Armenian Khachkar as a Current Transformer of Collective Memory

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Further Reading
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- Freeman, W.H. D.B. Pillemer, 1998. Momentous Events, Vivid Memories: How Unforgettable Moments Help Us Understand the Meaning of Our Lives. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
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Armenian *Khachkar* as a Current Transformer of Collective Memory

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Abstract

Based on the findings of the French sociologist of memory, Maurice Halbwachs, the following article tries to show how the Armenian traditional *khachkar,* or cross stone, is applied in the context of the monument of Mother Armenia in commemoration of the Great Patriotic War, i.e. World War II. After a short introduction to the character of the Cross-Stone (CS) and its contextualization within the realm of socialist ideology, the practical impact of the CS is analyzed on the basis of the monument named Mother Armenia in the capital city Yerevan.

Introduction

The current construction activities in Armenia's capital, Yerevan, seem to symbolize progress, but obscure the fact that throughout the last century Yerevan always was subject to civil development like this. In the middle of the remains of former houses waiting for reconstruction or replacement, for example near the Republican Square, a mason has set up his workshop. His cross-stones or *khachkars* probably appear for the people as a latent pole transforming the movement around him into something spiritual.

Armenian *khachkars* are markers of ethnic identity, mediators between Armenian history and the present age. *Khachkar* not only reflects a mere affirmative symbolism of why it was erected. Beyond that it feeds an intrinsic kind of potential counter history to the rule of a foreign or hostile power. To exemplify this insight, I will sketch out the positioning of the cross-stone on behalf of the "Mother Armenia" monument to the victory in the Great Patriotic War in Yerevan, which I compare with the Sardarapat Memorial to commemorate the 1918 battle which stopped the Ottoman advance into Armenia as we know it today.

The Character of the Cross-Stone

The cross-stone (CS) is a vertical stone with a westward-facing carved side. The background is made up of geometric elements interwoven with plants. Cross-stones are the descendants of steles, which originated with the megaliths in the 3rd millennium BCE. These stones are found all across the Armenian uplands in old settlements and cemeteries, at cross-roads, on mountainsides, springs, wells and bridges as well as near monasteries. They are also found where Armenian refugees erected them along the roadways they used. A cross-stone is an individual art form, not just for Armenian art but also as part of the early Christian cult of the cross. Alongside the sun as the most powerful and immutable body in the heavens, they symbolise salvation, eternity and resurrection, life, death, redemption and destruction. They symbolise periods of life and history which were not only important for individuals, but also for Armenians as a whole. The events which give rise to their erection can be secular as well as purely sacred.

A cross-stone not only reduces the complexity of history to its own shape and its content, but reformulates it as a symbolic event using an original Armenian code, which includes the aforementioned current event, but at the same time transcends it. Thus, a singular, historical event becomes a link in a time-based chain which stretches a long way back.

A CS is an architectural artefact, which is not only created within a space. Any architecture, which is organized by human labour, first creates the space. Beyond that man is positioning within space, thus developing

a particular perspective towards the latter and architecture. The Museum at Sardarapat has only two windows. One window looks out on Mount Ararat in Turkey, the other on Mount Aragats in the Armenian Republic. The effect is as if the two are connected by means of the museum, and so the political border between states is symbolically overcome. This needs to be put in the context of the overall design of the building, which through its architecture and exhibitions provides a glimpse into the depths of time, the history of Armenian culture. This includes the socialist movement, which after its collapse is able to remain intact so to speak through this interconnection with the present day.

Socialist Realism and Its Possible Overcoming

The ideology of Socialist Realism goes back to Lenin's article "Party organisation and Party literature" in 1905, where he divided the socialist times' preceding cultures into reactionary and progressive culture. In Stalinist architecture in particular, which implements this ideology only superficially, old forms were taken and pervaded by new ideological content. This synthesis included both the completion of all the traditions and the end of history (V. Paperny).

The problem is the one-sided emphasis of the progressive part of the culture subject to and coinciding with Moscow's centralism, where the criteria for being reactionary or progressive were defined. An over-exaggeration of Paperny's paradigm of Soviet architecture misjudges the intrinsic value of the thus centralist state of the incorporated national art. An example for this is the notable architect of Soviet Armenia, Rafael Israelyan (1908–1973), whose monuments are related to religious themes. His daughter told me in an interview, that if someone will see his works some centuries later being unaware of the date of their creation, he won't think that they have been built during the times of socialism. Israelyan was ignorant of the requirements demanded by the system, which is certainly reflected in the fact that he didn't get large commissions. For him it was immoral to subject art to politics as well as setting the artist's creativity into definite frames. Israelyan didn't pay attention to politics. His aim was to keep alive the architecture and the 'soul of his ancestors'. Thus the contradiction between a socialist society and the autonomy of individual imagination can be detected.

Maurice Halbwachs respected this in his conception of collective memory. Individual memory always develops as part of a group, but never is its image. Every individual participates in several groups by socialization. Thus there never can be congruency between individual and collective. In this perspective there is no single one collective memory but many. This principle affects not only Israelyan's thoughts and thinking but the broader Armenian society as well. Material forms like machines, monuments, and digital media bear incorporated "histories" (St. Tyler), which are individually discussed in a collective (M. Halbwachs). We can study the effect of this by focussing on the monument of Mother Armenia.

The Monument Mother Armenia

The monument of Mother Armenia is dedicated to the victory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW), i.e. World War II. It should record and memorialise the contribution of the Armenian people to the victory of the Soviet Union over fascist Germany (as everywhere in the Soviet Union). In the beginning of the 1950's it was a statue of Stalin himself posed on a pedestal. Some years after its removal, the statue "Mother Armenia" was erected there (1967). It was Israelyan who implemented a museum inside the pedestal (1974), whose exposition was about the GPW. Among the parts of the monument nearby the huge figure, which can be seen from the City of Yerevan, several CS are bordering the so-called Victory Street. On these CS the names of fallen Armenian participants of the war are engraved. It was those CS I was wondering about, when I saw them for the first time. Roughly the question was: if they possess such great significance to Armenian identity, why did the Armenians offer them up as a present of sorts to Socialist realism, leaving normative aspects aside.

Adding to this the content of the ascription of Israelyan to have revitalized the CS-culture in Soviet Armenia, we may have to pay attention to the character of the Museum, inside of which the hall in the 2nd floor is the most striking part. Israelyan said about this: "I have rebuilt Haghbat!" The hall resembles a Chapel of Haghbat monastery in Lori province. Inside the hall we can also see the model of a bell tower in one corner opposite of which swords with downward peaks are posed. By both we are reminded of the architectural function of a monastery as a fortress and the highly politicized function of the Armenian Church throughout the history.

Israelyan was asked to work on the Sardarapat monument (project). First he designed a sword of huge proportions pointing towards the skies. But this design was not accepted by the government. As a substitute he designed a tower with bells, which is reminiscent of the old bells ringing to call the whole people to stand up and defend Armenia. Israelyan had to change the form, but didn't change the content, because both forms (co-)exist in the same context referring to themes of battle. Thus form and content are interchangeable. Compared to that, e.g. Stalin preferred the pre-eminence of content before form, thus forcing heteronomy on art.

On Mother Armenia monument sword and bell-tower refer to the character of the hall resembling Haghbat monastery, thus symbolizing the defence of Armenian Christianity. For Israelyan sword and bell-tower are complementary to one another.

Khachkar as a Material Form of a Counter-History

Let's have a look at the development of the museum's content in relation to the meaning of CS. Having been focused on the importance of Armenian participation in WWII, the relevant exhibits of the museum were shifted into the chambers of the basement. The other ones on the first floor were replaced with those of the Karabagh independence war. Thus the CS keeps its meaning as part of the national fight for the existence of Armenian culture. One has to bear in mind that people always talk about Stalingrad as a decisive moment for Armenian culture, too. They assumed that if Stalingrad would have been lost to Nazi-Germany, the Turks—standing at the Armenian–Turkish frontier—would have invaded the country and completed what they had attempted in 1915–18. In this perspective, the names of the fallen on the memory stones besides the CS relate to those of the Karabagh war like a metonymy.

Here we can turn to the Sardarapat monument again. Since 1997 there are graves of eight Armenian defenders who fell in Karabagh. This probably demonstrates the most visible change to the memorial landscape at Sardarapat since Armenian independence. But, by content, the addition of the graves implies a continuity connecting Sardarapat to the conflict in Karabagh. The daughter of Israelyan explains the important symbolism of the addition: "If we lose Karabagh, the Turks will invade the whole country." Sardarapat and Karabagh both are symbols for ethnic identity and national existence, which exactly is represented by a memorial stone behind the graves with a carving of an eagle as its focus. This memorial stone we may categorize as a cross-stone as well. The meaning of the positioning of the eagle as part of this CS is the connection of part to a certain future in the presence.

The highly political value of *khachkar* is demonstrated by the cemetery in Djugha in former Armenian Nakhichevan, today belonging to Azerbaijan, whose President Aliyev had it destroyed in the beginning of the

21st century to annihilate the final traces of the Armenian existence there. In 1604 Persian Shah Abbas deported hundreds of thousands of Armenians to Persia, where they built a new home for themselves (the present Isfahan) and brought prosperity to the Persians. Abbas left ruins in Djugha and the cemetery. This we have to bear in mind to analyze the destruction of the cemetery by Aliyev. It is no wonder that he could announce that no Armenians had ever lived in Nakhichevan. There are no material forms to prove their existence. This again gives way to discussions of the cultural Genocide as a step before and after Genocide (R. Lemkin) as a way to destroy the memory of the Armenian presence in this region.

Conclusion

If we take Lenin's slogan "national in form, socialist in content" and look at the facts about Israelyan and the description of the monuments, we may conclude an inversion, which changes the form into the content. Israelyan did not only create his art in spite of the system, but in correspondence with it. Looking from outside, both the Museum and the CS seem to be part of a Socialist Realism project, but this again hides the content from the message as just its form. The spiritual character of CS raises Armenian history onto the level of socialist presence, and, while opposing it, it incorporates the latter without being reduced to a secularized level.

Although the monuments discussed here are a product of Socialism, their parts intrinsically are inscribed with basically national elements, which contradict socialist ideology as well as they incorporate it. The architect is characterized as someone, who interprets the cultural heritage of his native architecture. He does not repeat the styles of the preceding times but creates original, deeply national and at the same time modern works of architecture. Thus the architect is not only defending heritage, but the heritage itself is incorporated in the present. The heritage of CS is not merely handed down, nor is it passed over as an object to be used against the Soviet system to maintain a distinct identity. Consequently it gives us the opportunity to utilize the period of the Soviet system within the context of the thousands of years of Armenian history to characterize Armenian culture itself.

About the Author
Jürgen Gispert is an anthropologist at the University of Leipzig.

Recommended Reading
• Franz Schultheis, Stephan Egger (ed.), Maurice Halbwachs 2003: Maurice Halbwachs in der édition discours, vol. 1–7. Konstanz: UVK.