

Analysis

Armenia's Attitude Towards its Past: History and Politics

By Sergey Minasyan, Yerevan

Abstract

How do perceptions of the past manifest themselves in the public discourse of the Armenia of today? In what way do historical myths shape the political development of the country? To what extent and how do politics impact on historical narratives and the development of history writing? The following text attempts to seek answers to these questions and thus addresses the very broad question of the role of history for Armenians and Armenia in the 21st century.

Reconstructing the Past in the Post-Soviet Space

It is obvious that the various strands of historical narratives play an important role in the political development not only of Armenia, but all the post-Soviet countries. In order to cement a national identity distinct from the former supranational Soviet identity, the national elites, together with historians, have played and still play an important role in driving the process of history-writing, thereby striving to find a consensus on their nations' past as a basis for national mobilization. Naturally, this past is presented in a way that the elite and public would like to see.

Political elites and historians in certain authoritarian countries, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, are obliged to write and create national histories practically "from scratch". Other post-Soviet countries, for instance the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Georgia, have to come to terms with some of the "dark pages" of their past. Having been parts of the Tsarist Empire and then the USSR, the new historical narratives now seek to use this past as part of a political and propagandistic fight against the new Russia. In Azerbaijan, there is a notable process of putting the nation into the context of ancient civilization and using this as an argument in the country's struggle against Armenia over Karabakh. In Russia, the historical discourse fluctuates between "neo-imperial nostalgia" and attempts to critically reconsider the Soviet Communist past.

Perceptions of the Past in the Public Awareness of Today's Armenia

The rewriting of the past and the search for an often mythical "golden age" as the basis of nation-building are features in all the post-Soviet states. Presenting their nations' development and aspirations for independence as an outcome of "heroic" struggles against often stronger enemies is certainly a very effective way to create an ideological basis for national identity-building.

In Armenia, all the above mentioned historical narratives (with the exception of the neo-imperial discourse, which is mainly a specific Russian feature) are present. Like in other small countries of the post-Soviet space, perceptions of the past are heavily influenced by the ethnic factor. It is obvious that history is not only the last harbor of ethnic consciousness, but also a source of nutrition feeding it. The destruction of the former Communist totalitarian system coincided not only with the creation and formation of new independent states, but also with a sharp rise in nationalism beginning in the end of the 1980s. This surge in nationalism, in turn, stimulated great interest in national history.

Unfortunately, the narrow focus on ethnically-defined history has often led to the over-simplification of certain historical conceptions regarding Armenians and Armenia. This simplification resulted in great part from the Karabakh conflict, which favored the "ethnic" component of history writing. Armenian researcher Alexander Iskandarian called this the "Karabakhization" of Armenian history writing. The prevailing vision of history in post-Soviet Armenia has been that of a nation constantly struggling for independence in its "historical" territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, but being overwhelmed by various empires or aggressors. The present independent Republic of Armenia is thus seen as a logical continuation of a centuries-long quest for national independence, a vision which has in fact no relevance for many periods of history. In fact, prior to the short-lived Armenian Republic in 1918–1920, Armenians have only had (or strived for) national statehood for brief and very distant stretches of history.

For Armenian society as a whole (referring not only to Armenians living in Armenia, but the large Armenian Diaspora), history is extremely relevant and probably meets a broader public interest than in any other post-Soviet society. For many Armenians the past is more than just history, it is a protective reaction to problems of the present. Armenians lived through a similar experience to what they see today already in the first quarter of the

20th century, when they suffered from the trauma of the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman Empire and when they failed to construct an independent nation state after the disintegration of the Tsarist Empire in 1918–1920.

The first half of the 20th century can be called the “golden age” of Soviet Armenian historiography, as historians focused specifically on exploring their countries’ ancient and medieval history. At that time, immersing themselves in history gave the Armenian intelligentsia and some groups in society a means of escape from the daily burdens of Communism and Soviet totalitarianism. Similarly, the occupation with history during the difficult years of the 1990s, when Armenia suffered from socio-economic difficulties and the hardships caused by the Karabakh war, meant for many Armenians an escape from realities and search for a better future.

The fact that the history of Armenians as an ethnic group is very ancient has made history an over-important factor in nation-building. In 301 A.D. the medieval Armenian kingdom was the first state to accept Christianity as an official religion and state ideology, and the Armenian alphabet (created at the beginning of the 5th century) began to be used for writing historical chronicles of Armenia. In this aspect Armenians are similar to Georgians in that their perceptions of religious, linguistic and historical identity are linked to very ancient history and tightly interwoven. Even now, many Armenians, especially in the intellectual elite, do not perceive the future of their country as that of a modern nation but in endless reconsideration of the historical past in a paradigm of religious dissent and a struggle against aggression.

The Development of Historical Science: The Situation in Soviet Times

Examining the development of the historical discipline in Armenia is the best way to understand how the past is perceived. In Soviet Armenia, as well as in the other republics of the former USSR, history was the most politicized of the social sciences. Accordingly, Communist censors and ideological monitors exercised great control over history writing in Armenia through the end of the 1980s and historians were often forced to carry out propagandistic functions.

In Soviet Armenia, the politicization of history embraced not only certain critical events in history, like the 1917 revolution and the way that the process of Sovietization of Armenia in the 1920s was presented, but also the merger of the eastern part of Armenia to the Russian empire in the 19th century as a result of the numerous Russian-Persian and Russian-Turkish wars. This fact was presented as the salvation of the Armenian

nation from attempts of assimilation on the part of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, enabling Armenians to preserve their ethnic, religious and linguistic identity on part of their historical territory.

Even after the dissolution of the USSR, some Armenian researchers continued to write about history in the previous Soviet style, presenting it under the banner of “brotherly” relations and even in the Marxist context of class struggles. However, while these researchers still have a strong impact on history writing, they also represent a fairly senior, and thus fading, generation of Armenian historians.

The Role of the Diaspora for History Writing

A unique influence on the development of historiography in Armenia (distinguishing it from other Soviet republics) stems from the numerous historical works written by representatives of the Armenian Diaspora. Their contribution is especially valuable in providing systematic in-depth studies of the First Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) and the 1915 Genocide. Research on the Genocide includes comparative analyses of the Holocaust – an area of research that historians in Soviet Armenia could not have carried out. Additionally, Diaspora historians (such as Richard Hovhannisian and Ronald Suny) have made an invaluable contribution to investigating the history of Armenian political movements and parties which were founded in the late 19th century in the Russian Empire and were active throughout the Soviet years in the Armenian Diaspora. Since independence, these parties have become active in the Republic of Armenia and are known as “traditional parties” to distinguish them from the political parties newly formed in post-Soviet Armenia. In Soviet times, studying the history of the First Republic and the role of Armenia’s traditional parties was an extremely politicized theme; works published at that time had to be approved by the ideological censor and were mostly total falsifications.

When Armenia gained its independence in 1991 and abandoned Communist ideology, many of the studies written by Armenians in the Diaspora were published in Armenia. Since most of the research on contemporary history written by Soviet Armenian historians became irrelevant, historians representing the Diaspora gained a leading role in the re-conceptualization of Armenian history and the development of a new Armenian historiography.

Key Topics in Modern Armenian Historiography

With the outbreak of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Karabakh, the subject of Karabakh has become a major

theme of research for historians in Armenia and has also had a strong impact on the development of the country's historiography. They place a special emphasis on the period of the early 1920s, when the territory of Karabakh was transferred by decree to Azerbaijan. Another topic which has been and remains high on the historians' agenda is the Armenian-Azerbaijan relationship.

Another very popular theme which interested Armenian historians during the period of perestroika through the beginning of the 1990s was the short-lived history of the First Republic of Armenia (existing from 1918 to 1920), as well as related themes examining the history of Armenian traditional parties and the Armenian liberation movement in the western part of Armenia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The end of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism also motivated historians to look into chapters of their history which were considered taboo in Soviet times. Such black spots concerned relations between Armenia and its neighbors, including Russia. In particular, from the second half of the 1990s onwards, numerous works appeared which were dedicated to the history of Armenian-Georgian relations, as well as new works researching relations between Bolshevik Russia and Kemalist Turkey during the 1920s and the impact of these relations on the development of Armenia.

The fall of the Soviet Union and Communism lifted ideological constraints on history writing. However, a new form of constraint has been imposed, which is typical not only to Armenia, but all post-Soviet states. The trend is towards "antiquating" history, meaning that nation-building is presented as a long-term process, dating back hundreds, if not thousands of years. The "geographical scope" of history has also been increased to include all lands in which ethnic Armenians had lived in the past; the history of modern Armenia is thus replaced with the history of the Armenian ethnic group and the territories on which it was settled during various historical periods, including very ancient ones. However, research into ancient and medieval history is put into political context much less often than modern history.

Current political trends exert a strong influence over Armenian historiography. For example, in parallel with Armenia's efforts to move closer to Europe, there has been more research examining Armenian communities in the states of East and Central Europe, the USA, and elsewhere. At the same time, the number of books concentrating on Armenian-Russian relations has decreased to a minimum, whereas, expanded scientific contacts with Western colleagues, especially those in France, Belgium and the USA, have created conditions for carry-

ing out new research by Armenian scholars of those historical periods when Armenian kingdoms were closest to Europe, i.e. the Hellenistic period and the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia that had strong cultural, dynastic and political ties to medieval Europe.

Additionally, new studies have provided fresh insights on the historical relations between Armenia and Iran, Byzantium and other countries without the "ideological enmity" and political restrictions of the Soviet period.

Research on the Genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey has made new strides forward in independent Armenia. Even during the Soviet era, the communist authorities tolerated, and even encouraged, Armenian historians to conduct research on the Genocide. After Armenia gained its independence, the creation of the Museum-Institute of the Genocide of Armenians (MIGA) in 1995 played a large role in spurring further studies of the massacres. As a result of MIGA activity, new studies of the Genocide were published in foreign languages; the museum has made special emphasis on preparing and publishing collections of historical documents from archives in other countries.

More recently, Armenian historians and publicists took a new interest in the history of Soviet Armenia, however they are no longer constrained by the stereotypes of the Soviet period. The activity of many famous political and state figures from Soviet Armenia began to be interpreted as the works of pragmatic and patriotic leaders, compelled to work in the conditions of totalitarian oppression and the restrictions of a communist system. Typically these works are published in the form of historical biographies. Additionally, research dedicated to the dissident and anti-Soviet movement in Soviet Armenia has also appeared.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: History as a Facilitator or Constraint for the Political and Social Development of the New Armenia?

In at least one aspect, the current vision of history is impeding rather than promoting nation-building in Armenia. The prevailing concept of Armenians as a persecuted ethnic group with no nation-state of their own, doomed to reside in empires and constantly struggling against efforts towards assimilation and/or extermination, sharply contradicts the vision of a modern nation. In the "persecuted ethnic group" paradigm, Armenians, including Armenian historians, tend to view any state ruling over ethnic Armenians on their "historical" lands as an oppressor and aggressor, and this vision frequently spills over to the modern Republic of Armenia.

For example, in their criticism of Armenia's political leadership, opposition groups label it as a "foreign yoke", provoking a strong response from the society. Enhanced by the lack of tradition for national statehood, this "ethnic persecution complex" creates an opposition between ethnic identity and any form of statehood, clearly hindering the emergence of Armenian national identity.

Yet, despite the inertia of the Communist past and the influence of current politics, the tendency towards objec-

tivity and a separation from politics is already apparent in Armenian historiography. Of course, the use of Armenian history as a political instrument will continue for a long time (and most likely, as in other countries, it will be impossible to eradicate this practice completely), but nevertheless, Armenian historians have taken the first steps.

About the Author

Dr. Sergey Minasyan is head of the Political Studies Department at the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute.

Opinion

Time Turned Back: On the Use of History in Georgia

By Giorgi Maisuradze, Tbilisi

“Forward to David Agmashenebeli!” is one of the most famous slogans of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's government. This evocation of the great Georgian ruler from nearly 1,000 years ago, known for his military and administrative reforms, symbolizes the basic attitude towards history in post-Soviet Georgia as well as the tendency to use history as a political instrument.

Contemporary Georgian politicians see history not as the past, but as a way to shape the future. This tendency highlights Georgians' peculiar attitude towards the representation of time. This forward-looking attitude makes it difficult to interpret the past objectively and draw lessons from it. At the same time, it hinders the state modernization process to the extent that such a process requires a realistic appraisal of the present and its problems.

At the end of the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika stimulated a national movement in Georgia and in parts of Georgian society. This movement created a so-called “contra-representational myth” of Georgian history, retelling Georgian history in a way that contradicted Soviet and pre-Soviet versions, but presented new myths as fact, which has become the foundation of contemporary Georgia and seeks to define its future direction. This myth is anchored in an idealization of the past which serves to compensate on a psychological level for the difficulties of the present. The transformation of history into some form of “contra-representational myth” began in the 19th century as an integral element of a burgeoning nationalist movement work-

ing to stimulate nation-building processes under colonial conditions.

The Development of History Writing as a Profession in Georgia

At the end of the 19th century, a professional group of historians appeared in Georgia. One of the main objectives of its founder Ivane Javakhishvili was demystifying the past as part of an effort to understand the overall sweep of Georgian history. Javakhishvili's *The History of the Georgian Nation* is the first Georgian historical narrative on which this whole new Georgian historiography is based.

The objectives of Georgian historiography changed considerably in the Soviet period, particularly starting in the 1940s, when the Stalinist regime began to use history writing as an instrument of policy and ideology. Stalin defined a nation as a group based on an historically established language, territory, economic life and psychological structure. On this basis, history became an element of Soviet nationality policy and a major instrument for advancing political claims, legitimized as representing “historical justice”. The most remarkable example of this use of history as an instrument was an article entitled “About our legal claims towards Turkey” written by the Georgian historians Niko Berzenishvili and Simon Janashia on a direct order from Stalin and published in December 1945. In this article, the “legality” of Georgia's territorial claims against Turkey were represented as being determined by history.