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## The Memory of the Second Karabakh War and the Future of the National Lack in Azerbaijan

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### Abstract

The loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding, predominantly Azerbaijani-inhabited territories after the First Karabakh War formed a traumatic basis for the formation of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. The situation fundamentally changed after the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan regained control over surrounding territories and even began articulating a new irredentist discourse. Based on a psychoanalytic approach, this study examines the reflection of these shifts in unofficial cultural artefacts, namely, *mevkhana*. The article analyses the celebration of the return of national territory, the glorification of veterans, and the mourning of fallen soldiers as three modes of memorialising the war in popular songs. The study also analyses the proliferation of antagonism in the same genre.

### Introduction

The emergence of the national liberation movement in Azerbaijan in 1988 is closely connected to the interethnic clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. Interethnic clashes transformed into nationwide antagonism, utilised by both the protest movement and the government. While the protest movement demanded the protection of the rights of Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia and the retention of Nagorno-Karabakh within the sovereign borders of Azerbaijan, the government of Nagorno-Karabakh launched a passport-checking operation to identify Armenian armed guerrillas in late 1991, which essentially turned into an ethnic cleansing of Armenian villages (Murphy, 1992). Crisis and interethnic conflict evolved further after the massacre of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Khojaly in February 1992, after which the liberation movement's representatives, the Popular Front, came to power (De Waal, 2003).

The war intensified under their rule in the summer of 1992 when Azerbaijan took control over areas in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the growing power struggle with various warlords led to an internal crisis, which gave the Armenian forces a chance to restore control over Armenian-inhabited areas and occupy several strategic, Azerbaijani-inhabited areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian control led to waves of refugees from these territorial units. The occupation of Kelbajar in April 1993 was especially shocking, and the Popular Front declared a state of emergency (De Waal, 2003, p. 212). The internal crisis was solved after Heydar Aliyev's return to Baku in the summer of 1993, and he soon became Azerbaijan's third president. The first war officially ended in 1994 after both sides signed a ceasefire agreement.

The traumatic impact of the conflict essentially manifested in two events: the Khojaly massacre in 1992 and the loss of territories around Nagorno-Karabakh that formed the basis of antagonism in post-Soviet debates on

Azerbaijani national identity. Two discourses on national identity, one emphasising the ethnic Turkic background and the other referring to statism and patriotism, coexist and overlap in the social imaginary in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (Tokluoglu, 2005; Mamedov, 2017, p. 29). The inscription of national lack on the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and with Armenia were features of the nationalist social imaginary. The period between the 1994 ceasefire and 2010 was relatively calm. During this period, national antagonism toward Armenia became a sedimented part of Azerbaijani national identity, represented in school textbooks (Hakobyan, 2016) and cultural artefacts (Samadov and Grigoryan, 2022). The hegemonic rearticulation of socially accepted antagonism has become more evident in post-2010 Azerbaijan, where the authoritarian turn was accompanied by the “rescue” and public pardon of Ramil Safarov in 2012, who served eight years of a life sentence in Hungary for killing an Armenian soldier (de Waal, 2013, p. 3). The 4-day April war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016, which took the lives of more than 200 soldiers, was the first serious break of the ceasefire agreement (Broers, 2019, p. 1), materially proving the persistence of national antagonism.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War restored control over the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and significantly changed the social imaginary. Victory transformed older narratives about the loss of and desire for Karabakh into enjoyment, presented in the form of national celebration. The analytical part of this study shows the affective function of songs in the national celebration of the imagined community of Azerbaijan overcoming its former loss.

### Brief Theoretical Explanation

In psychoanalytically informed poststructuralist political theory, *lack*, *desire*, *fantasy*, and *enjoyment* are four categories of crucial importance (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006; Žižek, 2008; Stavrakakis, 2002). Lack is understood as a fundamental human experience that stems from the absence of stable foundations. According to the Lacanian approach, there is always a “certain fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack” (Žižek, 2008, p. 137), which forms collective identities and desires. Incompleteness is not only a feature of identities but also the symbolic order itself. Fantasy, realised in a narrative form, is thus necessary to cover the lack in the symbolic order, which organises and frames the desires of subjects (Žižek, 2008, p. 132).

Enjoyment, being a part of fantasmatic narratives, is imagined as an idealised state when there is no longer a valid lack. In nationalist narratives, the object of desire is presented as enjoyment stolen by an external enemy,

and nationalist political projects promise to get it back (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 152). From the Lacanian point of view, the national idea is a way to organise enjoyment through national myths (Žižek, 1993, p. 202). Identification with these collective myths grants the subject a sense of partial and momentary bodily enjoyment (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 157). The unofficial status is what makes such practices enjoyable. A more direct mode of such enjoyment is racist hate speech. By transgressing social norms and using a racial slur, the racist speaker obtains enjoyment by articulating offensive signifiers (George and Hook, 2022, p. 41).

In the case of Azerbaijan, national discourses placed the traumatic loss of Karabakh at the level of national lack. The national community was united by this shared loss and mutual experience of traumatic events. The 2020 war brought the historical chance to return lost lands and affectively experience the war and its outcomes. The study reveals the inscription of collective affects, such as celebration and mourning, in *meykhana* songs related to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Preference is given to *meykhana*, a relatively free-of-state-control rap-like national music genre, because this genre represents popular ideas and social narratives, including nationalism (Strzemžalska, 2022). Unlike officially sanctioned practices that only demonstrate enjoyment, the unofficial practices, e.g., rituals, customs, and dances, are more provocative in the celebration of national enjoyment and identification (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 157). Considering space limitations, only three *meykhana* songs, which have been watched more than 3 million times, are chosen based on a YouTube search for patriotic songs. The following framing does not limit the possibilities of other frames and interpretations of the war.

#### *Celebration: “I Would Sacrifice Myself For You, Karabakh!”*

In a viral patriotic *meykhana* (more than 5 million views), “We Are Coming, Karabakh” (“*Gəlirik Qarabağ*”) by Rövşən Binəqədili (2020), which was uploaded to YouTube on November 19, 2020, (11 days after the end of the war), *Karabakh* is repeated as a signifier in the context of sacred space (“May I sacrifice myself for you, Karabakh/I admire you, Karabakh”). This sacred space, Karabakh, has been finally reclaimed after “Armenians are chased out.” The emphasis on the act of “our return” designates the dominant national desire.

Karabakh is described as Azerbaijan’s lost paradise with a poeticised agency: “The hay field has missed us; the flowers have missed us.” Such an affective localisation of Karabakh with passive agency (it can *miss*) essentialises Karabakh as a space that morally belongs only

to Azerbaijanis. A paradisiac description of the land makes the fantasy of its return into a promise of total contentment, harmony, and completeness that the victorious nation deserves.

The song also mentions Khojaly: “Revenge has been taken, Khojaly!” (*Qanın alınır, Xocalı*). While the song has a celebratory tone, by reminding listeners of the most traumatic event in the national narrative, the author draws attention to the fact that complete victory only occurs with revenge for Khojaly.

#### *Glorification: “Step Aside, the Veteran is Coming!”*

Veterans’ social and psychological problems after the war have been the most pressing issue in Azerbaijan. Over 40 veterans have committed suicide (Aghayev and Shikhali, 2022). Many veterans publicly raised attention to unfulfilled demands for economic prosperity or unresolved health issues (Samadov, 2021). Slowly, the subject position of the veteran has become associated with injustice, increasing discomfort for some and raising empathy in others.

The song *Qazi gəlir* (“The Veteran is Coming”), performed by rapper Elvin Nasir and *meykhana* poet Aqshin Fateh (2021), pays tribute to the figure of the veteran. With 5 million views, the song describes the pain and memories of the veteran and is an explicit “diss” track targeting the entertaining music “Bashir is Coming.” This case reveals the tension among “sincere nationalists” and “consumerists,” who are resented by the former. While the Bashir video shows young people dancing and singing in downtown Baku, the veteran video depicts a one-eyed, disabled veteran who visits the graves of his brothers-in-arms. His bodily losses are meaningful: “He lost his hand, arm, legs/There is a whole area that is not given to the enemy.” Thus, the veteran’s bodily loss is justified by standing in for the national lack, as his health was “sacrificed for the nation.”

The lyrics tell us the story of the veteran, who was a refugee (“Once he left his home barefoot”), so his participation in the war was an act of successful revenge. This motive humanises the veteran but also mirrors the dominant narrative of resentment in Azerbaijani society after the loss of Karabakh, making it easier for the listener to identify and empathise with the veteran.

#### *Mourning: “Those Days with You”*

During the war, Azerbaijan lost more than 2900 soldiers. The glorification and commemoration of fallen soldiers (martyrs, *şəhidlər*) have become common, with an especially powerful affective force among the people. While glorification and remembrance are accepted forms of memory politics, the public mourning of human losses did not fit the narrative of overcoming national loss, and public media mostly avoided such stories. In

other words, mourning fallen soldiers was underrepresented in the official narrative of the victory and defeat of the enemy. The object of mourning, a fallen soldier, devalues the recently obtained national object of desire and potentially leads to melancholia.

A famous *meykhana* poet, Mahir, (2022) mourns the martyrs, “those who preferred the flag of the homeland as their shroud.” The video has been watched 8 million times on YouTube. The author remembers “those days with you” with a “broken heart.” Closer to the end, the listener can also hear a voice crying. The song is a rare example of mourning in the form of popular music without references to victory, heroism, revenge, and Karabakh. The high number of views proves that even if the practices of postwar mourning were excluded from national representation, the affective need for the act of mourning persisted.

#### *The Future of Antagonism*

According to the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, even if the community obtains the desired object, it does not solve the fundamental absence in the foundations. The impossibility of harmonious existence haunts human beings, causing further dissatisfactions and new demands. There can be different outcomes of antagonistic struggles, such as the transformation of antagonism into agonistic respect, “which is built upon the avoidance of physical and structural violence and on the recognition of all actors as operating within the same democratic, legal, and social sphere, without ignoring the diversity of their positions.” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 171). The analysed case shows that the victory of Azerbaijan has not transformed interethnic hatred. At the official level, President Aliyev blamed the Soviet decision to hand over “ancestral Azerbaijani lands” to Armenia and threatened to take these lands by force. This narrative has become “increasingly prevalent in Azerbaijani discourse” since the end of the Second War (Broers, 2021).

This discursive shift is articulated in *meykhana* rather occasionally. On the YouTube channel of the aforementioned popular *meykhana* writer, Rövşən Binəqədili, there are two songs related to this shift. In a *meykhana* song published on Binəqədili’s channel, “We are coming to Zangezur” (*Zəngəzura Gəlirik*), Vusal Khayal (2021) addresses Armenians, saying, “If you do not leave these areas peacefully/We will make you regret [your choices] again like dogs.” The intertextual reference to dogs should remind the listener of İlham Aliyev’s infamous speeches during the war, where he described Armenians as dogs that were chased away (Sahakyan, 2022). This dehumanising trope and the new irredentist focus show that Aliyev’s speeches have influenced popular discourse and prove that military victory did not end the antagonistic and exclusionary approach to

cross-border relations. After the war, the proliferation of antagonism and irredentist narratives materialised during the September clashes in 2022 in South Armenia. As a result, more than 100 soldiers died on both sides. In the same month, Rövşən Binəqədili (2022) released a new song, “We are coming to take it back” (*Almağa Gəlirik*, 200.000+ views), which refers to the imaginary capture of Zangezur, the land of “meadows and glades,” after the destruction of villainized enemies. Thus, the fantasy of reclaiming the stolen lands of Karabakh is transferred to capturing other historical lands. Notably, the relatively low number of views (32.000+ and 200.000+) and occasional articulation of the signifier “Zangezur” in unofficial discursive practices demonstrates that this irredentist shift in official discourse remains infrequent and does not affect national identity as much as the narratives on victory.

## Conclusion

The First Nagorno-Karabakh War left deep injuries on the post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. The memory of the first war formed a specific social imaginary based on exclusive victimhood and antagonistic nationalism, which “identifies the other-foreigner as a radically different and inferior actor, which is a threat for the self.” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 231) Victory changed the narrative

of the victimisation of the national Self to the celebration of the return of Karabakh. However, what victory did not change is the dehumanising attitude and continued antagonism towards Armenians. The conflict has been transformed only to a still-contentious border dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the future of the Armenian-inhabited part of Karabakh remains unclear.

Three modes of remembering the war, celebration, glorification, and return, are revealed in popular *meykhana* songs. Celebration is connected to the fantasy of the return of lost territory, promising enjoyment and harmony for the future. Glorification reminds the national community that the return is possible due to the heroic acts of veterans and martyrs. While glorifying fallen soldiers is an officially accepted form of memorialisation, public mourning over them remains marginalised.

Finally, an irredentist shift in official discourse introduces a further object of desire: Zangezur as lost ancestral lands. However, the lack of public memory of the “second loss” has not allowed the further sedimentation of this shift, which is also occasionally reflected in *meykhana*. The absence of peace narratives and the popularity of dehumanising ideas remain major problems for transforming antagonistic nationalism in Azerbaijan.

## About the Author

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