

Narrating Karabakh Conflict or Armenian and Azeri Conflict Histories Online

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Abstract: *The paper analyses Armenian and Azerbaijani national myths with special emphasis on the myths about the Karabakh conflict. By means of Paul Ricoeur's narrative approach we interpret selected Azeri and Armenian websites and find out the national myths regarding the Karabakh conflict. We conclude that the national myths of Armenians and Azeris are mutually incompatible and we identify the possible way out of the current deadlock.*

Keywords: *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, national myth, narrativism*

Introduction

The Karabakh conflict is one of several frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area. Armenians and Azeris, the two sides of the conflict, have fought themselves into in a stalemate and the conflict seems to have no solution in the forthcoming years. The conflict has a lot of causes; however, in this paper we will focus on the narratives of the historical development of the Karabakh region and the conflict itself. For both nations, Armenians and Azeris, history is one of the crucial sources of their national identities. Therefore, the narratives of their histories are completely different, though we deal with the same historical events.

Besides the disputes of politicians and professional historians, the Karabakh history narratives are also presented on the Internet. In this paper we will show how the history of the Karabakh conflict is being interpreted in selected English-language Armenian and Azeri web sites. By emphasizing the divergences of both sides' views, we show the obstacles to the peaceful settlement of the conflict based on the profoundly different popular narratives of history.

Methodology

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

This quotation from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* is one of the best explanations of narrativism, an interpretativist social science paradigm. Narrativism deals with the narratives — stories that interpret our lives or national histories. Narrative is a text based on an elementary structural unit called the *narrative sentence*, which has specific logic. Narrative sentence interprets historical events in the context of events that have not yet happened at the time of events being interpreted and in the context of the interpreter's historical time (Ricoeur 2000: 207). A text, which consists of such sentences, has certain *contentual narrative logic*, by which we mean a potential set of the all-possible variants of the story that might have happened. This means that the storyteller reconstructs subjective and objective¹ conditions that existed or might have existed at the time when certain events happened. This is de facto a set of all 'past futures'; by comparing these 'past futures' we are able to evaluate the story and its actors and to decide what was 'bad' and what was 'good' (see Ochrana 2009: 115–117 or Colombo 2003). This is also how national histories are being created.

In this paper we have to differentiate between narrative realism, narrative constructivism and narrativism as the paradigms explaining the nature of the stories. *Narrative realism* claims that the stories are lived by the people and by narrating them we simply discover the story itself, how it really happened. *Narrative constructivism* strongly opposes this idea claiming that there are no 'lived stories', because history is amorphous and unstructured, there are no beginnings and no ends in it. History is thus being *enstoried* by the people, who are trying to give it some sense by constructing stories based on the narrative sentences and contentual narrative logic. *Narrativist* approach criticizes both narrative realism and constructivism for being too constraining. It claims the stories lived by people are real. We all act intentionally, so we are trying to live the story we prefer. But this does not mean that we cannot, after some time, re-evaluate our live and find some new sense in our past actions. The same is valid in the field of history and other social sciences. The actors of historical events acted intentionally, they attempted to act out the story they preferred. But after some time we are able to re-evaluate past events, find out new stories that have emerged in new contexts (see Fay 2002: 213–236).²

The author of this paper favors the narrativist approach. The narratives told by selected websites re-evaluate some historical events connected with the Karabakh conflict. With the reference to Ricoeur's (2000: 181) interpretative narrativism, we proceed from the classification to the interpretation of these differences.

Terminological and theoretical framework

Before we start our analysis, we have to define the type of the stories we focus on. These stories can be easily identified as *national myths*. The word myth evokes something unreal, legendary, unscientific and fictional; however, the original meaning of the Greek word *mythos* is neutral — the story.

Historical myths constitute a crucial part of national identity. They legitimize the existence and demands of a nation saying who they are and who they are not. Here is how Tesář (2007: 141–162) summarizes the logic of the origin of these myths. What is an individual able to comprehend by experience of his own covers roughly 80 to 100 years (one remembers these events or he/she was told about them by parents or grandparents). Behind the scope of personal experience is a fuzzy time segment called the *floating gap*, beginning with the more or less legendary dawn of the nation. Only few historical events are distinctly rising from the fuzzy national lineage. These events are commonly known and taught at schools, however, they have not been selected accidentally, but went through a filter of *collective memory*, which is a product of communication in the frame of national community. This is where the events and stories are being evaluated: the rule of a certain king was good; the battle of just war was lost due to a treachery etc. Zolyan and Zakarian (in Veselý 2008: 15–16) claim that '*[e]very national historiography has its agenda in accordance with which historical facts are selected, and a link is created between historically or contextually distant events or phenomena.*' This phenomenon is sometimes called *employment*; evidently, we are back at the narratives again.

Professional historians do not have a monopoly on interpreting history. What is more, they often have to work not with the historical facts, but rather with the interpretations of these facts made by their antecedents. It would also be naïve to view historians as impartial judges. Many historians do strive to be 'objective' (that means working according to the methods of historiography, without consciously siding with any side), many others understand their work as celebrating the history of their nation and legitimizing its claims or political representatives. This fact has very important consequences for our research: we are not able to prove that one interpretation of the history is 'objective' and another one is just a historical myth. We can just presume that societies affected by nationalism more than other societies are better predisposed to produce national myths than to critically interpret their history or the national myths themselves. Armenia and Azerbaijan are (see Kopeček 2008a, 2007) seen as such societies.

Tesař (2007: 141–162) describes the structure of the great national myth (meaning the summa of myths referring to concrete events) by a triad connecting the past, the presence and the future. This triad is comprised of (1) myths about the origins of the nation, (2) myths about the golden and dark ages of the nation, its national struggle, (3) myths about the mission of the nation in the world, about the sense of national history. The hearth of this triad, the second cluster of myths, is structured as follows: There is a golden age of the nation, which ends by treachery, invasion etc. The impending arrival of dark ages was only one of the possible futures; the myth constructs these possible futures, evaluates them and shows that the dark ages were not necessary and were just a consequence of some negative doings. Then the myth describes the national struggle for the better future and possibly ends

with the events perceived as the national victory and the beginning of a new golden age. It is quite typical that there are several golden and dark ages in a nation's history and the shape of the great national myth can be described as zigzag or cyclic. The first and the third cluster of myths often construct some 'holy land', a mythical cradle of the nation, which is quite often occupied by the enemy — what incidentally happened in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Karabakh conflict and the World Wide Web

Nagorno-Karabakh is a territory in the South Caucasus which has no clear borders. In the past, some states or quasi-state entities existed there; some of them refer to themselves as Karabakh or Artsakhs (in Armenian). In 1923 the Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was created as a part of Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, although the majority of population constituted ethnic Armenians. The ethnic composition of the area in different periods favored Armenians (Christians) and Azerbaijanis (Tatars, Turks, Muslims).

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh tried to change the status of this territory and after an unsuccessful attempt to become a constitutive subject of the USSR or to join the Armenian SSR, Karabakh's government declared independence. A war broke out in 1992 between Karabakh Armenians, supported by the regular Armenian army, and the Azerbaijani army and other Azeri armed groups. War was never formally declared, but fighting lasted until May 1994, when an armistice was signed. During the war, Armenian units conquered nearly the whole former autonomous region and vast areas surrounding it, including the so-called Lachin corridor, which separates Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian Republic. Armenian forces occupied ca. 12 000 sq. km of the Azerbaijan Republic (14% of the country's territory). In the conquered territory, a self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was established, claiming also the Shahumian region north of Karabakh, which was never part of the Soviet autonomous region and was not even conquered by the Armenian forces (Kopeček 2008b).

The conflict itself has several causes and there are several reasons why the conflict is still alive. Profoundly different views of the Karabakh history and negative stereotypes about the members of the other nation are among the crucial ones. The author of this paper has observed during his several visits to the South Caucasus region that it is quite rare to meet Armenians or Azeris who do not follow the stereotypes constructed by their respective national myths. Armenians and Azeris have distinct perceptions of their histories, which are being reproduced by educational systems (as was perfectly shown in Veselý 2008), and there is also a struggle for the favor of the international community going on, with both sides trying to persuade the rest of the world that their interpretation of history is the right one. This war is being waged in the fields of politics, social sciences, culture etc. With the fast development of the Internet, the war of narratives moves to the cyberspace and many websites dedicated to the Karabakh conflict have emerged. Websites in English created by any side of the conflict play two roles. They help to unite vast Armenian and Azeri Diasporas with their ethnic kin in their homelands (through the incessant repetition of the national myths they strengthen

the belief that the myths are historically right), and they try to persuade outsiders in the verity of the Armenian or Azeri view of history and the conflict itself.

For the purpose of our case study three Armenian and Azeri websites have been chosen. Foreign Agents Registration Act 22 U.S.C. § 611e acknowledges Nagorno-Karabakh as a de facto sovereign entity and enables it to hold a mission in the United States — *Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in Washington, D.C.* Besides the diplomatic offices in Moscow and Yerevan, the office in Washington is a crucial diplomatic post for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and the web page of the office plays a major role in the presentation of the NKR's stance to the Karabakh conflict. The section of the website devoted to the Karabakh conflict is a comprehensive one, including popular versions of the conflict history, facts about the self declared republic, statements and speeches of Karabakhi politicians, overview of peace talks, links to another websites and a comprehensive list of books supporting the Armenian view.

Armeniapedia is a free online encyclopedia based on wiki-software; it means that anyone can edit the content of the articles with the exception of those temporary closed for editing. Armeniapedia was founded in 2004 and is owned by Raffi Kojian, one of the young members of the Armenian Diaspora who came back to Armenia after the declaration of independence. Kojian owns another important Armenian website www.cilicia.com and is one of the prominent public figures in Yerevan. The scope of Armeniapedia is much broader than the Karabakh conflict history; it is an English language encyclopedia about Armenia, Armenians, Armenian culture, nature etc.

Armenian History is a website of an amateur historian Yuri Babayan and, besides the general history of Armenia, Babayan researches the history of Nagorno-Karabakh or – as he uses the traditional Armenian name for the region — Artsakh.

Azerbaijan International aspires to be the world's largest site about Azerbaijan, which seems to be true. Founded in 1993 in the United States as a magazine about Azerbaijan, it has grown into a comprehensive web portal covering all the aspects of life in Azerbaijan. The core of the portal is an online magazine Azerbaijan International, however, one of the several categories on the main page is Karabakh conflict.

Karabakh.org is Azerbaijani website, whose anonymous authors can be reached via online contact form only. The website is structured into four main sections: news, the history of Karabakh, Karabakh conflict and international crimes (meaning war crimes, terrorism and genocide allegedly committed by the Armenians).

Armenian Aggression is a web site created by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It can be accessed from the ministerial main page through an easily recognizable banner. Besides a view of the conflict history, this website deals with some legal issues concerning the conflict settlement, situation in the territories occupied by the Armenian forces, the peace process etc.

These selected websites represent three types of online sources dealing with the Karabakh conflict. Pages of the Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the official sources, Armenian History and Karabakh.org are amateur pages dealing with the conflict history and Armeniapedia and Azerbaijan International are important independent web portals covering many spheres of Armenian and Azeri societies.

Karabakh conflict narratives online

It is to say that the stories told by the three Armenian websites are nearly identical — and the same can be stated about the three Azeri websites. The only two differences are in the level of *detail they are* providing and in particular topics they are emphasizing.

The Armenian conflict narrative can be briefly told as follows. Armenians are the autochthons in the region of the South Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia. They founded several famous empires,³ however, all of them were ruined by a combination of betrayal, national discord or by invasions of a mighty enemy. Armenians are proud of their Christian traditions and declare themselves to be the first nation who accepted Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD.⁴ From the 11th century Armenians suffered under the yokes of Muslim and Turkish rulers, but they have retained a certain level of self-rule in the mountains of Sasun, Syunik or Karabakh. Karabakh itself is perceived as the holy land, were the Armenian nobility resisted the Muslim rulers from the lowlands until the 18th or 19th century. The golden ages were changing with the dark ages during which Armenians were sometimes facing extermination — e.g. Varnadvank⁵ in the 5th century, Arabic invasion in the 7th and the 8th centuries, Mongol invasion in the 13th century, Hamidian⁶ massacres in the Ottoman empire in the late 19th century, the Armenian genocide during the years of WWI, or the Sardarapat battle⁷ of 1918.

According to Armenian historical narratives, Armenian brothers in faith several times betrayed the Armenian nation: Byzantines did so in the 11th century, British in 1919 and Russians in 1921.⁸ This betrayal repeats in 1991 again; Soviet (i.e. Russian) Special Forces together with Azeri militia ethnically cleansed the Shahumian district north of Karabakh and thereby assisted the Azeris in their fight against the Armenian nation. Thus, it was to Armenians alone to defeat the Azeris and conquer Nagorno Karabakh by force during the years 1992–1994. The war against numerous enemies is presented as a heroic liberation of the occupied territories, though part of Karabakh's territory is still perceived to be occupied by Azerbaijan (Shahumian district or parts of Martuni district).

Special attention is devoted to the events interpreted as pogroms or genocide committed on the Armenian inhabitants of Baku, Shahumian and Sumgait, to the railway blockade of Armenia, to the destroying of Armenian cultural heritage and discrimination against Armenians in Karabakh during the Azeri administration.

In the Azeri version of the story we can read about the same events interpreted in a different way with different historical events chosen by the Azeri collective national memory. Azeris are, in their opinion, the autochthons in South Caucasus and not an artificial nation, created by the Turkish nationalists at the turn of the 20th century or even by Stalin in 1936, as the Armenians often claim.⁹ The modern Azeris are said to be the descendants of Caucasian Albanians or Alwanians, an autochthonous ethnic group, which has been partly absorbed by the Armenians and partly Islamized and Turkicised¹⁰ to become a fundament of the Azeri nation. The territory of Karabakh was '*[f]rom ancient times up to the occupation by Russians in the early 19th century (...) part of different Azerbaijani states*' (Armenian Agression, n.d.). Armenian population was resettled to Karabakh as well as to Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Zangezur and other historically Azeri territories, during the Russian occupation of South Caucasus. These territories have been indeed stolen from Azerbaijan, and Armenian claims

for Karabakh are absurd. Moreover, the Karabakh Khanate, a state that existed in the second half of the 18th century, and especially its capital Shushi, is perceived to be the cradle of the modern Azeri culture.

Armenian aggressors and terrorists, who have occupied vast territories of Azerbaijan, committed numerous pogroms on Azeri towns and villages. Azeris call these events Azerbaijani genocide and the fate of the town of Khojaly north of Karabakh's capital Stepanakert has become a symbol of Armenian cruelty, hereby presented to the rest of the world.

Discussion

As we can see, the Armenian and Azeri Karabakh conflict narratives are extremely different. In these national myths no space is left for the neighboring nation, which is perceived as a thief, who is attempting to steal the national history and the territory, where the history happened. Azeris perceived Armenians as notorious aggressors and terrorists, while Armenians perceived Azeris as a nation without any history, whose claim on Karabakh is based on a fiction created by the Bolsheviks.

These incompatible historical narratives are the crucial issues that impede the peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict. They are present not only on the Internet, but also in school textbooks (see Veselý 2008), in the media and in the minds of people. As shown in Kopeček (2007) or Mikhelidze and Pirozzi (2008), Armenian and Azeri national elites have securitized the Karabakh conflict and the national myths at the end of 1980s and are not able to de-securitize them today, though the protracted conflict seems to be detrimental to both sides. Civil societies, which have been mobilized during the stormy years of the dissolution of the USSR in order to preserve the national myths and support the national claims, are crucial for the survival of corrupted political elites that have gained power in rigged elections in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Civil societies in Azerbaijan and Armenia barter their support to the political elites for the elites' strict stance towards the conflict settlement and the major parts of the civil societies tolerate, in return, the democratic shortcomings of the political elites. In such constellation there is no way out of the 'mythological stalemate' — a situation when national myths are preserved by the two civil societies in mutually incompatible forms.

Conclusions

Methodology based on narrativism enables us to interpret the national myths and conflict histories told by the conflict parties. Having defined and classified the narratives, we have introduced selected websites and interpreted the narratives they offer.

After comparing Armenian and Azeri narratives and their application to the contemporary stage of the conflict we argue that the resolution of the conflict is in both sides' interests,

but the incompatible narratives of the conflict history, transferred from generation to generation through the educational system, and which, among other, can be seen on the Internet too, present a major barrier for this. This controversy favors outside powers and especially Russia to use the Karabakh conflict for its own power policy goals in the South Caucasus.

There is still one question to be answered. Is there any chance to construct such narrative to be acceptable for both Armenians and Azeris? The answer is yes, however, it is a long-distance race. Any attempts for conflict resolution imposed from above are doomed to be rejected by the Armenian and Azeri civil societies, because it will collide with the national myths cherished by them and the state structures are too weak and discredited to handle the resistance of the conservative and numerous civil society. As a matter of fact, this job waits for the civil society, or more likely for the young generation of Armenians and Azeris, who are cautiously meeting each other when participating on international projects financed from the EU budget, at various universities in the EU, US or Georgia etc. This generation may renew the stalled communication between Armenian and Azeri societies and try to reshape the myths and overcome the pernicious stereotypes. However, this is just a possibility, rather than certainty.

Notes

¹ By subjective conditions we mean the individual's intentions, by objective conditions we mean the influence coming from the outside.

² We can demonstrate this with one of Karel Čapek's apocryphal stories — *Alexander the Great*, where Alexander writes a letter to his teacher Aristotle and explains to him how his own late interpretation of Persian expedition differs from his vision at the beginning of the expedition. *'I think back to the time, many years past (how long ago it seems to me now!) when I wrote you a foolish and enthusiastic letter from atop the tomb of Achilles. It was at the threshold of my Persian expedition, and I vowed then that the brave son of Peleus would be my exemplar in life. I dreamed only of heroism and greatness; my victory over Thrace was already behind me, and I thought that I was marching against Darius at the head of my Macedonians and Hellenes simply to cover myself with laurels of worthy of our ancestors whose praises were sung by Homer. I kept faith with my ideals at both Chaeronea and the Granicus, but today I hold a very different view of the political significance of those actions of mine. The sober truth is that our Macedonia, more or less united with Greece, was constantly threatened from the north by the Thracian barbarians; they could have attacked us at unfavourable moment which the Greeks would then have used as the pretext for revoking their treaty and breaking away from Macedonia. It was clearly necessary to subdue Thrace, so that we would have at least that side covered in the event of Greek treachery. It was sheer political necessity, my dear Aristotle, but your pupil did not understand this well enough then and indulged himself in dreams of emulating the feats of Achilles.'* (Čapek 1997: 39–40)

³ E.g. the Tigran's empire in the 1st century BC and the Bagratid kingdom in 10th and 11th centuries AD.

⁴ In fact, this date has been quite often questioned by Western historiography, because it is hard to imagine that a Roman vassal accepts Christianity as its state religion sooner than Rome itself (312 AD). This is surprisingly

reflected in Armeniopedia, which denotes year 301 AD as the traditional date and year 314 AD as the actual date. (Armeniopedia, 2009)

- 5 War for the Christian faith against Zoroastrian Persians ended by the legendary battle of Avarayr, where '66 thousand Armenians heroically fought the overwhelmingly superior Persian troops. Most of the Armenian lords including St. Vardan fell in battle, but Armenia undoubtedly won a great moral victory. Over 60 thousand of Persian soldiers were killed, and Yazdegerd's hopes were dashed.' (Babayan, 2002)
- 6 Named after sultan Abdulhamid during whose reign paramilitary units committed pogroms on Armenian villages.
- 7 Legendary battle where Armenians defeated the Ottoman army under the command of Vahib pasha. Babayan at Armenian History writes: 'Left alone, Armenians faced the total annihilation as the 100 thousandth Turkish army crossed the pre-war Russian frontier, annexed the city of Kars and approached the Armenian capital of Yerevan. After having depopulated the Western Armenia, the Turkish military were now about to destroy the rest of Armenia and achieve their goal of eliminating the Armenian nation. The Armenians raised an army of 40,000 men, including soldiers, officers, volunteers and mass levies. (...) The two armies met on May 28, 1918 near Sardarapat. The battle was crowned with an outstanding Armenian victory. Some 30 thousand of Turkish soldiers were killed; the Turks were flung out. Vahib-Pasha, the defeated Turkish commander, termed the Armenian soldiers as 'the best fighters in the world'. (...) On the same day of May 28, 1918 Armenia was proclaimed an independent republic.'
- 8 This year Nagorno Karabakh was made part of Azerbaijani SSR.
- 9 'From 1936, a new concept of 'Azerbaijanis' or 'Azeris' was brought into general use in the Soviet Union. Before that, what is now Azeri was simply called Türk or Caucasian Tatar. Stalin ordered the Soviet historians to create the 'history of Azerbaijan'. As a result, many of the Armenian cultural-historical monuments in Karabakh were then destroyed or shamelessly declared belonging to the Azerbaijani heritage (Babayan, 2002).'
- 10 According to Karabakh.org, the first Turkish tribes arrived to Caucasian Albania in the 7th century AD, roughly 300 hundred years before the Seljuk invasion and 500 years before the foundation of the Ottoman Empire.

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