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Between Memory and Memorial: Anastas Mikoyan and “Social Lustration” in Armenia

By Gayane Shagoyan, Yerevan

Abstract

This article analyzes the public discourse on the Soviet history of Armenia provoked by the initiative to raise a monument to the Soviet political figure Anastas Mikoyan in a central park of Yerevan in 2014. Within this discourse some Soviet historical events have been included into, or excluded from, the “national narratives” by different groups both in Armenia and the Diaspora. This case exposes the complex interrelations between family memories about the Soviet functionary and different versions of the official historiography and non-official oral histories of former Soviet citizens and their post-Soviet descendants.

Introduction: In the Beginning Was a Monument Initiative

When the Armenian Center of Ethnological Studies “Hazarashen” and the German organization DVV-international launched their project “Armenia Total(itar)is” on Soviet repressions in Armenia in 2012, they did not expect that the topic of the “Soviet past” could provoke hot public discussions only two years later.¹ Especially since fieldwork showed that memory of Soviet repressions was rather shadowed. Otherwise, following J. Olick’s terminology, the memory of Soviet repressions in Armenia was rather ‘collected’ than ‘collective’.

The situation crucially changed when the relatives of the high-level Soviet official Anastas Mikoyan decided to erect a monument to him in a public garden in the center of Yerevan. Mikoyan was born in Armenia and rose to the highest communist government positions in the Kremlin, achieving the most political longevity in the Soviet government’s history. There were already four memorials dedicated to this communist bureaucrat in different settlements in Armenia (outside of Yerevan) before this initiative was started. However, they were never a source of any arguments or debates. And nobody questioned the municipality’s decision to name one of Yerevan’s streets after Mikoyan in 2008.

We attempt to discuss how and why the Yerevan municipal decision on erecting the next memorial to this Soviet political actor in 2014 caused a wide public response and, in fact, turned into a detonator, which triggered in contemporary Armenian society the need to revise the history of Soviet Armenia. People perceive a particular event as a new link in a successive chain of events and recall more of the personal details from their experience by linking them to a “grand historical event”.

Family Memory vs. Public Memory

The discourse on this monument initiative sheds light on some mechanisms of memorializing the political leaders and constructing their glorious image. The Mikoyan monument case is interesting as an example of how the family or communicative memory (in the terms of J. Assman) could affect cultural memory. Mikoyan’s descendants managed to form and spread a positive image of this Soviet functionary as the result of their high level positions and their “numerical strength”. The domination of the family version of Mikoyan’s biography was caused first of all by the political longevity of Mikoyan himself, which saved him from any criticism directed against the Soviet regime in general. The second instrument for making a family version of Mikoyan’s bright biography more legitimate are the autobiographies and memoirs written both by himself and other members of his family (in particular, by his son and daughter-in-law). Most of the documentaries, TV programs and even research concerning Mikoyan were composed on the base of consultations or with the participation of his family members. Even the suggestion to erect Mikoyan’s monument in Yerevan was initiated by one of Mikoyan’s grandsons, Vladimir Mikoyan, who is the Regional Representative in Eastern Europe of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation.

Mikoyan’s Monument and a Discourse on “Re-colonization” of Armenia

The suggestion was adopted unanimously by the Standing commission for culture, education and social issues of the Yerevan municipality. However, the decision had to be approved by the Council of Elders—the elected representative body of the municipality. Haik Demoyan, one of the Council representatives and the director of the Genocide museum-institute in Yerevan, said that he would vote against this proposal, because he is acquainted with archive documents which sustain Mikoyan’s complicity in the repressions of thousands of

¹ A more detailed Russian version of this paper is in press (Publisher “Memorial” Center in Moscow).

people. His speech influenced only some opposition representatives of the Council and the proposal to erect the monument was adopted with 51 votes against 4 on 30 April 2014. This session of the Council was widely covered in the mass media for several reasons. Firstly, it was an unprecedented situation when a representative elected as a member of the Council of Elders on the dominant party list (Haik Demoyan) announced that he did not agree with the mayor's position. Secondly, the political context (the association of Armenia with the Russia-led Customs Union instead of the European Union unexpectedly proclaimed by President Serzh Sargsyan on 3 September 2013) created a suitable space for hot discussions on relations (historical or current) with Russia. So, the proposal to erect Mikoyan's monument became a part of the discourse on the "re-colonization" of Armenia by Russia. From the first glance, this discussion could be identified as a contest between "Westerners" and "Slavophiles", with civic activists in the first group and the state power sector in the second. In this discussion the contra group started to build a narrative describing Mikoyan as a "traitor of national interests" and a repressive functionary. However, besides Mikoyan's personality, they discussed the system of values, appropriate political models, and possible perspectives for Armenia. In fact, it seems that the discussions surrounding the initiative to erect Mikoyan's monument just woke a sleeping dog. Of course, Mikoyan was associated with "Russian oriented way of development", but at the same time—because of his political longevity—his figure gave a rare chance to provoke discussions concerning a lot of silenced Soviet events and especially those related to the history of Sovietization in Armenia.

Mikoyan's Monument and the "Lustration" Discourse

The heated debates lasted more than two months and seemed to explode across Armenia's social networks. My colleagues and I counted more than 1,000 Facebook statuses on this topic during two months. An internet petition against putting up the monument received 618 signatures. The theme of Stalin era repressions headlined newspapers and social group publications. A lot of memories, articles, extracts from works of fiction, and social and political essays concerning Soviet repressions were published and republished. It seemed as if society was divided between descendants of the regime's victims and descendants of their persecutors. Many people said publicly that this discussion had substituted for the lustration which Armenian society failed to have in the 1990s. There was also a sense that henceforth there was no need for lustration since the discussion had exposed a lot of hidden "Stalinists".

The support for the initiative revealed that many functionaries valued Mikoyan because of his brilliant ability for bureaucratic survival and conformism, while at the same time their attitude provoked a discussion about official and civic responsibilities under totalitarian circumstances. Summarizing the pro and contra arguments that have appeared in the mass media, the position of the supporters of the monument could be mainly defined as "it was not Mikoyan's fault, it was the call of the times", in response to this the new formula showed up: "the time was so terrible because Mikoyan and Co. made them like this".

National vs. Soviet: The Soviet Politician without Soviet History

One more important issue of this discussion concerned Mikoyan's biography. The question was the content of the biography, which should be considered official, as the representatives of the Council asserted that the biography in the package submitted to the Council did not include any discrediting information. For the Council representatives, the fact that Mikoyan occupied the highest power positions during the years of political repressions was not enough to reject the proposal to erect the statue. It is interesting that in the package submitted to the municipality, it was mentioned that Mikoyan was decorated by many USSR states. Using 'state' instead of the usual 'Soviet republic' the biography makers, on the one hand, seemed to raise the value of the awards (one may think that they were from different countries, though in fact they were from one single state, the USSR), and on the other hand, tried to reduce the "Soviet vocabulary" as much as they could. By the way, in the municipality project, Mikoyan was presented just as a "political figure" without mentioning "Soviet" or "communist". This all demonstrates the urge of the monument project initiators to keep Mikoyan out of the Soviet context and represent him out of historical time and even space. There was no mention of Mikoyan's deeds related to Armenia. They left the feeling that being an Armenian was enough to have a monument in Yerevan (the political leaders, especially from Mikoyan's native region, accentuated his Armenian descent). It is noteworthy that Mikoyan is represented as an extremely positive Soviet political actor even in the post-Soviet Armenian Encyclopedia. One might think that the composers of the package relied just on the encyclopedia article and perceived it as the official one. The positive image of Mikoyan could be much more convincing, if his apologists had referred to the works of professional historians who mention a long list of his diplomatic successes: participation in the Korean crisis, negotiation with China, success in international trade

and the establishment of the new industrial sectors, new approaches to the food industry and the creation of the “Soviet food ideology”, and so on. However, these facts were familiar only to a few persons, mainly to professional historians who were not involved in this discussion or preferred not to speak about these facts because they were in principle against erecting monuments to any political leader.

Virtual Memory vs. Hardcopy Memory

According to the chief architect of Yerevan, another source used by him when making Mikoyan’s “official biography” was Wikipedia. Interestingly, several days after the scandal concerning the municipality decision on Mikoyan’s monument began, a copy of Yezhov’s letter to Stalin was added to the entry; in this letter the head of the NKVD wrote at Mikoyan’s request about the necessity to increase the list of sentenced persons to be shot by another 700 persons. In other words, the monument discussion crucially changed the most popular digital resource.

Black-and-White Mikoyan vs. Complicated Mikoyan

As municipalities only erect monuments to positive heroes, it was necessary to prove that Mikoyan fit such a role or, if he didn’t, to prove the contrary. So the discussion gradually took the form of an argument over whether Mikoyan was a villain or a real hero, with the argumentation being based on a black and white interpretation of history. Even the participants of the discussion who were against such a framing of the question and tried to explain that a monument to a political figure would reduce the space for public debate on historical issues in fact were involved in discourse that was alien to them and tried to argue mainly from the position of the inexpediency of considering Mikoyan a “national hero”.

In this discourse, a number of interesting topics turned up: about the sort of monuments needed in Armenia today, like who would be “a hero of our time” and in which art style such monuments should be done. For instance, there was a suggestion to put up monuments to women because of gender misbalance in the “sculpture family” of Yerevan. As the decision on accepting or rejecting Mikoyan’s monument should have been made by the Council of Elders, the arguments on both sides of the debate were oriented to the imagined basis of the acceptable norms for the Council members. The

discourse likely took the form of a nationalistic discussion first of all as a result of this reason. Another point was that the elected body in this case reflected the position of their “nationalistic electorate” (let us remember that the main ideology of the dominant party in Armenia is a nationalistic one though there is a widespread opinion that the majority of this party does not have any ideology and perceives their membership as a chance to get a fast promotion track). So “Mikoyan’s crimes” in the mass media discourse were arranged on a downward line: crimes against the Armenian people, participation in the genocide of Poles in Katyn, participation in Soviet repressions of different nations without any special differentiation, indifference and detachment in taking his relatives’ and friends’ destiny into his hands when having such possibilities. As a result a very negative image of Mikoyan was popularized and the not yet erected monument turned into an “anti-monument”. Apparently as the discussions unfolded Mikoyan’s family realized that with their initiative they had only done a lot of harm to Mikoyan’s public image. It seems that they now prefer consigning this initiative to oblivion, at least until feelings calm down.

In addition, the decision making process concerning any new monument or memorial plaque was severely criticized after the scandal around Mikoyan’s monument. For instance, the decisions to put up memorials to the Soviet marshal A. Babajanyan and military industrialist M.T. Kalashnikov in Gyumri where a Russian military base is located drew a wide response. While the discussions on the memorial to Kalashnikov became a part of the discourse on the re-colonization of Armenia and military ideology spread by Russia, the memorial to Babajanyan was considered more in the context of the re-sovietization of Armenia.

Conclusion

The initiative to erect a memorial to the long-lived Soviet politician Anastas Mikoyan unexpectedly turned out to trigger a cardinal revision of the Soviet past in Armenia and expose many previously taboo subjects, including discussions of the totalitarian rule concerning not only the past, but also the present. In other words, this initiative produced results which usually occur after political lustration. There is an important difference in this case: while these kinds of processes are typically provided top-down, as a decision of the new authorities concerning the former one, in Armenia they unfolded bottom-up.

About the Author

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Further Reading

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Armenian *Khachkar* as a Current Transformer of Collective Memory

By Jürgen Gispert, Leipzig

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

The Character of the Cross-Stone

The cross-stone (CS) is a vertical stone with a westward-facing carved side. The background is made up of geometric ele-

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

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

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