

COMMEMORATING EXCLUSION: VIOLENT IMAGINARIES AND THE MAINTENANCE OF A WAR MOOD IN AZERBAIJAN



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ABSTRACT

Twenty-three years since the signing of the ceasefire that ended six years of violent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, the parties have moved no closer to forming a lasting peace agreement. Indeed, the ensuing lack of contact between the two sides has allowed their respective positions to become even more entrenched and uncompromising. This thesis seeks to analyse the means by which this international conflict manifests itself at the everyday level in the Azeri capital of Baku, some 400km from the Line of Contact, in the context of these cemented, and decidedly opposing, discursive stances. It will utilise the concepts of violent imaginaries in order to examine how the historicity and memory of the war continues to permeate everyday life, such that it seems a natural, common-sensical aspect of Azeri life, even for those with no direct experience of the fighting. Rather than focusing solely on top-down, elite-driven discourses, or on the specific experiences of individuals, the thesis will attempt to analyse the relational processes between the two involved in the production and reinforcement of violent imaginaries in Baku, and the possible impact this has on prospects for peace.

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Cover Image: Author's own photo of graves of victims of Black January at Alley of Martyrs in Baku, taken 04/04/17

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Introduction

Amid the hustle and bustle of Baku's Fountain Square stands the disused, silent Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, a former Armenian Apostolic Church and a footnote in the city's socio-cultural landscape reminding residents of the previously large population of Armenians in the Azerbaijani capital. The cross has been removed and it is no longer accessible to the public, an apt image for the abrupt end to the coexistence of the two peoples in the capital. Since the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh¹ War in 1988, Azerbaijan has been essentially emptied of Armenians, and vice versa for Azeris in Armenia². Twenty-three years since the signing of a ceasefire which brought a formal end to hostilities, the conflict is no closer to resolution, with the opposing positions of the involved parties becoming more entrenched as "no war, no peace" has become the status quo³. Any progress towards formulating a lasting peace agreement has been repeatedly hindered by military clashes along the Line of Contact, and the continued salience of the "Karabakh issue" in public opinion and political discourse⁴. This thesis will focus on the latter hindrance to lasting peace; namely the role of discourse in sustaining antagonisms related to the conflict. It will utilise the Critical Discursive Approach to violent conflict in order to explore how antagonisms and support for the war are encouraged through the production and reiteration of exclusionist discourses in Azeri society in particular, and outline the possible impact this has on prospects for peace.

Empirical Context

Emerging out of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are many reasons why the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh took on an ethno-nationalist nature, from geographical divides reinforcing difference, and the disparate socio-economic distribution of

¹ *A note on place names*: the war under discussion, along with others in the South Caucasus region, has become so politicised that the terms used to describe the area of Karabakh itself can indicate a bias in one way or another. The official Armenian position refers to the region variably as "the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" – in (unofficial) recognition of its *de facto* independence – or the "Republic of Artsakh", in reference to the 10th century Armenian province in the area (King, 2008, 265). Throughout, this thesis will use the name "Nagorno-Karabakh", as it is referred to in documents of various International Organisations such as the OSCE and the EU. However, quotes used throughout will undertake various regional differentiations in spelling such as "Garabagh", "Qarabag", or the transliterated Russian "Nagorny-Karabakh". All variations translate roughly to mean "black garden" or "mountainous black garden" (De Waal, 2013), and their use should not be taken to reflect any political leaning of the author.

² Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through War and Peace*, 2nd ed., (London; New York: New York University Press, 2013), 251

³ *ibid*

⁴ Rasim Musabayov, "The Karabakh conflict and democratisation in Azerbaijan", in *Accord*, Vol.17, 2006, Conciliation Resources, available at: <http://www.c-r.org/accord/nagorny-karabakh/karabakh-conflict-and-democratisation-azerbaijan>

resources across countries, to the role of perestroika and the Soviet Nationalities Policy⁵. While the two nations have fought in the past, their mutual history is largely one of peaceful co-existence and cooperation⁶. In spite of this, the two narratives surrounding the conflict have served to rewrite this history according to their own strategic position: with Azerbaijan emphasising the role of Armenia as an aggressor, seeking to occupy Azerbaijani lands, while the Armenian leadership have tried to emphasise the inevitability of the conflict – claiming that since the early twentieth century when Nagorno-Karabakh was first brought under Azerbaijani sovereignty, the collapse of the Soviet “central authority” would inevitably result in Karabakh Armenians seeking to claim back their autonomy⁷. Thus, two parallel narratives of the conflict have developed on either side, and they continue to permeate relations (or lack thereof) between the two states. Indeed, the only common aspect of the two narratives is the assertion on either side that Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of their respective national identities⁸. The war which followed the dissolution of the USSR lasted from 1988-1994, and ended in military victory for the Armenian side, holding onto Karabakh and expanding further into Azerbaijan to establish a “buffer zone” through the occupation of seven surrounding provinces⁹. Since then, the two neighbouring states have existed in virtual diplomatic isolation of each other, with the war often inappropriately described as “frozen”, despite periodic skirmishes along the Line of Contact, with significant violence in April 2016 resulting in multiple deaths on either side¹⁰

Despite the lack of contact between Azeris and Armenians, a 2013 survey carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) found that 90% of respondents in Azerbaijan continue to define Armenia as the “main enemy of the country”, with 99% disapproving of doing business with Armenians¹¹. With the majority of the Azerbaijani population physically separated from the Line of Contact, and many too young to remember the original causes of the war, this research supposes that the continued salience of these antagonisms comes from the creation and reproduction of exclusive, nationalist rhetoric and discourses from both elites and the masses in Azeri society. It will thus look to examine the dominant means by which antagonistic attitudes, and continued support for the war, are

⁵ Aytan Gahramanova, “Paradigms of Political Mythologies & Perspectives of Reconciliation in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, in *International Negotiation*, vol.15 (1), 2010, pp.133-152; 134-5

⁶ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 125

⁷ *Ibid*, 126

⁸ Gahramanova, “Political Mythologies”, 135

⁹ Charles King, *Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 214

¹⁰ BBC News, “Nagorno-Karabakh violence: Worst clashes in decades kill dozens”, 03/04/16, Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35949991> (Accessed 23/02/17)

¹¹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC). “Caucasus Barometer 2013 Azerbaijan”, 2013. Retrieved through Online Data Analysis application (ODA) - <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013az/codebook/> (Accessed 01/04/17)

encouraged within Baku, the country's capital, through particular reproductions of narratives, performances, and inscriptions relating to the collective memory of the war.

Research Question and Significance

In examining the means by which antagonisms are sustained in Azerbaijan, this thesis will look to explore the role of exclusionist discourses and collective memories in everyday life in Baku. In order to adequately study this phenomenon, this thesis is based around the following research question:

How do violent imaginaries surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh war serve to encourage antagonistic attitudes towards Armenians among the youth in Baku in 2017?

Despite the existence of several accounts analysing the narratives and collective memories at play in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, most of the scholarship in this area focuses solely on the macro-level top-down production and reinforcement of divisive narratives, or alternatively the micro-level experiences of the trauma of certain groups¹²

This thesis intends to somewhat unite these two approaches in the exploration of the relational process of discourse production. Its basis is in the premise that the general population are not passive recipients of elite discourse, but that divisive rhetoric and narratives resonate with them due to specific socio-historical contexts, and as such they themselves also partake in the reinforcement of antagonistic attitudes. It will tackle this through an exploration of the everyday production and experience of such discourses, looking to expand upon ideas relating to the maintenance of conflict at the discursive level, in the absence of manifest violence.

Methodology

This thesis draws upon the Critical Discursive Approach to conflict and takes an interpretivist epistemological stance, focusing on understanding the constructed meanings and production of discourses and symbols incorporated within present-day interpretations of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The goal of the research is thus in line with Ragin's category of "interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena", as it maintains a focus on the subjectivity of historical events within the present, looking at selective remembrance and how different interpretations of history can impact attitudes and opinions in a contemporary context¹³. As a result, a qualitative research strategy

¹² See, for example, King, *Ghost of Freedom*, Rauf Gargazorov, "Narrative Approach to Interethnic Conflicts: Narrative Templates as Cultural Limiters to Narrative Transformations", in *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations of Theory and Practice*, Vol.2 (1), 2015; Gargazorov, "Painful Collective Memory: Measuring Collective Memory Affect in the Karabakh Conflict", in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol.10 (51), 2015; Kevork Oskanian, *Fear, Weakness and Power in the Post-Soviet South Caucasus*, (Handmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

¹³ Charles Ragin, *Constructing Social Research: the Unity and Diversity of Method*, (Thousand Oaks; London; New Dehli: Pine Forge Press, 1994), 39-41

proved most appropriate to take, as it lends itself to the in-depth exploration and description of particular phenomena¹⁴, in this case those “violent imaginaries” which aid in the production and reinforcement of antagonisms at a discursive level.

Throughout, the focus remains on the production and experience of war discourse within Azerbaijan. However, that is not to suggest that similar processes do not exist within Armenia. In studying the conflict, it quickly becomes clear that there is a lack of available objective information from both sides, such that no matter how it is written, the content of one’s argument can be taken to convey biases in one direction or another. The focus here being on Azerbaijan is not intended to express support for one side or the other, but rather is the result of methodological considerations. A similar study into the existence of war discourses and space for counter discourse in Armenia goes beyond the scope of this MA thesis, though would be encouraged as a topic of further research, especially given the somewhat contradictory and ambiguous position of the Armenian state regarding their involvement in the conflict¹⁵.

The decision to focus on Azerbaijan rather than Armenia here came as the result of the progression of the research question, which began as a study into the experiences and attitudes of the children of IDPs from the Karabakh region, having experienced the war through the transgenerational transmission of memory through stories of their parents and its presentation in Azeri society. Within this framework, a focus on Azerbaijan was favourable due to the sheer volume of IDPs within Azeri society, and their continued legal status as IDPs within it. As the topic of this research was developed further, and methodological limitations in areas such as access and language became clearer, the focus moved from the specific experience of IDPs to the more general representation of the war across society, but maintaining a focus on the means by which people experience the war in their everyday lives, separated from the front lines both physically and temporally.

I have based the methodology of this thesis within the analytical framework of I.W. Schroeder and I.B. Schmidt’s ideas of “violent imaginaries”¹⁶, which can be defined as:

¹⁴ Jane Ritchie, “the Application of Qualitative Methods to Social Research”, in Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE, 2003), 27-8

¹⁵ The official Armenian position represents itself as mediator in a trilateral framework involving itself, Azerbaijan, and the de facto independent (though not officially recognised) state of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, as the people of the latter strive for self-determination, but is still the primary supporter of the armed forces of the region. King, *Ghost of Freedom*, 214-6

¹⁶ I.W. Schroeder & B.E. Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries & Violent Practices" in Schroeder, I.W., & Schmidt, B.E., (eds.), *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2001),

the emphasising of the historicity of present-day confrontations...represented through narratives, performances, and inscriptions. Each of these representational strategies are easy to manipulate and are highly fragmented in any larger social context¹⁷

As previously mentioned, the research underpinning this thesis is based on a Critical Discursive Approach to conflict. In this framework, it seemed most appropriate to operationalise the study of discourse and war through reference to the work of Schroeder and Schmidt regarding violent imaginaries, as the use of narratives, performances, and inscriptions in reinforcing these discourses is in line with the assertion of Sayyid and Zac that “discursive configurations include both linguistic and non-linguistic elements”¹⁸.

Narratives, performances, and inscriptions thus form the basis for the empirical and observable phenomena which contributed to the data-gathering process of this thesis, as they act as distinct manifestations of discourse through which antagonisms can become normalised. They serve as practical means by which the conflict and the associated antagonisms are transmitted across generations through bottom-up discursive processes, but also through top-down discourse production. Schroeder and Schmidt define the three categories of observable phenomena as follows:

- ***Narratives:*** *these keep the memory of former conflicts and past violence alive in stories, either by glorifying one’s own group’s achievements and benefits...or by the perceived injustices, losses, or suffering incurred by one’s own group*
- ***Performances:*** *public rituals in which antagonistic relationships are staged and prototypical images of violence enacted*
- ***Inscriptions:*** *images displayed on banners or murals...broadcasting of TV images...visual displays of antagonisms*¹⁹

Based on these concepts, the following sub-questions were used to operationalise the research question, and inform the practical fieldwork carried out in Baku over the course of four weeks from March-April 2017:

1. *What are the dominant discourses surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh war in Azeri society?*
2. *What stories can be observed in everyday life in Baku which serve to recall the events of the Nagorno-Karabakh war?*
3. *What visual displays of antagonisms related to the Nagorno-Karabakh war can be observed in everyday life in Baku?*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁸ Bobby Sayyid & Lillian Zac, “Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations”, in Scarborough, E. & Tanenbaum, E. (eds.), *Research Strategies in the Social Sciences: A Guide to New Approaches*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257

¹⁹ Schroeder & Schmidt, “Introduction”, 9-10

4. *How are antagonistic relationships related to the Nagorno-Karabakh war depicted through public rituals?*
5. *What actors and institutions serve to promote and reinforce narratives, performances, and inscriptions relating to the Karabakh war in everyday life in Baku?*
6. *What – if any – space is there to contest these narratives, performances, and inscriptions in Baku?*

Each element of violent imaginaries in turn lent itself to different empirical objects and methods of study. In the study of narratives, I made use of both naturally-occurring and generated data, by asking respondents of their own interpretations of the Karabakh war, and their experience of it in Azeri society more generally, as well as through the study of written narratives, taken from government websites, policy documents, news reports, and tourist literature. I also made use of secondary data in the form of existing literature and reports regarding the content of history textbooks, as I was unable to utilise these first-hand due to language and access restrictions.

In studying inscriptions, I made use of naturally-occurring data, through observations of public imagery such as monuments and other visual manifestations of collective memory, such as photography and artwork displayed in various national museums, and “Martyr’s Lane”, a cemetery and memorial situated in a former park in Baku with an area for those who were killed during the war with Armenia.

The study of performances again made use of naturally-occurring data through observations of public rituals and commemorative activities relating to the war. In line with the ideas of performance which will be elaborated on in chapter one’s discussion of the theoretical framework, this included observations more “everyday” performances of nationhood and identity. Additionally, I made use of news reports and other secondary accounts of ceremonies and performances I did not myself attend or observe.

In all three cases, I made use of non-probability, purposive sampling, as I did not look to draw statistical generalisations from the gathered data, and chose what to analyse based on what I determined to be appropriate and accessible over the course of the research. Whilst in Baku, I came across numerous obstacles in carrying out my initially intended research – an investigation of the attitudes and opinions of second-generation IDPs from the conflict – in terms of language barriers and accessibility. Although I had made contacts with numerous organisations before arriving in Baku, many of these contacts could only provide limited assistance once I arrived. Second-generation IDPs were difficult to access due to the reluctance of potentially helpful organisations to work with a foreign researcher, and my own inability to speak Azeri or Russian. As a result, the sampling method for accessing narratives relating to the conflict was altered to focus on young people within Baku, rather than specifically on

IDPs. This was achieved through the use of various social media platforms, as will be explained below. Purposive sampling was most appropriate in the study of performances and inscriptions as well, as it allowed me to maintain a specific focus on those relating to the Karabakh war and relations with Armenia. The language barrier was circumvented in this area through a focus on English-language sources such as tourist literature and the English-language pages of government websites. A core element of the Azeri position in the war rests on not only justifying it to internal audiences, but also to the international community and, as such, I was able to find evidence of violent imaginaries in English as well as Azeri, which allowed me to gather the necessary data to carry out the research.

As briefly mentioned above, this research is greatly indebted to the use of “new media” such as smartphone applications and social media sites. While in Baku, I made use of these non-academic sources such as the location-based, informal networking, application Tinder in order to expand my network of young people in the city. Though I did not initially intend to use the application to carry out research, it quickly became clear that it was in fact a useful means of gaining access to young people who had not experienced the original violence of the war, and provided a straightforward way to initiate conversations with them regarding their own experiences of war discourse, and opinions of Armenia and Armenians. It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to adequately discuss the value of such new media in conducting academic research, but based on my own experience, such social platforms were able to provide an innovative and useful means by which to reach particular sectors of the population in an everyday context who importantly spoke English, which was otherwise difficult to find in the short time I was in Baku. Furthermore, in the context of violent imaginaries, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter provide easily-accessible catalogues of data, with a plethora of examples of narratives, performances, and inscriptions available to browse.

Chapter Outline

The thesis will begin with an overview of the theoretical framework which has been used to guide the research, articulating the relationship between the discursive approach to violent conflict and the construction of memory and identity. This will provide the basis for a discussion of the selective use of collective memory and history in the creation of antagonisms between groups. It will then highlight the means by which such antagonisms can become normalised within a society through an outline of the concepts of everyday and banal nationalism to explore the unconscious internalisation of difference in society. Such an approach is particularly relevant in the Azerbaijani case due to the deeply entrenched ideas of exclusionary identity rooted in collective memories of the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Following this, the second chapter will begin the analysis of data gathered in the production of the thesis by outlining the content of the dominant narratives of the war in Azerbaijan. It will outline four dominant premises within these narratives, namely: 1) Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijani national identity; 2) Armenia threatens this national identity through policies of aggressive nationalism; 3) In spite of this, Azerbaijan is a resilient nation and so remains morally and materially superior to Armenia; and finally, 4) However, Azerbaijan cannot reach its full potential while it continues to be subjected to Armenian aggression. This chapter will look to outline and analyse the Azeri evidence that is used in support of these dominant premises, in the hope of appropriately contextualising the remainder of the discussion.

The third chapter will build explicitly upon Schroeder and Schmidt's violent imaginaries in order to analyse the actors and institutions which produce these narratives, performances, and inscriptions in such a way as to generate and maintain a war mood in Azeri society. It will explore four dominant realms of discourse production, namely the state school system, sites of informal cultural education, the military, and state media. In outlining the means and methods by which antagonistic discourses are diffused throughout society, this chapter will point to how exclusive identities can become normalised in such a way as to promote continued warfare.

Finally, the thesis will explore the space for counter-discourses of peace to emerge within Azeri society. It will look at the work of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and other civil society actors in creating and promoting these discourses, before outlining government attempts to repress them. It will close with a discussion of the impact this repression seems to have on the availability and resonance of such counter-discourses, and what this can mean for prospects of reconciliation.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Before exploring the specificities of the case of Azerbaijan, it is first necessary to outline the theoretical framework which will underpin this thesis. In order to do this, this chapter will begin with an overview of discursive approaches to conflict, as well as an analysis of the existing literature regarding the role of collective memory and narratives in creating and reproducing exclusionary identities. It will then go on to look at the scholarship regarding the everyday manifestations of such collective memory, focusing in particular on the ideas of “violent imaginaries” and “everyday nationhood” which serve to shape discourses in societies involved in conflict. Through situating the research within this framework, the hope is to move beyond top-level International Relations-style analyses of the Karabakh conflict in order to explore the discursive continuation of antagonistic attitudes amongst the general population through the production and reinforcement of narratives, performances, and inscriptions relating to the war.

1.1: The Discursive Approach to Violent Conflict

The theoretical framework within which this thesis is based is that of the Critical Discursive Approach to violent conflict, which is premised on the idea that conflict is a social process that is altered and reproduced through interactions and discourse²⁰. Additionally, discourses do not exist in this context as tools that are used to describe an objective reality, but rather they serve to construct and reproduce this reality, or as Vivienne Jabri puts it: “they do not describe things, they *do* things”²¹. In the context of conflict, then, this approach serves to analyse the discursive means by which antagonisms are constructed between groups, through appeals to certain group “limits” as established through exclusive narratives and conceptions of a group’s unique collective memory²².

In this context, conflict between communities can thus be understood as a conflict between said narratives, which do not exist objectively but rather are constructed by the communities themselves through social interactions and activities. Following this, Jabri’s definition of conflict is most appropriate for the purposes of this thesis:

Conflict is the time at which free individuality becomes submerged into a wider group affiliation ***defined in terms of the nation and a collective memory***. Conflict is the time at which the language of politics becomes a ***discourse of exclusionist protection against a constructed, diabolical, hated enemy*** who is deserving of any violence perpetrated against it²³

²⁰ Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2017), 124-5

²¹ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, (Manchester; New York: New York University Press, 1996), 94-5

²² Sayyid & Zac, “Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations”, 261

²³ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 134 [emphasis added]

The consequence of the existence of such discourses is to reconstruct identities as inherently incompatible by using collective histories to legitimate present-day conflict. Such a process can be seen as the source of “everyday primordialism” in conflict situations, whereby divisions between groups are perceived to be a natural result of their respective identities’ inherent incompatibility rather than constructed in a particular socio-historical setting²⁴. It follows that the discursive approach would suppose that violence does not emerge from difference, but rather that difference is created and reinforced through conflict and its representation.

The emphasis on the fluidity of discourse within this approach also serves to reinforce the importance of socio-historical context in allowing for the emergence and maintenance of antagonisms. Rather than suggesting elites, or the masses, can create a discourse and use it as if pressing certain buttons to mobilize the public to violent action and attitudes, discursive approaches instead emphasise the need for certain societal conditions and contexts such that particular narratives will be more easily received than others, but also emphasize that such contexts and structures are produced through discourse²⁵.

Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov asserts that “culture is that image that society makes of itself”, and goes on to argue that situations of conflict result in the emphasis of different aspects of the “hierarchy” of culture²⁶. He argues the definitive aspect in conflict comes from the most salient manifestation of difference between the warring parties – for example, religion in the Irish conflict, or language in different parts of Spain during the Spanish civil war²⁷. It is in this context that nationalism and national identity have become salient and defining features of difference between the Armenian and Azeri state and peoples over the course of the Karabakh war. When such aspects become the most cited causes of conflict by those in positions of authority of information, it becomes such that the public will view everyday life and politics through this lens of nationality, such that if the conflict turns to violence, nationality becomes the most defining feature through which that violence is interpreted²⁸

Therefore, the next section of this chapter will develop the discussion on the formation of exclusive identities through the exploration of selective appeals to nationalism and collective memory.

²⁴ James D. Fearon & David D Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity”, in *International Organisations*, Vol. 54 (4), Autumn 2000, pp.845-877, 848

²⁵ Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 129-130

²⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *the Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilisations*, translated by Andrew Brown, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 58

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

1.2 Collective Memory and the Construction of Exclusive Identities

Such a framework of the discursive construction of reality is closely related to discussions of collective memory and narrative-formation in the case of nationalism and political conflict. Paul Connerton's seminal text *How Societies Remember* is particularly effective in outlining the parameters and importance of collective memory in the formation of national identity. As he explicates in the opening pages, "our experience of the present very much depends on our knowledge of the past"²⁹. Thus, within the framework of discursive understandings of conflict, it can be deduced that collective memory is a powerful tool in the creation and reproduction of antagonistic relationships between groups in the present through certain readings and presentations of their history. Indeed, Schroeder and Schmidt claim that:

the most important code of the legitimation of war is its historicity. The symbolic meaning of prior wars is re-enacted and re-interpreted in the present...Wars are fought from memory, and they are often fought over memory, over the power to establish one group's view of the past as the legitimate one³⁰

There have been numerous studies in this area into the primary means by which political elites and members of the intelligentsia have constructed hostile relationships between groups through a selective reading and presentation of history. For example, Dubravka Stojanovic provides an effective overview of the "construction of historical consciousness" in the Former Yugoslavia through the wide distribution of history textbooks within Serbia which served to undermine histories of peaceful relations with Croats, instead focusing on past conflicts, and placing particular emphasis on instances of Croat hostility to Serbs, such as under the Nazi-imposed *Ustasha* regime during the Second World War³¹. Additionally, many writers have highlighted the role of the mass media in propagating and reproducing divisive rhetoric to serve certain interests through selective and sometimes deliberately misleading reporting³². As observed by Connerton, "to study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible"³³ and, as such, this thesis will maintain a focus throughout on said "acts of transfer" which serve to reinforce antagonisms in the context of the Karabakh war, including through education and the media.

²⁹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2

³⁰ Schroeder & Schmidt, "Introduction", 9

³¹ Dubravka Stojanovic, "Construction of Historical Consciousness: the Case of Serbian History Textbooks", in Maria Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, (London: Hurst, 2004), pp.327-338

³² See for example, Mark Thomson, *Forging War: the Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (Luton: University of Luton Press, c1999); Charles B. Stone & William Hirst, "(Induced) Forgetting to form a Collective Memory", in *Memory Studies*, Vol.7 (3), 2014, pp.314-27; Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, "Constructing the Enemy-Other: Anxiety, Trauma, and Mourning in the Narratives of Political Conflict", in *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 2008, pp.1-22; Philip Schlesinger, *Media, State, and Nation: Political Violence and Collective Identities*, (London; Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991)

³³ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 39

Furthermore, with regard to the role of memory in shaping interpretations of the present as well as the construction of collective identity, it is useful to draw upon what Umut Ozkirimli terms a “new approach to nationalism” through the study of the “reproduction of nationhood”³⁴. Within this framework, nationalism constitutes “a particular way of constructing the social reality we experience” through reference to a certain discourse which: “claims that the interests and value of the nation override all other interests and values...regards the nation as the only source of legitimacy...[and] operates through binary divisions...between ‘us’ and ‘them’”³⁵. It is in this regard that Schroeder and Schmidt place nationalism and ethnicity as a “common currency of violent imaginaries”, drawing attention to their use as a key theme in recalling past instances of violence³⁶.

Within this framework of producing violent imaginaries, and reinforcing antagonism and nationalism, it is important to note the construction and reproduction of national identity “from below”, through the everyday practices and experiences of members of the nation. In particular, Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss explore ideas of “everyday nationhood”, drawing attention to the fact that nationalism is constituted and reproduced through everyday social interactions and relations, rather than simply through top-down mechanisms of elites and the media, as is often suggested³⁷. They highlight the unconscious means by which national identity permeates everyday life, and through which average citizens of the nation contribute to the construction and reproduction of nationalism, through means such as dialogue about the nation, and the reproduction of national symbols and traditions³⁸. Thus, the antagonisms and divisions associated with warfare could be seen to be unconsciously reproduced and internalised in a similar manner. As highlighted by Jabri:

...the symbolism which accompanies specific national commemorations which glorify past victories in war may be said cumulatively to reproduce and perpetuate a culture of violence where identity is constructed in terms of adversity, exclusion, and violence directed towards past and present enemies³⁹

In addition to the commemoration of victory, however, it is also important to look at the significance of commemorating victimhood and defeat in the attempt to establish a “[legitimate] view of the past”⁴⁰. In the scholarship regarding collective myths and war, authors often pay great attention to the glorification of group identities as a unifying factor⁴¹, but within the context of violent imaginaries

³⁴Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2000), 199

³⁵ *Ibid*, 229-230

³⁶ Schroeder & Schmidt, “Introduction”, 11

³⁷ Jon E. Fox & Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Everyday Nationhood”, in *Ethnicities* Vol.8 (4), 2008, pp.536-576

³⁸ *ibid* 549

³⁹ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 80

⁴⁰ Schroeder & Schmidt, “Introduction”, 9

⁴¹ As explored by David Bruce MacDonald in his discussion of the tendency of nationalist scholars such as Anthony D Smith to place undue emphasis on the “Golden Age” of the nation’s history in the construction of

it is equally as important to highlight the use of histories and myths which present the group in question as the victim, as this serves to provide historical justification for continued hostilities. As Todorov observes:

Whereas being a victim of violence is a pitiful state, it has become desirable...to obtain the status of a former victim of collective violence...[This] is indirect evidence of a reinforcing among us of the idea of justice: who would have any idea of demanding to occupy the victim's place if he did not have any hope of seeing his suffering acknowledged and obtaining reparation?⁴²

Such a phenomenon of narratives reinforcing victimhood is similarly described by Vamik Volkan as a "chosen trauma" which becomes integral to a collective identity passed on through generations through stories such that it is able to be used as a national myth in times of conflict to legitimise action against those responsible for the original trauma⁴³. Similarly, Marianne Hirsh has articulated the idea of "postmemory" to describe the transgenerational transmission of traumatic memory such that those who have only experienced an event indirectly, through the stories and narratives of the previous generation, begin to internalise it within their own identities⁴⁴.

The concept of a chosen trauma is also representative of the idea that meaning is discursively constructed within a particular social setting or group. As Schroeder and Schmidt explain, the "narratives, performances, and inscriptions" relaying these chosen traumas will have less impact among different groups, unfamiliar with certain collective myths and memories specific to the identity of the culture or group which experiences them⁴⁵. Such an approach also serves to draw attention to how certain discourses relating to conflict and certain readings of history can achieve permanence within society to such an extent as they come to be perceived as common sense, thus limiting the options for changing them.

Thus, the place of collective memory in conflict lies not only in establishing a positive view of the in-group, but also plays a role in defining that group in opposition to another⁴⁶. Through victim-centered narratives of the past, the image of a "diabolical, hated enemy"⁴⁷ can be concretised through historical

national identity, at the expense of "Fall" myths, which he deems equally as important; in *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002)

⁴² Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians*, 60-1

⁴³ Vamik D. Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity: a Study of Bloody Conflicts*, (Charlottesville: Pitchstone, 2006) 179-186

⁴⁴ Marianne Hirsh, "the Generation of Postmemory", in *Poetics Today*, Vol.29 (1), 2008, pp.104-128

⁴⁵ Schroeder and Schmidt, "Introduction", 9

⁴⁶ Murer, "Constructing the Enemy-Other", 4-9

⁴⁷ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 134

examples. In this sense as well, what Todorov terms a “time collapse”⁴⁸ is often created in order to unify and contextualize past hurts of one group under the same banner of persecution at the hands of an enemy-other.

1.3 The Normalisation of Exclusion

Having outlined the role nationalism and collective memory play as the currency of exclusionist discourse, this section will look to draw attention to how this can become manifested at the everyday level; that is, beyond top-down mechanisms of narrative diffusion. In other words, how such discourses can become normalised, such that they seem to be the common-sensical and natural way of things, and as a result are reproduced among the public.

Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” – regarding the internalisation of national identity through inscriptions and national symbols – is especially useful in this regard⁴⁹. Billig comments on the significance of “forgetting the saluted flag” in the context of the United States as an example of how ingrained into the subconscious national symbols can become: the presence of the American flag on buildings and in everyday contexts, such as in schools, outwith ceremonial and state events, is seen as standard and unremarkable, while it serves as an unconscious daily reminder of national identity⁵⁰. In a similar manner to Fox and Miller-Idriss, Billig’s work rejects the mainstream theories of nationalism which conceptualise it as surplus, extreme behaviour, and rather focuses on the means by which it is reproduced among the populace of established nations⁵¹. He critiques the idea that what is presented as patriotism among the masses of these nations is different from divisive nationalist ideas of “us” and “them”, and the way in which nationalism is often presented as belonging to the “other”⁵². This is evidenced in Karabakh case, for example, through the focus of the official Azerbaijani position in portraying “Armenian aggression” in terms of a dangerous nationalist project, while simultaneously emphasising Azerbaijan’s “rightful ownership” of the region as common-sense, rather than a nationalistic ideal⁵³.

The idea of everyday nationalism and the subconscious internalisation of identity can also be related to Schroeder and Schmidt’s ideas surrounding violent imaginaries as it serves to explain and document the normalisation of certain discourses. This in turn acts to legitimise violence, and it is in a similar manner that these unspoken “imaginaries” can serve to reinforce antagonistic attitudes among the populace, as the memorial practices and stories that serve to do so can become a ritualised and

⁴⁸ Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians*, 57

⁴⁹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 1995

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 49-52

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 5-8

⁵² *Ibid*, 5

⁵³ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 104-5

unremarkable aspect of daily life. Such ideas are especially valuable when applied to cases of protracted conflict, as they go beyond standard understandings of the continuation of war through manifest and visible violent clashes, instead drawing attention to the discursive reproduction of antagonisms and exclusive identities. Rather than presenting citizens as passive recipients of elite discourse, such approaches allow them agency, instead perceiving the production of antagonisms and conflict as a relational activity.

Billig's ideas of "banal nationalism", as well as Schroeder and Schmidt's "violent imaginaries" thus serve to illustrate *how* such discourses of exclusion become normalised within a society, resulting in the generation of what Richardson terms a "war mood", referring to the widespread, and perceivably common-sensical, support for war within a society⁵⁴. Jabri points to two "dualisms" that emerge within this war mood which each serve to create a sense of collective unity: that between "self" and "other" – which can be related to the above discussions of nationalism and difference – and between "conformity" and "dissent", whereby those who are seen to be working against the status quo, or to be not adequately supporting the "war effort" are chastised as traitorous and dangerous to the rest of the community, thus justifying their punishment or censorship⁵⁵. In cases of protracted conflict in particular, these dualisms can become especially entrenched within everyday life – as the conflict becomes a state of normality – and as such become detrimental to peace efforts, as the idea of peace becomes further and further removed from what is conceivable, even in the absence of outright violence.

Therefore, it could be argued that the function of upholding a "war mood" within Azeri society is to maintain support for the continuation of a war the majority of people are spatially and temporally removed from, in such a way as to *de*-mobilise the population from demanding anything other than a continuation of the status quo. In his discussion of the Yugoslav wars, V.P. Gagnon espouses such a theory relating to the portrayal of the conflict as an ethnic one: if ethnicity becomes the defining factor of the war, it simplifies its causes and thus acts as a means of "political demobilisation" which in turn serves to secure the authority of those already in power by creating a scapegoat and relaxing political pressure for change, the idea being that if people see ethnicity as the source of their problems they turn their anger towards an ethnic other and away from the political sphere⁵⁶. This idea is similarly advocated by Murer in his discussions of ethnic war, highlighting:

⁵⁴ Lewis F. Richardson, "War Moods", in *Psychometrika* 13, Part 1(3), 147-74; in Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 131

⁵⁵ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 108

⁵⁶ V.P. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004)

As the ethnicised explanation of crisis conditions begins to gain cultural and public currency, there is increased pressure for all members of the community...to think and act in an increasingly ethnically defined manner. These narratives demarcate the ethnic boundary and redefine the relationship between groups⁵⁷

Additionally, similar processes of political demobilisation and the establishment of a state of everyday primordialism is referred to by Jabri as the “naturalisation of the present”, whereby:

the interests of dominant groups are bound up in the preservation of the *status quo*. Forms of signification ‘naturalise’ the existing state of affair, negating the mutable, historical character of human society. It is here that modes of discourse and particular social orders are taken for granted in lived experience. They largely constitute the unacknowledged conditions of action which are continually reproduced intentionally or unintentionally through human interaction⁵⁸

For Jabri, the intentional or unintentional reproduction of these discourses manifests itself through Anthony Giddens’ structures of legitimation, signification, and domination, which act as a means to diffuse certain narratives throughout society⁵⁹. Within this framework, structures of legitimation refer to the institutionalisation of certain discourses within those structures which govern social life; signification refers to the symbolic cultural currency that has meaning within specific groups; and domination to the asymmetrical power structures these discourses exist within which allow the interests of dominant groups to be prioritised, in such a way as to define the political function of such discourses⁶⁰. It is through these structures, then, that Jabri’s “dualisms” of war discourse become normalised throughout society, and as a result this thesis will view these structures in relation to the production and reproduction of violent imaginaries in Azeri society: the second chapter will relate to structures of signification as it outlines the master narratives and discourses at play in Azeri conceptions of the Karabakh war; the third to structures of legitimation through an exploration of the actors and institutions which serve to relay these discourses in everyday life; and the final chapter will relate to structures of domination through analysis of the power structures that exist to maintain these discourses and restrict opportunities to dissent from the status quo.

Within these structures, however, Jabri’s conception of discourse – as an active tool that contributes to their establishment and reification – also allows for their narrative content to be challenged in the public sphere through the creation of an inclusive, counter-discourse of peace⁶¹. The argument follows that “if enough people participate in the discourse of peace, it will become an alternative structure

⁵⁷ J.S. Murer, “Ethnic Conflict: An Overview of Analysing and Framing Communal Conflicts”, in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol.24, pp.561-580, 2012

⁵⁸ Jabri, *Discourses o Violence* 96-7

⁵⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, (London: Macmillan, 1979), in Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 96-7

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 160

that can legitimise decisions for peace”⁶². This points to the idea of creating a “positive peace” whereby peace is not defined by the absence of violence, but by the presence of an inclusive and pluralistic society. This is particularly relevant in the case of Azerbaijan, as the majority of people are not directly involved in, or experiencing, violence, and thus the war is continued through antagonistic attitudes. It follows that, in theory, the promotion of inclusive and peaceful discourses could serve to challenge the current status quo and instead promote reconciliation from the ground-up.

The succeeding chapters will seek to explore the means by which a “war mood” continues to permeate everyday life within Azerbaijan – particularly through manifestations of violent imaginaries – and the possible impact this has on the space for the creation of a counter discourse of peace. The next chapter will open this discussion by analysing the specific war discourses that exist within Azerbaijan, before moving on to look at the particular institutions and actors which help to promote these discourses through specific manifestations of narratives, performances, and inscriptions.

⁶² Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 132

Master Narratives of War in Azerbaijan

Having outlined the theoretical framework of this thesis, the discussion will now move to exploring the content of the most prominent narratives of the Nagorno-Karabakh war within Azerbaijan. This chapter will thus draw attention to the historicity – to use Schroeder and Schmidt’s term – with which the war is framed in Azeri society. It will look to outline the primary narrative templates within which the war is presented, in order to set up the subsequent chapter’s discussion of the actors and institutions which utilise these templates, and the means by which they do so. In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of national myths and collective memories discussed in the previous chapter, the four sections here can be seen to each embody the theme of either Azeri national pride or victimhood. It begins with pride, looking at the argument that Karabakh forms an integral part of Azeri identity, being historically Azerbaijani lands, and the source of much of the most impressive aspects of Azeri culture. This section will also outline the argument that looks to delegitimize Armenian national identity through reference to these historical claims. The chapter will then move onto the overarching victim-centred narrative of the conflict: that Armenia is an ultra-nationalist aggressor which continues to violate international law. This section will also outline the specific events and periods that are consistently re-emphasised in Azeri discussions of the war, such as the March Days massacre of 1918, Black January, and the Khojaly “genocide” of 1992. This will be followed by a discussion of the idea that, in spite of this victimisation, Azerbaijan continues to be economically and militarily superior to Armenia, and increasingly resilient in the face of repeated aggression. The chapter will conclude with a final victim-themed narrative: that Azerbaijan cannot reach its full potential while it is continually subjected to Armenian occupation. This will involve a discussion of the government’s continued use of IDP figures and statistics on occupation in order to deflect criticism on the lack of democratisation or poor economic performance of the country. The hope is that by first outlining the core aspects of the Azeri position regarding the war, it will provide adequate contextualisation for the next chapter’s discussion of the institutions and actors which promote and reinforce these narrative templates in everyday life.

2.1: Karabakh as an Integral Part of Azerbaijani Identity

Both sides of the conflict appeal to history in different ways to support their respective positions, each adding to the symbolic historicity of the war. It is important to note when discussing this, however, that the conflict should not be seen to be the result of any “ancient hatreds” or ethno-national incompatibility of the two peoples. Indeed, Thomas De Waal points to the fact that “both the form

and the content of the...dispute date back little more than one hundred years” and that “the ideological framework of the dispute is also quite modern”⁶³.

Having said that, the “main theatre of war” between historians involved in the conflict is in fact the medieval period, with scholars on both sides pointing to old monasteries, mosques, monuments, and artefacts as a means to establish the most “legitimate” historical claim to the region⁶⁴. Relics from the period take pride of place in the museums and historical accounts of both sides, acting as an inscriptive means by which to legitimise their respective versions of events, and in turn reinforce their well-entrenched political positions. The Azeri war hero-turned-scholar-turned politician Zia Buniatov even referred to Armenians in the region as “Armenianised Albanians” – in reference to the Roman name for the people inhabiting what is now Northern Azerbaijan – rather than conceding the fact that Armenians themselves had inhabited the land in the thirteenth century. The crux of the argument in Azerbaijan came down to the idea that:

the Karabakh Armenians had no relation to the Armenians of Armenia. They were either ‘guests’ of Azerbaijan (nineteenth century immigrants) or Azerbaijanis under the skin (descendants of Albanians) and should behave accordingly⁶⁵

The argument also extends beyond the Karabakh region and into Armenia proper. The English-language brochure, *Rulers of Chukhursad and Khans of Iravan* was funded and endorsed by the President of Azerbaijan and has an emphatic message relayed on the back cover, insert, and opening paragraph that “the Republic of Armenia was built on Azerbaijani lands”⁶⁶. In sum, the historical element of the war in Azerbaijan is based on claims which aim to delegitimise Armenian national identity and subsequent claims to Karabakh. Likewise, the Armenian account sees the war as being inevitable, that the only reason the two parties hadn’t been at war over the area during the majority of the twentieth century was due to the central Soviet power maintaining control⁶⁷.

In addition to establishing historical legal “ownership” of the Karabakh region, a core element of the conflict stems from the fact that both sides attribute the region as a “cornerstone of their national identity”⁶⁸. In Azerbaijan, the region is frequently held up as deeply intertwined with the national

⁶³ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 140

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 165

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 166

⁶⁶ Najafli Guntakin, *Rulers of Chukhursad and Khans of Iravan*, (Baku: Public Society of Azerbaijani Historians, 2016)

⁶⁷ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 125

⁶⁸ Gahramanova, “Paradigms of Political Mythologies”, 142

cultural heritage, held up as the birthplace of celebrated musical, literary, and culinary traditions⁶⁹ Such a position serves to re-emphasise the burden of having such culturally and historically significant lands under Armenian occupation, and inevitably gives the war an added sense of national importance, extending the hurt beyond those directly affected it.

Uncovering the objective reality behind the conflicting histories of Karabakh and the war goes beyond the scope and relevance of this thesis, and would require far more detailed archival and historical research. What is important to note for the context of this research is simply the existence and opposite nature of the two accounts of history, and particularly how the Azeri account is presented and utilised in everyday life, which will form the basis of the subsequent chapter. This can be related to Schroeder and Schmidt's ideas that wars are often fought over memory, and establishing who's view of the past is the legitimate one: in the case of Karabakh, much of the discourse surrounding the war on both sides is related to trying to establish legitimate claims to the lands in question through reference to select readings of the history of the region.

2.2: Armenia as Aggressive Enemy-Other

The primary means by which antagonisms towards Armenians are justified in Azerbaijan is through reference to Armenia as an ultra-nationalist nation, embarking upon a militaristic campaign in Karabakh and beyond to aid their own expansionist policies⁷⁰. Within this framework, Azerbaijan is portrayed as the primary victim of these policies, with its very national identity under threat.

One of the most commonly referenced events of the war within the framework of Azeri victimhood is that of the Khojaly massacre of 1992. The town of Khojaly, in the Northeast of Karabakh, was a mostly ethnically Azeri town which was occupied by Armenian forces on the 26th of February 1992, resulting in the massacre of 613 Azeri civilians, and prompting Azerbaijan to accuse the Armenian side of committing a genocide against its people⁷¹. The event is invariably represented in emotionally-charged terms throughout Azeri society, with much of its memorialisation used in support of claims of Armenian barbarism and Azerbaijan's moral superiority.

To illustrate the significance of the representation of Khojaly, it is interesting to note the prevalence with which the image displayed in Figure 2.a – outlining statistics relating to the massacre and emphatically terming it a genocide – can be found in various social outlets of Azerbaijani society. Whilst in Baku, I came across this image on various social media profiles, otherwise unrelated to the

⁶⁹ Virtual Karabakh Information, Communication, Technology Centre, "Karabakh Culture", Available at: <http://www.virtualkarabakh.az/read.php?lang=2&menu=48&id=169#.WYHJh4h942w> (Accessed 23/04/17)

⁷⁰ Gahramanova, "Paradigms of Political Mythologies", 146-7

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 145

war, and one of my key informants in the city told me of how the same image, or one with a similar sentiment, can be easily found across platforms such as Facebook, even pointing out its use in a

friend's wedding photo album⁷².



Additionally, the story of Khojaly is often conflated with other past hurts of Azerbaijan. In 1998, then-President Heydar Aliyev declared the 31st of March the Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis, in a move to commemorate multiple events of Azeri suffering in one. Thomas De Waal has commented on the use of the term 'genocide' here as particularly representative of the contemporary politics underpinning the declaration, suggesting:

the commemoration was less about the past than about present-day politics. The message was, if Armenia could have a Genocide Day, then why should Azerbaijan not have one too? By using the term, Aliyev had initiated a duel of the martyred nations⁷³

Thus, much of the discourse surrounding the Karabakh war amounts to a "competition of victimhood": whichever side can portray itself as having suffered more at the hands of the other is seen to be more deserving of both internal and external support, as they are fighting for the more morally just cause⁷⁴. As

will be explored in the following chapter, this sense of collective victimhood is disseminated throughout society through various manifestations of narratives, performances, and inscriptions, including the educational system, cultural products, and public discourse⁷⁵.

The date itself is taken from the "March Days" events of 1918 where, during the Russian Civil War, a joint Bolshevik-Dashnak force entered Baku and killed Ottoman Turks and Azerbaijanis in the city. This is also understandably tied to the events of the 20th of January 1990 – known in Azerbaijan as "Black

⁷² Informal Conversation with Fakhri, 24/04/17

⁷³ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 97

⁷⁴ Daniel Bar-Tal, Lily Chernyak-Hai, Noa Schori, and Ayelet Gundar, "A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood in intractable conflicts", in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol.91 (874), June 2009, pp.229-257; p.246-7

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 247

January” – where Gorbachev declared a state of emergency in Baku, and Soviet forces thus used violence to clamp down on political protest, leading to the deaths of 130 people⁷⁶. The victims of these two events, along with other victims of the Karabakh war, are buried together at the “Alley of Martyrs”, which stands above Baku in a former park and is visited annually on the Day of Genocide by thousands of people marching to commemorate the war-dead⁷⁷. This year on the same day I observed a notable demonstration by school children aged roughly eight or nine in Baku’s Fountain Square holding up letters spelling (in English): “Justice for Azerbaijan, March 31st Genocide” accompanied by various class-members lying on the ground, presumably to depict victims of genocide themselves⁷⁸. This represents a clear performative aspect of commemoration within the violent imaginaries framework, and the emotive demonstration can also be seen to be in-line with other observed commemorations on that day, such as the headline in English-language newspaper, *AZERERNEWS*: “History Suffocated in Blood” referencing the various events commemorated on Genocide Day⁷⁹. The perpetrators are variously depicted as “Bolshevik Armenians”, “Armenian nationalists”, and “Soviet and Armenian forces” adding a further sense of continuity between the events⁸⁰. The collective

⁷⁶ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 96

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 96

⁷⁸ Author’s own fieldnotes from 31/3/17

⁷⁹ Amina Nazarli, “History Suffocated in Blood”, *AZERNEWS*, March 31-April 4 2017

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

memorialisation of these disparate events in Azeri history serves as one “chosen trauma” through which current experiences and discourses of the war can be examined in Azeri society.



FIGURE 0.B: ROW OF GRAVES OF VICTIMS OF BLACK JANUARY AT “ALLEY OF MARTYRS” AUTHOR’S PHOTO TAKEN 04/04/17 IN BAKU

It is important to note, however, what is left out of the narratives, performances, and inscriptions relating to these events of Azeri victimhood. Black January, in particular, is often presented as a stand-alone event in which Soviet-Armenian forces entered Baku in order to crush the threat of the Azeri independence movement. While not necessarily incorrect, Azeri depictions of Black January omit what De Waal refers to as “part one”, taking place between the 13th and 15th of the same month, whereby “murderous anti-Armenian violence overwhelmed Baku”, and marked the final stage in the essential expulsion of Armenians from the capital⁸¹.

In addition to the selective representation of Black January, it is interesting to note the Azerbaijani representation of anti-Armenian pogroms which took place in Sumgait, a city to the north of Baku, two years earlier in 1988. In late February, a crowd had gathered in Sumgait’s Lenin Square to protest the escalating situation in Nagorno-Karabakh⁸². The small protests escalated over the next few days into violent riots amid the news that two young Azerbaijani men had been killed in the Karabakh town

⁸¹ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 91-2

⁸² *ibid*, 33-4

of Askeran⁸³. The crowds overwhelmed the streets of Sumgait, and Armenians were attacked, killed, and raped while the local police – mostly made up of ethnic Azeris – apparently did not intervene⁸⁴.

The Azeri account of these events, however, actually places the blame on Armenians, claiming that they themselves organised the violence in order to depict Azeris as murderous, and justify further intervention in Karabakh⁸⁵. Indeed, a statement regarding the events on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims:

...the Sumgayit unrest was a well-prepared provocation against Azerbaijan. It was masterminded by the leaders of Armenian 'Karabakh'...committees to discredit Azerbaijan and pave the way for the separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan⁸⁶

Overall, there is a clear emphasis within Azeri discourses surrounding the war of Armenian aggression, and the extent to which this permeates everyday life will be expanded upon in the subsequent chapter. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of the emphasis on Armenian aggression and past Azeri victimhood, the narratives surrounding the war as it is ongoing currently serve to reinforce the idea of Azerbaijan's economic, militaristic, and cultural superiority, to which the discussion will now turn.

2.3: Resilience of Azerbaijan

As explicated by Tzvetan Todorov, one of the functions of portraying a collective as the victim in a conflict stems from the implied promise of retribution⁸⁷. Additionally, as demonstrated above, portrayal of one's own group as the sole victim of a conflict serves to project all blame for violence onto the other party, portraying them as barbaric and immoral, and thus in turn promoting a positive, peaceful image of the ingroup⁸⁸. Within this framework, another aspect of the dominant Azeri narratives surrounding the Karabakh war is that of Azeri moral and material superiority over Armenia. The point is consistently made that Azerbaijan could eliminate the Armenian threat by force if necessary, but that – as the more civilised party – they are determined to find peace.

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ *ibid*

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 42-3; David Remnick, "Hate Runs High in Soviet Union's Most Explosive Ethnic Feud", *The Washington Post*, September 6th 1989, Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/09/06/hate-runs-high-in-soviet-unions-most-explosive-ethnic-feud/38ac827c-17a0-474c-9647-39189d0415ec/?utm_term=.da0123bee1f9 (Accessed 30/01/17)

⁸⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Information about the Sumgayit Events of February 1988", available at: http://www.mfa.gov.az/files/file/Sumgayit_events.pdf (Accessed 01/07/17)

⁸⁷ Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians*, 60-61

⁸⁸ Bar-Tal et al. "A Sense of Self-Perceived Victimhood", 244

The football team of *Qarabag FK* (Karabakh FC) can be seen as a prime example of an image of Azeri glory in the face of adversity. The team, originally from Agdam – one of the areas outside of Karabakh under Armenian occupation – is often referred to as a “refugee team”, as they were forced to relocate to Baku during the war⁸⁹. Thomas Goltz, in his documentary film on the subject – notably available to watch when flying with Azerbaijan Airlines – summarised the sentiment associated with the team when he describes them as “having the unique claim as the only team to have not played a home game in 20 years”⁹⁰. The documentary follows the team as they compete in the group stages of the Europa League in 2014, travelling across Europe and facing high-profile teams such as Italy’s Inter Milan. For Goltz, the journey of the team ultimately represents a “story of resilience and resolve”, and is one that is clearly presented in such a way as to resonate with Azerbaijanis across the country, particularly those IDPs and refugees from the conflict itself⁹¹.

The story of Qarabag FK, as well as acting as a source of national pride, is an apt reminder of the continued presence of IDPs and refugees in Azerbaijan who, much like the football team, remain unable to return to their homes in the West of the country. This depiction plays a dominant role in the portrayals of contemporary victimhood in Azeri society, which continue to act as a means of maintaining the war in public memory.

2.4: Azerbaijan Curtailed by Continued Armenian Occupation

Aside from the cases of historical victimisation described above, the dominant Azerbaijani position also situates itself as a victim within contemporary contexts. As evidenced in the discussion of Qarabag FK, while continuously promoting Azeri military victories and superiority on the front lines, there is also reference to the continued plight of IDPs within Azerbaijan’s borders. Indeed, Azerbaijan continues to house a significant number of IDPs, amounting to approximately six per cent of the population, with the majority having been forced from their homes in Karabakh and the surrounding regions occupied by Armenian forces over the course of the war⁹².

The preferable solution for both the government and the majority of displaced persons themselves would be the return to their homes, but the stalled peace processes has left many in “limbo”, unable to return home, but also unable to fully integrate into their “temporary” communities in the twenty-

⁸⁹ Matt Gault, “Qarabag are exiled from their home but could shock the Champions League”, *the Guardian*, 6th August 2014, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/these-football-times/2014/aug/06/qarabag-agdam-champions-league-azerbaijan-red-bull-salzburg> (Accessed 20th February 2017)

⁹⁰ *On Aggregate: Champions Without a Home*, Directed by Thomas Goltz, New Silk Road: 2015

⁹¹ Goltz, *On Aggregate*

⁹² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), “Azerbaijan Country Profile”, Available at: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/azerbaijan/> (Accessed 27/04/17)

three years since the ceasefire⁹³. Despite the wealth of resources the government have invested in IDPs – raising awareness of their situation and providing them with discounted or even free education – the official position still sees their situation as temporary, and this has served to limit the opportunities for adequate integration into Azeri society⁹⁴.

Some commentators have pointed to this lack of integration as evidence that the government use the IDP situation in Azerbaijan as a scapegoat when they are challenged on their economic or political records. Fakhri, a 23-year old bursar at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic University (ADA) supposed that:

...the government wants to maintain their status as IDPs because then they have something to point to – something they can use to deflect any criticism against them. If International Organisations or Non-Governmental Organisations criticise their lack of democratisation, or the way the economy is handled...the government can point to IDPs [and the Karabakh issue] and say “...we have all these IDPs to deal with, this is unfair criticism, we are the victims of war and the occupation of our lands”⁹⁵

Similarly, the position of the government means that those born to IDP parents are also given IDP status, and as such, they are less able to integrate into Azeri society, and are associated with the war by their own status as well as their parents’, despite not experiencing it directly⁹⁶. As opined by Fakhri, the maintained status of IDPs could be seen as fulfilling a political function of maintaining the war’s place in public memory, in such a way as to detract from any criticism that could be lauded against the government, as they continue to be curtailed by the aggression of Armenia. Additionally, at a macro-level, the status of IDPs allows the government to remain uncompromising on its position in negotiations with Armenia: as long as IDPs are there and visible, the right of return to occupied lands that they have been forced from remains the most important item on the agenda, and needs to be met before the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh can be discussed⁹⁷. Since Armenia are dedicated to the exact opposite way of approaching negotiations, it generates a stalemate on either side with no clear sign of resolution at this time. With this in mind, the next chapter will discuss the actors and institutions which serve to produce and reinforce violent imaginaries in such a way that such a war

⁹³ International Crisis Group (ICG), “Policy Briefing No.67: Tackling Azerbaijan’s IDP Burden”, 27th February 2012

⁹⁴ IDMC, “Azerbaijan: After more than 20 years, IDPs still urgently need policies to support full integration”, 26th March 2014, Available at: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Europe/Azerbaijan/pdf/201403-eu-azerbaijan-overview-en.pdf> (Accessed 27/04/17)

⁹⁵ Conversation with Fakhri, 21/04/17

⁹⁶ IDMC, “Azerbaijan: After more than 20 years”, (Accessed 27/04/17)

⁹⁷ Gahramanova, “Paradigms of Political Mythologies”, 142

mood is continually preserved in Azerbaijan, in turn allowing for the justification of military spending and increased government control in society.

Sources of War Discourse

There are multiple actors and institutions through which the average Azerbaijani will encounter narratives which promote a war mood in everyday life, including through the mass media, educational resources, and through various political institutions within the country. Each of these vessels of discourse production can serve to influence the attitude of Azeri citizens towards the conflict and Armenians more generally, and often serve to limit the space for discussions of peace and alternatives to the status quo. This chapter will thus seek to explore the roles of various actors and institutions in promoting and reinforcing such narratives and practices which serve to contribute to a war mood within Azeri society.

First touching on the influence of the state education system from an early age, it will look at the promotion of a one-sided version of history which allows for the normalisation of certain anti-Armenian attitudes and opinions, and how the narratives explored in Chapter Two are spread through education. As well as the school system, the chapter will look at socio-cultural spheres which also serve to promote a certain history, such as museums, monuments, and other informal sources of education. Additionally, Jabri's idea of the militarisation of everyday life will be explored more explicitly through a discussion of the role the military plays in public discourse in Azerbaijan, and how this serves to reinforce favourable attitudes to the war among the general public. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the mass media as the primary means by which the public access information regarding the war, and how the language and select information used can impact their opinions and ideas on the issue. This will hopefully set up the discussion of the final chapter regarding the space for – or lack thereof – alternatives to this discourse within Azerbaijan. Throughout, this chapter will exemplify empirical examples of Schroeder and Schmidt's violent imaginaries that can be observed in Azerbaijan which serve to create and reproduce antagonisms at a discursive level.

3.1: The School System

Accounts of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in Azerbaijan are experienced from a very early age through the state education system, where the government plays a very active role in the creation of a specific discourse. School history textbooks are “assessed by the government, according to government-established criteria and the government controls the whole process of textbook adoption”⁹⁸, and no input is taken from civil society initiatives, with the content entirely dependent on what the

⁹⁸ Anahit Hakobyan, “State propaganda through public education: Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *Caucasus Edition*, 04/04/16, available at <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/state-propaganda-through-public-education-armenia-and-azerbaijan/> (accessed 04/05/17), 7-8

government approves⁹⁹. The education system in Azerbaijan thus fits well into Bellino & Williams' assertion that education acts as "a repository of *official memories* and *legitimate* knowledge"¹⁰⁰. Indeed, as this section will illustrate, what is taught and experienced in schools across Azerbaijan reflects the content and structure of the dominant war discourse explored in the previous chapter, including the construction of Armenia as an enemy-other, and the glorification of Azerbaijan's past and present, particularly in a military context.

Azeri school textbooks and curricula arguably serve as a dominant means through which a collective memory is constructed and institutionalised among the youth, in turn contributing to the formation of a national identity. The content of these memories can in turn be seen to fall under the "narrative" bracket of Schroeder and Schmidt's violent imaginaries, as they encapsulate stories which both glorify the group in questions' past successes, as well as their past hurts¹⁰¹. The role of the state in the particular construction of these narratives is significant, as controlling the content of textbooks and the structure of the school curriculum essentially means that the state can promote whichever version of history and construction of memory it deems most appropriate to serve its own purposes¹⁰². Looking at the content of history lessons and textbooks within Azerbaijan can thus act as somewhat of an indicator to the political function of promoting and reproducing discourses of war.

Commentators Abbasov and Rumyanstev suppose that the initial function of these narratives was to act as a means of reinforcing Azeri independence from the Soviet system, with the Karabakh conflict acting as the most recently significant event in the history of an independent Azerbaijan, and one which could ultimately be related to the existence of the independent Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan from 1918-20, given the brief armed conflict over the same territory in 1920¹⁰³. If the political function at the time of the collapse of the USSR was to consolidate Azeri independence through a particular construction of historical consciousness, then it follows that the specific historical content emphasised would come to represent core tenets of Azeri national identity, and so remain relevant and functional today in maintaining national unity during the ongoing conflict.

With regards to the emphasis of the war in this construction of national identity, it is interesting to note that those most glorified in Azeri textbooks are not so much those who have contributed to the

⁹⁹ Email interview with Arzu Geybullayeva, Journalist and civil society worker from Azerbaijan, currently living and working in Turkey, 23/5/17

¹⁰⁰ Michelle J Bellino & James H. Williams, "Introduction", in Bellino, M.J & Williams, J.H., (eds.) (*Re*) *Constructing Memory: Education, Identity, and Conflict*, (Rotterdam; Boston; Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2017), 1, [emphasis added]

¹⁰¹ Schroeder & Schmidt, "Introduction", 9-10

¹⁰² Hakobyan, "State Propaganda", 2-3

¹⁰³ Abbasov & Rumyastev, *Ways to perpetuate the past*", 37-40

arts, but rather those associated with militaristic achievements, with stories of well-known Azerbaijani war heroes from ancient times through to the present a dominant feature throughout¹⁰⁴. It is thus clear how, through such an emphasis on military victory, official state textbooks serve to construct an atmosphere in which war and military success is intrinsically associated with national identity, given the names of textbooks such as “History of the Homeland”. As a result, Azeri identity and history can be seen to be prominently associated with the military, and, within the context of military heroism, there thus emerges the necessity to present an “other” against whom the Homeland can be defended. As Abbasov & Rumyantsev explain:

the image of ‘others’ is an indivisible part of the conceptualisation of the Homeland, as it is exactly ‘our Homeland – our Mother’ that should be protected from continuous encroachments by ‘others’¹⁰⁵

It is in this context where the representation of Armenia and Armenians becomes salient: as multiple analyses of the content of history textbooks illustrate, they are consistently represented as the primary aggressor against which “the Homeland” needs to be defended, thus serving to justify continued military action in the defence of Karabakh – an intrinsic and necessary component of this Homeland¹⁰⁶.

The role of school textbooks thus fits into Schroeder and Schmidt’s ideas of violent imaginaries in serving to establish the historicity of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and its connection to Azeri national identity. The description of Azerbaijan’s past creates what Todorov would refer to as a “time collapse” – associating past hurts with more recent events¹⁰⁷, for example by colluding the “March Days” massacre of 1918 with later events such as “Black January” in 1990, or at Khojaly in 1992. The result is the image of a linear and unified progression of history, in which Azerbaijan consistently overcomes adversaries who would seek to destroy it. It is within this image that Armenians take the prime place as the most prominent enemy throughout the accounts of history presented in school books.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* 37-8

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 38

¹⁰⁶See, for example: Ilham Abbasov, and Sergey Rumyantsev, “ways to perpetuate the past: analyzing the images of “others” in Azerbaijani history textbooks,” in Vesley, L., *Contemporary History Textbooks in the South Caucasus*, (Prague: Association for International Affairs, 2008); Barseghyan, H & Sultanova, S. “History Lessons in Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, available at <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/history-lessons-armenia-and-azerbaijan> (Accessed 04/05/17); Hakobyan, “State Propaganda”; Bakhtiyar Aslanov, “Education as Conflict Promoter: the Nagorno-Karabakh Example”, *Caucasus Edition*, 01/04/13, available at <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/education-as-a-conflict-promoter-the-nagorno-karabakh-example/>; additionally confirmed through information accrued from: informal conversation with Fakhri, a Bursar at ADA University, Age 22, 24/04/17; Skype interview with Zamira Abbasova – civil society worker from Azerbaijan based in Georgia, 18/04/17, and email interview with Arzu Geybullayeva, 23/5/17

¹⁰⁷ Todorov, *Fear of Barbarians*, 57

In addition to the *content* of history textbooks, it is also interesting to comment on the language through which the narratives are presented. Abbasov and Rumyanstev's translations of certain phrases from fifth grade history textbooks include examples of emotionally-charged language such as "treacherous aliens", "choked with blood", and "the lost pleasures of freedom"¹⁰⁸. Such a representation of history lends itself to the fermenting of patriotic and nationalist sentiment among readers, rather than presenting a more objective account of past events.

The result of this one-sided and time-collapsed version of history is the normalisation of exclusive identities: it makes the conflict seem a natural and inevitable result of Armenian aggression, and the apparent incompatibility of the identities of the two peoples. It also serves to absolve the Azeri state of any sense of guilt or wrongdoing over the course of the Karabakh war, instead focusing on the aggression of Armenians, and presenting the somewhat paradoxical image of Azerbaijan as both a victim of this aggression, and a glorious victor in the face of past subjugation. The implied function of this narrative is to instil a sense of patriotism among the Azeri youth which in turn serves to justify any future violent action against Armenia, while simultaneously glorify militarism within Azerbaijan through the repeated images of national heroism in the face of adversity.

Beyond the content of textbooks, Azerbaijani schoolchildren are also educated on the war through informal curricula such as through the existence of clubs from Kindergarten through to university, for example, which supposedly centre on the promotion of peace-building activities, but – according to some of the Azeris I spoke with – actually act as another informal means by which to promote the Azeri side of the war¹⁰⁹. Additionally – and perhaps as an illustration of the fact that anti-Armenianism is not merely a governmental project – Azeri journalist and civil society worker Arzu Geybullayeva told me an anecdote about time she spent in the USA on a high-school exchange from 1999-2000, where she was able to meet and befriend an Armenian through a programme connecting students from post-Soviet states. She told me of her experience sharing this with her teacher upon her return:

...during one of my classes my history teacher warmly welcomed me and asked me how it went. When I told him I met great people including a girl from Armenia he was infuriated. His sweetness disappeared and he started this long spiel about the mistake I have made by even talking to this girl, because they are our arch enemies. He even asked me whether he has not taught me anything from our history class...I was a little surprised. And then decided to keep it to myself next time someone asked me about whom I met during my exchange year¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Abbasov & Rumyanstev, "Ways to perpetuate the past", 40

¹⁰⁹ Skype Interview with Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/17; informal conversation with Fakhri, 25/04/17

¹¹⁰ Email Interview with Arzu Geybullayeva, 23/5/17

Arzu's experience shows that antagonistic discourses do have resonance with the public, as evidenced through her teacher's strong reaction to her even conversing with an Armenian. This points to the interplay of top-down and bottom-up discourse recreation, and reflects how – in-keeping with the theories of Billig and Fox and Miller-Idriss regarding “everyday” and “banal” nationalism – nationalistic attitudes become internalised and normalised among the public such that an exclusive and primordial view of identity becomes common sense¹¹¹. Additionally, it is interesting to highlight the fact that these opinions came from someone in a position outside of the government – albeit still an authority figure with a role in the state education system – and so represent the means by which such discourses become common sense in society.

3.2: Informal Cultural Education

As well as through the standard school education system, Azerbaijani citizens will learn about and experience stories of the Karabakh war and Azeri-Armenian relations through socio-cultural aspects of life, such as through museums, artwork, monuments, and other memorial practices. This section will thus look at the more informal sites of education on the war, such as museums and tourist literature, and not only what is included but markedly what is left out of these representations. Such sites of memorialisation serve to normalise certain discourses, and reinforce ideas of collective identity and patriotism within established nations¹¹². In this context, it is interesting to look at the representations of Azeri history, and particularly the Karabakh conflict, within state museums and other cultural spaces, and the means by which the dominant narratives explored in the previous chapter are manifested in the contemporary cultural landscape of Azeri society, in this case through my own experiences in Baku. The focus here on museum exhibitions, monuments, and online resources, can be seen to represent both “narratives” and “inscriptions” within Schroeder and Schmidt's violent imaginaries, through the telling of stories, and representation of images, which serve to reproduce antagonisms by recalling certain significantly violent parts of Azeri history¹¹³.

Upon entry to the National Museum of Azerbaijani History in Baku, one is greeted with two maps: one representing the geographical makeup of the Caucasus region, and another which is also featured on multiple government websites and depicts the “Results of Armenian Aggression” (*Fig.B, also displayed in the museum in English*), with various statistics relating to the Karabakh war.

¹¹¹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*; Fox & Miller-Idriss, “Everyday Nationhood”

¹¹² Fox & Miller-Idriss, “Everyday Nationhood”, 549

¹¹³ Schroeder & Schmidt, “Introduction”, 9-10

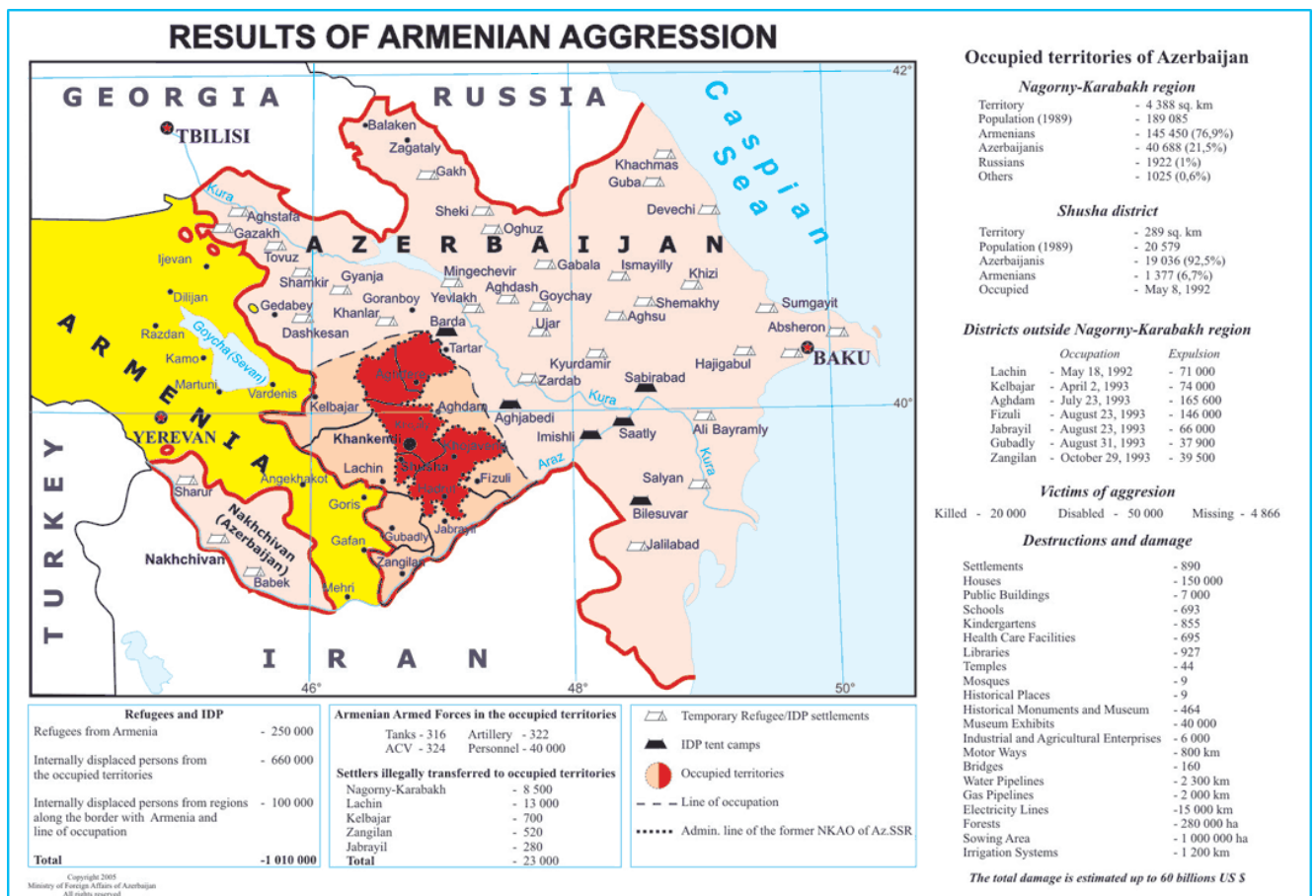


FIGURE 3.A: MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF AZERBAIJAN, “RESULTS OF ARMENIAN AGGRESSION”, 2005. MAP AS SEEN ON A VISIT TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AZERBAIJANI HISTORY, 06/04/17. RETRIEVED ONLINE VIA OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN TO JORDAN, AVAILABLE AT: [HTTP://WWW.AZEMBASSYJO.ORG/CONENTPAGES/CONTENTS.ASPX?MENUID=177&ENTRYID=146](http://www.azembassyjo.org/conentpages/contents.aspx?menuid=177&entryid=146) (ACCESSED 08/04/2017)

The inclusion of this map – which presents a clearly one-sided version of events through its title, labelling, and featured statistics – within a national history museum provides an apt example of an inscription which serves to promote a clear symbolic message; placing blame for the war on Armenia, and illustrating the victimisation of Azerbaijan through visual and numerical representations of the human and infrastructural cost of war on their side. The same map was also featured in the Independence Museum of Azerbaijan, and can be found in Azerbaijani on various government websites such as those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹¹⁴, the Ministry of Education¹¹⁵, and the State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons¹¹⁶. At this point, it is also interesting to relate these inscriptions to the work of Benedict Anderson, and his discussion of nationalism, in which he identifies the map, the census, and the museum as three primary vessels through which national identity is consolidated, but also places equal emphasis on the importance of

¹¹⁴ Available at: http://mfa.gov.az/files/file/ermenistan_tecavuzu.jpg (Accessed 03/07/17)

¹¹⁵ Available at: <http://edu.gov.az/en/page/482/10844> (Accessed 03/07/17)

¹¹⁶ Available at: <http://www.refugees-idps-committee.gov.az/en/pages/1.html> (Accessed 03/07/2017)

what is *left out* of these manifestations¹¹⁷. Throughout the museum, what is omitted is accounts of Armenian expulsions from Azerbaijan at the beginning of the war, but also any indication of previous coexistence and cooperation between the two peoples, thus serving to further normalise the idea of antagonism between the two peoples.

In addition to the content of museums, it is interesting to note their spatial configuration, that is, the physical ordering of the exhibitions and artefacts on display. As Steiner notes, “the ordering and reordering of objects and representations in national museums can serve to legitimate or “naturalise” any given configuration of political authority”¹¹⁸. When walking through the National Museum of Azerbaijani History, the exhibition moves from one documenting the “March Days”, to the events of “Black January”, to the Khojaly massacre of 1992¹¹⁹. The spatial arrangement of the museum is thus significant in creating and reproducing aspects of the narrative that Azerbaijan has long been victim to external aggression, and mirrors the time-collapse created in history textbooks discussed above. Overall, it creates the idea of victimhood as a means to justify future action against Armenia in particular, and conflates these separate incidents into one image of prolonged Azeri suffering.

These representations of the nation and national history can also be related to the structures of signification and legitimation explored by Jabri in discussing violent discourse: contents of the museum serve to *signify* certain cultural and political norms, while their placing within the museum itself serves to *legitimise* their place in the identity and history of the nation¹²⁰. It is such that the history of the Karabakh war as presented in the national museums of Azerbaijan comes to represent the definitive account of said history, with little to no room for contestation. Much like in the education system and the language and imagery used in textbooks, the guide which accompanies the National Independence Museum of Azerbaijan creates an emotive depiction of the war, presented as objective fact through the institutional setting of a national museum, endorsed by the Government, describing the events of the war as a result of “Armenian barbarity”, and those Azeris who were killed are deemed “martyrs”¹²¹. Indeed, after a visit to the National Museum of Azerbaijani History, one with no prior knowledge of the war would likely leave with the very firm impression that Azerbaijan has repeatedly been the victim of Armenian nationalist aggression, and that this nationalism in Armenia

¹¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 163-185

¹¹⁸ Christopher B Steiner, “Museums and the Politics of Nationalism”, in *Museum Anthropology*, Vol.9 (2), 1995, pp.3-6; 4

¹¹⁹ Author’s fieldnotes from the National Museum of Azerbaijani History, 06/04/17

¹²⁰ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 137

¹²¹ From the English-language guide to the Independence Museum of Azerbaijan in Baku, visited 22/04/17

comes as the result of having no real historical identity claims to rest on, Armenia having been built on Azeri lands.

3.3: The Military and the Ministry of Defence

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) itself also promotes the narratives explored in the previous chapter, with an entire section of the MoD website entitled “Memory”, with subsections on the Karabakh war, the massacre at Khojaly, and “Black January”, ultimately following similar templates as above and linking the three to Armenian aggression¹²². Additionally, the same section of the website also contains a more obscurely placed page entitled “the History of Iravan [modern-day Yerevan]”, which outlines the same claim as the aforementioned brochure that “Armenia was built on Azerbaijani lands”, thus denying Armenian national identity itself, and so any claims to the Nagorno-Karabakh region¹²³. The placement of these excerpts on the Ministry of Defence website thus serves as a means to justify the enmity of Armenia and Azerbaijan: it enshrines the idea that the Ministry of Defence’s main concern is with the Armenian issue, and that this issue extends back to the time of the Azeri Khanates in the 18th century. As such, there is an implication that the purpose of the Ministry of Defence is enshrined within this section of “memory”, regarding the past hurts of the Azerbaijani nation, and so in the defence against an Armenian aggressor. This adds to the idea of the historicity of warfare surrounding Schroeder and Schmidt’s “violent imaginaries”: the MoD by definition exists because of threats to the very existence of Azerbaijan, and here those threats are each represented in the collective memory of the nation as coming almost exclusively from Armenia, and so the Azeri position is legitimised through the re-emphasis of this.

The MoD website also provides a good example of narratives of present glorification, which somewhat contradict images of Azerbaijan as a helpless victim to Armenian aggression. The ideal representation is thus a balance between a nationalist and aggressive Armenia and the military superiority of Azerbaijan. Indeed, with the exception of the sections describing the threat of Armenian nationalism and the past trials of the Azeri people, the website is mostly devoted to promoting the technical prowess of the Azeri army, and the gains (however small) they have made, or are making, against “the enemy” in the Karabakh conflict¹²⁴. As such, much of the state commentary amounts to an information

¹²² English-language version of Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan website. Available via: <http://mod.gov.az/en/khodjali-genocide-411/>; <http://mod.gov.az/en/the-january-20-tragedy-414/> and <http://mod.gov.az/en/history-of-karabakh-075/> (Accessed 07/07/17)

¹²³ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “History of Iravan”, Available at: <http://mod.gov.az/en/the-history-of-iravan-410/> (Accessed 04/07/17)

¹²⁴ For example, compare the headlines of the following news items on the MoD website: “The member of the reconnaissance-sabotage group of the enemy is captured” (21/06/17; available at: <http://mod.gov.az/en/news/the-member-of-the-reconnaissance-sabotage-group-of-the-enemy-is-captured-18999.html>); “Russia continues delivering modern military equipment to Azerbaijan” (24/06/17; available at:

war about which side is making the most progress and which has the most up-to-date and powerful technology, combined with efforts to maintain the moral high ground and demonise the other party.

Beyond the top-level analysis of the activities and publications of the Ministry of Defence, it is interesting to look at the role the military plays in public life in order to establish the extent of the “militarisation of everyday life” within Azerbaijan.

Within both Azerbaijan and Armenia, all fit men are required to complete a term serving in the military. Zamira Abbasova, a civil society worker involved in the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation – an NGO which looks to encourage cross-border dialogue between warring parties across the South Caucasus – commented in an interview that:

all the males that are graduating, they have to go to the military. How to face the Armenian soldier while you believe in peace?...it is a crime to refrain from conducting military service. So you cannot really do it [believe in peace] - either you flee from the country or you go to shoot, even if you believe in peace...even if they believe in peace they cannot practice it, actively¹²⁵

As such, the continuation of conscription makes the promotion of peace among the youth difficult, as – especially for young men – the military is a necessary part of life in Azerbaijan. The Imagine Center Zamira works with have organised events in the past which bring together young people from Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to promote peace and cooperation. However, with conscription also in place in Armenia, Zamira highlighted the fact that it becomes difficult for the youth to harbour empathy for their Armenian counterparts while they will be forced to face them on the frontlines, so no matter how much progress is made over the course of these events, the prominence of the military in their lives makes any lasting change to the discussion difficult¹²⁶.

Additionally, the military is celebrated through performances such as the parade of forces which takes place on June 26th every year since 1988, on the “Day of Armed Forces”, and also through the celebrations of the national flag across the country. Recently, in November 2016, one such celebration involved the performative element of an Azeri politician punching a slate replica of the Armenian flag which members of the armed forces had made¹²⁷. However, during the ceremony, the slate was held

<http://mod.gov.az/en/news/russia-continues-delivering-modern-military-equipment-to-azerbaijan-font-color-red-video-font-19067.html>); “Armenia once again used combat UAVs” (22/06/17, available at: <http://mod.gov.az/en/news/armenia-once-again-used-combat-uavs-19028.html>); and “Armenia carried out another large-scale provocation on the front line” (04/07/17, available at: <http://mod.gov.az/en/news/armenia-carried-out-another-large-scale-provocation-in-the-frontline-19150.html>)

¹²⁵ Skype interview with Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/2017

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

¹²⁷ Anonymous, “Azerbaijan: the Presence of War in Everyday Life”, *Chai Khana*, 07/06/17, Available at: <https://chai-khana.org/en/the-presence-of-war-in-everyday-life--2> (Accessed 30/06/17)

upside down and so bore closer resemblance to the Colombian flag¹²⁸. Nevertheless, in a later interview, the politician asserted: “I am veteran of Karabakh war; and when I broke that flag I recalled all atrocities committed by Armenians”¹²⁹

3.4 State Media

Within Jabri’s framework of the creation and reproduction of discourses on violence, the media plays a central role “in the process of linking the masses to the war process” through “the generation of a war mood and the creation of a ‘collective mind’”¹³⁰. The final section of this chapter will thus explore how far the media within Azerbaijan performs these functions in the reporting of the Karabakh war. Indeed, for the majority of people within Azerbaijan, mass media is the primary means by which the war is experienced. With this in mind, it is important to highlight the fact that the media environment in Azerbaijan is very limited, with little room for diversity of stories or opinions¹³¹. Therefore, the language and images widely used by – primarily state-owned or operated – media outlets are able to become the primary associations with the Karabakh war for the general public, and so provide an apt example of how a war mood is generated and reproduced in Azerbaijani society, and how war is normalised even for those not experiencing direct violence. This section will focus on how war-centric narratives are reproduced through the media, while the final chapter will look more at the lack of independence and freedom of these media outlets, and the impact this has on the space for creating a counter-discourse.

The Hrant Dink Foundation, in collaboration with the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, recently published a comparative discourse analysis of the media in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey and the specific reporting of fighting in April 2016, often referred to as the “four-day war”¹³². The report revealed a somewhat formulaic means by which the “other” was demonised in the media of all three countries, with the content and context changing, but the means by which “discriminatory discourse” was created was similar across all cases¹³³. Throughout reporting in Azerbaijan, the narratives explored in the previous chapter are evident. Depictions of Armenians are simplistic ones

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Ikin Parali, “Ahad Abiyev: I punched Armenian flag, not Columbian”, *Report News Agency*, 10/1//16, available at: <https://report.az/en/domestic-politics/ahad-abiyev-i-punched-armenian-flag-not-columbian/> (Accessed 26/07/17)

¹³⁰ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 109

¹³¹ Based on findings of IREX & USAID, “the Media Sustainability Index 2017”; Zeynep Arslan, Philip Gamaghelyan, Arzu Geybullayeva & Sargis Khandanyan, “Four Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Discriminatory Discourse Analysis of the Media in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey”, *Hrant Dink Foundation*, (Istanbul: April 2017) 24

¹³² Arslan et. al, “Four Day War”

¹³³ *Ibid.* 11

of an enemy-other: they are barbarians, rapists, and murderers occupying Azeri lands, with usually little distinction between the Armenian state and Armenian people¹³⁴.

Additionally, it should be highlighted that the veracity of the information which saturates Azeri media coverage and analysis of the Karabakh war, and more generally conditions in Armenia, should not be taken at face value. According to the aforementioned Hrant Dink Foundation report, no Azeri media outlets have reporters based in the Nagorno-Karabakh region or Armenia, and no journalists in either country are accredited to work with their counterparts across the border¹³⁵. In illustration of this, one of my key informants in Baku spoke of an almost comical representation of Armenian society on the state news channel in Azerbaijan whereby the same video footage of a dilapidated bus in Yerevan town centre, clearly from the late 1980s or early 1990s, is played in the background of reports regarding the poor state of the Armenian economy and living conditions for its citizens¹³⁶. Indeed, as explored previously, one of the dominant narratives in Azerbaijan regarding the war and Armenia in general is based upon Azeri economic and military superiority. There are regular stories in the Azerbaijani press regarding living conditions in Armenia, despite the aforementioned fact that there are little to no Azeri reporters still operating in the country or Armenian reporters communicating with Azerbaijani news outlets.

In the English-language newspaper *AZERNEWS*, for example, one headline claims: “Expert Center confirms poor state of Armenian economy”¹³⁷. Additionally, within this paper, there is a section devoted to the Karabakh war with headlines such as “MP: Armenia is aggressor country that remains unpunished”¹³⁸, and “MP: Restoration of Jojug Marjanli [village in NK region recaptured earlier this year] is serious message to Armenia”¹³⁹, which illustrate this nationalistic means of reporting, encapsulating similar images of Armenian fault, Azerbaijani glory, and Armenian weakness and struggle, as are exemplified on the MoD website.

It seems, then, that the ideal is to present reports in such a way as to maintain the moral high ground in the war, while minimising claims of Armenian damage to Azeri military factions: it is the dual representation of strength and victimhood, arguably for two different audiences. For the international community, Azerbaijan is presenting Armenia as the party at fault for the continuation of hostilities,

¹³⁴ *Ibid* 23; Interview with Fakhri, 12/04/17

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 25

¹³⁶ Informal conversation with Fakhri, 25/04/17

¹³⁷ Rashid Shirinov, “Expert Center confirms poor state of Armenian economy”, in *AZERNEWS*, no.23, March 31-April 4, 2017

¹³⁸ Rashid Shirinov, “MP: Armenia is aggressor country that remains unpunished”, in *AZERNEWS*, no.27, April 14-18, 2017

¹³⁹ Rashid Shirinov, “MP: Restoration of Jojug Marjanli village is serious message to Armenia”, in *AZERNEWS*, no.27, April 14-18, 2017

while showing its internal audiences both that they are the stronger power, and that continued investment in the military and the war effort is justified. Attempts at dissenting from the official line touted by the mainstream media in Azerbaijan has been met with increasing repression and censorship in recent years, and thus the final chapter will now move to discuss these attempts and their wider reception among the public.

Opportunities for Dissent

In discussing violent imaginaries, Schroeder and Schmidt suppose that “violence needs to be imagined in order to be carried out”¹⁴⁰. In this context, the same can be argued for situations of peace – it needs to be imagined before it can become a reality. As such, as long as Azeri discussions of the war are saturated with anti-Armenian, and generally belligerent, rhetoric, it could be argued that the space for peace is limited since such a reality is so far removed from what is known widely in society, and thus what can be imagined.

Within this context, it is interesting to look at the attempts to promote and establish these discourses of peace in a society saturated with images and narratives of war. Thus, this chapter will begin with an overview of the sources and content of counter-narratives in the Azerbaijani case, highlighting the efforts by various actors to create “track two diplomacy” and “civil peacebuilding” initiatives in order to change the narrative patterns and content of war discourses in Azerbaijan. This overview will hopefully provide a suitable contextualization for the remainder of the chapter: by first highlighting the counter-discourses that exist within Azeri society, the discussion will then move to how the government receives and ultimately counters this dissent from the official line. Building upon the discussion in the previous chapter of the media’s representation of the war, it will outline the lack of press freedom within the country, and the impact this has on the possible circulation of this counter-discourse, and thus the political function of maintaining a war mood. Following this, I will discuss the impact of these counter narratives at the ground-level, commenting briefly on their relevance among such prominent discourses of war, and exemplifying cases of their rejection among the public in order to demonstrate that said war discourses resonate with the public due to the specific socio-historical context and personal experiences.

3.1: Counter Narratives

Within Jabri’s ideas of discourse on war, she allows for the possibility that, since these discourses are constructed, and do not represent an objective truth or reality, discourses of peace could also be constructed, in such a way as to redirect what is “normal” away from a state of war to one of cooperation and coexistence¹⁴¹. This section will thus look to explore the existence, sources, and content of any such counter-discourse within Azerbaijan. The majority of such counter-discourses in Azerbaijan have emerged within frameworks of what can variously be described as “civil peacebuilding” and “track two diplomacy” initiatives; that is, projects which focus on peacebuilding

¹⁴⁰ Schroeder & Schmidt, “Introduction”, 9

¹⁴¹ Jabri, *Discourses on Violence*, 160

beyond the political sphere and instead look to promote change from the ground-up¹⁴². They aim to go beyond ideas of conflict settlement and negotiations, instead focusing on creating a “positive peace” based on mutual understanding and coexistence¹⁴³. Overall, the content of these counter-narratives revolve around denying the perceived inevitability and intractability of the conflict, instead encouraging bottom-up discursive processes in order to dispel antagonisms and exclusive attitudes, drawing attention to its political rather than ethnic origins¹⁴⁴.

In conducting my research, prior to my entry to the field, it would appear based on online desk research there were a number of NGOs and Civil Society actors operating within the country to this end and, as such, an open and accessible space for the production of a counter-discourse to those promoting and encouraging war and exclusionist attitudes. However – as will be elaborated on in subsequent sections – the reality on the ground was that many of these NGOs were either no longer present in Azerbaijan, or simply unable to function due to increasing government restrictions on their operation. In spite of this, I was able to find a select few organisations which continue to promote alternative views of the war and look to encourage dialogue between the two parties, but most had had to close their Azerbaijan offices and were operating out of neighbouring countries in Georgia, Armenia, or Turkey, for example. This section will thus reveal the work done by these NGOs, and comment on their approaches to peacebuilding through narrative intervention.

Two of the key informants of this research from the civil society sector – Zamira Abbasova and Arzu Geybullayeva – had worked closely with an NGO called the Imagine Centre for Conflict Transformation (the Imagine Centre hereafter), which acts as a facilitator of cross-border dialogue in conflicts throughout the South Caucasus region. Since its establishment in 2007, the Washington DC-based Imagine Centre has organised many events and conferences aimed at aiding the breaking down of negative stereotypes, development of a common narrative of history and the creation of links between like-minded professionals across conflict lines¹⁴⁵. The Centre looks to maintain an explicit focus on approaching ideas of difference which permeate society, allowing participants in their programmes to:

¹⁴² Arzu Geybullayeva, “Nagorno-Karabakh 2.0: How New Media and Track Two Diplomacy Initiatives are Fostering Change”, in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.32 (2), June 2012, pp.176-185

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 180-183

¹⁴⁴ Gamaghelyan, “Intractability of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, 9-13

¹⁴⁵ Imagine Centre for Conflict Transformation, “Home”, Available at <http://imaginedialogue.com/> (Accessed 01/03/17)

express their differences, understand each other and analyse the root causes of the conflict. Only after working out their differences and developing strong relationships, the participants move on to discussing the areas where they can cooperate¹⁴⁶

The Centre also works towards restructuring narratives through the creation of alternate sources of information and analysis of the war, through their online journal *Caucasus Edition: Journal for Conflict Transformation*, which, along with the youth-centred platform *the Neutral Zone*, serves to provide a narrative means by which existing violent imaginaries can be challenged.

Each outlet of the Imagine Centre looks to promote a common narrative of the conflict, with contributions from both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in order to go against one-sided accounts of the war. In the “Glossary and Guidelines” of the *Caucasus Edition*, for example, preferred terms for regions, actors, and events are outlined in order to move away from politically and emotionally-charged language that is often used in reporting and analysis from both sides of the conflict. The guidelines, for example, state:

We recommend avoiding exaggerated ethnicization, overly broad and general designations, allowing the shift of guilt for certain activities onto an entire ethnic group/nation/national community; clichés reproducing ‘the enemy image’ (‘ruthless’, ‘historical enemies’, ‘cruel’ and such). In general, it is recommended to avoid adjectives that do not carry a factual connotation and are instead aimed at shaping fully generalized conflict images encompassing all members of an ethnic group/national community.¹⁴⁷

These guidelines for submission to the journal are interesting when contrasted with the language and narratives of government websites exemplified in Chapter Three. The alternative discourse promoted through *Caucasus Edition* and *the Neutral Zone* is thus one of neutrality of not only information, but language too, as it seeks to avoid morally- and emotionally-charged reporting of the war, which can serve to unconsciously reinforce antagonistic positions.

Through the focus on the history of the war, the Imagine Centre also looks to debunk the “ancient hatreds” approach through maintaining the view that it is an overtly political conflict, not one rooted in any inevitable incompatibility of identities, as is often suggested in the prominent war discourses.

Similar to the Imagine Centre, the online media platform *Chai Khana* looks to promote alternative voices across the South Caucasus, particularly those under-represented in everyday life. Focusing on a plurality of themes, not just conflict-related, the website – whose name translates to mean “Tea House” – produces new content every other month covering “a unique issue or topic - from migration

¹⁴⁶ Imagine Center, “Our Methodology”, available at: <http://imaginedialogue.com/our-methodology/> (Accessed 18/04/17)

¹⁴⁷ “Glossary and Guidelines”, *Caucasus Edition*, available at: <http://caucasusedition.net/glossary-and-guidelines/> (Accessed 20/07/17)

to the bazaar in the Caucasus, using creative and experimental approaches in documentary photography, multimedia, and film”¹⁴⁸. In reporting on the everyday experiences of people in Azerbaijan and Armenia through film and photographs, *Chai Khana* can be seen to represent inscriptive means of promoting a counter discourse which looks to debunk dangerous nationalist “us/them” rhetoric in favour of maintaining an inclusive focus on the commonalities of stories and experiences of people either side of the conflict. In the most recent publication, the theme of which is “Communication”, one article mimics the very theme of this thesis, entitled “Azerbaijan: The Presence of War in Everyday Life”, taking the form of a photo-essay essentially exemplifying various inscriptive examples of violent imaginaries from across Azerbaijan, featuring photos of schoolchildren commemorating the 1992 fall of the town of Shusha, and various militaristic posters and photos which permeate public life¹⁴⁹. By drawing attention to the way in which such discourses “nurture nationalism”, the article represents a critique of their prevalence in Azeri society, instead encouraging more inclusive dialogue and less divisive rhetoric surrounding the conflict¹⁵⁰.

Meydan TV, an independent Azeri news outlet run from Berlin by dissidents, is another vessel providing alternative discourse surrounding the Karabakh war and Armenian-Azeri relations. While not exclusively focused on the war, Meydan TV provides a rare outlet for criticism of the Azeri government and commentary on the depleting situation of press freedoms within the country. Zamira Abbasova commented on the fact that this criticism of the government and their militaristic policies has been somewhat detrimental to the site’s public appeal, as “the line between who is in the opposition party, and who is generally opposing to militarism, is very blurry”¹⁵¹. As a result, some within Azerbaijan see them as a vessel of support for the opposition parties within the country, despite their position as a neutral media organization not affiliated to any political actors¹⁵².

However, despite this, Meydan TV has continued to challenge existing narratives of the war. For example, in the “Analysis” section of the website, there are a number of photo-essays relating to the poor housing conditions of IDPs and Refugees living in Azerbaijan, which serves to support the idea that the government prefers to maintain the status of IDPs as a means of sustaining the war in public memory¹⁵³. Additionally, the website also encourages what De Waal has named a “third narrative” of

¹⁴⁸ “About”, *Chai Khana*, available at: <https://chai-khana.org/en/about> (Accessed 14/07/17)

¹⁴⁹ Anonymous, “Azerbaijan: the Presence of War in Everyday Life”, *Chai Khana*, 07/06/17, Available at: <https://chai-khana.org/en/the-presence-of-war-in-everyday-life--2> (Accessed 30/06/17)

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Interview with Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/17

¹⁵² *Ibid*

¹⁵³ See, for example, Meydan TV, “Khojaly Massacre Survivors Live in Untenable Conditions in Baku”, 27/02/17, available at <https://www.meydan.tv/en/site/society/21428/> (accessed 09/05/17)

the conflict, that is, one of Armenian-Azerbaijani coexistence and cooperation¹⁵⁴. In an article entitled “A Narrative of Peace: Ethnic Armenian-Azeri Coexistence in Georgia”, journalist Onnik James Krikorian looks to refute the commonly-touted everyday primordialist approach to the war which sees Armenian and Azeri identities as simply incompatible¹⁵⁵. The focus on inter-ethnic communities in Georgia is useful as it serves to explore the experiences of those isolated from the everyday violent imaginaries present in Armenian and Azerbaijani societies and, indeed, according to Krikorian, the ethnic Armenians and Azeris he spoke to agreed that the Karabakh war is “a political conflict, not an ethnic one”¹⁵⁶. Of course, this also demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural context, as those living in Georgia, Russia, or Iran have the freedom to step outside of the “mental conflict zone”, and “a free ticket...to ignore the conflict”, which is not to say that – were they forced to confront it – Azeris or Armenians coexisting abroad would not repeat the dominant positions of their respective homelands¹⁵⁷.

Despite the work of these initiatives in promoting counter-discourses of peace, their very existence and accessibility is threatened by the increasingly authoritarian nature of the government in Azerbaijan. The following section will thus briefly discuss the state of governance and democracy in Azerbaijan to comment on the pressure this creates on conforming to the government line, and the limitations it places on the space for these counter discourses to exist and flourish.

3.2: Repression of Counter Narratives

The space for civil society initiatives and independent media in Azerbaijan diminished dramatically in recent years, with the government banning five independent media outlets from operating in the country – including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the aforementioned Meydan TV – in May of this year¹⁵⁸. The websites had been blocked intermittently since March, with Meydan TV countering this by posting full news stories in their “comments” section on Facebook¹⁵⁹. Independent NGOs such as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly criticized the government’s clamp down on freedom of the press and “freedom of the net”, with the former ranking the country as distinctly “not free” (comparatively – Armenia is ranked as “partly free”, with “free” freedom of the

¹⁵⁴ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 279-283

¹⁵⁵ James Onnik Krikorian, “A Narrative of Peace: Ethnic Armenian-Azeri Coexistence in Georgia”, *Meydan TV*, 16/05/17, Available at: <https://www.meydan.tv/en/site/society/22692/> (Accessed 20/05/17)

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁷ De Waal, *Black Garden*, 282-3

¹⁵⁸ RFE/RL Azerbaijani Service, “Azerbaijani Court Orders Block on RFE/RL Website”, *RFE/RL*, 12/05/17, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-rferl-service-website-court-orders-blocked/28482679.html> (Accessed 14/05/17)

¹⁵⁹ Information from Fakhri via text message, 2/5/2017

net and a “not free” press)¹⁶⁰. Additionally, the Court of Appeals has recently ordered the return of jailed-and-released human rights activists Leyla and Arif Yunus, issuing an international arrest warrant for the pair who were jailed on trumped-up charges after criticizing the government and released last year on health grounds¹⁶¹. While not directly involving the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the arrest of those critical of the government is a clear indication of the increasingly repressive nature of the regime, and as such suggests an inability to promote alternative discourses and narratives which promote peace and cooperation with Armenia and Armenians. An example of this in action can be seen in the briefly aforementioned move to close many International and National NGOs operating within Azerbaijan in what has been referred to as a “crackdown” beginning in 2013 when the government began targeting civil society actors, journalists, and rights activists, and introducing laws which make it increasingly difficult for those still operating to do so effectively¹⁶². Indeed, Zamira Abbasova commented on the former cooperation between Imagine Dialogue and the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Azerbaijan (SAM):

we used to work with them actually, very closely, until the government prioritised militarisation for themselves. Then actually they stopped working with us, and they just said that the government has strict rules and strict priorities so we are not talking about peace, or anything related to peacebuilding, so we will stop communicating¹⁶³

Zamira also commented on having a similar experience with the Azerbaijani Diplomatic University (ADA) whereby they stopped working with the Imagine Center due to governmental pressure. The repression of the government regarding these counter narratives of peace and reconciliation can be seen to be in line with Jabri’s second dualism of the war mood: that of conformity and dissent. The move to censor, punish, and demonize actors seemingly going against the “us” of Azeri society is an act legitimized by the war mood that exists within the country. An example of this can be seen in the story of Azeri author Akram Aylisli, the former “People’s writer” of Azerbaijan, stripped of his title after the publishing of his novella *Stone Dreams* which depicted the Sumgait and Baku pogroms of Armenians, supposedly portraying too sympathetic a position towards Armenians¹⁶⁴. In 2013, the writer was expelled from the Union of Writers, had his presidential pension stripped, and his wife and

¹⁶⁰ Freedom House, “Azerbaijan Country Profile”, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan> (Accessed 15/05/17)

¹⁶¹ RFE/RL Azerbaijani Service, “Azerbaijani Court Orders Forcible Return of Activists Leyla, Arif, Yunus”, RFE/RL, 17/05/17, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/leyla-arif-yunus-forcible-return-azerbaijan-court-order/28493480.html> (Accessed 18/05/17)

¹⁶² Interviews with Arzu Geybullayeva, 23/05/17; Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/17

¹⁶³ Skype interview with Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/17

¹⁶⁴ Damien McGuinness, “Azeri writer Akram Aylisli hounded for 'pro-Armenian' book”, *BBC News*, 15/02/13, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21459091> (accessed 21/03/17)

son also lost their jobs in what some commentators suspect was a coordinated campaign from the government, featuring television programmes and official statements denouncing him and his novella, with one politician even offering a monetary reward to anyone who cut off Aylisli's ear¹⁶⁵.

Another example of the prominence of the "conformity/dissent" dichotomy in Azerbaijan can be found in the overt politicization of the Eurovision Song Contest. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been reflected in numerous years of the contest, with Armenia refusing to compete in 2012 when it was held in Baku, and Azerbaijan supposedly cutting off the live broadcast of the Junior equivalent of the competition in 2010 when it became clear the Armenian entry had won¹⁶⁶. In terms of conformity and dissent, it is interesting to note that the government seized phone records and even questioned one Azeri who had voted for Armenia during the 2009 contest, claiming it to be an issue of national security¹⁶⁷.

As will be elaborated on in the subsequent section of this chapter, the advent of social media and the internet has ushered in new hopes regarding the promotion of cross-border dialogue in divided societies, theoretically providing an open space in which to access different views and information. However, writers Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior instead argue that such online "dissent" can be co-opted by the government in order to discourage protest and activism, and as such silence alternative voices and narratives seen to be going against the government¹⁶⁸. They describe this idea as a representation of "networked authoritarianism", and argue it is widely used throughout the post-Soviet sphere¹⁶⁹. This concept is premised on the notion that, rather than overtly censoring sources of dissent, authoritarian governments instead "compete" with them, ultimately looking to dissuade the public from engaging in activism or the promotion of alternative views, either through open action against those seen to dissent, or by saturating the internet with pro-government discourse¹⁷⁰

In addition to ideas of "networked authoritarianism", the possible positive effects of the internet in producing counter discourse should not be overstated in Azerbaijan due to various issues with

¹⁶⁵ Shaun Walker, "Bring me the ear of Akram Aylisli! Politician offers £8,000 for attack on writer", *the Independent*, 12/02/13, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/bring-me-the-ear-of-akram-aylisli-politician-offers-8000-for-attack-on-writer-8492268.html> (accessed 23/05/17)

¹⁶⁶ William Lee Adams, "How Armenia and Azerbaijan Wage War Through Eurovision", *Time Magazine*, 11/03/12 <http://world.time.com/2012/03/11/how-armenia-and-azerbaijan-wage-war-through-eurovision/> (accessed 10/07/17)

¹⁶⁷ RFE/RL "Azerbaijani Interrogated Over Eurovision Vote", 26/08/09, Available at: [https://www.rferl.org/a/Azerbaijani Interrogated Over Eurovision Vote/1808333.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Azerbaijani%20Interrogated%20Over%20Eurovision%20Vote/1808333.html) (accessed 25/05/17)

¹⁶⁸ Katy E. Pearce & Sarah Kendzior, "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan", in *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, 2012, pp.283-298, 284

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*

accessibility across the country¹⁷¹. Internet usage is very much concentrated in the largest cities, namely Baku, Sumgait and Ganja, and, in addition, there was recently a switch from analogue to digital television, leaving a high proportion of the population without access to TV unless they buy themselves a converter. For comparison, when Georgia made the same switch, the government gave out converters for free to those in need¹⁷². As such, even once alternative discourses are created, there remains a problem with accessibility in the majority of the country outside of Baku and other major cities, leaving the dominant nationalist and exclusive accounts of the war as the most widely experienced, and thus limiting the opportunities for change.

3.3: Ground-Level Implications

Due to limitations involving language and accessibility to respondents, this research has been unable to appropriately gauge the social meaning of the explored narratives and counter-narratives among the general public within Azerbaijan. However, this section will attempt to outline the observable impact of the interplay of each in wider society, through a focus on social media and access to prior research carried out by organisations with more resources and access to appropriate sectors of the population. Overall, it will look to bring the discussion back to an emphasis on the fact that the discursive maintenance of antagonisms is not simply the result of top-down propaganda, but that the socio-historical context and experiences of the war and post-ceasefire society means that antagonistic discourses do resonate with the public, and as such are created and reproduced at a micro as well as macro level.

As briefly touched upon above, in recent years, much has been written on the new possibilities in the creation of counter discourse through the internet and social media. In theory, these platforms provide a borderless space where people can connect with those from the other side of the conflict, and also gain access to different viewpoints than they would experience otherwise¹⁷³. Indeed, as evidenced in the discussion of the work of NGOs such as the Imagine Centre and *Chai Khana*, these platforms *do* exist to provide just that: alternative and inclusive views of the war and of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Much of the peacebuilding initiatives active in the region maintain a focus on “creating a space for dialogue” and social media acts as a significant tool in the achievement of this¹⁷⁴. Additionally, there is a desire amongst at least some of the younger generation to meet and interact with Armenians: one source told me of an application he has on his phone which allows him to speak

¹⁷¹ IREX & USAID, “the Media Sustainability Index 2017”

¹⁷² *ibid*

¹⁷³ Geybullayeva, “Nagorno-Karabakh 2.0”, 180

¹⁷⁴ Larisa Sotieva, “A reflection on 20 years of civil society initiatives on the nagorno-karabakh conflict”, *International Alert*, September 2014

to people from all over the world, but – in an apt microcosm of Armenian-Azeri relations overall – lamented how he had so far been unable to connect to any Armenians as they did not want to speak with him after finding out he was from Azerbaijan¹⁷⁵. As such, the reality of promoting alternative discourse through social media has clearly proved more complicated than the borderless and inclusive space envisioned by some.

The prevalence on social media of many groups and individuals promoting and reproducing the government line regarding the war and Armenia(ns) can be taken as an apt illustration of the fact that the prevalence of war discourses and the existence of violent imaginaries does not come simply from a top-down government-led process, but that such ideas and discourse do resonate with the public more generally. The realm of social media is thus somewhat of a double-edged sword; on the one hand providing communication opportunities where they would not exist otherwise, but also leading to echo chamber dynamics. Arzu Geybullayeva had little faith in this regard, saying that:

[social media] will always remain a battle ground for pro-war supporters on both sides. There are so many pages on Facebook especially about evil Azerbaijanis and evil Armenians...these pages and groups are [a] direct outcome of aggressive rhetoric - had there been genuine efforts at home in both countries in commenting with the people and talking about dialogue, peace, I doubt these groups would exist or at least have the popularity. Surely there will always be those in support of war and violence but so long as there is no ground level dialogue it is unlikely anything could help or change¹⁷⁶

Thus, from Arzu's point of view, the primary value in social media with regard to peacebuilding is in the ability to challenge the claims of the government that they are promoting peace, arguing that the groups and hateful rhetoric observed online have not emerged in a vacuum, but rather are an outcome of aggressive and hateful rhetoric within society. It follows that the government are not doing as much as they may claim to counter such rhetoric, and are even promoting antagonisms, as touched upon in the aforementioned discussion of "networked authoritarianism".

Indeed, beyond the realm of social media, the efficacy of promoting counter-discourse through civil society peacebuilding initiatives is also marred by the saturation of Azeri society with discourses promoting war. As observed in a review of civil society initiatives across the region produced by International Alert:

for various reasons, including the ideology perpetuated by military propaganda, narratives about participation by civil society representatives in peacebuilding initiatives or their successes are not popular in the societies [Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh]. In fact, there is more likely to be active support for the official line that civil

¹⁷⁵ Informal Conversation with Fakhri, 25/04/17

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Arzu Geybullayeva, 23/05/17

peacebuilding has led to nothing and will not lead anywhere. This creates a sense of powerlessness in the societies in the face of major political manoeuvring. It also helps to generate a sense of chronic social passivity, even apathy, making it easier for people to be manipulated and controlled¹⁷⁷

According to the same report, there is also a general mistrust of peacebuilding initiatives that can be seen to go against the nationalist rhetoric of the government as, due to a lack of diverse sources of information, and the lack of transparency of peace talks, such initiatives can often be perceived as going against the national interest and threatening security¹⁷⁸, thus embodying conceptions of traitorous “dissent” in Jabri’s dichotomies of a war mood¹⁷⁹.

Despite the limited influence civil society actors can have on political actors within both Azerbaijan and Armenia due to the non-democratic nature of the regimes in both countries, International Alert has pointed to certain positive outcomes that have arisen from such peacebuilding initiatives over the past 20 years, including the creation of a space for dialogue, the education of the public through more balanced information, and the encouragement of greater conflict awareness and independent thinking¹⁸⁰. They explain the continued importance of such initiatives in conflict societies despite these restrictions, outlining how:

The current socio-political realities in the region mean that civil peacebuilding and humanitarian projects can only have minimal influence on political resolutions. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such initiatives are hugely important in resisting the onslaught of nationalistic and even chauvinistic rhetoric and ideology¹⁸¹

The report even outlines the fact that peacemakers at the top-level will utilise the peacebuilding tools promoted through civil society initiatives, even if only when it suits their interests to do so¹⁸². Indeed, one of the dangers in promoting counter-discourses through civil society initiatives in the Nagorno-Karabakh case is the possibility of their co-opting and the politicisation of their means and methods by top-level actors looking to achieve their own goals. This is evidenced through the rise in the “politicisation of peacebuilding” in the region, for example through the existence of “Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs)”¹⁸³.

An example of this in action can be seen in the 2016 establishment of the Armenian-Azerbaijan Peace Platform. The Platform came as the result of cooperation between Azerbaijani officials and Armenian

¹⁷⁷ Sotieva, “A Reflection”, 5

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* 16

¹⁷⁹ Jabri, *Discourses of Violence*, 108

¹⁸⁰ Sotieva, “A Reflection” 10

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 9

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 11

¹⁸³ International Alert, *20 Years of Civil Peacebuilding in the Context of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, August 2013, p.6

dissidents, and promotes itself as a vessel of dialogue and peacebuilding between the parties to the conflict, encouraging coexistence and cooperation¹⁸⁴. However, various civil society actors and commentators have commented on its inefficacy, claiming it is a false initiative being used as a PR mechanism by the government in order to attract foreign aid, and appear to be the more peaceful actor in the conflict to the international community¹⁸⁵. Indeed, while the platform does use less nationalist and one-sided language and rhetoric than other vessels of discourse production surrounding the war, there is still a clear lack of impartiality, with its core principles argued with recourse to international law, a position frequently emphasised by the Azeri government in their critique of the Armenian position. Zamira Abbasova commented on the platform's inefficacy in this regard, claiming that:

it is [a] one sided platform [in] which Azerbaijan is making official peace with Armenian dissidents, but not with the Armenian government. It is a very fake platform, their only intention is to play to the media and tell to the international organisations that, 'you see we are open for peace, this is what we are doing, we have created the platform, if Armenia as an official side wants to join it - go ahead' but Armenia doesn't want to, so they have created this weird, manipulative, narrative on peacebuilding¹⁸⁶

Orkhan Nabiyev, the Azerbaijani co-coordinator of the Platform, contests this view, reiterating the aims of the organisation in establishing ground-level peacebuilding processes, rather than focusing on the government's rhetoric¹⁸⁷. Having said that, Nabiyev concedes that the government are indirectly involved in the project, firstly since one of the co-founders is Rovshan Rzayev, a Member of Parliament in Azerbaijan, and secondly due to the fact it is based in Baku itself, and so has certain freedoms of operation which other organisations do not¹⁸⁸. On top of this, one of the Armenian co-founders of the organisation, Vahan Martirosyan, recently published a video denouncing the platform as false, determining it to be a government-front with no role or connection to Azerbaijani society¹⁸⁹. The Platform has since released a statement attributing Martirosyan's as coming as the result of threats from nationalists interested in "maintain the status quo" who view him as a traitor¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁴ Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform, available at <http://arm-azpeace.com/index.php?lang=en> (Accessed 23/05/17)

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Zamira Abbasova, 18/04/17

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁷ Skype Interview with Orkhan Nabiyev, 08/05/17

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*; "Founders", Armenia-Azerbaijan Platform for Peace, Available at <http://arm-azpeace.com/news.php?id=1017&lang=en> (Accessed 08/05/17)

¹⁸⁹ Joshua Kucera, "After Denunciation, Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform on Shaky Ground", *Eurasia Net*, Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83751> (Accessed 03/06/17)

¹⁹⁰ Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform, "Statement of Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform issues on Vahan Martirosyan", 29/05/17, available at: <http://arm-azpeace.com/news.php?id=1722&lang=en> (Accessed 05/06/17)

Regardless of its internal issues, and the fact it ultimately seems to promote an Azeri view of the war in a contemporary context – through reference to UN resolutions and other vestiges of international law calling for the withdrawal of Armenia – the Platform can be seen to be incorporating a more discursive approach to peacebuilding than other government-associated efforts. It looks to promote a “history of coexistence”, and at least encourages tolerance towards Armenian people, if not the government¹⁹¹.

This role of GONGOs in promoting a certain *kind* of peace acts as an apt representation of Demmers’ critique on Jabri’s ideas of discourses of peace, in that, while she articulates the impact structures of domination have on the production of war discourse, she omits the same line of argumentation for the production of peace discourse – namely, a discussion of *who’s* conception of peace is being promoted¹⁹². It is in this context that the criticism of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform should be observed in this thesis, as

¹⁹¹ Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Platform, “Some Aspects of the History of Co-existence of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis”, available at: <http://arm-azpeace.com/news.php?id=1101&lang=en> (Accessed 31/05/17)

¹⁹² Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 132

Conclusion

As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, this thesis began as an investigation into the attitudes and experiences of second-generation Internally Displaced Persons from Karabakh and the surrounding territories living in Baku. The idea was that those born since the 1994 ceasefire – having had no experience of their “homeland”, or the conflict which prevented them from living there – were still inevitably a part of the war, more so than the average Azeri, due to their own personal family history, as well as their continued status as IDPs under Azeri law. Emerging out of my own interest in the interplay of collective memory, nationalism, and the discursive construction of reality, this subject area seemed the most apt means through which to explore how discursive interpretations of memory can be utilised to construct a certain conception of national identity and belonging, based upon the various producers of said discourse and memory – in this case either at the personal level of family histories, or the state level of institutionalised discourses.

However, upon arrival in Baku to carry out my field research into this topic, it quickly became clear that, due to a lack of appropriate connections, and an inability to speak the language (and no time to learn), studying the experiences and attitudes of IDPs would be too difficult in the short timescale I had available. I would thus encourage further research into this specific area, as I feel there is a need to explore the complex relationship between memory, identity, and discourse within a context whereby that identity is determined by others in the same group – namely family or the nation.

Building upon the same theoretical underpinnings, but with a broader subject matter, this thesis has sought to explore how a war mood is maintained beyond the front lines, not only physically but also – for a lot of the population – temporally, as the youth have grown up in a situation of “no war, no peace”, whereby the majority have had no direct experience of violent conflict with Armenians, but are simultaneously surrounded by discourses which assert that they are a barbaric and aggressive people, intent on the destruction of Azeri national identity.

Most of the literature acknowledges the vitriolic and hateful narratives which both sides of the conflict project onto the other, but either tend to frame it in a way that implies the two populations are inherently incompatible due to certain historical instances of warfare, or that antagonisms come as a result of elite discourse in an attempt to hold onto power. This thesis has attempted to take a middle ground between these two approaches, acknowledging the role of both the masses and the political elite in producing and reinforcing antagonisms through various manifestations of violent imaginaries.

Such a framework has allowed for the acknowledgement of the role of socio-historical context and collective memory in the discursive maintenance of warfare. As such, it supposes, in line with Jabri, that discourses can *be changed*, and in turn *can change* realities. In the context of the violent

imaginaries observed in Baku, through a certain kind of discourse intervention, they could in theory be transformed into “peaceful imaginaries”, which could in turn have an impact on the perceptions of Armenians among the public. In-keeping with the “middle-ground” approach, however, this discursive intervention would have to come alongside a change in socio-political conditions to affect a change in attitudes.

In this context, as was explored in Chapter Four, much of the anti-Armenian discourse does not seem likely to be effectively countered within the current climate of political and press freedoms (or rather, lack thereof) within the country. There is little to no room for dissent from the official position regarding the history of the war, and thus from the demonization of the "other", in this case Armenia and Armenians. Independent media outlets are silenced, bloggers and human rights activists are jailed, and history textbooks are written and approved by state-run bodies. However, the public support of the war outside of these government-sponsored actors and institutions remains pertinent in society. Although – due to aforementioned methodological issues – this research could not adequately gauge the social meaning and reception of violent imaginaries among the public, the data of the CRRC and the fact that governments have faced public backlash in the past for considering compromising with Armenia can be taken to demonstrate that the war mood in Azerbaijan is not simply the result of top-down discourse projection onto an unwilling but easily manipulated public, but that there is ground-level support for the current policies relating to Karabakh. It is this area which

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