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IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM IN PUBLIC SPACES

1

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Armenian History in Urban Everyday Life

The paper discusses why history matters for Armenians, and shows in which ways historical accounts are used to make sense of current everyday life. Referring to Eliade's (1963) and Malkki's (1995) concepts of "myth" and "mythico history" it is explained how historical accounts are used as "moral and cosmological ordering stories", which provide guidelines for behaviour and action.

There are two topics that dominate these "ordering stories": the so-called "sense of antiquity", and the "sense of tragedy".

The "sense of antiquity" manifests itself in a pursuit of the roots of the Armenian ethnic group and culture. The "sense of tragedy" is linked to the bloody history of persecutions, massacres and martyrdom. This paper explores how these two topics, in combination with historical accounts, function as a moral index, and how they transform into a hierarchical system of values. Interestingly, the hierarchy of historical accounts seems to have its roots in a very Soviet understanding of "modernization" and "progress". History thus is a combination of both, culture-specific leitmotifs and an Armenian interpretation of historical materialism. While the leitmotifs make up most of the content of the "moral and cosmological ordering stories", the Soviet interpretation of evolutionism provides a hierarchy of these stories ordering them along a pseudo-chronology of progress.

Keyword: *Armenian history, Yerevan, memory, myth, martyrdom, morality.*

Սուսաննե Ֆիլինգս

Գիտությունների դոկտոր,
Սոցիալ-մշակութային մարդաբանության բաժանմունք,
Մայնի-Ֆրանկֆուտի Գյոթեի անվան համալսարան

Հայոց պատմությունը քաղաքային առօրեականության մեջ

Հոդվածում քննարկվում են հայերի համար պատմության կարևորության պատճառները և պարզաբանվում պատմության դրվագներն առօրյա կյանքում՝ այն իմաստավորելու նպատակով օգտագործման եղանակները: Հետևելով Էլիադեի (1963) և Մալքքիի (1995) «առասպելի» և «առասպելապատմության» հասկացություններին՝ հոդվածում բացատրվում է, թե ինչպես են պատմական դրվագներն օգտագործվում որպես «բարոյականությունը և տիեզերաբանությունը կարգավորող» պատմություններ՝ ծառայելով որպես կենսա- և գործելակերպերի ուղեցույց: Այդ «կարգավորիչ» պատմություններում կարելի է առանձնացնել երկու թեմա՝ այսպես կոչված «հնության զգացողությունը» և «ողբերգության զգացողությունը»:

«Հնության զգացողությունը» դրսևորվում է հայերի էթնիկության և մշակույթի արմատների փնտրտուքում: «Ողբերգության զգացողությունը» կապված է հալածանքների, ջարդերի ու նահատակությունների արյունալի պատմության հետ: Այս հոդվածը մանրամասնում է, թե ինչպես այս երկու թեմաները, պատմության դրվագների հետ միահյուսված, գործում են որպես բարոյական ուղեցույց, և ինչպես են դրանք վերածվում արժեքների հիերարքիկ համակարգի: Պատմական դրվագների հիերարքիկ սանդղակն իր ակունքներով թվում է, թե գնում է դեպի «մոդեռնիզացիայի» և «առաջընթացի» խորհրդային ընկալումները: Այսպիսով, պատմությունը հանդես է գալիս որպես այդ երկուսի՝ պատմական մատերիալիզմի հայաստանյան - մեկնաբանության և մշակութային առանձնահատկություններ ունեցող լեյթմոտիվների խառնուրդ: Մինչդեռ այդ լեյթմոտիվները բարոյատիեզերաբանական պատմությունների բովանդակության մեծ մասն են կազմում, էվոլյուցիոնիզմի խորհրդային մեկնաբանությունն առաջ է քաշում այդ պատմությունների հիերարքիան՝ կառուցված առաջընթացի կեղծ քրոնոլոգիայի հիման վրա:

Բանալի բառեր. *հայոց պատմություն, Երևան, հիշողություն, առասպել, նահատակ, բարոյականություն:*

Сюзанне Фелингс
История армян в городской повседневности

В статье обсуждаются причины значимости истории для армян и разъясняются эпизоды истории в повседневной жизни (для осмысления ее способов применения). Исследуя понятия «миф» и «мифическая история» из «Элиаде» (1963) и Малкки (1995), в статье объясняется, как могут эпизоды из истории использоваться как сказы, регламентирующие праведность и космизм, служа как путеводитель по стилю жизни и режима дня.

■■■

"Yerevan, in the Armenians' opinion, is the largest settlement in the world. According to their tradition, Noah lived here before the flood and after it with his family, having come down the mountains that his ark had been moored to. Besides that, the Armenians assert that it was here that Paradise on Earth was to be found. These traditions are, of course, not well-founded and are perpetuated by ignorant and boastful people" (Jean Chardin, Travels in Persia, 1673-1677).

"There can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth, and identity and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the very concept of a nation" (Smith 1986: 2).[1]

Introduction

Between March 2009 and March 2010 I conducted a year of anthropological fieldwork in the Armenian capital Yerevan. During my research I was able to experience first-hand the value Armenians attach to their past. Whenever I mentioned I was an anthropologist, people would start to talk to me about "history". I under-

1 Suny (1993) uses this quote from Anthony D. Smith as an opening quotation for his book on Armenian history "Looking toward Ararat".

stood this reaction to be not only due to their conception of me being an "etnograf" (anthropologist), whose leading principle of research should be – as in Soviet times – historicism (Petrova-Averkieva 1980, 19)[2]. It was obvious that people talked about history not only to help me, but also because of their own need and desire to express their cultural tradition and identity.

In this paper I shall discuss the importance of historical accounts for Armenian identity, and for the contemporary urban life in the Armenian capital Yerevan.

The question of what constitutes "an Armenian" is closely linked to the understanding of history. As Suny details, Armenians "*have been different in different times and different from one another at the same time*" (1993: 4).[3] This is of course also true for my interlocutors, who belong to different generations and have different social backgrounds. Nevertheless, an "imagined community" (Anderson 1997) has developed since the 19th century that became a powerful entity and based its existence on more or less "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), a unique Christian faith, a presumed common language, a particular ethnic background, a certain interpretation of history and specific socio-cultural values. The definition of "Armenianness" that is linked to these factors provides the basis for my argument that – despite all individualism and group fragmentation – some things matter for *all Armenians*. Consequently, this paper is first of all about concepts rather than about "realities".

As one can observe and as has been mentioned by many authors writing on Armenians and Armenian history (see Suny 1993), there are at least two major concepts or *leitmotifs*, which belong to the described understanding of Armenianness: *ancient origins* and *tragic heroism*. As Halbach puts it:

> *"What distinguishes Armenians from other people in the Soviet Union, even from their neighbours in the Caucasus, is a unique combination of factors promoting nationalism. They define themselves as an ancient, a tragic, a small folk in need of protection and as a highly sophisticated people. In particular, the combination of a "sense of antiquity" and a "sense of tragedy" has given an exceptional gravity to their national sentiment"* (Halbach 2003: 758; own translation from German).

2 According to the Soviet tradition, the discipline of anthropology (*etnografia*) was a part of the science of history and often subordinated within the history or archaeology departments. An anthropologist was required to record oral culture, folk memory, forgotten traditions and material artefacts of popular life. The underlying mainstream theory was historical materialism and Marxist evolutionary theory. These theoretical approaches were part of Soviet ideology and had a particular impact in the context of Soviet nationality policy. Scientists, respectively historians, archaeologists, linguists and anthropologists, were involved in the legitimization of this ideology and provided theory with ethnographic material, which was then absorbed by local people (Gellner 1980; Semenov 1980; Petrova-Averkieva 1980; Meurs 2001; Mühlfried & Sokolovsky 2011). Even today one can observe how Soviet anthropology influenced local identities as Privratsky has exemplified in the Kazakh case (Privratsky 2001).

3 According to Suny (1993: 4-9), until the 19th century there has not existed such a thing as a single Armenian people with a clear national sense, and consequently no clear definition of an Armenian prototype. At best, there has been an ethno-religious community of Armenians sharing some common ethnic roots.

Shnirelmann, who refers to Lezov (Lezov 1992), adds one more important factor, namely religion. According to Shnirelmann Armenian history circles around: "*first, the belief in the Armenian role as a civilizer, based on the classic historical heritage*[4]*; second, self-identification as a stronghold of Christianity in the East; third, the self-image as the eternal victim of oriental barbarians, suffering for the sake of humanity"* (Shnirelmann 2001: 22).

In my opinion religion is difficult to separate from the other two issues and is part of the same argument. In times of political fragmentation, faith remained the element unifying the dispersed population of Armenians; and even when ideas of secular nationalism (coming from western Europe in the 19th century) challenged this conception of a "religious community", religious topics like "sacrifice" and "dedication" (tragic heroism) remained important values simply presented in a new disguise (Suny 1993: 8-11). Furthermore, most of the historical accounts people refer to until today originate from the literate clerical elite (Suny 1993: 6). We can thus find the topics of "ancient origins" and "tragic heroism" in the classical texts on Armenian history written by Agathangelos and Moses Khorenatsi in the 5th century AD. These texts and consequently their topics remain the foundations of modern Armenian historiography (Suny 1993: 6).

I shall amplify the two (three) mentioned topics. After having discussed why history matters for Armenians in general, I shall explain how historical accounts are used as "moral and cosmological ordering stories" (Malkki 1995). I shall start with the so-called "sense of antiquity", then turn to the "sense of tragedy", and finally, explain the impact of both themes on contemporary Armenian society. I shall compare "Armenian history" to Eliade's (1963) and Malkki's (1995) theoretical concept and definition of "myth" and "mythico-history". Thus I shall show the significance that the past has as a moral index and as a hierarchical system of values that recalls the evolutionary system of historical materialism.

Why history matters

As mentioned above, history was a favoured topic during my fieldwork in Yerevan. I was permanently told about the "glorious times" and about the assumption that Armenian culture was the origin of mankind and civilization. A typical quote from one of my interlocutors living in Yerevan and belonging to the urban intelligentsia would go as follows:

> *"Armenians have created so much. It is a historical exception, that you can find an extraordinary personality in every small Armenian village. Great warriors, politicians, writers and scholars originate from the smallest places. That is unique. Armenians have lived everywhere, except in their country. They have built Baku and Tbilisi, and they travelled as merchants all over the world".*[5]

4 Equal to the "sense of antiquity", "ancient origins".

5 This quotation has previously been published in Fehlings (2014: 337).

Consequently, museums[6] in Yerevan are full of archaeological evidence of this presumed historical importance, which few people outside Armenia have likely ever heard of. Is it possible that Armenian history has been hidden from the rest of the world? Some of my Armenian friends were convinced that this is the case and that a conspiracy lies behind it. I quote:

> *"Those who were not able to create something themselves and only were able to destroy, they most of all steal the history of others. Iranians respect Armenian history as they have an old culture themselves. The situation is different with the Turks. Even in scientific contexts they would steal […]".*[7]

Indeed, there has been a tendency, for instance in Soviet times, to suppress and falsify parts of Armenian history, such as the period of the First Republic (1918-1920) or the Armenian Genocide during the Ottoman Empire (1915-1917) (Darieva 2007: 70-73; Suny 1993). Furthermore, as one might deduce from the quotation above, Turks and Azeris are constantly blamed for falsifying the Armenian past to justify their own acts of cruelty and territorial claims. The Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide, for example, is a trigger of conflict that has never been resolved.

Of course, not all examples of historical events are so conspicuous as those just mentioned. Nevertheless, local history in the Caucasus in general clearly is a controversial subject. This situation became particularly apparent in October 1976, when members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences met in Sukhumi to work on a universal "Transcaucasian History". This project, discussed for the last time in 1988, failed because it appeared that there is not one but many versions of the local past (Shnirelmann 2001: 12). There was of course a Georgian, an Azerbaijani and an Armenian interpretation of the historical truth, which mirrored the rivalry between the Caucasian neighbours.[8] But even these approaches were intrinsically controversial. Within the discipline of Armenian history, for example, there began a huge discussion among ethnic Armenians about the origins of the Armenian azg (tribe, people). In this dispute members of the Armenian diaspora usually favoured the so-called "immigration theory", legitimizing the diaspora's affiliation to Armenians living in the territory of Soviet Armenia (Shnirelmann 2001: 33-40). Armenians of the Soviet Republic, by contrast, tried to prove the "theory of indigenous ancestors" to outline their ancient link to their sacred homeland (2001, 41-56).

There are many other topics like these, for example that of religion, which have been treated very differently by specialists/historians of different Armenian subgroups at different points in time. Shnirelmann (2001), in his history of Caucasian

6 "History Museum of Armenia", the "National Gallery", the "History Museum of Yerevan", the "Matenadaran", and the "Erebuni Museum".

7 This quotation has previously been published in Fehlings (2014: 336).

8 There has been a recent joint attempt to rewrite such an integrated Caucasian history by several scholars from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (see Rajabov et al. 2010).

historiography, demonstrates very well the experts' dilemma. They had to adapt to daily politics and scientists, intellectuals, writers, schoolbooks, exhibitions, museums and media – voluntarily or involuntarily – mirrored and shaped the opinion about "the historical truth" during specific periods of Caucasian historical scholarship.

What "true history" comprised was evidently an important question – not only for experts but also for the colonial regime (Van Assche et al. 2013), the local government, "the masses", the diaspora, and members of ethnic and social subgroups. "History" in the described context is thus not merely an object of scientific investigation. It has, first and foremost, socio-cultural functions and legitimizes identity. By consequence, one understands that there is not such a thing as a constant, stable and single "Armenian history". At best, I believe, one can detect "topics". These topics are not only defined and discussed by academics. They derive from the interplay of:

- Scientific interpretations of historical dates and events (influenced by various external factors such as ideology and politics)[9],
- "Collective memory" in the sense of Halbwachs (1985)[10] and Assmann (1988)[11] and, to a much smaller degree,
- Individual experiences and individual interpretations of historical accounts and events.

My interlocutors always explained their attitude and affinity towards "history" in similar terms. They told me that (written, oral and remembered) history for them is a "*strategy for survival*". "*First of all you have to know your history, otherwise you will just disappear and become nobody*", was an argument I heard quite frequently. Understandably, historical occurrences such as the genocide, persecutions in the context of ethnic conflicts, and the situation of being surrounded by enemies (by Muslim Turks above all), have led to the Armenians' self-conception as victims living in permanent danger of elimination. When I talked to a well-established businessman about the Spitak earthquake he told me: "*If something like this happens in China, it has no fatal consequences. There are a lot of Chinese people. But if something like this happens in Armenia, it is a disaster. We are a small people and suddenly we no longer exist*".[12]

9 Armenian historiography starts with early medieval writers, who were obligated to clerical interests and nobility (Conrad 2014). Soviet historiography, as already mentioned, was based on Marxist evolutionary theory.

10 For Halbwachs (1985) "memory" is not an individual but a social/collective matter. It is not a product of man's nature (biological preset) but of culture and socialisation. "History" starts for Halbswachs at the point at which memory fades away. It is a concern of specialists (historians). In my opinion it is extremely difficult – almost impossible – to separate both concepts.

11 Assmann (1988) took up and extended Halbwach's idea of the "collective memory". He distinguished between subcategories of "collective memory", such as the "communicative" and "cultural memory".

12 This quotation has previously been published in Fehlings (2014: 343).

This danger and the resulting fear calls – I guess – for a lasting proof of Armenian's existence. "History" and its passing on by all available means is therefore seen as the most important merit of Armenian culture. This is presumably why old scripts, monuments and buildings are guarded like gold. Kirakos of Gandzak (Gandzaketsi), living in the 13th century, already had this in mind when he wrote his *History of Armenia* (a summary of the events of the 4th to the 12th century). As Conrad (2014) details in his thesis, the mission of writing history was "*to preserve memory for the following generations, to pass on knowledge from fathers to sons, "as the prophet Davit commands" and "Moses taught", in which persists the divine law that the presence and those who live in it fall not victim to oblivion*[13]". Writing a chronicle or history book in this sense became a mystical experience (2014: 181).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union we can find similar fears and reactions. Nevertheless, parts of history have been forgotten by a huge number of the Armenian population. The Armenian historian Suny therefore defines Armenians as follows: "*Armenians are a peculiar people; first, they form a nation (or at least a nationality) that lives within another nation; and second, they are a people often proud of their heritage about which they have not got the foggiest notion*" (1993: 15). Interestingly this pride and lack of knowledge encouraged even more the engagement in saving history, which has been a means of survival since Kirakos of Gandzak, as well as a means of protest against Soviet rule in Soviet times (Darieva 2007)[14]. According to Anderson (talking about "invented traditions") the fact that parts of history have been forgotten produces a need for a narrative of identity in particular (Anderson 1996: 207) – and this narrative is (notably in the context of nationalist movements and nation building) always, again, linked to a narrative of history. This is definitely true in the Armenian context, as was shown by the anti-authoritarian demonstrations on 24 April 1965. These demonstrations, which were part of the national movement within the Soviet Republic, were interpreted as the first public expression of resistance against forgetting the Armenian tragedy (genocide, massacres, and loss of land). The same need of recognition resulted in the erection of the *Genocide Memorial* on *Tsitsernakaberd*[15] (Suny 1997: 377; Darieva 2007; Marutyan 2007: 89-93; Lehmann 2007: 179-189; Lehmann 2015); and is, until today, fostered by politicians, as shown by the speech by President Serzh Sargsyan on occasion of the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide in 2015:

13 KG, 4 see Psalm 78: 3-6.

14 Lehmann (2015) argues that nationalist statements were not necessarily contradictory to the Soviet project. Lenin's authority was not questioned, but used for nationalist goals. Thus reasoning for nationalistic purposes often followed the logics of historical materialism.

15 Tsitsernakaberd is the name of a small hill close to the centre of Yerevan. Besides the Genocide Memorial it hosts the Genocide Museum, which was built in 1995. Every year on 24 April, genocide memorial day, people come here to participate in a huge ceremony to remember the Armenian victims.

> *"For us, Armenians, remembrance is a moral obligation and, at the same time, inalienable individual and collective right. It is our moral duty and right to commemorate the one and a half million of victims, inhumane sufferings endured by the hundreds of thousands, loss of the material and spiritual heritage accumulated by our people throughout millennia, extermination of the substantial part of the early 20th-century Armenian intelligentsia, who mainly resided in Constantinople, that led to the mass slaughter. It is because of this cohesion of the right and duty that we have adopted the motto "I remember and demand" for the commemoration events"* (ArmeniaNow, 22.04. 2015).

According to my own observations during the last five years, the past becomes an explanatory model for every phenomenon, action and reaction in the present and even provides the Armenian people, the nation and the individual, with guidelines for the future. In the words of Minasyan: "*For many Armenians the past is more than just history, it is a protective reaction to problems of the future*" (Minasyan 2009: 10).

Having this function, historical accounts assume a certain shape: chronology and verifiability become secondary; instead, *leitmotifs*, having a socio-cultural priority, constitute the main content. For that reason, history is turned into something that Malkki (1995) calls "*moral and cosmological ordering stories*". These ordering stories include moral lessons and can serve as guidance for taking decisions. They are like allegories or parables in the Bible and can be read as advice: one has to endure hard times because the ancestors did (stories about Armenian heroes); one has to honour one's parents because it is tradition (accounts of ancient traditions); one has to believe in God because Armenia was the first Christian state (stories about the formation of the Armenian Church and its survival in times of invasion); one has to be smart and hardworking because this has been taught by Armenian intellectuals since the Middle Ages (stories of outstanding scholars, writers and artists). These pieces of wisdom are packaged in endless stories about ancient battles, heroes and fates (see below).

Their moral meaning is not considered as strict rules, but they have an impact on the attitudes, approaches, and even on the feelings of community members – or are an expression of them. That these moral stories exist does not mean that their instruction is always followed, but it is common knowledge that it would be wise to adhere to it.

Let me give an example: even at the most trivial level of constructing houses and city planning, history teaches the "right" lesson. The choice of using red tufa as a building material, for instance, is based on reflections about the past. In Yerevan, red tufa will most likely be regarded as superior to other building materials because it was the material with which ancestors built the first Armenian churches (picture 1), which embody Armenian Christianity and therefore Armenian identity as the first Christian state of the world. The Soviet-Armenian chief architect of the capital, Alexander Tamanyan, becoming a role model himself, chose tufa for this reason

(picture 2), and even contemporary skyscrapers are clad with the red stone (picture 3). Current discussions about city planning are led by the proper use of this material. Modern architects are thus criticised for using tufa as mere decoration, while older buildings were entirely built with blocks of the stone.

Picture 1: An Armenian church in Hovanavank, made from red tuffa.

Picture 2: Soviet-Armenian architecture, Republic Square in Yerevan, made from red tuffa.

How exactly to interpret the general lessons of history is a source of conflict. It is not always easy to read the doctrines of the past. How to design the urban environment, for example, is a huge debate in which different groups of people vote for entirely different solutions by referring to the same past in a different way.

Picture 3: Contemporary architecture, Northern Avenue in Yerevan, made from red tuffa. In the background: Map of the Avenue as a part of the city's master plan.

(Hi)stories from the Origin

When walking around in today's Yerevan, visitors and inhabitants very seldom encounter authentic buildings from ancient times. If one compares the oldest maps of Yerevan drawn by the explorers Tavernier and Chardin in the 17th century (History Museum of Yerevan 2008, 8, 26; Inv. 381, Inv. 382), one finds almost nothing in common with the current capital. The only buildings from the town's early history[16] that are still a part of contemporary Yerevan are the *Gai Djami Mosque*[17] and some Christian churches[18] that have survived Soviet secularism. There are some buildings from the 19th century[19], too, but most of the city planning was done and

16 Little was left after the earthquake of 1679 (Arutyunyan et al. 1986: 29-32).

17 It almost fell to ruin. For several years it hosted the *History Museum of Yerevan*. In 1995 it was given to the Iranian Delegation in Yerevan, which renovated the building complex and opened a cultural center there (see Darieva 2012).

18 Seven churches in Yerevan origin from the early Middle Ages (Arutyunyan et al. 1986: 29-32). They have been renovated or rebuilt in recent years.

19 Yerevan was a provincial city in the time of the Russian Empire. Russian city planning, which was the starting point and raw material for Tamanyan, started with a sketch by V. Nazarev in 1850 (History Museum of Yerevan 2008, 28; Inv. 383/3). City structure is thus in some respect based on the 19th century's colonial bureaucracy. There is some architectural evidence of this

implemented in Soviet times.[20] The centre is shaped by the master plan from 1924 (History Museum of Yerevan 2008, 45; Inv. 386) by Tamanyan[21], whose architecture is a mixture of European and Russian neoclassicism and of Armenian ornamentation adopted from ancient church architecture (Abrahamian 2006; Ter Minassian 2008). The majority of the constructions of this time (to the 1950s), including the typical housing units with five floors, consist of red tufa and line the major axes of the city centre. Later, from the 1960s to the 1980s, pragmatism resulted in the typical Soviet skyscrapers becoming an obligatory part of the Soviet suburbs. As a result, Yerevan is in great part a very Soviet city in the narrow sense of the word.

Besides the Soviet architecture, more recent buildings shape the capital. A symbol for the post-Soviet construction boom is the so-called Northern Avenue. It consists of huge buildings that play host to expensive chain stores, apartments and offices. For the Northern Avenue and similar constructions to be built, many older buildings had to be demolished and replaced, a fact that led to much discussion and protest among city dwellers, officials and the media. As one of my interlocutors put it:

> *"If this continues this way, nothing of old Yerevan will be left. You come from Germany and you know about the ancient Armenians, the ancient people, thousands of years; of Erebuni and so on; and you wish to see it. But where is the Ancient? … And then you see these houses and you think that this city has been built only recently. That's not right! That's not good".*

Yet in this "modern" environment, the past casts a shadow and influences the arguments, concepts and values of urban population. This sounds like a paradox, but as the example of building materials (red tufa) has shown, the past and its material evidences serve as a blueprint for modern creations and are used as a measuring stick for evaluating new developments. The past is not forgotten but is even visible and actively remembered.

The link to the past is maintained in many ways, first of all through rituals and historical accounts connecting (new) urban space to historical events and legends. As an illustration: during my fieldwork Yerevan celebrated its 2791st birthday. Armenian flags and city symbols decorated public places and almost everyone on the street wore some stickers labelled with "*I love You, Yerevan" or "Erebuni-Yerevan 2791*". Many weeks before the event, the streets were cleaned up, the parks and gardens planted with beautiful flowers and the pupils trained in traditional dance forms

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and the subsequent, short-lived period of the First Republic. These buildings are built in a neoclassical style and currently are often in bad condition (Fehlings 2014: 50-55).

20 For the history of Yerevan and its planning and architecture, see (Ter Minassian 2007, Terian 2008, Hakopian 2003, Arutyunyan et al. 1968, Fehlings 2014, and Gasparyan 2004).

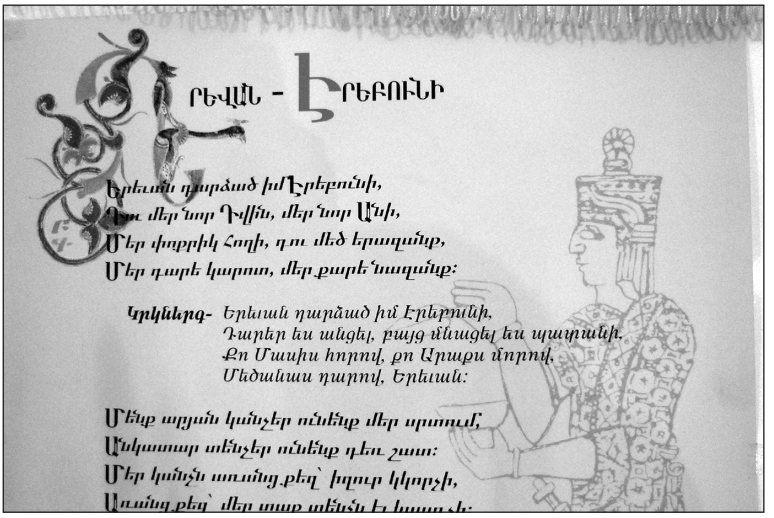
21 There is a lot of literature, archive material, and a museum about Alexander Tamanyan and his work. Most of the information about the architect is included in Ter Minassian's book from 2007.

Picture 4: Young girls dressed in traditional dresses for Yerevan's Anniversary.

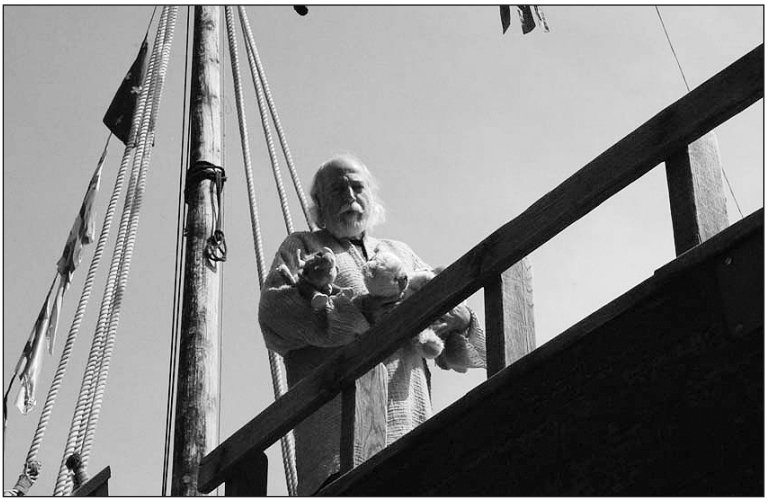
(picture 4). On the feast day, the whole population was out on the streets. People, being in festive mood, wore their best clothes. At different locations there were exhibitions, concerts, dance performances and speeches from the city's officials. The most interesting part of the event consisted in a parade. It started from a place called Erebuni and terminated at the Republic Square, which is the heart of Yerevan's centre. The people participating in this parade partly were disguised as *Urartians*[22] led by King Argishti I, founder of the fortified settlement Erebuni in 782 BC. Erebuni, located on a hill, is now integrated into modern Yerevan. The archaeological site was excavated by Soviet archaeologists in the 1950s and transformed into a museum[23], which *officially* and *scientifically* "proves" the ancientness of an early civilization living at this specific place. Yet, according to Abrahamian, no historical continuity can be found, either between Armenia and Urartu, or between Yerevan and Erebuni (Abrahamian 2006; compare Suny 1993: 7); Yerevan is interpreted as the successor city of Erebuni. This presumed link is expressed in the title of Yerevan's hymn "Yerevan-Erebuni" and justifies the anniversary celebrations (picture 5). It explains Yerevan's presumed age of 2791 years, and ranks the Armenian capital among the most ancient cities of the world – more ancient even than Rome. Marching from Erebuni to the contemporary centre people participating in the parade symbolize this claim: Urartians are ritually made into the ancestors of the modern urban population.

22 Urartu was an Iron-Age kingdom, which rose to power between the 9th and 6th century BC. Its expansion started from Lake Van in Asia Minor and reached to the Urmia Basin, Sevan Basin and the Arax Plain. It therefore included the Armenian Highlands (Hofmann 2006: 15-23).

23 With the increasing nationalism, Erebuni was rediscovered in 1968 and taken for the first time as a pretext to celebrate Yerevan's 2750th birthday (Shnirelmann 2001: 9, 46).



Picture 5: The hymn of the city presented in the City History Museum.



Picture 6: My Armenian colleague Levon Abrahamian posing as Noah

Surprisingly, as one can infer from academic writings, many Armenian archaeologists, historians and anthropologists support this theory of succession[24]. Ritual practice, art and science obviously go hand-in-hand to establish the connection between one of the first high cultures in the region and the modern state of Armenia, between one of the oldest settlements in this locality and the modern capital.

In biblical legends the origins of Yerevan are traced back even deeper into the past. Here, Yerevan is associated with Noah who, when rescued after the flood, came down from Mount Ararat and settled in the Ararat Plain (Genesis 6:1-9:29) (picture

24 Armenian linguists, for example, deduce the name of Yerevan from “Erebuni” (Ananikjan 1989: 14)

6).[25] According to Armenian folklore, Yerevan "appeared" to Noah. It "became visible", which in Armenian language sounds like "*jerevats*" (երևաց) or "*jerevum e*" (երևում է). The Armenian expression in this context is interpreted as the linguistic origin of the designation "Yerevan". The biblical story of Noah has an Armenian continuation. The "father of Armenian history", Movses Khorenatsi (about 410-490 AD.), begins his genealogy of the Armenian people with Noah. The biblical descendants of Noah are his son Japheth, Japheth's son Gomer and Gomer's son Togarmah (Torgom). According to Khorenatsi, Torgarmah is the father of Haik and Haik the father of the Armenian azg, the ethnic group of Armenians (Samuelian 2000: 8; compare Suny 1993: 4, Shnirelmann 2001: 33; Hofmann 2006: 25).[26] But Noah is more than the father of humanity and – in the first place – of Armenians. "*Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard*" (Genesis 9:20). He was thus the man who invented agriculture and human civilization. Consequently, the Ararat Plain and Yerevan can be interpreted to be the cradle of human culture in general.

This story, which I was told many times during my fieldwork, and which I would classify as "mythico history" (see below), apparently was told to other European travellers[27] before, as prove, for example, accounts by Paul von Franken printed in the *Die Gartenlaube*, the first journal for the German middle class, in 1862 (Franken 1862). If one remembers that Noah's ancestor can be recognized in the even older character of Utnapishti in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*[28], and I am sure that this connection is made, we then understand that this allusion brings us to the first myth of the creation of mankind (Sallaberger 2008).

To summarize, as demonstrated by these two examples with regard to the capital, in Armenia one can observe a huge effort to trace the origins of the people, the places and their names back to ancient times. As I could witness, the search for one's roots is an important task taken very seriously by most of my interlocutors. The deeper the roots go, the better, because the deeper they are, the more they are deemed to be legitimized and authentic. Therefore, being the "first" is an important virtue and implies a hereditary title that is made into the foundation of many contemporary claims – as in the case of Karabakh or Western Armenia. Some claims are less serious and part of jokes, which are expressed in sentences such as: *"Tbilisi was built by Armenians, it is an Armenian city"*. With this argument in mind, one can understand why Armenians try to link the modern Armenian Republic to the first

25 Stories about the great flood and a new beginning of mankind and calendar are typical themes of founding myths all over the world (Frazer 1916; Frazer 1923; Leach 1983: 13-15).

26 The biblical genealogy after Noah is continued by the Armenian descendants of Haik, who are Aramaneak, Aramayis, Amasya, Gegham, Harma, Aram und Ara the Beautiful (Samuelian 2000: 8; Shnirelmann 2001: 33; Hofmann 2006: 25).

27 Such as Chardin, Auzley, Porter, and Linch.

28 Many parts of the biblical story of Noah and the story of Utnapishti in the Epic of Gilgamesh are identical and probably originate in the same source.

state in Asia Minor, the state of Urartu (9th–6th century BC.) (Dudwick 1991: 113-118) and of course to the first Christians and the first Christian state of the world, the kingdom of Trdat III in the 4th century AC., which existed even prior to Constantine the Great's conversion (Hofmann 2006). Scientific arguments, biblical stories, legends, all kinds of historical accounts, poetry, art, rituals, and folklore, are brought together to underline this point. The efforts not only of Armenian lay people but also of archaeologists, as Abrahamian (2006: 10-11) describes with irony in his book, to find a paleo-anthropoid skeleton of the first *homo sapiens* on Armenian territory[29], can be interpreted as an expression of the same intention, which is to explain that:

> *"Armenia is one of the oldest centres of civilization. The centuries-old traces of material culture, myths, and legends, geographical and personal names reveal that Armenians are the natives of the Armenian Highland; they […] have lived there since the dawn of humanity"* (Terian 2008: 1).

Apparently, it is not a coincidence that the capital of Armenia fits into this picture. To link the modern city with the ancient past is a technique to extract ancient splendour for current and future challenges. The ancient origins are a way to justify the Armenian claims for land, and, at the same time, are taken as proof of Armenia's importance for the world (and for world history) – in the present and in the future as in the past. They place Armenia and Armenians in the centre of a cosmos, which is described by "ordering stories" like those mentioned above. Armenian history in this sense can be defined in the same way as "mythico-history" described by Malkki (1995: 54):

> *"It represented, not only a description of the past, nor even merely an evaluation of the past, but a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms. In this sense, it cannot be accurately described as either history or myth. It was what can be called a mythico-history. Like in the Bible stories and morality plays to which I have linked them, the refugees' historical narratives comprised a set of moral and cosmological ordering stories".*

The History of Victims

The second subject that dominates Armenian historical tales is "tragic heroism", which is connected to sacrifice and victimization. Yerevan is full of memorials testifying to this hypothesis.

Armenian heroes, it is my impression, very often die a somehow senseless death and become victims of mindless and cruel brutality. They suffered in ancient times fighting against Persians and Turks, were humiliated and killed during the Genocide, joined the Soviets against the Nazis, were persecuted under Stalin, lost their lives in the Karabakh War, and suffered from serious shortages after the breakdown of the Soviet Union – just to mention some examples of stories that always include a moral lesson.

29 I have heard that, meanwhile, this discovery has been made.

Picture 7: Statue of Komitas at the Pantheon in Yerevan.

One specimen for a "victim-hero" is the Armenian monk, collector of folk songs and compositor Vardapet Komitas. Many of my friends had a portrait of him in their homes, a famous epic poem by P. Sevak is dedicated to him, his impressive and tragic statue is situated in the centre of Yerevan (picture 7), and in Echmiadzin, the spiritual centre of Armenia, his headdress is conserved like a relic. He was an outstanding representative of Armenian intellectual and Christian history, and one of the first victims of the Armenian Genocide in the 20th century. Along with other Armenian intellectuals, he was arrested in Constantinople on 24 April 1915, the date officially recognized as the starting point of the Genocide and the date of its Commemoration Day. Most of Komitas' comrades were killed, but Komitas himself amazingly survived, is said to have suffered a nervous breakdown, and died in a Paris asylum in 1935 (Soulahian and Kuyumjian 2001; Dudwick 1991: 55-58; Marutyan 2007: 101-103; Lehmann 2007: 181; Lehmann 2015: 17). When in 1965 the tradition of the commemoration celebrations started with the illegal demonstrations on the occasion of the Genocide's 50th anniversary, a part of the crowd headed toward his grave as an ultimate symbol of their mourning (Lehmann 2015: 17).

In my opinion, the figure of Komitas can be read as a symbol for the Armenian attitude often characterized by my Armenian interlocutors as the "*attitude of lambs*". Very frequently I heard the following sentence: "*We are like lambs, they are like wolves*", which of course alludes to the Christian themes of sacrifice and martyrdom. Thus many conversations included these comparisons, even when talking about enemies within one's own society:

> "*They are like wolves. There is a theory that there are people able to smell blood. When they smell blood, they get into a trance and start to murder. This is true for*

Turks. […] But Turks always stick together. This is different with Armenians. […] The UNESCO wanted to proclaim the Year of Kirakos. Immediately, there were some Armenians to prevent it. […]".[30]

Picture 8: Remembering Armenian victims of the Genocide and Hrant Dink, Commemoration Day at Tsitsernakaberd, Yerevan.

There are a lot of other prominent examples like Komitas, as for example Vardan Mamikonyan, who died along with 696 of his men in the name of Christianity in the battle of Avarajr against Persians in 451 B.C. (Suny 1993: 9; Hofmann 2006: 245; Elisaeus: 410-480); or, a contemporary case, Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian journalist and editor, who was shot in 2007 (picture 8)[31]. Armenians can fight bravely, as I was told and as history has proven, but ultimately often have no chance against "evil forces" that in their opinion are more brutish, barbaric, and "bloodthirsty" (compare Suny 1993: 2).[32] Consequently, many heroic battles – for example against Turks, Persians, Russians, and Soviets – ended in disaster (see Hovannisian 1997). Even Franz Werfel's (1990)[33] novel about the self-defence and desperate but successful struggle of a small community near Musa Dagh in the Ottoman Empire, based on true events that took place in 1915, meets a sad end. Here, in "*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*" the hero Gabriel Bagradian manages to rescue his people, but himself,

30 This quotation has previously been published in Fehlings (2014: 204-205).

31 The case of Hrant Dink was extensively discussed in the international media, which is why I won't explore this topic here.

32 These characteristics usually are used to describe Turks.

33 The theme of sacrifice has also been adopted by non-Armenian writers to describe and characterize Armenians and Armenianness.

as the ultimate hero and moral idol, loses his son, stays back, and is killed by a Turkish bullet at his son's grave.

As the lamb in biblical stories, Armenians feel themselves to be innocent. They interpret their victimization as a sacrifice that they have to endure for the grace of God and "*for the sake of humanity*" (Shnirelmann 2001: 22; Suny 1993: 9). As Alishan has concluded: "*Martyrdom became for the Armenians, as it had become for the Jews before them, an attempt to escape history, to rise above it, and by placing the historical event in a religious context, to reinterpret it and redefine "victory"*" (Alishan 1985: 29; compare Suny 1993: 9).

Interestingly the intellectual elite, the so-called *intelligentsia* or *mtavorakanuthiun*, particularly identifies with victimization and martyrdom. In 1879 the Armenian writer Raffi defined the intellectual elite as "*those who sacrifice themselves, endure all kinds of persecutions, fight against prohibitions, work and act without even being encouraged and praised, because they believe that the future is theirs*" (Raffi [1879] 1958: 457, quoted from Antonyan 2012: 79). Indeed, Armenian intellectuals and artists, for example Aksel Bakunts, Egishe Charents, Ervand Kochar and Sergei Parajanov (compare Suny 1993: 155) – and even the national hero and architect Tamanyan – suffered from persecution. They were always under suspicion of undermining state power, last but not least in Soviet times (see Suny 1993: 154-156; Lehmann 2007; Melkonian 2010). They were therefore punished and at the same time admired, because they were supporting Armenian values and independence. Interestingly, the intellectual elite, since its emergence in the 19th century, was the vanguard of Armenian nationalism. Thus people like Nalbandian were the first to talk about an Armenian nationality distinct from the Armenian religious community. In doing so, they were also propagating and passing on a unifying version of a "history of the Armenian people" that stretches from ancient to modern times, and which incorporates the topics described in this article (see Suny 1993: 52-62).

Today's urban population, as I understood from discussions with my interlocutors, envisions itself in a similar way as the *intelligentsia*: today, the "educated and civilized" population is "fighting" against "ignorant and vulgar" oligarchs and state officials, who do not – this is a widespread opinion – honour Armenian values and traditions, and who are known to be corrupt and dishonest (Fehlings 2014; Fehlings 2015). I witnessed many activities that can be interpreted as a (desperate) struggle against the "wolves" within their own society: public demonstrations, boycotting of certain goods, legal steps taken against powerful opponents, and engagement in NGOs and human rights organizations.

Especially in the context of city planning and construction, there are many opportunities to become a victim. People are forced to leave there homes against their will, because investors and oligarchs want them to make place for new prestigious constructions that are not affordable to common citizens. The urban environment is changed and destroyed, which people often perceive as an act of barbarism. This

includes the destruction of historical sites and local memory connected to space and material artefacts, and corruption is thereby seen to be blossoming to the advantage of the bad and the ugly. Marutyan (2005, 2007) even uses the word "genocide"[34] to describe this situation. In these circumstances, some individuals fight for their rights, aware of their minimal chances, as for example did a friend of mine. He was protesting against the city administration, which wanted him to leave his house in order to demolish the building and sell the ground for profit to investors. My interlocutor compared himself and his role to William Wallace, the Scottish freedom fighter, whom he knew from the film directed by and starring Mel Gibson. The Armenian Wallace had not yet lost his fight but nevertheless esteemed himself as a victim and martyr, which was, in this case, the *leitmotif* of his personal biographical story:

> *"It is difficult to fight against the government. But there is a law. If they come for me; if they pull me by the hands onto the street… this is another thing. Yes. But I am not against it. So be it. Then I will know for sure, that such a person like me, an intelligent, ordinary citizen, is of no need in this country. Here, they only need bandits, scumbags, and prostitutes."*

This perception of oneself's (current) situation is not uncommon in Armenia and I encountered this attitude very often during my fieldwork. To be a victim, according to my impression, is considered not shameful but honourable. It is even viewed as an Armenian fate. During my fieldwork I recorded a lot of biographies, and it is a curious fact that almost all biographies – biographies of common people – were presented as a succession of personal dramas, often linked to Armenian history. The same is true for the history of Yerevan. Many biographies started with the terrible experiences of some ancestors of the narrators, who survived the Genocide or other massacres. These stories were passed on from one generation to the next. Other tragic events were even more actively remembered. The older generation remembers, for example, repression under Soviet rule[35], and the younger generation mourns its relatives killed in the Karabakh War[36] or in the earthquake of Spitak in 1988[37]. Almost everybody remembers the so-called "black" or "dark years" after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, when food, electricity and heating were scarce.

All these historical events manifested themselves in the city landscape in the form of destruction or in other ways. The city suffered like its inhabitants: it was

34 The term "genocide" is used in many contexts of suffering (see below).

35 The Armenian Center for Ethnological Studies 'Hazarashen' NGO in collaboration with the German non-governmental organization 'DVV International' (Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association) started the implementation of a project on memories of Soviet totalitarism and repression. Some of the data have been published online at: http://armeniatotalitaris.am/?lang=en#; see also Melkonian 2010; Suny 1993.

36 For further information see de Waal (2003), Reiter (2009) and Halbach & Kappeler (1995).

37 For further information see Libaridian (1989) and Verluise (1995).

destroyed through invasions and earthquakes; populated and depopulated because of massacres; and the houses went to wrack and ruin because of hard times. Directed towards the Ararat, the whole outline of the capital can be interpreted as a monument to the loss of lands of the Armenian *azg*. When I looked at the photo albums of my interlocutors, I was confronted with collections of sorrowful stories and faces, and when I asked about certain places, I could be sure that they were *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 2005) "d'une histoire triste".

Even everyday conversations frequently circled around suffering, victimization, and martyrdom. Thus, for example, when talking about the encounters within bureaucracy, debates about city planning, or everyday interactions, many people used a drastic vocabulary to describe their dissatisfaction. The term "genocide", for example, is used quite frequently, not only to describe the events that occurred in the Ottoman Empire, but also to designate other disasters and sufferings such as ethnic cleansing in the context of the Karabakh War and the exodus of the *intelligentsia* after independence (white genocide); ecological disasters such as the desertification of Lake Sevan, and the problems linked to the atomic plant Mezamor and the chemical factory Nairit (ecological genocide); or the destruction of the urban landscape (cultural genocide) (Marutyan 2007b: 111; 2009).

Clearly, the "sense of tragedy" comes up as a *leitmotif* at every instance. To summarize: tragic events are the pillars of Armenian legends, chronicles and history books, the dominant theme of collective memory (the tragic experience unites Armenians all over the world), watersheds in personal life (hi-)stories, and became imprinted in the capital's urban landscape in every period of history. Komitas' martyrdom therefore explains his own role, but also the role of Armenia and Armenians in the world and in relation to God.[38] Stories like this really explain the "Armenian universe" constituting and explaining the cosmological order of things in a very specific way. The "pursuit of happiness" as a purpose of life appears egoistic and insignificant. "History" consists of disasters and because of disasters it is important. This is what Armenians are proud of, and for this reason Kirakos of Gandzak seems to become emotional: *"May this [his book about the History of Armenia] become our sepulchral monument, not like the stone of Abisolom, but vital"*[39] (see Conrad 2014). To conclude: suffering propels the desire to live and makes life precious.

History as Myth: The Beginning and the End of Time

The two *leitmotifs* – the "sense of antiquity" and the "sense of tragedy" – are, I presume, interconnected. They are often linked to religious (Christian) themes and have a moral character, which relates them to specific Armenian socio-cultural val-

38 All extraordinary people, for example the architect and city planner Tamanyan, are said to have some of the characteristics of 'Komitas-altruism' – an altruism that has the qualities of sacrifice.

39 2. Sam 18:18.

ues. Thus, for example, suffering – as mentioned above – is understood as a virtue; and social practices, such as living with family members or providing neighbours with mutual help, are explained with recourse to ancient rules and customs. Everyday actions acquire the sense of carrying on ancient achievements and rescuing Armenian and human civilization. Many explanations would start with introductions like: "*Armenians have always been like this…* (*hayerə misht aidpisin ein*)", or: "*This is our tradition* (*da mer avanduytn e*)".

Somehow, history can in this context be compared to myth and implies similar functions. The above-mentioned topic of the beginning of time and mankind, the "story of the origins", is a typical core feature of myths. By the definition of Eliade (1963: 16), a myth is a "holy story", which reports on primeval beginning. Knowledge of the myth is knowledge of the origin of all things; and, if one knows the origin of things, one can control and manipulate them (1963: 32). In his book chapter "Les Mythes du Monde Moderne" Eliade links together myth and *nationalism* and myth and *Marxism*.

Time and Nationalism

Within *nationalism* the necessity of the search for origins is a priority. The enthusiasm for national and ethnic history is, for Eliade (1963), evidence of this assumption. Not surprisingly then, my Armenian colleagues (anthropologists and historians) are frequently interviewed about "authentic traditions" by the local press. They are asked, for example, about the "genuine traditional Armenian wedding ceremony", a question that is quite hard to answer.

Politicians and the majority of citizens are less hesitant in dealing with the past. In contemporary Armenia, especially in the capital, this is clearly visible as exemplified in the case of the Northern Avenue. The above-mentioned festivities for the Anniversary of Yerevan and the Urartrian parade are just one more example. There are many other celebrations like this: the national day, commemoration days like 24 April; traditional and ecclesial holidays like Vardavaṙ[40], Ternəndaṙaj[41], and Easter; and national holidays such as Victory Day[42]. Most of these festivities allude either directly to the past or are taken as a pretext for remembering historical events. Their

40 The "feast of water" is celebrated in July. According to Ohandjanian (2007: 79) it origins from prehistoric times and was celebrated to bring about rain. My interlocutor associated it with Jesus' baptism, and according to the calendar of the official Armenian Church it is the day of the transfiguration (Matthew 17: 1-9). On this day people sprinkle each other with water.

41 The "feast of fire" is celebrated in February. It also has a pagan origin and was appropriated by Christians. On this day fire is blessed by priests and taken home by believers. This fire is said to heal sick people and to have an effect on fertility (Ohandjanian 2007: 30-31). According to the calendar of the official Armenian Church it is the day of the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2: 21-40).

42 The Victory Day can be interpreted as a Soviet commemoration day for the victims, heroes and veterans of WWII. But the same date is also associated with Armenian victories in the Karabakh War ("the liberation of Shushi") .

intention is to unify the nation, to justify the current policy of state officials and the national elite and to motivate the citizens to face and endure current and future problems in their sacred homeland.

Picture 9: Grigor Lusavorich Church

The same is true for museums and monuments, which are interpreted as "lieux de mémoire"[43]. Since Armenian independence historical and ethnographic museums as well as national monuments have been restored and modernized and new national symbols that pick up ancient topics are built. As a result one can see many new or recently renovated churches. The Grigor Lusavorich Church, named after the funder of the Armenian Apostolic Church, was one of the first monumental projects after Armenian Independence and was completed and consecrated in 2001 in time to celebrate 1700 years of the Armenian Apostolic Church's existence (Rickmann 1999) (picture 9). The enlargement of the Cascade[44] and the renovation of Grigor Khanjyan's mural paintings[45] are secular examples of the same trend. Simultaneously, a lot of streets have been named after Armenian heroes of the ancient and recent past.

43 Technically, they do not match Nora's (2005) definition of the "lieu de mémoire". The monuments, museums and places gaining importance, today, in many cases had no importance in the past. But I use Nora's term here, because these things and places are used and perceived in the same way.

44 The Cascade was already part of the initial plans by Tamanyan in the 1920s. Its construction started in the 60s but for a long time the Cascade remained an unfinished Soviet relic. Its renovation started in 2002, when Gerard Cafesjian financed the transformation of the Cascade into a museum (Fehlings 2010).

45 "The Invention of the Armenian Alphabet", "The Battle of Vardanank/Avarayr" and "The Rebirth of Armenia (Foundation of the First Republic of Armenia)" (Fehlings 2010; 2014)

Especially in art and architecture there is flexible scope to translate the past into new forms of expression.

As already mentioned above not all interpretations of the past are accepted by a majority. Especially in the context of city planning different readings of history divide opinion. This concerns the buildings of the *Northern Avenue*, but also ecclesiastic buildings like Grigor Lusavorich Church. While new elites think that new buildings adequately represent the splendour of glorious times, intellectuals prefer to preserve historical buildings that might be less prestigious but authentic. Abrahamian (2011: 131) thus criticizes:

> *"[…] for a city with such a long history […] it is rather strange […] to face this discrepancy between history and the lack of historical urban spaces. Perhaps the reason is that the Yerevan style of urbanization presupposes thorough rebuilding rather than preserving. And this is hardly a general Soviet trend, but rather an Armenian attitude towards history which can be formulated as highly articulated on the level of words and rather poor on the level of deeds".*

The question about what is authentic, "original" (derives from "ancient origins") and therefore valuable is fought out between new elites and common people (most of them perceive themselves as *intelligentsia*) (Fehlings 2014). This battle is not only about city planning, housing and profit. It is about moral issues and socio-cultural values. The wrong interpretation of ancient times (resulting in ugly buildings) is read as an indicator for immorality, brutalism and primitivism.

Most of all, the elites are blamed for these negative features. The Northern Avenue and its buildings, for example, are associated with officials and elites and described in very negative terms by most of my interlocutors. Talking about architecture is thus a way to talk about society, politics and rulers. While architects, investors and state officials understand themselves as successors of Tamanyan acting in a honourable way by accomplishing the master's grand plan via modern means[46], most people question this link just as they question the honesty of state leaders, and blame them for "killing the past": "*There is a bunch of people who sit on their armchairs, and they decide who has to do what. This is why it happens that these houses are destroyed and that they build something new instead. That is only for their own profit*". Consequently, those responsible are not only criticized for their bad taste but for attacking places of "collective memory" and Armenian history itself. In the context of the construction of Grigor Lusavorich Church these accusations are even more illustrative. Here, elites are accused of "*ignoring spirituality and thereby the essence of Armenianness*". As I was told, not even God is satisfied with their activity, which is why "*the bride and groom who were the first to marry in the new cathedral died during the wedding ceremony*". Some of my interlocutors were convinced that

46 A sketch of Tamanyan's plan decorates one of the facades of the Avenue's buildings to illustrate this link.

the new architecture and skyscrapers have a negative effect on the mental constitution of urban citizens; and that it was one reason for many people to leave the country. Urban legend even says that the new buildings threaten health and provoke cancer, which is another drastic way to condemn the elites' way of using the past in an illegitimate way.

The "right reading of origins", on the other hand, is a key for right behaviour and should serve as a guideline for present decisions. The present – at best – should be a copy of the past. One could compare this attempt with the Babylonian understanding of time as described by Maul:

> *"A Babylonian was convinced to […] look at a past that was lying in front of him, while believing that the coming future was to his back and therefore invisible from his straight perspective. While we believe ourselves to walk on a "timeline towards the future", the Mesopotamians moved, according to their own perception, backwards toward the forthcoming. By going with their backs ahead they kept their eyes fixedly on the past"* (2010: 72-77, translation by SF).

Time and Marxism

In Marxism, on the contrary, "to look ahead" and the idea of a future "golden age" expected at the "end of times" is predominant (Eliade 1963: 223-226). My Armenian interlocutors were very familiar with this concept, too. In Soviet times, most of the urban population, as my older interlocutors told me, was full of enthusiasm for Soviet modernization and urbanization projects. Yerevan's time of prosperity started with its reconstruction in the 1920s. The prospect at that time was positive and it was the duty of every citizen to work for the "bright socialist future". The historian Kotkin describes the Marxist agenda as follows: "*Marxist socialism was an attractive schema for realizing the kingdom of heaven on earth*" (1995: 8).

The "end of times" topic, which is characteristic for myths and also part of Armenian tradition of historiography, is of course very special in the Soviet reading. In the Armenian writing tradition the eschatological theme of the "final events" and the "ultimate destiny of humanity" have no terrestrial happy end. Kirakos of Gandzak, for example, was convinced of having witnessed the apocalypse, which for him was connected to the Mongolian invasion of his time (Conrad 2014). Soviets, by contrast, had a much more down-to-earth vision rooted in the belief in "progress", which was thought to improve all realms of human existence. As Lehmann (2015) shows, Armenians became quite enthusiastic about the Soviet project in general and made sense of it in their specific Armenian way (Apricot Socialism). Heaven, to some extent, seemed to have been realised. As an old woman who grew up in Yerevan told me: "*We were satisfied in the sense that we were sure to be living in the very best country*".

But even before Armenian independence the Marxist enthusiasm seems to have ceased. During the late 1980s, when war broke out and an earthquake demolished the city of Giumri, and in the "black years" of the early 1990s, when people starved

from hunger, and when there was no heating, no electricity and no money, the bright future became hazy. As articulates Platz: "*The Armenian leadership's inability to produce energy and illuminate the present represents the nation's metaphorical dark end*" (2000: 114) and "*changes in the experience of daily time corresponded to changes in the imagination of historical time, which, according to some, had ended, ruptured, or begun to go backward*" (115); "*habitual social action, life, existence, and even history seemed to be at an end*" (129).

Nevertheless, Soviet ideology, historical materialism and nationality policy in particular, still have an influence on the perception of the past, even now after independence.

The Moral Order of Things and Evolution

In the current Armenian conception of history, as in the myth as per Eliade, time gains its present meaning in its origins. One is "looking back to the future". The past in this sense is not past. It is vivid, serving as a constant source to give significance to the present (Rüsen 2004: 372). At the same time, one can recognize a discourse of "progress" that is certainly routed in the evolutionary theory of the historical materialism of the Soviets. On the one hand we have "*a set of moral and cosmological ordering stories: stories which classify the world according to certain principles, thereby simultaneously creating it*" (Malkki 1995: 54). On the other hand, the stories are ordered in a very specific way that recalls an evolutionary system: people, behaviours, material culture, urban planning and socio-cultural values are hierarchically ranked using the vocabulary of Soviet propaganda (Fehlings 2014: 366-372). Typical terms used in this context derive from popular dichotomies that describe stages of evolution and were part of the Soviet rhetoric. To mention some examples, the oppositions of primitive and civilized, rural and urban, and backward/Asiatic and developed/European are frequently met. Bad taste, for example, is often describes as "rural", and young women whose make-up is too jarring, will be describes as "village girls". This rhetoric, again, which was the basis for Soviet nationalities policy (Kapeller 2005; Halbach 2003; Suny 1997), was based on the understanding of history as an ongoing progress of human society, which develops in relation to the progress of its mode of production. Marx (1977) defined different modes of production, linked to historical periods (stages of evolution) and societies, which he called "Asiatic", "ancient", "feudal", and "bourgeois". According to the Soviet anthropologist Semenov:

> *"The great October revolution laid the foundation of a new world system – the socialist, which in the subsequent period emerges as the centre of the world historical developments, thereby opening up a further epoch of global history. The world socialist system appears as the only one, which can be and necessarily will become global. And in the furthermore future, with the transition to communism, human society will inevitably transform itself into a single social organism"* (1980: 48).

Even if this goal became obsolete, the hierarchical system of evolutionary stages remains a valid system for the classification of moral accounts linked to moral issues. Backwardness is bad, and every bad thing is backward, primitive, rural, wild or Asian (which in this perception is the same as oriental, Turkish or Muslim). The Northern Avenue, despite being a new structure, is, for example, described with these words: "*You have the impression this is not the centre of Yerevan city, but some village – I don't know – somewhere at the back of beyond.*"

People also use this vocabulary to classify their physical and socio-cultural environment, for example, when talking about politicians, who they call "*wild*" and "*not civilised*": "*They only recently became rich and still are vulgar and wild. In Europe, rulers have been rich for several generations. These are already different and more civilised people*". Women telling me of their men's unpleasant habits often said: "*Our men are still Asians!*" Things are not only "good" because they represent Armenian tradition, but because they simultaneously represent progress, which means education, modernization, urbanization and westernization. Interpreting these Soviet ideals in an Armenian way (compare Lehmann 2015), these terms are associated with a broader cultural context linking the positive vocabulary with Armenian culture and Christianity. To conclude with a quotation by Platz:

> *"Understandings Armenianness depended simultaneously on perceptions odd Armenia as a modern, industrially developed and "advanced" society with good economic and technological within the Soviet Union an on attachments to pre-Soviet traditional practices, such as kinship, that were thought to resemble and to support continuity with the national past"* (2000: 122).

Conclusion

In this paper I wanted to give an idea of the importance of "history" in the broadest sense for contemporary urban life in Armenia and in the Armenian capital Yerevan.

From childhood onwards, city dwellers are introduced to, and live with, history. Learning about ancient Armenian history is part of their socialization. Soviet history also belongs to this memory. It is in any case very present because of the whole city (its planning, infrastructure and architecture) has been shaped by it and because the old generation still vividly remembers and constantly talks about it. Knowledge about history helps people to cope with their unsatisfying lives and their current suffering. It gives them strength and justification for enduring their situation to be aware of the utility of their sacrifice for Armenian culture, Christianity and human civilization. In some contexts, such as that of city planning, "ancient and Soviet history" even provides clear guidelines. If one wants to know how to build a house or how to plan a city one has simply to learn from "historical solutions" to this problem.

There are some predominant topics in historical accounts. Two of them are the topics of the ancient origins and of tragedy. Massacres, genocides and setbacks are

esteemed as the destiny of the Armenian people. This experience and the inherited knowledge about unjust cruelty and victimization unify Armenians all over the world. It is this destiny, which makes it important to remember and to preserve history and cultural heritage. Armenians – as many of my interlocutors expressed – are constantly in danger or fear of elimination. This is why it seems important to leave traces. At the same time, Armenians understand themselves to be making sacrifices for the better, for the glory of Christianity or their identity. This is true on the abstract level of ideas and philosophical questions and on the trivial level of everyday life in the urban context.

History thus is a combination both of culture-specific *leitmotifs* and an Armenian interpretation of historical materialism. While the *leitmotifs* make up most of the content of the 'moral and cosmological ordering stories', the Soviet interpretation of evolutionism provides a hierarchy of these stories ordering them along a pseudo-chronology of progress.

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