some degree of organisation and collaboration with the authorities. The local law enforcement forces disappeared from the streets, leaving the carnage to continue for three days; it only came to an end on the evening of 29 February. Eventually, the Soviet army was sent in to put an end to the violence. The much-doctored official death toll was 32 people, six of whom were ethnic Azeris, and hundreds of injured, while unofficial sources cite much higher figures.¹¹ The remaining Armenian population was chased out of the city. In contemporary vocabulary, they were ‘ethnically cleansed’.

The nature of the Sumgait events remains disputed. Was it a spontaneous eruption of ethnic passions? Or was it an ‘organised event’ and if so by whom? In the words of Vazgen Manukyan, the Sumgait pogroms were ‘organised ... I cannot say on what level the events were organised, whether it had reached up to Gorbachev, or whether it was organised on Azerbaijani Central Committee first secretary level, I do not have such information, but it is clear that the events were organised’.¹² Azerbaijan as a political factor did not figure on the horizon of the Armenian political activists. Ashot Manucharyan, another ANM leader, told me, ‘those who took decisions were in Moscow ... Azerbaijan as a factor started to take form after January 1990’.¹³

¹⁰See also Marshall (2010, pp. 35–41).

¹¹Gerard Libaridian in his preface to Shahrmatian (1990, p. xi) mentions 72 deaths, while Russian journalist and dissident Andrei Shilkov is quoted as saying that ‘at least’ 350 people died in the pogroms (Remnick 1988).

¹²Author’s interview with Vazgen Manukyan, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

¹³Author’s interview with Ashot Manucharyan, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

The Karabakh conflict started as an internal Soviet problem. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast*' and the Armenian SSR and Azerbaijani SSR were part of the Soviet Union in 1988. It was only after the collapse of the USSR in December 1991 that an internal dispute suddenly became an international conflict between independent Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Turkey and the Karabakh conflict

In order to understand Turkish policy towards the Karabakh conflict, it is important to outline how the Armenians were perceived in Turkey in the 1980s. This was a time when Armenians had no voice in the Turkish public space. Their identity, history and culture were defined from outside the community, in strictly negative terms. They were the perfect 'other' in the Turkish Republic (Göl 2005, pp. 121–39; Dixon 2010, pp. 467–85). This was a decade where Turkish public opinion and the political elite rediscovered the Armenian question from the perspective of Armenian terrorism, which mainly targeted Turkish diplomats with the aim of gaining recognition of the mass killings of World War I (Cheterian 2015). As Armenian militancy subsided, another violent movement erupted, that of Kurdish guerrillas under the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*—PKK), representing yet another issue censored and forgotten. In the imagination of the Turkish public and the Turkish elites, the Armenian and the Kurdish problems overlapped (Cheterian 2015, p. 274). In this period, the term 'Armenian' became a pejorative expression and continues to be so today. Armenians were described as traitors, internal enemies who collaborated with imperialist forces to betray Turkey and its armed forces (Taylor 2014). In other words, the Turkish political elite and public opinion held deeply xenophobic attitudes towards the Armenians, and this inevitably affected Turkish policy towards the Karabakh conflict.

Turkish policy in Karabakh was also influenced by the conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus, which were largely seen through a sectarian prism: Christians against Muslims. This was the case in Bosnia, Abkhazia and eventually Karabakh (Tonoyan 2018), all of which reminded the Turkish public of the nineteenth-century Balkan and Caucasus wars, which had had a catastrophic impact on the Muslim populations, who ultimately became *muhajirs* (refugees) in Ottoman lands. It was in this context that the Soviet Union collapsed and independent Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia appeared on Turkey's eastern borders.

Yet, despite this highly charged atmosphere, and even before the declaration of Armenian independence, Turkish diplomats tried to contact the leaders of the emerging ANM. As early as 1990, there were meetings between Armenian envoys and Turkish diplomatic representatives when Ashot Yeghyazaryan, the deputy foreign minister of what was still Soviet Armenia, visited Ankara, and in Yerevan during visits by Turkey's ambassador to the USSR, Volkan Vural. During these early contacts, two Turkish preconditions were formulated for the normalisation of relations with the emerging Armenian state: that Armenia would press the Armenian diaspora to stop international campaigns aiming to gain recognition of the Armenian genocide; and that the Soviet–Turkish border be recognised as the definitive border of the neighbouring states, meaning that an independent Armenia would not demand any territory from Turkey (Hakobyan 2012, pp. 280–81). A third precondition was added only later: the resolution of the Karabakh conflict according to Baku's interests, that is, the return of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani governance and the renunciation of all claims.

The ANM, which had struggled against the Soviet system, was ready to revise its previous policies, including relations with Turkey. In Yerevan, the dominant atmosphere at the time was anti-Soviet, not anti-Turkish; the political struggle was seen as directed against Moscow, not Baku, and certainly not against Ankara. The ANM was ready to put aside the past in order to build normal relations with neighbouring Turkey. Turkey, however, was not ready to forget the 1915 genocide and its consequences: the continuous Armenian diaspora struggle for recognition and reparation. It insisted that Yerevan must surrender politically on this issue, by withholding any diplomatic support for the ‘recognition campaigns’ abroad before normal diplomatic relations could be established or the border opened. In the meantime, the Karabakh conflict became an all-out war following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in November–December 1991. After Armenian forces occupied Kelbajar Province, located between Armenia proper and Nagorno-Karabakh, in April 1993, Turkey imposed a total blockade on Armenia. Ankara has since adopted the Azerbaijani position on the conflict: that the Armenian side should withdraw its forces and Karabakh should remain under Azerbaijani sovereignty (Hakobyan 2012; Cheterian 2017). The violent evolution of the Karabakh conflict added yet another layer of complication to Armenian–Turkish relations.

Moreover, Turkey went as far as playing a direct role in the Karabakh conflict by providing military support to Azerbaijan at the height of the armed struggle. At this time, Ankara sent a large number of Turkish ‘military advisers’ to Azerbaijan, to assist with military planning as well as training Azerbaijani troops (Croissant 1998, p. 96).¹⁴ Turkish military assistance to Azerbaijan intensified following Azerbaijani defeats in the first half of 1992 (Chorbajian *et al.* 1994, p. 33). Furthermore, Ankara took part in the Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia with the objective of making Armenia capitulate to its demands.¹⁵ As a result, Armenia, with the major part of its frontiers either closed (in the case of the border with Turkey) or constituting a war front (with Azerbaijan), has suffered significant economic losses, which have caused significant hardship to its population and continue to do so today (Cheterian 2017, pp. 71–90).

Baku ‘privatises’ genocide

In Soviet Azerbaijan, the ‘Armenian issue’ was absent from public discourse. Soviet Azerbaijani national ‘victimisation’ was addressed towards Iran and the Persians, with Soviet-sanctioned propaganda talking of Iran’s occupation of ‘south Azerbaijan’ and thereby promoting what Shireen Hunter calls ‘the Myth of Greater Azerbaijan’ (Hunter 1994, p. 60).¹⁶ Only a small number of specialised professionals were engaged in coded yet intense debate about the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijani people, and whether Azeris or Armenians were ‘native’ peoples and therefore legitimate owners of the land.

Yet, only a week after the Supreme Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast*’ made its historic decision of 20 February 1988 demanding that the region be brought under the jurisdiction of neighbouring Soviet Armenia, anti-Armenian pogroms erupted in Sumgait, a town several hundred kilometres from Karabakh situated on the northern shores of the

¹⁴There were 150 military advisers in Azerbaijan during the conflict (Croissant 1998, p. 96); see also Rugman (1992).

¹⁵The blockade imposed by Turkey continues until now; in fact, the Turkish–Armenian border is the last preserved portion of the ‘iron curtain’. See Cheterian (2017).

¹⁶See also Swietachowski (1995, pp. 163–77).

Absheron Peninsula. This event was not a footnote in the genesis of the Karabakh conflict—as some scholars tend to suggest (Goltz 1998, p. 83; Cornell 2011, p. 49)—but was instead a constitutive act for two fundamental reasons. First, it transformed a conflict that had previously been articulated solely in political terms into a violent conflict. Second, the Sumgait pogrom carried symbolic meaning, implying that continued political mobilisation around the status of Karabakh would be met with further mass violence. The event resonated even more threateningly against the background of the unrecognised violence of 1915. In isolation, the anti-Armenian violence in Sumgait could be interpreted as a localised disturbance; against the background of the 1915 genocide, however, it has a completely different meaning, as expressed by Manukyan: ‘Sumgait influenced us very strongly. ... It was like putting salt on our wounds. We already had complexes linked with the 1915 genocide, with our former history, and Sumgait made us understand that the Soviet Union provided no guarantee against new massacres’.¹⁷

Sumgait was not an isolated event, as anti-Armenian pogroms continued to strike Armenian communities in Azerbaijan, uprooting entire populations and destroying their cultural heritage. The next to occur were in Kirovabad (now Ganja) in November 1988. This process culminated in mass violence against Armenians in Baku, in January 1990. In April–May 1991, Azerbaijani Interior Ministry forces, with the support of the Soviet armed forces, also deported an estimated 5,000 ethnic Armenian villagers from areas to the north of the administrative border of Nagorno-Karabakh (de Waal 2003). There was no countervailing discourse to oppose ethnic conflict at the height of *perestroika*. In the dominant Azerbaijani discourse the victims themselves were held responsible for the violence: ‘Armenian nationalists’ had organised the pogroms. A prominent mouthpiece for this view was the influential Azerbaijani academic and author Ziya Buniatov, who had earlier developed the theory that Armenians were newcomers to the Caucasus, and that Armenian dynasties or churches were in fact built by Caucasian Albanians (Aghvank, a people who inhabited parts of present-day Azerbaijan):

Why Sumgait? Because the Dashnaks¹⁸ once again wanted to rework Vereschagin’s painting Apotheosis of War into modern photograph with ‘Armenian skulls’ The Sumgait tragedy was carefully prepared by the Armenian nationalists. Several hours before it began, Armenian photographers and TV journalists secretly entered the city where they waited in readiness. The first crime was committed by a certain Grigorian who pretended to be Azerbaijani, and who killed five Armenians in Sumgait. As to what follows it is no more than a technical question because there was no way to stop the enormous crowd.¹⁹ (Buniatov 1989, p. 175)

This discourse continues to dominate the official Azerbaijani stance to this day. Similar to the Ottoman period, when pogroms and massacres were carried out as reprisals for demands by minority groups for reform and political equality between religious communities, the pogroms in Sumgait were a reaction to political mobilisation; in both cases the victims were accused of having ‘staged’ the pogroms themselves, and therefore bearing responsibility for the violence.

¹⁷Author’s interview with Vazgen Manukyan, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

¹⁸By ‘Dashnaks’ Buniatov was referring to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaksutyun*—ARF) which was active at the time in the Armenian diaspora.

¹⁹For the English translation, see Chorbajian *et al.* (1994, pp. 188–89). Buniatov’s article was re-published in *Visions of Azerbaijan*, March/April 2010, available at: http://www.visions.az/history,37/#cite-note_12, accessed 28 February 2018.

Just as in the case of the Young Turks, Buniatov turned the identities of victim and perpetrator upside down. Moreover, by citing the diaspora-based ‘Dashnaks’ he suggested a strong link between the Karabakh conflict, the Sumgait pogrom and the unrecognised genocide of 1915.

The effect of the mass violence was to transform a struggle over the political status of a region and the democratic rights of its inhabitants into an interethnic conflict. On 21 November 1988, the Armenian community of Kirovabad (now Ganja), the second largest city in Azerbaijan, came under attack. A mob attacked Armenian houses, killing and injuring unarmed citizens. The Soviet Army had been deployed, and many soldiers also died in the clashes. Ganja Armenians gathered around Surp Sarkis Church in the old town to defend themselves. In the week-long violence, scores of Armenians were killed and wounded before the army evacuated the entire Armenian population of 45,000, escorting them to neighbouring Armenia (Oganesev 2011). The more populous and wealthier Armenian community of Baku was targeted next, followed by a series of other violent incidents at the start of 1990 (Hakobyan 2008). On 11 January, activists linked to the Azerbaijani Popular Front (*Azerbaijan Khalq Jebhesi*—APF) took control of government buildings in Lankoran on the border with Iran.²⁰ On 13 January, the APF then organised a large rally during which participants voted to establish a paramilitary structure named the ‘council for national security’ (Dahlburg 1990). Speakers talked about the killing of Azeris in Armenia; some called for the expulsion of all Armenians from Baku.²¹ Etibar Mamedov, one of the leaders of APF, held the republican authorities responsible for the violence, claiming that ‘[APF] leaders had appealed the Azerbaijan minister of internal affairs to use MVD [Ministry of the Interior] troops and police to disperse crowds and bring violence under control. No action was taken’ (Altstadz 1992, p. 213). The enraged crowd attacked Armenian shops and apartments, in a pogrom that continued for six days without police intervention. Between 60 and 90 Armenians were killed, and over 2,000 apartments were attacked and robbed. The remaining 200,000 Armenians of Baku were evacuated by Soviet troops to other parts of the crumbling empire. A state of emergency was declared, and Soviet troops were dispatched to Baku on 19 January 1990. As a result of clashes between the troops and activists who had raised barricades to block the roads, over 100 people died. Human rights organisations wrote reports condemning the Soviet troops’ excessive use of force.²² After January 1990, Baku no longer had an Armenian community (Nerssessian 2012).

Violence is contagious. When left unaddressed, historic mass atrocities generate a trauma that is often expressed during times of uncertainty. This trauma creates an excessive reaction, leading to mass mobilisation, as it did in Karabakh and in Armenia during the disintegration of the Soviet Union. There are clear similarities here with the political movements of Abkhaz, Chechens and Ingush in the last years of the Soviet Union, each of which had its own experience of unrecognised mass trauma, leading to mobilisation and eventually to clashes and violent conflict (Cheterian 2008, pp. 285–315). Although in its essence Karabakh was a

²⁰The Azerbaijani Popular Front was established in the summer of 1988 by members of the nationalist intelligentsia, such as Abulfaz Elchibey, a philologist and translator at Baku Faculty of Oriental Studies, and industrial workers such as Nemet Panakhov. The APF was in power in Azerbaijan from June 1992 until September 1993, when its leader Elchibey was overthrown in a military coup.

²¹‘Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaijan’, Human Rights Watch & the Inter-Republic Memorial Society, 1991, pp. 6–7.

²²‘Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaijan’, Human Rights Watch & The Inter-Republic Memorial Society, 1991, p. 15.

typical Soviet legacy problem, similar to conflicts elsewhere in the Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Chechnya) or elsewhere in the USSR (Crimea, the Osh conflict in 1990, Tajikistan), it was increasingly framed through the wider historic context of Armenian–Turkish antagonism. The close association of Turkey and its identification with Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict has necessarily influenced the way the conflict is perceived by both sides.

Azerbaijani violence was met with similar violence from the Armenian side. In late 1988, most Azerbaijanis, as well as most of the Muslim Kurdish population of Armenia, estimated at 160,000, were forced to leave their homes. Ethnic Azeris inhabiting Soviet Armenia were also forced to depart, sometimes exchanging houses with ethnic Armenian families in Baku or Ganja, though there is no record of mass violence comparable to the Sumgait or Ganja pogroms.²³ Indiscriminate violence by both sides against the civilian population and prisoners of war escalated during the Karabakh war. When Armenian fighters attacked and overran Khojali (a strategic town where the regional airport is located), a massacre of local Azeri prisoners and civilians ensued. The attack on Khojali took place on 25–26 February 1992, that is, exactly four years after the Sumgait pogrom, suggesting an element of revenge. Men of fighting age were killed on the spot.²⁴ What occurred in Khojali remains the object of dispute: before the conflict, the town had a population of 2,000 people. According to official Azerbaijani statistics, 613 people were killed in Khojali.²⁵ Other organisations, however, put the number of victims at 161.²⁶ Certain aspects of the massacre also require further investigation, such as the circumstances in which civilians who were given safe passage from the town to Azerbaijan proper were killed as they came under fire in open fields between Askeran and Aghdam. Which side opened fire on them? The then Azerbaijani President Ayaz Mutalibov accused the Azerbaijani opposition of having committed the massacre to discredit his administration and overthrow him, a claim which was seized upon in Armenia and is officially cited as the explanation for the Khojali killings.²⁷ Subsequently, however, the Baku authorities have deployed the Khojali massacre as a major propaganda weapon within a narrative of Azeri victimhood.

Indeed, official Azerbaijani discourse on the conflict has increasingly appropriated the image of genocide victim, thereby engaging in the genocide debate on its own terms. On 26 March 1998, Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliiev announced that 31 March would henceforth be a ‘Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis’.²⁸ The decree did not refer to a specific historic event but to two centuries of genocide being ‘repeatedly committed against the Azerbaijani people’. The chronology outlined in the decree starts with the signing of the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813 and the Turkmenchai Treaty of 1828, between Russia and Persia, as a result of which

²³See Rumyanstev and Huseynova in this special issue.

²⁴Author’s interview with an ethnic Armenian commander who took part in the military operation, Stepanakert, April 1992.

²⁵Author’s interview with an ethnic Armenian commander who took part in the military operation, Stepanakert, April 1992.

²⁶‘Azerbaijan, Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh’, Human Rights Watch Helsinki, 1994, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/a/azerbjn/azerbaj94d.pdf>, accessed 28 February 2018.

²⁷The original interview with Mutalibov was done by Czech journalist Dana Mazalova, published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on 2 April 1992. See Rettie (1992), Zvyagin (2010).

²⁸See, ‘Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Genocide of the Azerbaijani People’, Baku, 26 March 1998, available at: <http://www.human.gov.az/?sehife=etrafli&sid=MTMyMjMzMTA4MTMyNjE1Mw==&dil=en>, accessed 28 February 2018.

Transcaucasia passed to Russian rule, followed by the ‘massive resettlement of Armenians on Azerbaijani lands. A policy of genocide was to become an essential element in that occupation of Azerbaijani territory’. The decree refers to the intercommunal clashes between 1905 and 1907 as having resulted from Armenian attacks with the aim of creating a ‘Greater Armenia’. Other elements that the Day of Genocide covers include the Baku Commune²⁹ as an attempt to realise ‘the liquidation of the Azerbaijanis’. The decree traces a linear Armenian policy of Azeri extermination throughout the Soviet period, reaching the present-day conflict with the entry of Soviet troops to Baku in January 1990 and, finally, Khojali: ‘this bloody tragedy, which has entered our history as the Khojali Genocide, ended with the annihilation of thousands of Azerbaijanis, with others taken prisoner and the city erased from the face of the earth’.³⁰ Yet while this official discourse proclaims Azerbaijanis as victims of genocide, it denies that Armenians have been the victims of any mistreatment whatsoever. Here, we see clearly that following independence from the USSR and the Karabakh conflict, the leaders of Azerbaijan have integrated images of ‘genocide’ into a narrative of national victimhood, thereby mirroring the Armenian narrative.

In addition to ‘Genocide Day’, Azerbaijan also commemorates the Khojali massacre on 23 February. State-financed commemorations have been launched both in Azerbaijan and abroad. For instance, Azerbaijan financed a campaign of posters in Istanbul, Washington, DC and elsewhere to inform public opinion about the ‘Khojali genocide’.³¹ The commemoration of Khojali has also become an occasion for mobilising extreme nationalist forces in Turkey. On 23 February 2012, tens of thousands of people gathered on the streets of Istanbul on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the massacre. Right-wing nationalist parties such as the Nationalist Movement Party and Islamist Great Unity Party gathered their supporters for the occasion. Carrying Azeri and Turkish flags, they screamed ‘revenge’, and ‘We are all Turks, what about you?’, a reference to the slogan ‘We are all Armenians’ that had been chanted at the funeral of the murdered Turkish–Armenian journalist Hrant Dink.³² On the same day in 2014, Turkish ultra-nationalists marched from the Armenian-inhabited Şişli district in Istanbul towards Taksim Square, carrying Azerbaijani and Turkish flags and a banner that read: ‘Hooray for Oğün Samast! Down with Hrant Dink! Salute Azerbaijan and keep on fighting’.³³

²⁹The short-lived period of Bolshevik rule in Baku under Stepan Shahumyan and a group of multinational radical revolutionaries, from April to July 1918.

³⁰See, ‘Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Genocide of the Azerbaijani People’, Baku, 26 March 1998, available at: <http://www.human.gov.az/?sehife=etrafli&sid=MTMyMjMzMTA4MTMyNjE1Mw==&dil=en>, accessed 28 February 2018.

³¹Posters about Khojaly Massacre Appear in U.S. Cities’, *Azernews*, 22 February 2013, available at: <http://www.azernews.az/nation/50057.html>, accessed 28 February 2018.

³²‘Azeri Mark 20th Anniversary of Khojaly Massacre in Istanbul’, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 February 2012, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/azeris-mark-20th-anniversary-of-khojaly-massacre-in-istanbul.aspx?pageID=238&nID=14673&NewsCatID=355>, accessed 28 February 2018.

³³‘Nationalists Unfurl Banner Hailing Assassin of Hrant Dink at Khojaly Massacre Commemoration’, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 February 2014, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/nationalists-unfurl-banner-hailing-assassin-of-hrant-dink-at-khojaly-massacre-commemoration.aspx?pageID=238&nID=62849&NewsCatID=341>, accessed 28 February 2018.

Constructing modern Azerbaijani identity

When Heydar Aliyev—formerly the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijani SSR—returned to power in 1993, he launched a new process of top-down identity-building, which has been further strengthened during the presidency of his son Ilham Aliyev from 2003 onwards. ‘National identity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan rests in large part, then, on the cult of the Aliyevs, alongside a sense of embattlement and victimisation and a virulent hatred of Armenia and Armenians’, according to one scholar (Smith 2013, p. 296). As part of this process, the ‘Armenian’ became the negative ‘other’ against which Azeri identity was to be defined. In doing so, the authorities in Baku have sought to foster support from an Azeri diaspora while simultaneously presenting Azerbaijan as the real victim of genocide. Azerbaijani populations do exist outside the republic; in the Marneuli district in neighbouring Georgia, as well as important Azerbaijani communities in Russia, Turkey and Iran. The origins and historic experiences of those communities have very different references, and therefore self-identities: for example, while the Azeris of Georgia identify themselves with the Republic of Azerbaijan, those of Iran have historic experience of turning towards Iran, where Turkic-speaking dynasties were in power over centuries, and do not feel bound to the rulers in Baku.³⁴ There is a third case, that of recent Azerbaijani migration to Russia, Europe and North America, composed of migrant workers or students sent on state grants. Azerbaijani embassies have encouraged Azerbaijani youth to take part in diaspora organisations and activities. The aim of such policies is to generate pressure groups to match those of the Armenian diaspora, which can be used as a foreign policy tool (Balci 2011). Sergey Rummyantsev claims that the Azerbaijani state ‘not only sponsors the process of construction of diaspora but also tries to control it ... the official project for the construction of “Azeri diaspora” is very largely built on stereotypes about the Armenian diaspora’ (Rummyantsev 2010, pp. 111, 122).

Sociologist Ceylan Tokluoğlu carried out two series of interviews with the Azerbaijani political elite concerning their views on the Karabakh conflict, the first in 2001 and the second in 2009. Her research reveals a discourse built on stereotypes of Armenians, a major obstacle to normalisation and conflict resolution. What emerges is a collective belief that Armenians are newcomers to the Caucasus, who were settled in the region by Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as such have no legitimate claims to Karabakh or any other territory in the Caucasus. Moreover, the study reveals negative, racist stereotypes dominant among the Azeri elite, based on the conviction that Armenians do not accept historic facts and ‘always depend on super powers and are unreliable due to their cultural traits’ (Tokluoğlu 2011, p. 1235). A historian who is also a member of the Azerbaijani parliament is quoted by Tokluoğlu as saying: ‘all these Armenian lies are planned against the Greater Turkish World, against Great Turkey. Today these lies still continue. The Armenians kill each other and say that Azerbaijanis did the killings. They do this to create conflicts between different nations’ (Tokluoğlu 2011, p. 1236). Similar views are expressed by another academic:

Armenians polish the shoes of those who are powerful. However, if the powerful ones grow weak, they stab them from behind and then ally with other powerful states. This is what they have always done. In the Ottoman society they were once known as *millet-i sadika*, meaning the most loyal nation

³⁴On the tensions between Iranian Azeris and the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially regarding questions of identity, see Hunter (1994, 2006).

of the Ottoman state. What did they do? They joined hands with Russians and stabbed the Ottomans from behind. (Tokluoğlu 2011, p. 1239)

What emerges from Tokluoğlu's research is the Azerbaijani elites' belief that the Armenian aggression of the 1980s and 1990s is a continuation of '1915'. As Armenians could not fight a stronger Turkey, they instead attacked the more vulnerable Azerbaijan. From the perspective of the Azerbaijani elite, countries that recognise the genocide of the Armenians are enemies of Azerbaijan (Sanjian 2008, pp. 28–33). By recognising 1915 as a crime against humanity, they are seen not as defenders of universal human values; instead, they are depicted as partisans taking sides in the Karabakh conflict in favour of the Armenians. Tokluoğlu's analysis goes further. She argues that contemporary Azerbaijani national identity is constructed by defining the Armenians and not themselves as a 'unique community' with a 'special mission': to create conflicts and occupy the lands of the Turks:

Azerbaijanis also attribute a 'unique destiny' to the Armenians: a destiny to be deported from all countries they once lived in. In this context, remembering the past becomes important for the Azerbaijanis since 'national destiny' presupposes a well-remembered past ... the Turks of Anatolia are accused for not remembering their past well. It is claimed that if they had remembered the Armenian aggressions against the Anatolian Turks, they would willingly support the Azerbaijanis against the Armenians. (Tokluoğlu 2011, p. 1225)

Official Azerbaijani state-sponsored rhetoric of victimisation continues in the present day. In 2013, Azerbaijan inaugurated its 'Guba Genocide Memorial Complex' in a northern locality, where a mass grave was discovered in 2007, according to official Azerbaijani sources. The complex is dedicated to 12,000 victims of interethnic strife in March 1918, with Bolshevik and ARF militants on the one side and members of the Azeri Musavat Party on the other.³⁵

Alternative voices do exist inside Azerbaijan, but they are muted by threats and violence. The case of Akram Aylisli is a good illustration. A well-known Azerbaijani writer, Aylisli was respected by the establishment and qualified for the official title of 'People's Writer', even becoming a member of parliament from 2005 to 2010. All of this changed when he published the novel *Stone Dreams* in the December 2012 issue of the Russian literary journal *Druzhba Narodov* (Mamedov 2015). The novel talks about the Sumgait pogroms from the perspective of two Azeri characters who try to save their Armenian neighbours. This modest attempt to build bridges between neighbours was ferociously attacked by the Azerbaijani establishment: Aylisli lost his title and financial privileges; his family members lost their jobs; demonstrations were organised that included people who had not even read the novel; Hafız Hacıyev, the leader of the pro-government 'Modern Musavat' party in Azerbaijan, went so far as to promise financial compensation to anyone willing to cut off one of Aylisli's ears.³⁶ The Azerbaijani authorities have cultivated their own version of history, which includes genocide, denial of genocide and an imagined worldwide diaspora. Any foreigner who contradicts such a stance is stigmatised as an Armenian agent, and any Azerbaijani offering a different reading of history,

³⁵'Genocide Memorial Complex Opened in Guba', *News.Az*, 18 September 2013, available at: <http://news.az/articles/politics/82690>, accessed 28 February 2018.

³⁶'Azeri Party Offers Bounty for Ear of Author', *Reuters*, 12 February 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-writer/azeri-party-offers-bounty-for-ear-of-author-idUSBRE91B1GD20130212>, accessed 28 February 2018.

even as fiction, can be threatened. The Azerbaijani authorities have gone as far as to demand the imposition of sanctions on states that recognise the Armenian Genocide, though this was not followed by any concrete steps (Sanjian 2008, p. 31).

The denial of genocide and mass violence is not only dangerous to minorities; it also pollutes the political culture of entire societies, where violence and threats become part of a political exercise degrading basic rights and democratic practice.

Failed protocols

The intersection between the genocide legacy and the Karabakh conflict has also precluded any breakthrough in long negotiations on the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia, known as ‘football diplomacy’. Secret diplomatic contacts between the two countries restarted in 2007, that is, 16 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Armenia. The negotiations were launched under a US political initiative and through Swiss mediation (Phillips 2005), yet also reflected a generational change in Ankara, following the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP) in 2002. By 2007, AKP had imposed its dominance over the Turkish state, and one of its leaders, Abdullah Gül, had become President. The new administration aspired to revise Turkey’s foreign policy under the slogan of ‘Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbours’.³⁷ This policy was given further impetus by the August 2008 Russo–Georgian War, which revealed the limits of Turkey’s influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, marking Russia’s forceful return to a space Ankara deemed vital, especially in the field of energy. The ‘zero problem’ policy was, however, immediately paralysed by Turkey’s position on the Karabakh issue. This realisation prompted a new policy of opening towards Armenia, which began when Turkish President Gül accepted an invitation from his counterpart Serge Sargsyan to visit Yerevan and watch a football game. This marked the start of a series of Turkish–Armenian diplomatic encounters (Tait 2008), leading to the signing in October 2009 of documents (the Zurich Protocols) on the opening of the Turkish–Armenian border, and the establishment of diplomatic relations (Cheterian 2015, pp. 290–94). The Turkish leaders who were pushing for the normalisation of relations argued that this could have a positive impact on Armenian–Azerbaijani relations and should be pursued for the sake of a peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict (de Waal 2010).

The chief Armenian negotiator with Turkey, Deputy Foreign Minister Arman Kirakosyan, claimed that the main merit of the Zurich Protocols was to separate the normalisation process from both the Karabakh conflict and genocide recognition: ‘the basic Turkish demands going back to 1993 were the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Kelbajar and Karabakh, and regulating the conflict in favour of Azerbaijan. ... These two preconditions are not present in the protocols’.³⁸ On the other hand, Giro Manoyan, a leading member of the ARF, claimed that three of Turkey’s demands in the negotiations had been met—two of them directly in the Protocols (the recognition of borders and the cessation of Armenian genocide recognition campaigns) while ‘the third precondition, the Karabakh conflict, is not in the texts but is

³⁷See the Turkish Foreign Ministry document: ‘Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbours’, undated, available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa>, accessed 8 June 2018.

³⁸Author’s interview with Arman Giragosyan, Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Yerevan, 7 October 2009.

present in the process: Turkish leaders are declaring that no borders will be opened before a positive solution' to the Karabakh conflict.³⁹

Baku regarded this shift in Turkish policy as nothing less than treason to the common cause. The Azerbaijani leadership threatened to abandon oil and gas contracts concluded with Turkey (Champion 2009) and to re-orient itself geopolitically towards Russia. The angry Azerbaijani opposition to the normalisation of Armenian–Turkish relations eventually succeeded. At the moment of signing the protocols in Zurich, the then Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, wanted to include some comments on the Karabakh conflict, which was beyond the scope of the documents. Tension arose between the two delegations, delaying the signing ceremony for several hours. After intense US pressure it was decided that neither Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan nor his Turkish counterpart Davutoglu would issue a statement. Nevertheless, this tension signalled a clear divergence. Although the protocols were signed in Zurich, the political will that had shaped them was no longer there; the necessary parliamentary ratification was never achieved. In fact, while Turkish President Abdullah Gül was behind the 'football diplomacy' initiative, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan opposed it. He made his stance clear in a speech delivered to the Azerbaijani *milli mejlis* (parliament) on 14 May 2009:

Turkey shut its borders with Armenia after its occupation of Azerbaijani lands. The border may open after the occupation is eliminated. So long as the demands of our Azerbaijani brethren are not met, we will not back a single step away from this stance. This is inter-related and cannot be considered separately.⁴⁰

Although the Zurich Protocols were signed in the presence of world leaders, the Turkish parliament has refrained from ratifying them. Thus, for a quarter of a century, Armenia and Turkey have been unable to separate the normalisation of their diplomatic relations, the opening of a closed border between the two states and recognition of the 1915 genocide from the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Finally, nearly ten years after signing the protocols in Zurich, Armenia officially cancelled them in March 2018.⁴¹

Conclusion

In her lengthy essay, to which the title of this essay alludes, Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan emphasises the growing importance of historic references in modern societies, which sometimes take on a religious dimension: 'in a secular world, which is what most of us in Europe and North America live in, history takes on the role of showing us good and evil, virtues and vices' (MacMillan 2010, p. 20). MacMillan notes that, while 'history is becoming more important in our public discussions, professional historians have largely abandoned the field to amateurs' (MacMillan 2010, p. 35). Hers is a cry to historians to come back and engage with public opinion, with current affairs, with commemorations and anniversaries,

³⁹ Author's interview with Giro Manoyan, head of 'Armenia Cause' office of ARF, Yerevan, 6 October 2009.

⁴⁰ 'Baku Raps Turkish–Armenian Accord', *Azernews*, 13 October 2009, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/15007.html>, accessed 28 February 2018.

⁴¹ 'Armenia Scrapping Protocols to Normalize Relations with Turkey', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 1 March 2018, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-turkey-yerevan-scrapping-protocols-normalize-relations/29071069.html>, accessed 8 June 2018.

so that laypersons do not distort the study of the past and its lessons for us today. Yet in both the Soviet Union and the Republic of Turkey, history and historians were at the service of the powers that be, serving to legitimate hegemony and dominance. How can we trust historians who, for most of the twentieth century failed to study, write and publish works about the relevance of the first modern genocide? I would argue that many of the scholars who have dealt with the history of the Karabakh conflict have either chosen the indifference of the ‘third party’ stance, or even adopted the denialist position.

The genocide of the Ottoman Armenians is historically significant as the first modern genocide, whereby a state decided to physically eliminate a portion of its own society. Nevertheless, the consequences of the Armenian genocide have been ignored in the century since, not the least by its perpetrator, Turkey, even though these consequences are evident in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Two exclusivist discourses have emerged from those dark events: one from the side of the descendants of the victims who have called for recognition and compensation, arguing that justice left undone would perpetuate the crime by encouraging others; the other, from the side of the perpetrators, argues that the victims bear the responsibility for their calamity because they were rebellious and collaborated with enemy powers. The Azerbaijani political class has adopted this second discourse about the Armenians, which was dominant in Turkey in the 1980s when the Karabakh conflict emerged. While the Turkish position has since changed somewhat, with the official stance now being that 1915 was a civil war in which both sides suffered, the official discourse in Azerbaijan continues to reflect the stereotypes of the 1980s. In an indirect manner, the denial of the Armenian genocide in Turkey helped to transform the Karabakh conflict from a political dispute to a violent conflict, and it continues to be one of the major obstacles on the road to its peaceful resolution.

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