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The Alley of Martyrs: Deaths, Memory and the Nation

By Leyla Sayfutdinova, Ankara

Abstract:

This article examines the evolution of Baku's Alley of Martyrs. As different authorities came to power over the course of the last one hundred years, they have transformed the site to serve a variety of purposes.

From Cemetery to Park, and Back

No other place in Azerbaijan's capital Baku reflects the post-soviet transformation with its pain, change and continuity more than the Alley of Martyrs (*Şahidlər Xiyabani*).¹ Located on the top of a hill overlooking the Baku Bay and most of the city, this alley had, in the twentieth century, undergone several transformations that followed and accompanied the political history of the city and the region as a whole. The hill, where two cemeteries, Moslem and Christian, were located in the nineteenth century, became a site of burial for the victims (*şahid*) of the Armenian-Azerbaijani massacre of 1918, and also soldiers and civilians of all sides who died in the bloody conflicts of 1918–1920—Azerbaijani, Armenian, British, Russian, and Turkish. But, in those turbulent years, the memory of the events was not consolidated, and the cemeteries did not turn into memorial complexes. The Soviet authorities, on the other hand, were more interested in erasing the memory of the massacre and the related inter-ethnic strife, so during Soviet times the cemetery was destroyed and transformed into a park. The park was reconverted to a memorial cemetery in 1990, when victims of the Soviet troops' intervention on January 20, 1990 were buried there. Thus, a park that was once a cemetery became a cemetery once again; moreover, it became the main memorial complex in Azerbaijan. This last transformation of the park into a national memorial site and the symbolic representation of Azerbaijan's national history that it has come to portray are the focus of the present essay.

Kirov's park

Hilltop Park (*Nagorniy* in Russian or *Dagustu* in Azerbaijani) was built in the place of the old cemetery in the mid-1930s. The construction involved complex terrace landscaping, extensive use of sculpture similar to other soviet parks of the same period, and recreational facilities, such as cafes, pavilions and an open-air stage. The official name of the park became "Hilltop Park of Culture and Recreation named after Sergei Kirov" (popularly called either Kirov's park or *Nagorniy* park), thus formalizing the association between recreation and com-

memoration. In 1939 a monument to Sergei Kirov was erected on a high terrace with a view of the bay. The commemorative use of the park was expanded in 1949 when a monument to the Great Patriotic War hero General Hazi Aslanov was erected near the park's entrance. This was also the first memorial grave in the park—as the remains of Hazi Aslanov were brought from Latvia, where he was killed in 1945 and re-buried here. But during the Soviet period, the park remained mainly an entertainment area, with new recreation facilities installed in the course of renovations during the 1960s and 1970s.

Throughout those years, the history of the park as a cemetery was largely forgotten; nothing in the park itself recalled the old cemeteries, and official publications hardly mentioned its history. The memory about the cemetery and the tragic events associated with it was transmitted privately and orally, if at all. Yet, the muting of the memory did not mean its full erasure and the orally transmitted memory became a powerful tool in the transformation of the park into a memorial complex in 1990.

Turning Point: January 20th, 1990

The turning point in the history of the park came in January 1990, when the victims of the Soviet military intervention in Baku were buried there. The intervention, killing 168 people, took place on the night of 19th–20th January. It was initially justified by Soviet officials as a necessary measure to stop inter-ethnic violence and protect the Armenian population of Baku, but was more likely aimed at suppressing the national movement that emerged in Azerbaijan in response to the Karabakh conflict that had erupted two years earlier. This national movement was led by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, a political organization headed by a number of prominent historians and literary scholars critical of the official Soviet version of Azerbaijan's history. The Popular Front and its leadership played a key role in formulating national ideology and demanding independence from the declining Soviet Union. The movement took its inspiration from the brief experience of national independence in 1918–1920 under the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR). The Popular Front sought to establish continuity between itself and the ADR government, as well as between present political conflicts and those that the ADR had to go through seven decades ear-

1 A longer version of this article was published in Therborn, J. (Ed.) *Postsoviet Capitals: Minsk, Vilnius, Baku*. Minsk: pp. 256–265.

lier. Making this link necessarily involved a reinterpretation of the soviet version of Azerbaijan's history, particularly the events of 1918–1920, and the roles played by each of the major parties of that period—Bolshevik, Armenian Dashnak and Azerbaijani Musavat.

In this socio-political context, the disproportionately brutal and poorly justified military intervention served to increase national sentiments rather than put an end to the national movement. The reaction to the intervention was one of shock and outrage. For the first time since the beginning of the Karabakh conflict, all major political forces were united in common grief. The Popular Front meanwhile interpreted the intervention in terms of national struggle. The events of 1918, and particularly the massacre of Azerbaijanis in Baku in March 1918, were invoked. To reinforce that connection and memory, the decision was made to bury the victims of the January days in the same place where the victims of the “March days” had been buried more than seventy years earlier—in *Nagorniy* Park.

The funeral itself took place two days after the intervention, on January 22nd. A huge funeral procession walked several kilometers from Lenin Square (now *Azadliq*—Freedom) in the lower part of the city, the site of largest protests in Azerbaijan's history, to *Nagorniy* Park to mourn and bury the victims. Those who died were represented not simply as victims of a brutal invasion, but as martyrs (*Şahid*) in the struggle for independence, and the Park was then re-named as *Şahidlər Hiyabani* (The Alley of Martyrs). Thus, its official history as a recreation site was put to an end and a new history, of a memorial complex, began.

The Alley of Martyrs

In a few months after “Black January,” as the intervention came to be known, with the escalation of violence in and around Karabakh, those killed in the fighting also began to be buried in *Şahidlər Hiyabani*, in a lane below the Black January victims' alley. While the original layout of the park has not been significantly changed, many objects of the old park design were removed. First were the recreation facilities, followed by Kirov's monument in 1992. At the same time, a number of new monuments began to be erected in the Alley. The first of these were the gravestones of the January 20, and later Karabakh war *şahidlər* in the two upper lanes of the old park. Another early construction was the Martyrs' Mosque (*Şahidlər məscidi*), built in 1996 with the financial assistance of the Turkish government.²

² The mosque was closed “for renovation” in 2009 and has not yet been reopened. Although currently not used for religious purposes, it continues to serve as a memorial.

In 1998 a memorial eternal flame commemorating all victims, from 1918 to the Karabakh war, was erected in the Alley. This is a tall (21 m) octagonal structure with a glass cupola, made of local limestone and performed in the traditions of medieval Azerbaijani architecture. The monument is placed at the end of 20th January lane, at a new viewpoint that was constructed above the platform where Kirov's statue once stood.

In 1999 a monument to the Turkish soldiers who died in Azerbaijan in 1918 was installed. Like the mosque, the construction of this monument was financed by the Turkish government. The Turkish regimen led by Nuri-pasha entered Azerbaijan at the request of the Musavat Government of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The Turkish forces together with the ADR army took Baku in September 1918, but withdrew shortly after, in November of the same year, after the Ottomans signed Mudros Treaty with the Allies. The monument, a dark red obelisk surrounded by limestone plates with the names of all Turkish soldiers killed in Azerbaijan, is located at the entrance to the Alley.

Behind the Turkish obelisk, somewhat more inside the older part of the park, there is a smaller and less visible monument to the British soldiers who were killed and buried in Baku during the same period. The British regimen was sent to Baku to prevent the taking of the city by Turks in August 1918. The placement of these two monuments so near each other is somewhat ironic, as the two regimens fought against each other in 1918. This monument did raise a lot of controversy in Azerbaijan. Originally prepared and shipped by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1997, it was kept in storage until 2003 while Azerbaijani historians and decision makers were debating the role of the British in that difficult period of Azerbaijan's history. The controversy was eventually resolved, at least at the official level, and the monument was installed, so presently both Turkish and British soldiers are commemorated in the Alley.

Only one of the Soviet era monuments still stands in the Alley: the monument to General Hazi Aslanov. A Soviet hero, he is also accepted as a hero of Azerbaijan, someone who had fought for Azerbaijan's interests within the Soviet Union. Moreover, unlike the October Revolution, the memory of the Great Patriotic War, in which many Azerbaijanis participated, did not undergo a significant reinterpretation in the post-Soviet era.

The process of transformation of the old park into a memorial complex is not yet complete. Thus, there exists a yet unfinished project for an Independence Monument that is to be constructed in the place where Kirov's statue once stood. The pace of reconstruction of the old park is also uneven: the cemeteries and the areas around the new monuments are the first to be renovated and are the

best taken care of. The architectural design of the new parts of the Alley is also quite heterogeneous, especially in comparison to the old park. Thus, the monuments here come from different countries and different architectural traditions, including the soviet socialist realism of General Aslanov's bust, Turkish military obelisk, an Ottoman style mosque, and the eternal fire made in the traditions of the medieval Azerbaijan architecture.

The alley is heterogeneous not only in terms of architecture, but also in terms of the use of space. The memorial parts of the Alley naturally are the ones that are used for commemoration, both formal and informal. Relatives and friends come here to visit the graves of their loved ones as they would in any other cemetery. But the Alley is also the site of official commemoration ceremonies on all the major tragic days of Azerbaijan's recent history, such as January 20th, February 26 (the massacre in the Karabakh town of Hocali), and March 31st, commemorating the massacre of 1918.³ In addition, foreign delegations are brought here to honor the victims and the children come on school visits.

Conclusion

It is somewhat paradoxical, but the Alley of Martyrs, as the main national memorial complex, commemo-

rates Azerbaijan's national losses rather than its victories. With the exception of the monument to General Aslanov, all other monuments here commemorate lost battles: in the events of 1918 Azerbaijanis were massacred and the ADR itself eventually fell to the Eleventh Red Army in 1920; in 1990 Soviet troops took Baku; and Karabakh, with surrounding territories, is still in Armenian hands. The importance of such a memorial in the Azerbaijani national imagination can probably be explained by the value of martyrdom that comes from Islamic culture. Dying for a cause is especially important in Shia Islam, which is dominant in Azerbaijan, with its rich traditions of mourning and remembrance rituals associated with the death of the Prophet's cousin Ali and his son Husain. That is why it was the losses and the collective mourning over the victims of the Soviet intervention and Karabakh war that had such a strong impact on the development of Azerbaijani national identity in the post-Soviet period. Yet, despite all these losses, Azerbaijan did achieve national independence, and it can be said that the main message of the Alley of the Martyrs is the triumph of nation despite all its lost battles.

About the Author:

Leyla Sayfutdinova is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. Her research interests include nationalism, ethnic conflict, post-socialist urban transformation and the sociology of professions.

Recommended Reading:

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- On Soviet recreational architecture: Shaw, D. J.B. (1979) Recreation and the Soviet City. In: French, R.A. and Hamilton, I. F. (eds.): *The Socialist City: Spatial Structure and Urban Policy*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons. Pp. 119–143.

³ March 31 became an official Day of Genocide according to a Decree of President Heydar Aliiev signed on March 26, 1998 (<http://www.president.az/browse.php?sec_id=56#31>).