

EC 299A Capstone

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01.05.2020

Music, Ideology and How They Interact: From Sacred Music to Black Metal

Key words: music, extreme metal, politics, religion, culture, Christianity, Neo-Paganism, Satanism, National Socialism, Communism, Armenia

Introduction

Music and ideology – be it religious or political – are not as separate as it first seems. If we take a look back at the Middle Ages, when religious music, or sacred music was of great importance, there was a reason for it to be monophonic: one God, one melody. Another reason was that the beauty and complexity of it should not have distracted you from the sacred text, or the lyrics, as it reflected the religion that was being preached and practiced. In fact, not a lot has changed ever since. Tracing the time only a century back, when the Soviet Union was still alive and breathing, and while the Nazi Germany was fervently attempting to conquer the world, the music that was to be played did not go unnoticed and faced its own regulations. Four years after the Nazi party came to power, in July 1937 two art exhibitions were put on in Munich – one demonstrating the artwork that Adolf Hitler approved of, and the other – abstract, modern, or non-representational, called by the Nazis “Entartete Kunst”, or “degenerate art”. The purpose of the latter was to ridicule and represent the artists in a negative manner, in that way planting the seeds of hateful and haughty attitude towards them and their works. Music, naturally falling under the category of “art”, was not an exception. Naturally, a Nazi institution called *Reichsmusikkammer* or “Reich Music Chamber” was established in 1933 by Joseph Goebbels and the *Reichskulturkammer* or “State Bureau of Culture”, which was to promote “good German

music” – the only music they thought acceptable - censoring and banning everything composed by Jewish composers, communists, as well as modernist and atonal music, jazz music and so on. Composers of the Classicist period such as Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, as well as such composers as Brahms, Wagner and the like, on the other hand, were considered “good German music”, as they embodied the true Germanic spirit, values as well as the supremacy of German culture.¹ In fact, Adolf Hitler is said to have claimed that "there is only one legitimate predecessor to National Socialism: Wagner." The latter, in his turn, published his *“Das Judenthum in der Musik”*, which translated to English means “Jewishness in Music” back in 1850s, declared that “it was the Jews who were responsible for much that was going wrong in art and society.”²

The Soviet Union also had its rules on how the music should sound, banning music which did not correspond to their vision of true Soviet music, while simultaneously positioning itself as a progressive country. According to the Socialist Realism aesthetic, proposed by Joseph Stalin, music was supposed to serve the working class and be immediately accessible and understandable to the listener, a category experimental, avant-garde music, or operas that had “inappropriate” characters, did not fit. An example is Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* that Stalin banned both because of the music and the characters that were not representative of a true Soviet person.³ Important is to mention, as Marina Frolova-Walker discusses in her article *“National in form, socialist in content: musical nation-building in the Soviet Republics”* (1998), that for Stalin, “the national and socialist are not two separate entities to be combined and reconciled; rather, the national is a necessary component of socialism.” Though, “this was meant as a temporary concession, until all the national tributaries could merge into a single mighty river of international Soviet culture, socialist in both form and content.”⁴ Needless to say, atheism was propagated, as religion was believed to be “opium of the people.” As a result, many composers, such as, for example, the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki, regardless of their religious beliefs, wrote a number of sacred music compositions as an

opposition to the communist regime.

What about rock and metal music? Although Russian rock started emerging in the 1960s, its golden age being the coming 1980s, it was in 1985, when a list consisting of 38 ‘foreign musical groups and artists whose repertoires contain ideologically harmful compositions’ was released in the USSR. Some of the examples of ideologically harmful compositions are those containing anticommunist lyrics, or texts about nationalism, religious obscurantism, religious mysticism, violence etc.⁵ Ironically, bands headlining the list, such as for example, the legendary band Black Sabbath, the members of which are considered to be “the Godfathers of heavy metal” and their famous song “War Pigs” demonstrates the band’s antiwar philosophy. In fact, in his book “*Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult*”, Dayal Patterson introduces Black Sabbath as one of the early influences on the most controversial subgenre of metal which is *black metal*. In the chapter “Roots of Evil” claims that Black Sabbath had its share of inspiring “the supernatural and Satanic obsessions of later metal bands.”⁶ My research, however, demonstrates that black metal, which is often associated with Satanism, is ideologically very diverse through providing a close analysis of lyrics of bands such as Sargeist, Dissection, Horde, Shining, Goatmoon, Absurd, Jarost Marksa, as well as the Iran-based Armenian black metal band Avarayr. According to Keith Kahn-Harris, the author of the book “*Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*”, there are number of reasons making extreme metal an interesting and significant phenomenon: it is influential and innovative, artistically challenging, reproduced through innovative social practices, and as it was already mentioned, diverse.⁷ Nevertheless, it is known, and is almost obvious, that the subgenre is disliked by the majority of people and by some metalheads/metal musicians as well. According to Narek Avedyan, the frontman of the black metal band Avarayr, during the Metal Attack Festival in Yerevan in 2019, the Canadian sludge/doom metal band Nadja claimed that “we are not going to play until you kick these Nazi guys out.” They were referring to the Armenian death metal band Merial, who were performing their song “Aryan Supremacy”, which caused the frustration of the band. For that reason, a number of bands are

often censored or banned from performing in a certain place, or a country, at all. While some studies have been done regarding this topic, it is also important to look at the situation with extreme metal music in the Armenian society, which is the second important question this research is addressing. For example, when the Polish death metal Vader was to perform in Yerevan, Armenia in 2019 – which it eventually did – the concert almost got cancelled because of one Facebook post made by a fellow Armenian who is a Subdeacon of the Armenian Apostolic Church, serving the Armenian communities in North Carolina and Georgia. Without questioning the situation on their own, most people managed to blindly agree with the post that on top of everything claimed that the place of the concert – the Puppet Theatre – was not chosen accidentally. “Where there are voices of children, - claimed the Subdeacon, - there is the Spirit of God.” This indicates that the overwhelming majority holds extremely negative attitudes towards the genre and the metal community itself; however the root cause remains a blur. Is it really an ideological conflict or perhaps just a matter of preference? Does the religion come into play? Should such music be censored, according to the general public in Armenia?

In short, this research attempts to identify the internal conflicts of the metal community through surveying metalheads, as well as find out the reason behind negative attitude of the Armenian general public towards extreme metal music and matters of censorship.

Literature Review

In his book *“Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge”*, a sociologist and extreme metal music enthusiast Keith-Kahn Harris explores the global extreme metal scene drawing on first-hand research. Harris dives into the obscure and frequently bizarre themes of extreme metal music such as war, death, Satanism, neo-fascism etc., while also demonstrating the other, the friendly side of the metal scene through interviews with musicians and fans, from countries

ranging from the UK and US to Israel and Sweden.

In his book *“The Rest is Noise”*, Alex Ross demonstrates why twentieth-century composers felt obligated to create a baffling variety of sounds, ranging from absolute beauty to pure noise, while struggling against the indifference of a wide public and as well as the will of dictators, who were imposing their ideas on the direction the music was to take. The narrative goes from Vienna before the First World War to Paris in the twenties, from Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia to downtown New York in the sixties and seventies, thus telling and attempting to understand the history through the music of the twentieth century.

In her article *“National in form, socialist in content: musical nation-building in the Soviet Republics”* (1998) Marina Frolova-Walker discusses how for Stalin, “the national and socialist are not two separate entities to be combined and reconciled; rather, the national is a necessary component of socialism.” Though, “this was meant as a temporary concession, until all the national tributaries could merge into a single mighty river of international Soviet culture, socialist in both form and content.” (...) And even then, “new operas from the republics were thus always measured against the yardstick of the Russian classics.”

In their book *“Die Reichsmusikkammer: Kunst im Bann der Nazi Diktatur”*, Albrecht Riethmüller and Michael Custodis take a look back at the Nazi past of Germany, exploring the relationships of the regime with the art and music. The Reichsmusikkammer was an institution that centrally managed the musical life in Nazi Germany. In contrast to the numerous studies on individual musicians and the musical life of that time, the work of the Reichsmusikkammer has not yet been researched in a coherent way. In order to better understand the structures and tasks as well as the staff of this institution, the authors of this volume question the example of prominent protagonists such as Richard Strauss, Paul Graener, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Paul Hindemith, Emil N. von Reznicek, Heinz Drewes, Werner Egk or Peter Raabe the scope and limits of art during the Third Reich.

In his article for *Decibel Magazine*, Matt Harvey, the frontman of Exhumed, Gruesome,

Expulsion and Pounder, brings an entirely opposing argument: “The lyrical and visual aesthetic surrounding the music is likewise confrontational and provocative. This is a function of what is known as prosody in music theory—the idea that the music and lyrics should fit together to create a cohesive piece of art. (...) Prosody and logic dictate that aggressive, confrontational music demands imagery and lyrical content that matches. (...) Metal has aggressively and actively challenged lifestyle, political and religious norms since its inception. When society embraced a return to “Christian family values” with the dawn of the Reagan era, metal gave us Slayer, Mercyful Fate, Venom and Bathory. These bands served to challenge the prevailing consensus about religion.” And of course, it is impossible to talk about metal without mentioning Satanism and devil-worship, which is also prevalent ideology in the metal community.

In his book *“Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult”*, Dayal Patterson thoroughly tells the story of the genre through the voices of the musicians themselves: the author presents a collection of interviews that clearly demonstrate where the musicians stand on the political and religious field and how their ideas are reflected in their music. As a contribution to the studies, I would love to focus on some bands that haven’t been widely discussed such as the Swedish bands Dissection and Shining, the Finnish Goatmoon and some others. I will also discuss the hostile attitudes of the Armenians towards foreign bands that perform in Armenia, as people still have strong belief that metal and Satanism are inseparable, and this ideological battle manifests itself rather aggressively. There are little to no studies done about that in Armenia.

In order to understand and analyze the subject at hand more profoundly, namely, the lyrics of the bands chosen for this project, literature dealing directly with certain ideologies was required. In his collection of essays *“Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives”*, Michael Strmiska tries to find the links between Paganism and Nazism, as paganism was in fact “rejected by the upper echelon of the Nazi Party and Hitler himself, and was contradicted by the alternative line of Nazi propaganda that interpreted Christian texts, teachings and figure of Jesus himself in a racist, pro-German, anti-Semitic manner, with a view

to creating a Nazified version of Christianity.” This leaves Alfred Rosenberg as one of the very few Nazi leaders who wanted to promote nationalistic mythos, as he believed it to be the most important function of history and other human sciences. Rosenberg, in his turn, took this conviction from British historian and “racialist writer” Houston Stewart Chamberlain. So, to say that there is a direct link between Nazism and Paganism would be a false claim. What combines the two, however, is Odinism. Strmiska further explores the adoption of Odinism by various movements in Scandinavia, as well as the rise of “white power” youth in 1980s, that blended Neo-Nazism, Odinism and Satanism in their music as a way of self-expression- some for shock value, some out of personal beliefs. One of the most prominent figures who are often linked to all three of these notions is the Norwegian musician and author Varg Vikernes.

In his book *“Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives: origins, changes, and interactions”*, Andrén Anders discusses Vikernes’, what the author calls, dissertation *“Germanic Mythology and World View”*, where the latter claims that the academic world is not willing “to understand and describe Old Norse myths in such a way that they can have meaning for the present.” Vikernes himself claims to be an Odalist, Odalism being a movement that tried to distance itself from other similar movements such as asatru, Wotanism and Odinism, which Anders discusses later in the chapter.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, a thorough analysis of lyrics was necessary to demonstrate how music and ideology interact, and how the worldview of the artists is reflected in their lyricism. Further, two surveys were required. One of the surveys was targeting the metal community, or the metalheads, due to the fact that as members of the community, they would be able to accurately identify the internal conflicts of the metal community. Additionally, an

interview with an Armenian black metal musician was conducted, who helped gain more insights into the metal community both in Armenia and the neighboring country Iran, which could help the reader compare the situation with the metal community in both countries and see the bigger picture. The second survey was meant to identify the reasons why the Armenian general public is aggressively opposed to metal music as well as their stance on censorship of the latter in Armenia. No other individual interviews were conducted. Surveys, in this particular case, served as the most sufficient method to collect as many answers as possible in order to identify a pattern in the given answers.

Analysis of Lyrics

Sargeist

An expression and communication of a certain ideology in music has varied from century to century. In case of black metal bands and rock bands in general, aside the evident protest and dissatisfaction with the status-quo that lies within the sound of the music itself, lyrics play the most significant role in communicating the beliefs that the bands stand by. One of the ideologies that is most frequently associated with the metal community as a whole is Satanism, which in its turn varies its branches, and thus, depending on the band, can mean one thing or another. While most black metal bands tend to have some association with Satanism in one shape or form, or at least, play along with the stereotype, some black metal bands proceed to indentify as Satanic Black Metal bands. One of such bands is the Finnish **Sargeist**, the name of which is a combination of two German words “Sarg”, which means “coffin”, and “Geist”, which means “Spirit.” In 2003, the band releases an album *Satanic Black Devotion*, which shares its title with the first track of the record that the listener hears after a short *Preludium* resembling a sound of souls being tormented in the underworld. It is, then, not a coincidence that the track itself begins

with the following lines:

“Hear the chant of my tormented soul

In black devotion I have prayed

Veins re-opened, bleeding for Satan

With pride my flesh is cut”

The aforementioned lines demonstrate the significance that Satanism plays in the band’s self-expression and self-identification. Important is to mention that when speaking of Satanism in this band’s context, it would be reasonable to assume that the ideology that the band stands by is **Theistic Satanism**, meaning the band believes, or perhaps, pretends to believe in the biblical Satan, seeing the latter as an existing supernatural force to whom the supposed ritual is dedicated.⁸ Needless to say, the chorus consists of certain sentences in Latin – the language of a number of sacred texts - which reaffirms that the song is about the process of devotion and sacrifice to the biblical Satan. For example:

Sanctissime colere chaos

Obscurities unveil to me- a Disciple

Important is to mention, that while the band takes an anti-Christian stance, the belief in the biblical Satan as a supernatural force assumes their belief in an existence of its opposite, namely the Christian God himself, even if only within the realm of the band. It reinforces their position, as, unlike many bands, they do not deny the possibility of God’s existence, but rather accept it to the point that pushes them to join the “dark” side. The frontman, who was at the time Hoath Torog (Marko Saarikalle), exclaims:

I am the sick and devoted fanatic

My appearance is foul

In your fear you will avoid hurting me

Even in my name I carry rotting omens

It must be noted, that the above mentioned lyrics demonstrate some sense of self-awareness and self-reflection: the band recognizes its obsessive attitude towards the subject and proceeds to refer to itself as “the sick and devoted fanatic.” The following tracks deal with such themes as misanthropy or hatred towards human nature as well as express fascination with death and anything that could lead to global destruction e.g. the theme of war in the sixth track called Panzergod. In that particular song, Hoath Torog announces himself as “His prophet”- and by His he means Satan’s – thus, becoming a more powerful mediator between the ideology and the listener. The power lies not merely in the articulation of the lyrics, but the role of the prophet that the frontman assigns to himself.

Dissection

Satanism, however, is not limited to Theistic or Atheistic, also known as *LaVeyan*, which was a religion founded by the American occultist Anton Szandor LaVey in 1956. The latter was also the author of the Satanic Bible as well as the founder of the Church of Satan. The religion is materialist, rejects the existence of supernatural being, including Satan, body-soul dualism, and the afterlife. Satan is instead viewed as “a positive archetype representing pride, carnality, and enlightenment. He is also embraced as a symbol of defiance against Abrahamic religions which LaVeyans criticize for suppressing humanity's natural instincts and encouraging irrationality.” Its philosophy is based on “individualism and egoism, coupled with Social Darwinism and anti-egalitarianism.”⁹ However, the band which is about to be discussed has very

little in common with the above-mentioned manifestations of Satanism.

The rise of anti-cosmic Satanism began during the 1980s in Scandinavia and the UK, merging ancient forms of Gnostic thought, the obscurity of the heavy metal subculture as well as some magical traditions from Latin America and the Caribbean, associating death and consequently suicide with the ultimate liberation.¹⁰ Jon Nödtveidt (June 28th, 1975 – August 13th, 2006), the late frontman of the Swedish blackened death metal band *Dissection* and one of the ardent representatives of anti-cosmic Satanism, interpreted these ideas the following way:

“The Satanist decides of his own life and death and prefers to go out with a smile on his lips when he has reached his peak in life, when he has accomplished everything, and aim to transcend this earthly existence. But it is completely un-satanic to end one's own life because one is sad or miserable. The Satanist dies strong, not by age, disease or depression, and he chooses death before dishonor! Death is the orgasm of life! So live life accordingly, as intense as possible!”

While also known for **anti-Christian** rhetoric, which was and still is a common trait of the eerie Scandinavian black metal, there are also similarities to the ideas about death and transcending the earthly realm in **Christianity** as well as Eastern teachings, which is, in a way, a paradox.

In 1995, an occult order called The MLO or *Misanthropic Luciferian Order* is founded in Sweden. In 2002, the MLO released *Liber Azerate*, a modern grimoire written by the order's Magister Templi Frater (brother) Nemidial. Azerate is the hidden name of the "eleven anti-cosmic gods" described in the book, and the highest of them is Satan. The eleven gods are considered to be manifestations of a higher being known as Azerate, the Dragon Mother, representing all of the 11 gods united as one. The belief in *Chaosophy* is essentially what unifies

the order. Chaos, they believe, unlike the cosmos that is three-dimensional and has one linear time dimension, is an infinidimensional plane which is timeless. The order believed that a true Satanist “must not be a part of the modern society, as it is founded upon lies. The very fabric of this reality is a lie that hinders chaos from realizing itself.”¹¹ In 2006, Dissection releases their third and final album *Reinkaos*, based on the teachings of MLO as well as *Liber Azerate*, and the lyrics of which were co-written by the order’s Magister Templi Frater Nemidial.

After the short but mysterious sounding opening called *Nexion 218*, which is almost entirely instrumental - the only lyrics are “**Zazas Zazas Nasatanada Zazas!**”, – the listener is introduced to the first song called *Black Horizons*. One of the verses goes as follows:

This is the realm of Azerate, eleven as one
Destroyer of cosmic order, extinguisher of the sun
In this place so sinister I shall find my dreams
Illuminated by the blackest flame
To transcend with dragon wings

It is interesting to note how the chorus varies each time. After exclaiming “**Vedar-Gal Tiekals Somdus Azerate!**”, Nödtveidt refers to Azerate as “**Anti-Cosmic Bringer of the End**”, and then the second time as “**Anti-Cosmic Bringer of Revenge**”. Another line that should be payed attention to – and Nödtveidt does not repeat it again throughout the song – is **Eleven to Kill the Ten**. Taking into consideration the general anti-Christian sentiments, the **Ten** here may stand for the Ten Commandants, and these, perhaps, Nödtveidt sees as the “cosmic order”, while **Eleven** is the number of anti-cosmic Gods described in the book of *Liber Azerate*.

Black Horizons is followed by a song called *Starless Aeon*, which opens room for drawing a number of parallels and interpretation. For example:

Unfold the starless aeon, the hungry end is coming soon

Harbinger of the day of wrath will eclipse the sun and rape the moon

The Sun and the Moon are often portrayed together to represent the duality: the day and the night, the good and the evil, the God and the Devil, the Jin and the Jang, and so on. It is not excluded, that by “eclipsing the sun” and “raping the moon”, Nödtveidt wanted to once again reverberate the idea of transcending the duality omnipresent in the earthly realm, thus also emphasizing the idea of death as the ultimate liberator, a means to overcome the duality. The song continues:

The snake will completely devour itself putting an end to the cycle of time

Acausal flames will burn all to ashes erasing all signs of the demiurge crime

Our dark gods of chaos will return, this time to rule forever supreme

The dragon mother will then resurrect and end this cosmic dream

Here, one should make out what is **the snake** that Nödtveidt is referring to: an educated guess should be made. Most probably, Nödtveidt is referring to **Ouroboros**, a Gnostic and alchemical symbol of a serpent eating its own tail, “devouring itself, putting an end to the cycle of time”. It is the symbol of time, infinity, or destruction and re-creation, the cycle of life, death and re-birth, and hence, the immortality; perhaps, this is what the third line of the verse suggests.

After the verse comes the chorus, written in Latin, which consists of the following and only sentence repeated twice:

Dies Irae Dies Illa Solvet Cosmos In Favilla

Vocamus Te Aeshma-Diva

In English, the above-mentioned sentence could be translated as “The Day of Wrath, the Day that will dissolve the Cosmos into Ashes. We call you Aeshma-Diva.” Here, Nödtveidt takes the original sentence (“Dies irae, dies illa solvet saeculum in favilla”) and replaces the world **Saeculum** (eng. Earth) with the word **Cosmos**, which is better fit to express his beliefs and agenda. He further “calls” the Zoroastrian demon of wrath Aeshma, supposedly to contribute to the destruction of the entire Cosmos. It also shows how anti-cosmic Satanism, although anti-Christian in its essence, unlike many Christianity - opposing ideologies, does not merely speak against , but rather uses some ideas or characters from pre-existing religions to express itself. For example, one of the following songs, namely *Dark Mother Divine* is dedicated to the female demon *Lilith*, who was supposedly Adam’s first wife. She is also one of the eleven gods of Chaos-Gnostic Satanism.

From her throne of skulls rules our Queen of endless might

She is the initiator of dark dreams - Bringer of Luciferian light

She is Satan's mistress, a reflection of the Black Sun

A Queen of the sinister moon - She's our dark mother divine

In the chorus, Nödtveidt expresses his readiness to kill the world in the name of Lilith and sacrifice in her name, further referring to himself as her faithful child.

Nödtveidt was one of the very few in the metal community who, in fact, practiced what he so eagerly preached, and anti-cosmic Satanism was not a mere gimmick for shock value but his actual lifestyle. One of the core beliefs of the ideology, as Jon himself mentioned, is dying by choice, when everything one ever wanted to accomplish in the earthly realm is accomplished – death before dishonor, before life becomes meaningless. On 13 August 2006 Nödtveidt was found dead in his apartment in Hässelby, by an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound inside a

circle of lit candles.¹² Shortly after the incident, the media mistakenly reported that Nödtveidt was found with an open copy of the Satanic Bible, which, of course, could not be the truth. These claims were later dismissed by Set Teitan, Dissection's guitarist, who said that "it's not any atheist, humanist and ego-worshipping The Satanic Bible by Anton LaVey that Jon had in front of him, but a Satanic grimoire. He despised LaVey and the 'Church of Satan'."¹³

While it may seem like all black metal musicians had an almost unhealthy obsession with Satanism, such a suggestion, in fact, is not completely true.

Horde

As we know, the 20th century is known for a number of changes, movements and counter-movements in the world of music. Such were, for example, many avant-garde composers who deviated from the tradition. Not even black metal became an exception. The controversial movement within already controversial black metal scene called unblack metal, or Christian metal, emerged shortly after the rise of the Second Wave of Black Metal in 1990s, and took a stance against Satanism, Satanic lyrics and imagery, which was among the most popular themes and one of the unifying beliefs of the black metal scene as a whole.¹⁵ In 1994, the Australian band Horde releases their debut album called *Hellig Usvart* which birthed the concept and the term "holy unblack metal", a word play on Darkthrone's slogan "unholy black metal" used on the albums *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* and *Under a Funeral Moon*. The album was released on Nuclear Blast Records. The release of the album on that label resulted in a controversy: the frustrated black metal fans would send death threats to Nuclear Records demanding the drop of the album from the catalogue due to its Christian, anti-satanic lyrics that at the time contradicted the usual black metal thematic and ideology. For the same reason, such magazines as *Morgenbladet* thought that the album was a parody of the Norwegian black metal movement.¹⁶ Undeniably, such an artistic decision could not be overlooked in the 1990s, and can be

considered a good publicity stunt – very much like the case of the one-man band Burzum, the founder of which burned down churches to get publicity.

The album begins with a one-minute ambient opening called “*A Church Bell Tolls amidst the Frozen Nordic Winds*”, which is very descriptive of what the listener hears. It is followed by the first song of the record called “*Blasphemous Abomination of the Satanic Pentagram*” and contains the following lyrics:

five pointed star of hell

symbol of satanic goat

appearance at the ritual site

unholy amulet of the santanist

sacred to the devil's child

abomination to the mighty one

It becomes immediately evident that “**the mighty one**” could not possibly be addressing Satan, but rather the opposite – the Christian God. It continues:

every point

evil stench

every side almightly hates

crush the star under foot

tear the robe on which it lies

accursed image it portays

symbol of blasphemy will never rise

now powerless against us
it lay in pieces in the dust
awaiting the fires of hell

The following tracks contain similar lyrics with threatening undertones, such as in the song “*Behold the Rising of the Scarlet Moon*” where the band demands the listener to “**reconsider or consume the wine of wrath.**” Another example is the song “*Thine Hour Hast Come*”:

behold
lucifer
son of the morning
thine hour hast come
thou will be stripped of power
and be lowered into the very depths of hell
thy fate is worse than death
eternal suffering and damnation

Here the band references *The Book of Revelation*, where the war in heaven is described. The war is between angels led by the Archangel Michael against those led by "the dragon", identified as Lucifer, who will be defeated and thrown down to the earth, thus getting expelled from heaven.¹⁷ Without looking into the lyrics, musically, the band’s sound is in no way distinct from that of an average black metal band: it shall not come as a surprise that the album was perceived as a parody. This attempted “crusade” in the black metal movement did not become particularly popular and seems to be overlooked, despite the resonance it has received during the 1990s. Although, nowadays, many black metal fans, who claim to be “atheists” also claim to enjoy the

band's music, and they do not shy away from ridiculing those "true kvlt blackers" who are "offended" by the lyricism – proof to that are the comments on YouTube under the video containing their tracks. It demonstrates yet again how the "offensive" black metal genre can offend not only the outsiders, but also the members of its own community. So is the case with National Socialist Black Metal bands that will be discussed further.

However, before proceeding to start a conversation about those, the following band, although not built on a particular religious or political ideology, clearly demonstrates the frontman's worldview, which is built on hate towards all humanity, misanthropy and nihilism. The reason why the band is important to mention within this context is due to the fact that besides varying politically and religiously in its themes, the black metal genre is anti-human in its core and was initially driven by misanthropy. The following band is one of the best examples how lyricism accurately reflects the artist's worldview, who, not only sings about it but also acts on it, admittedly in the name of Satan, too.

Shining

I am, at last, referring to the Swedish depressive - suicidal black metal band Shining. The band was named so since, according to founder, composer and vocalist of the band, Niklas Kvarforth, "Shining" signifies the path to enlightenment. Kvarforth is known in the scene for his extreme and sometimes violent behaviour during live performances that includes fighting members of other bands, and handing out razor blades to audience members in 2007, as well as assaulting and threatening audience members in 2017.¹⁴ Kvarforth does not stop there: in most of the given interviews he does not shy away from misanthropic and nihilistic speculations, while simultaneously giving a hard time to the interviewers by mistreating and mocking them. Considering his anti-human sentiments, however, it should not come as a surprise. Only recently,

on the 17th of March of the year 2020, as the world was going through the aftermath of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - and in some cases, the fatal outcome could not be prevented – Niklas Kvarforth, unlike many metal musicians who expressed their support and encouragement to the world to battle on, posted a video of himself on his official Instagram account, saying:

"Hey there! Let me just ask you one question. All of you people are constantly talking about bringing down the world, hating every human being, blah blah blah... And now when we have been blessed with such a beautiful curse as the Coronavirus, you all complain? You just want to run away and hide? The f*ck is wrong with you all? Celebrate it instead. Celebrate, I mean, it is not the end of the world, absolutely not, unfortunately not. But, we can at least hope, yeah? Stop being such f*cking hypocrites."

In his lyricism, Kvarforth expresses similar ideas, although, in a more delicate and poetic way. While most song-titles are in Kvarforth native language, namely Swedish, the majority of lyrics are written in English. Important is to mention, that Kvarforth founded the band when he was only 12 years old. In 1998, when Kvarforth was already 14, the band released their first EP called "*Submit to Self-Destruction*", on which he played guitar and bass. The first song of the EP is called *Eternal Solitude* and contains the following lyrics:

Bitter winds embraces my naked body

With it's eternal charm

I'm forced towards this eternal Darkness

With it's eternal pain

For what is the meaning of life?

If not... Suffering

I wonder what's the meaning of this weak existence

If not... Sorrow

The idea of suffering is a reoccurring theme in many religions, both in Western and Eastern. For example, the fact that the axiomatic western individual is embodied by someone who was unjustly crucified and tortured is not accidental. Parallels can also be drawn with Buddhism and the idea of life being suffering. One could also remember the words of Friedrich Nietzsche: “hope, - in reality, it is the worst of all evils, because it prologs the torment of men.” In one of his most controversial interviews (Brussels, 2013), Kvarforth explains that everything in life has the nature of Satan – thins such as death, war, etc. – and criticizes fellow black metal musicians – he refers to them as “f*ggots” - who merely speak about the Devil without having experienced the true ugliness of life, while living “in Oslo where everyone hugs each other.” Kvarforth also admitted to feeling ashamed of spreading the message of “his Lord” to the masses that do not take the subject seriously and do not live up to what they claim to agree with. Six years later after the release of their first EP, Shining releases their fourth album called “*IV: The Eerie Cold*”, which is one of their most successful records. Before the actual songs comes an opening speech to the album, where the listener can clearly hear Niklas Kvarforth expressing his frustration. The message contains the following lines:

“Look at all the pathetic black-clad wannabees running off to buy the new Shining album. Yea, within the framework of our scene this shit's the latest thing, something to take a stand for, right? Something new and oh so evil, I mean shit what could possibly be more true than suicide, right? What you ignorant little fucks don't seem to be getting though. What oh so very few of you seem to realize at all, is that this is no fucking joke. Far too many of you haven't questioned yourself nearly enough to deserve to pretend to feel at home with this music. And honestly, most of you are even more degenerate and shallow than the commercial mainstream you pride yourself so

for hating...

Kvarforth's exasperation is straightforward and, although not to be agreed with, is comprehensible. It is undeniably true that, while the "enemy", which in this case is the pop-culture and the mankind as a whole, are functioning forces, those who take the opposing stance do not extend their thoughts and feelings towards taking action. While an average human could not possibly agree with the encouragement and appeal to commit atrocities against humanity, one could not deny that Kvarforth makes a valid and logical point. He continues:

...Hate. You don't know what real hatred is! And consequently horror is just a joke to you, in reality humanity is horror. Just think of all the putrid decadence and inner ugliness passed down genetically to all of us. We're all potential child rapists, flaming homosexuals, murderers, thieves, and any other egocentric dung you can think of. And as much as it might appeal to you to support all this, in essence, our nature.

Speaking of homosexuality, interesting is to note that Kvarforth himself has been continually "accused" of being a homosexual. While the musician does not hesitate to get intimate with his own band-mates on stage, occasionally granting them with kisses, and, needless to say, has been filmed making out with Hoest, the frontman of the Norwegian black metal band Taake, the musician denies all of the allegations and claims to be a heterosexual.

It's just pathetic since you'd shit in your f*cking panties if confronted to the real world out there. And what is with you f*cking morons, dissing men like Eminem and Manson? What? Is that jealousy due to the fact of them bringing this shit to the masses without pretensions for style? I mean at least in their case the audience reflects the artist, right? Which is something that can't be said for Shining now, is it? So take a long good look at yourself, because maybe Shining isn't really your thing, maybe you should just turn on the radio and forget all about these obscure releases you have to buy in order to listen to. And maybe you should just give the f*ck up understanding the

perspectives of schizophrenics and psycho's making art just to destroy the minds of stupid little kids with too big allowances. Shining is not into building an army! Shining is not a promise for the future! Shining is just the pain of being human, here and now. If during through the whole organized misanthropy thing I suggest you go for shit like Dimmu Borgir instead, like, me...! Anyway, on behalf of Shining and Selbstmord Services it's my honor to extend a general deathwish to all of you fucking weak ones. Ah. Fuck humanity.”

By his actions and behavior, Niklas shows that the black metal scene is not always about frightening imagery and lyrics for the sake of shock value. Just like Nödtveidt, he lives up to what he writes about and preaches. In the controversial interview, which was previously mentioned, Niklas even goes as far as to claim that Jesus is his hero, because he died for what he believed in. Despite the confusion that Niklas might have caused with his statements, still, it could have not been more obvious who his true admiration is. In 2012, Shining releases their eighth album called *“Redefining Darkness”*, which ends with a song called *“For the God Below”*. According to Niklas, it is a love song dedicated to the Devil, who he referred to as “Father” in the aforementioned interview. So begins the song:

Ever since birth I've been

Attracted to the sinister

All the malignant, cruel forces of the world

Yet at times I've been misled by her opposite

And it is with great shame

I acknowledge these mistakes

Considering that Kvarforth started the band very early compared to many musicians – he was only 12 – this verse can be viewed as auto-biographical.

Father... who art not in heaven

Hear my cries of true remorse

To let a mortal being ever coincide with thou

Must be punished with a fate worse than death

It goes without a doubt that by "Father" Kvarforth implies no other than Lucifer himself. While "Father" is a term of address for priests and deacons in some churches, especially the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, Kvarforth uses the term in its literal sense.

From the aforementioned discussion, one could conclude that Shining does not deal with anything that concerns political matters, as a political inclination would show an attempt of betterment of at least a particular group within the society, or the society as a whole, which would be contradictory to what the artist believes in. The band targets the humanity as a whole, unlike, for example, National Socialist black metal bands, who clearly demonstrate their preference towards a particular group of people, whilst targeting those who do not belong in their group of preference. The following bands that were identified as NSBM bands are the best examples demonstrating the bands' stance on politics and how it is reflected in their lyricism.

Goatmoon

The first band that should be discussed within this context is Goatmoon. Goatmoon is a Finnish National Socialist black metal solo act, founded in 2002 in Helsinki, Finland by Jaakko Lähde who calls himself BlackGoat Gravedesecrator. Over the years, he has been accompanied by various session/live musicians in numerous lineups. When analyzing Goatmoon's lyrics, it is important to keep the prosody theory in mind. Unlike Horde, the sound and the lyricism of the band match perfectly. The album most demonstrative of this claim is "*Tahdon Riemuvoitto*",

which is the Finnish for “Triumph of the Will”. Important is to mention that “Triumph of the Will” is the title of the infamous Nazi propaganda movie “*Triumph des Willens*” directed by Leni Riefenstahl in 1935. The album consists of 4 instrumental songs (*1.Abomination of Winter; 2.Storming Through the White Light; 3....and Tears of our Fatherland Fell; 7. From the Barbaric Shores*) while the remaining three (*4.Race of the Heroes; 5. For our Blood and Native Soil; 6.Aryan Beauty*) support the bands’ NSBM stigma. *Race of the Heroes*, although contains three sentences, is enough to understand where the band stands ideologically:

Achtung Untermenschen!

Ihr seid nichts im Vergleich zu uns!

Wir sind die Herrenrasse, die Rasse der Helden.

Translated to English, the following lines mean: “*Attention, subhumans! You are nothing in comparison to us! We are the master race, the race of Heroes.*” Considering the Nazi context, the term “subhuman” refers to the “inferior people”, or “masses of the East”, namely Jews, Slavs, Roma people as well as “Blacks, Mulattos and Finn-Asian.”¹⁸ However, in order to better understand who the band refers to as “subhumans” nowadays, it is important to look at the background of the current reality. For example, in 1942, the infamous Nazi text published in Berlin and edited by *The Reichsführer-SS / SS Office* called “*Der Untermensch*”, although demonized a number of groups of people, it saw those of Jewish origin as the main “enemy.” However, today the right-wing Europeans are more concerned with the immigrant newcomers from the Middle East that adhere to the Islamic faith. It must be, nevertheless, noted, that anti-Semitic canards are still present in the modern reality.

The title “*For our Blood and Native Soil*” stems from the German nationalist idea “*Blut und Boden*”, “a Nazi slogan which held that ethnicity is based solely on blood descent and the

territory one maintains.”¹⁹ It is, perhaps, for that reason that the lyrics are not so political, as much as they are descriptive of the Northern European nature, as an appreciation and love for one’s own land:

**Through frosty yellow plains I walk to the forest and beyond
Under the light of north star I wander to the places of war
Last glimpse of sunset will soon be just a memory
Like the feeble screams of my dying enemies
I feel drawn to the horrifying blackness of this night
I now see the path placed before me
The will of the triumph guides me through the terrors
And nightmares, violence and bloodshed**

Many lyricists’ obsession with descriptions of nature and pagan symbolism and references is the reason behind why Paganism and Nazism are often times linked. In his collection of essays “*Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*”, Michael Strmiska tries to find the links between Paganism and Nazism, as paganism was in fact “rejected by the upper echelon of the Nazi Party and Hitler himself, and was contradicted by the alternative line of Nazi propaganda that interpreted Christian texts, teachings and figure of Jesus himself in a racist, pro-German, anti-Semitic manner, with a view to creating a Nazified version of Christianity.”²⁰ In fact, one of the very few Nazi intellectuals who saw nationalistic mythos as a crucial, if not most important function of history and human sciences was Alfred Rosenberg. “All the fruits of Western culture, Rosenberg posited, had evolved solely from the Germanic tribes. While Rosenberg’s *völkisch* arguments and his emphasis on *Lebensraum* (German “living space” in the East) corresponded with Party ideology, many fellow Nazis found his mystical constructs and his

prose hard going.”²¹ The song continues in a similar manner:

Northwind's quiet whisper on these fields where the battles shall be clashed

We will trample our enemies with our conquering feet

Like a barbaric hymn to praise the war

The howl of whirling steel covers the suffering yells of our dying enemies

The day breaks

Swords saturated with blood

Smoke cloaks the battlefield

Reek of burnt flesh

Charred skeletons laying on the ground like frozen tree branches

To the death we will fight for our blood and native soil

The lyrics seem to be a call to action. In fact, there are already a number of movements in the Scandinavian countries. For example, the *Nordic Resistance Movement*, described as a terrorist organization, is a Pan-Nordic neo-Nazi movement and in Sweden, a political party aiming to abolish democracy. It “advocates an immediate stop to what they call mass immigration to the Scandinavian countries, and repatriation of people that are not of Northern European or of closely related descent. It also advocates Nordic self-sufficiency and withdrawal from the European Union.”²² Similarly, *Soldiers of Odin* (SOO) established as a response to thousands of migrants arriving in Finland amid the European migrant crisis, call themselves a "patriotic organization that fights for a white Finland" that wants to scare away "Islamist intruders" they say "cause insecurity and increase crime".²³

Finally, the song *Aryan Beauty* describes the Nazi idea of the Aryan “Übermensch“, the (English: *Overman* or *Superman*) racial version of the term coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (German: *Also sprach*

Zarathustra). The song begins the following way:

Enchanting eyes, blue like thousand crystal clear lakes

Pure pale skin, white as mighty nordic winter view

Hair, blonde like a silver forest with shapes of gold

In the last rays of the sun

Will and spirit

Of honourable and undefeated Aryans

The descendant of our ancestors

From the triumphant land - Ultima Thule

For the reference, in classical and medieval literature, “ultima Thule (Latin "farthermost Thule") acquired a metaphorical meaning of any distant place located beyond the borders of the world that is known to man.²⁴ It is also supposedly the most northerly region.

No threats from foreign lands, nor the traitors of blood

Nor the keepers of values, morals and ideals of the weak

Can harm your fragile Aryan beauty

In the name of our blood

I am sworn to protect you

With honour to the death

Goatmoon is by far not the only band merging Nazism and Paganism. Another band that should

be mentioned in this section is the German National Socialist black metal band **Absurd**.

Absurd

Founded in 1992 by Hendrik Möbus (also known as Randall Flagg / Jarl Flagg Nidhögg / JFN) and Sebastian Schauseil, Absurd's lyrics concern "nationalistic, pagan (Hendrik Möbus is the founder of the Deutsche Heidnische Front), pro-heathen revivalist Germanic, and anti-Judeo-Christian themes."²⁵ One of the most popular songs that should be discussed is Absurd's "*Des Wotans Schwarzer Haufen*" (English: We are Odin's Black Troops) The original title of the song is "Wir sind des Geyers schwarzer Haufen" (English: We are Geyer's Black Troops), and it is about Florian Grey - the participant of the Peasant War in Germany – and his subordinates known as the "Black Troops" or the "Black Squad." It was created several years after the end of the First World War and gained popularity among the people, later it was politicized. From the first sight, there are no evident Nazi references in the song, however in this particular case one should consider the historical background of the song which was gradually altered. Originally, the song reflected the aggressive behavior and the attitude of a common 16th peasant towards the church and feudal lords.²⁶ However, before the Second World War, the song was actively used by the Nazis as part of the struggle against the Catholic Church, and was also one of the official songs of the SS. Considering the band's anti-Judeo-Christian themes the use of this particular song is an obvious choice. Below are the examples of some of the lyrics that the band altered:

Am Kirchtor setzt' es Brand und Stank, /At the church's gate there's fire and stench

So mancher über uns're Klängen sprang / Many men died by our blades

Oh Vater Thor, dich preisen wir, / Oh Father Thor, we worship you

Wir bringen Germaniens Kämpfe dir, / We bring you Germania's struggles (battles)

Another example is the song “*Der Hammer Zerschmettert das Kreuz*” (English: “*The Hammer Smashes the Cross*”) from the album “*Totenlieder*” (English: “*Songs of the Dead*”). Below are the lines most demonstrative of the band’s ideology:

**Feindesherrschaft muss vergehen, fremder Glaube fällt / Enemy’s rule must pass,
“alien” belief falls**

**Hammerschlag malmt zu Vergang'nem, die das Kreuz erwählt / The beat of the
hammer grinds all those who chose the cross into the past**

Naturally, the “alien belief” in this context is Christianity. Here is another example expressing a similar idea:

**Heidenkraft steht wider jene, die das Kreuz gebracht / The pagan power stands
against those who brought the cross**

**Schwert und Hammer senden sie in ewigliche Nacht / Sword and Hammer send them
into eternal night**

Lastly, in their song “*Germanien über Alles*” from the album “*Asgardsrei*”, titled after the beginning and refrain of the first stanza, “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*” (English: “*Germany, Germany above all*”) of the “*Das Lied der Deutschen*” (English: “*The Song of the Germans*”), which has been the national anthem of Germany since 1922. After the fall of the

Nazi Germany the first and second stanzas were no longer used. The music was written in 1797 by the Austrian composer from the classicist period Joseph Haydn and was originally a hymn called "*Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser*" composed as an anthem for the birthday of Francis II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and later of Austria. The German linguist and poet August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben wrote the lyrics of "*Das Lied der Deutschen*" later in 1841 as a new text for that music, "counterposing the national unification of Germany to the eulogy of a monarch, lyrics that were considered revolutionary at the time."²⁷ Naturally, Absurd's "*Germanien über Alles*" does not have anything in common with the original melody, and yet lyrically it is typically NSBM. For example:

In den Divisionen "Wiking" und "Nordland" waren geeint / In the divisions
"Wiking" and "Nordland" were united

Unsre Ahnen unerschütterlich für das Reich gegen den Feind. / Our ancestors
steadfast for the empire against the enemy.

Ihre Ehre die hieß Treue, in den Adern floss ein (arisch) Blut, / Your honor was
called loyalty, the (aryan) blood flowed in your veins,

Und ihr Heldentum soll leiten uns und stets härten unsren Mut. / And their heroism
should guide us and always harden our courage.

The reoccurring idea in the song, which makes the chorus of the song, is the following:

Ein Volk... ein Glaube - uraltes Heidentum, / One folk, one belief – ancient paganism

Germanien über alles - für alle Zeiten nun! / Germania above all - for all times now!

One of the ideologies that should be discussed in this context is Odinism. As the Odinist fellowship states: “Odinism is a polytheistic religion. We believe in and honour the life-giving and bountiful gods and goddesses of the Odinic pantheon, whom we refer to collectively as the High Gods of Asgarth, or as the Æsir and Vanir. Odinists regard our gods, not as our masters, but as firm friends and powerful allies.”²⁸ In his collection of essays *“Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives”*, Strmiska further explores the adoption of Odinism by various movements in Scandinavia, as well as the rise of “white power” youth in 1980s, that blended Neo-Nazism, Odinism and Satanism in their music.²⁹ Three of these ideologies have been ascribed to Varg Vikernes, a Norwegian musician, the founder of a one-man project Burzum and an author of multiple books. However, the latter identifies himself as an Odalist. In his book *“Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives: origins, changes, and interactions”*, André Anders discusses Vikernes’, what the author calls, dissertation *“Germanic Mythology and World View”*, where the latter claims that the academic world is not willing “to understand and describe Old Norse myths in such a way that they can have meaning for the present.”³⁰ In July of 2005, the following was published on Burzum’s official website.

“...since I am not a "nazi" I began to use another term, in the late 90ies. I did it not just to avoid confusion, but also to find a term more suitable and accurate than the other terms I had used. This new term was odalism, from Norse *óðal* ("homeland", "allodium", "allodial law", "nobility", "noble", "inherited goods", "fatherland", "land property", "distinguished family", "distinguished", "splendid", "kin" and "the nation"). This term replaces everything positive about all the other -isms I have ever used, and in it lies

Paganism, traditional nationalism, racialism *and* environmentalism.”

Vikernes continues:

“If we have a positive relationship to our homeland, to our blood, to our race, to our religion and to our culture we will not destroy any of this with modern "civilization" (*id est* capitalism, materialism, Judeo-Christianity, pollution, urbanization, race mixing, Americanization, socialism, globalization, *et cetera*). The "nazi ghost" has scared millions of Europeans from caring about their blood and homeland for sixty years now, and it is about time we banish this ghost and again start to think and care about the things that (whether we like it or not) *are* important to us.”

Interestingly enough, Burzum’s lyrics, unlike many bands, do not feature the political views Vikernes is known for. Most of the lyrics are inspired by fantasy and Norse mythology.

Rahvira

In this section, it would also be crucial to mention the Armenian equivalent of a black metal band inspired by Nazi ideas. The band Rahvira (English: “Pioneer”) calls itself a pagan black metal band and was formed in 2005 by the guitarist Tigran and the drummer Garegin. It all began when Vahagn, Gevorg, Tigran and Garegin got acquainted. Due to their similar worldview and musical taste and taking as a principle the saying "Not only by words, but by deeds", with their love to new discoveries, the guys decided to combine music and patriotic ideology. Their

ideological leader is Garegin Nzhdeh. Important is to note, that during the World War II, Garegin Nzhdeh, Armenian statesmen and military strategist, assisted the Armenian Legion of the Wehrmacht (German: "Armenische Legion") the armed forces of Nazi Germany, he hoped that if Germany succeeded in conquering the USSR, they would be able to grant Armenia independence. His doctrine "Tseghakron" ("the carrier of race") took an institutional form after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was supposed to be a part of national reawakening. Besides, instead of Christianity, the Armenian Neopaganism/Hetanism was readopted.

Some of the works of the band are "Կոչ արյաց" ("Appeal to the Aryans") and "Մպիսակ Ջարդ" ("white massacre"). There are no lyrics available online.

However, not all Armenian black metal bands with pagan themes in their lyrics come close to being put in the same category with Rahvira, a band that merges Paganism and Nazism, just like the above-mentioned German band Absurd. The following band proves that one could appreciate their own culture without necessarily thinking of it as superior in comparison to other cultures.

Avarayr

Avarayr is an Iran-based Armenian black metal band formed by Narek Avedyan, formerly of Symphony of Silence, after it disbanded in 2013. As it is stated on the band's official page, the music is "focused on Atmospheric themes and passages mixed with black metal voicing, with lyrical content covering Armenian legends and folktales as well as that incessant obsession with nature." In a recent interview, Avedyan clarified that he does not approach mythology as many Armenian bands do. To the question whether there is a rebellion against Christianity in his music, he gave the following answer:

"...I never wrote anti-Christian lyrics because for me... I am not a practicing Christian but I also

recognize [Christianity], and this is an issue I have with many other bands and people, we've talked about this many times. We've had discussions over this with a band like Highland. I have no issues with Christianity in the Armenian context, even though it destroyed 95% of our pre-Christian culture, in Armenia Christianity is not separate from culture like in other countries. In Germany, it is very easy to distinguish culture and religion. In Armenia, it is kind of melded into each other. We were the first Christian country; it is woven into the culture. You cannot separate those. "

On the contrary, the musician claims that destroying traces of Christianity in Armenia would be counter-productive as it is part of the culture. However, for Avarayr, it has never been about pushing an Armenian ideology, let alone proclaim the Armenian culture as superior.

"Even though I am a nationalist, I am not a Nazi. There is a distinct difference between that. I do like my own culture, my history more than other people's without hating others' history and culture. I actually use other people's history and culture in my music, or different outlets."

In 2019, Avarayr released its debut full-length album "*Symphony Carved in Stone*" which fuses elements from traditional black metal and Armenian/Persian folk music. The lyrical themes involve Armenian mythology and folktales. For example, the second song of the record "*Vahagn*" based on a Yeghishe Charents poem, is about the death of Vahagn. The song begins:

Հրդեհի աստված, հրդեհ ու կրակ, / God of fire, fire and flame

Օ, Վահագն արի: – Տեսնում եմ անհա, / Oh, Vahagn, come. – I see,

Որ ծիծաղում ու քրքջում են նրանք / That they laugh and giggle

Արնաքամ ընկած դիակիդ վրա: / Over your fallen bleeding body

By “they”, Avedyan might have implied those Armenian who have forgotten their ancient culture.

The song continues:

Թե մի՞ջ էիր դու ... Եկան երգեցի՜ն / Or were you a myth? One evening

Մի հին իրիկուն գուսանները ծեր, / Came the old bards and sang,

Որ դու կաս՝ հզոր, հրուս, հրածի՛ն, / That you exist, strong and fiery

Որ դո՛ւ կբերես փրկությունը մեր: / That you shall bring our salvation

The verse is followed by the chorus and the bridge of the song:

Հանգչեց կրակը, չի փայլում կայծակը / The fire is extinguished, the lightning does not
shine

Հանգչեց կրակը, Վահագնը էլ չկա: / The fire is extinguished, and Vahagn is gone

Մեր ձեռքերով հողին տվինք կյանքեր ծաղկած / With our own hands we buried
blossomed lives

Մեր ձեռքերով հողին սվինք մի հին սասուլաձ: / With our own hands we buried an old
god

Avedyan interprets it as letting the Armenian pagan gods die metaphorically.

“We’re damaging our own culture, – he says, - we have a chisel and a hammer, and we’re chiseling what is the base of our culture, what creates our culture.”

Despite the musician’s mere desire to express appreciation for his own culture, without necessarily taking a hateful stance against other cultures and peoples, the band Avarayr has been called and classified as NSBM on numerous occasions. Although Avedyan does not agree with the ideology advocated by NSBM bands, and even denied to perform some of the newer songs by the aforementioned Armenian NSBM band Rahvira due to a personal issue with the lyrics, he does not believe in censorship of such music. In the interview, he claimed that by censoring NSBM bands “people aren’t contributing to any positive change” or “the betterment of the society”, even when banning bands that are not inherently NSBM. While the musician does not approve of lyrics of a number of bands, and is very against lyrics about “child molestation, rape, which is what 90% of grindcore bands do”, he believes in the bands’ freedom to sing about whatever they want. He continues:

“The only time I am going to have a problem, - says Avedyan, - is when they actually start acting out the lyrics I will have a problem with that. But it’s just art. If you want to censor art, you should be censoring Shakespeare, the Bible, fairy tales, Vedic mythologies... how different

is the season of Game of Thrones from a band that has misogynist lyrics? Honestly. It is hypocritical.”

In fact, there have been a number of arguments surrounding NSBM and whether or not the bands performing such music should be banned. In his article for *Decibel Magazine*, Matt Harvey, the frontman of Exhumed, Gruesome, Expulsion and Pounder, brings another argument:

“The lyrical and visual aesthetic surrounding the music is likewise confrontational and provocative. This is a function of what is known as prosody in music theory—the idea that the music and lyrics should fit together to create a cohesive piece of art. (...) Prosody and logic dictate that aggressive, confrontational music demands imagery and lyrical content that matches. (...) Metal has aggressively and actively challenged lifestyle, political and religious norms since its inception. When society embraced a return to “Christian family values” with the dawn of the Reagan era, metal gave us Slayer, Mercyful Fate, Venom and Bathory. These bands served to challenge the prevailing consensus about religion.”³¹

While it seems to be the case with most bands, the following band demonstrates how some black metal bands, despite being musically aggressive, do not always have aggressive lyrics, and on the contrary, can be pro-human, due to the artists’ political stance.

Jarost Marksa

To the surprise of many, black metal music has a subgenre dubbed Red and Anarchist Black Metal, which is the polar opposite of NSBM. RABM bands, although very few due to their incompatibility with the core themes of the subgenre, are known for their communist ideology. Such was the Russian band Jarost Marksa (Russian: “Ярость Маркса”; English: “The Wrath of Marx”) formed in 2007 by French-born Antoine Durand, who moved to Russia in 2005. After a while, seeing the Eastern European reality, Durand was disappointed in capitalism, which pushed

him to form Jarost Marksa along with Nikolay Vasilyev, Mikhail Sokolov and Ivan Kuznetsov. In 2008, the band released its only EP called “We the People” containing three songs titled “Empires Shall Fall”, “United Under Red Banter” and “The Sacred War”, a black metal cover of the famous Soviet World War 2 song "Svyaschennaya Voyna" (Sacred War) which was originally performed by the Red Army Choir of Aleksandr Aleksandrov. Both of the band’s songs are straight to the point. Here are some examples from the first song of the EP, “Empires Shall Fall”:

The streets are red with blood
Oh, comrades, do not falter
For the rich are powerless
Without the working class
End all racist ignorance
In unity we stand and fight
The enemy we have in common
Their empires will fall

Important is to note that in the fight against capitalism, the band also addresses other forms of injustice such as “racist ignorance”, which could also be an attack on NSBM bands.

Sisters and brothers
Let us share the earth
We need no possessions
Branded no more

Unlike most black metal bands, Jarost Marksa does not show any hints of misanthropy, and on the contrary, calls for unity of all people, which is a curious phenomenon considering the “repulsive” sound typical of the subgenre. It contradicts the prosody theory mentioned above. The same could be said about the second and last original song of the EP “United under Red Banter”:

**There can be no freedom
While the state exists
So comrades, march on
For the people's revolution
The bringer of democracy
Workers, free yourselves
From the chains of capitalism
To end all exploitation
Our unity is our strength**

Ironically, the call for unity is something that Jarost Marksa has in common with NSBM bands that similarly aim to bring together people who belong to a specific culture. The song continues:

**The end of class antagonism
The victory of communism
Shall heal all of our wounds
No religions, no races**

No countries, no classes

To separate us anymore

Unity, at last

The ideas that Jarost Marksa expresses in this verse could be dubbed as Cultural Marxism by those on the political right, which in its turn is an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that claims that the Frankfurt School - a school of social theory and critical philosophy- is part of an ongoing academic and intellectual effort to undermine and destroy Western culture, values and tradition. For example, Varg Vikernes' claim that the academic world is not willing "to understand and describe Old Norse myths in such a way that they can have meaning for the present" could be based on these motives. The song continues:

The power of the people

Communist triumph

Ideas, immortal

We pledge our lives

To the red banner

Bow to none

In this context, important is to mention that while the band actively promotes communism, it would most probably be banned under the Soviet regime due to the way it sounds. One should once again recall the case of Dmitri Shostakovich and his infamous "*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*" opera.

This analysis first and foremost demonstrates how music and ideology interact, how they are communicated as well as the contradictions that may come to surface given the particular qualities typical of the black metal subgenre, its core philosophy and the political or religious

stance of the musicians performing in that subgenre.

Research Analysis

In order to answer the questions this research is raising, two surveys were conducted: the first one addressing the general public in Armenia (**90** participants) in order to find the main reason behind their dislike of the metal music as well as their stance on censorship of the given genre, whereas the second one, targeting the Armenian metal community (**55** participants), was aiming to identify the internal conflicts of the metal community, as according to metalheads in Armenia.

Survey #1: the General Public

I Demographics | Age and Gender

1. **43%** of the participants were aged 35-50
2. **23%** of the participants were aged 25-35
3. **14%** of the participants were aged 18-25
4. **12%** of the participants were aged 50
5. And only **7%** of the participants were younger than 18.

64% of the participants were female; **36%** of the participants - male.

II Music | The first statement was concerning the effect of the music on its listeners – be it positive or negative. The survey shows that the overwhelming majority of the participants – **71%** - strongly agree that music can influence the listener both positively and negatively. **14%** of the

participants were inclined to agree, **10%** remained neutral, while the remaining **4%** was inclined to disagree or strongly disagree with the statement.

The following statement was concerning the perception of heavy metal music as “just noise”, and not actual music. Research shows that **64%** of the participants believe that heavy metal music is just noise, whereas **32%** disagrees with the statement. The remaining **4%** believes that it is merely a matter of taste.

The final statement suggested that heavy metal music could negatively affect its listeners. **48%** of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, **19%** of the participants were inclined to agree, whereas **14%** remained neutral. The remaining **19%** disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

III Censorship | This section of the survey deals with the attitude of the general public regarding censorship of music, containing hateful or vulgar lyricism, one of the statements addressing censorship of such music specifically in Armenia. **43%** of the participants strongly agreed that music with hateful and vulgar lyricism shall be banned, **13%** was inclined to agree, whereas **14%** remained neutral. The remaining **30%** disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Whether such music shall be banned specifically in Armenia, **53%** of the participants expressed strong agreement, **11%** were inclined to agree, whereas **13%** remained neutral. The remaining **23%** disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

One of the assumptions about the general public in Armenia was that their negative attitude towards extreme metal music is mostly influenced by their religious beliefs. However, survey shows that the majority of participants – **66%** - disagreed with the statement. While **29%** of the participants considered religion as the primary factor of their dislike of extreme metal music, **5%** noted that it is a matter of taste, which has nothing to do with religion. The participants then were given a chance to write down their own option. While the majority of participants similarly expressed that like or dislike of a certain type of music is a matter of

personal taste, some answers were the following: “It is Satanic”; “I am not Eurocentric/ Pro-European”; “No one in my circle of friends likes such music”; “It causes headache”; “It’s a deceptive (misleading) art”, “I only listen to Armenian music”; and “I don’t see the point of *such* symbolism.”

Important is to note that there is, in a fact, a huge dissonance among the given answers. While the majority believes that each is entitled to have their own musical taste - and naturally, this does not include fondness of music containing hateful or vulgar lyricism – it is also the majority of participants who voted for the ban of such music, more so out of dislike rather than the belief in the ability of music to have an effect on its listeners. The latter could be interpreted as a cultural characteristic, which could be the result of the remaining Soviet influence and mentality or due to the lack exposure of the genre. According to Avarayr’s frontman Narek Avedyan, who shared his opinion on this issue as well, people might feel like such music “threatens their everyday lifestyle.” However, the musician believes that the lyrics should not be blamed as the slurred vocal style such as growling causes the inability to comprehend what is sang about in the first place. Aside such music being perceived as “noise”, Avedyan also mentioned the repulsive symbolism of metal bands that, as a matter of fact, are attempting to get a reaction and quite naturally expect a negative reaction from the general public.

Another crucial point to discuss is the association of liking extreme metal music with Eurocentrism/ being pro-European, or an attempt to appear more “Western”. In this way, the nationalistic tendencies of some people are not only political, but also have the capacity to influence such factors as like or dislike of a certain types of art. Yet again, one could draw parallels with the oppressive regimes of the 20th century.

Survey #2: the Armenian Metal Community

The following survey provides the analysis of the answers given by 55 participants from the metal community in Armenia.

I First and foremost, the survey asked the participants to report the period of time they identified as a metalhead and saw themselves as a part of the metal community. Having more experience as a member of the community could suggest the availability of deeper insights into the internal conflicts of the community.

The results are as follows:

1. **42%** of the participants have been part of the metal community for over 8 years
2. **42%** of the participants have been part of the metal community for 4-8 years
3. **9%** of the participants have been part of the metal community for 2-4 years
4. **4%** of the participants have been part of the metal community for 1-2 years
5. The remaining **3%** of the participants have been part of the metal community for less than one year

II The following statement asked the participants to express their agreement or disagreement whether they have experienced prejudice for being a metalhead in Armenia. While **36%** of the participants reported having such an experience, **33%** remained neutral about the statement. The amount of participants who strongly agree and those who disagree is the same – **14%** each. The remaining **3%** strongly disagreed with the statement.

III Further, the participants were asked whether they give great importance to the lyrics when listening to music. **38%** of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, **29%** were inclined to agree, whereas **22%** of the participants remained neutral. Only **11%** of the participants disagreed with the statement. None of the participants marked “strongly disagree” on the spectrum.

IV Politics | Religion The participants were then asked to indicate where they stand on the political spectrum. An open-ended question was given. The results are as follows:

1. **42%** of the participants identify as apolitical
2. **27%** of the participants identify as liberals, Social-Democrats, or with left wing ideology
3. **7%** of the participants claim to stand in the middle ground
4. **5%** of the participants identify as nationalists
5. **5%** of the participants identify with radical right wing ideology
6. **5%** of the participants identify as libertarians

The remaining **9%** gave single answers such as “Capitalism”, “Anarcho-Syndicalism”, “Artistic Individualism” and “I support whatever is best for Armenia” etc.

Considering that the majority of metalheads in Armenia identify as apolitical, as according to the research results, their openness to the genre with its numerous politically charged branches becomes self-explanatory. While most metalheads do give lyrics great importance, again, as according to this research, due to their lack of interest in politics, or rather the absence of the latter, lyrics expressing strong political beliefs can often be overlooked.

Then, the participants were asked to choose a religious group they belong to:

1. **57%** of the participants identify as Atheists
2. **13%** of the participants identify as Christians
3. **11%** of the participants identify as Agnostics

The remaining **19%** gave single answers such as “Pagan”, “Buddhist”, “Satanist”, “Mostly all

and none”, “Just being a decent person”, and “Heaven’s Gate”, the latter being a sarcastic remark.

It is crucial to mention that most participants of this survey claimed to identify as atheists, which neutralizes their attitude towards lyrics dealing with religious matters, including Satanism that naturally opposes the dominant religion in the given country.

V Conflicts in the Metal Community | Finally, the participants were asked to share their experience and observations regarding the internal conflicts they have identified in the metal community. While there is a similarity in answers, there are also some contradictions. According to the Armenian metalheads, musical elitism causes the most tension in the community. One of the participants referred to the metal community as **“mostly full of snobs who think listening to metal makes them better, calling metal is real music and thinking they are better and have a better taste in music...most common in the old school listeners (dad rock- boomer rock metal).”** Another metalhead claimed that **“old-school metalheads hate it when young people do that ridiculous Hardcore dancing...swinging their arms and kicking like a bunch of 4 year olds throwing temper tantrums.”**

On the contrary, another metalhead believes that intolerant behavior is rather common among the younger generation of metalheads:

“Actually I saw the metal community as friendly, however sometimes conflicts appear between old and new generation, where the new generation is of a bigger opinion about itself, and because of it they behave inappropriately with others, especially with the old generation of metalheads.”

Regarding musical elitism particularly, another metalhead expressed a similar idea:

“The metal genre is vast, and some "metalheads" tend to dictate the others which branch of metal genre is 'true', and which one is 'false'. You escape the world full of boundaries and narrow minded people not to experience the same in the metal community, where these elitists try to put you in some kind of boundaries.”

Here, the participant touched upon an important idea. A number of studies and documentaries demonstrate how people turn to the metal community precisely because they feel that they do not fit into their societies and refuse to conform to certain societal norms. The metal community, however, grants them the opportunity to communicate with like-minded individuals. Two other metalheads claimed to have had a negative experience as well, saying **“narrow minded assholes, most of them [metalheads]. But still much better than the other communities, so...”** and **“I don't care really. I hate them all specially the core scene.”** However, some of the participants, although mentioned elitism as a problem, saw the metal community as **“very friendly and open-minded.”** Another participant offered expressed his desire seeing the metal community more mature, saying that **“we can all be square-headed sometimes, but we should all have critical discussions instead of blatantly calling each other posers.”**

One metalhead touched upon sexism in the community by quoting those who say that **“bands with female vocalists can't be metal.”**

Another portion of metalheads saw the **“differences in political and cultural views”** as one of the main reasons behind the clashes between fellow metalheads. For example:

“Some have very problematic views, like Nazi or Satanic ideology, but overall the Armenian community isn't that bad I think” as well as **“Theres is some mild racism, lots of genre hypocrisy and internalized prejudice towards different styles.”**

Some specify the racism particularly prevalent among black metal bands:

“I do agree there is a racism problem especially within the far right BM community” and “Neo Nazi and anti-Nazi. Especially in black metal community there are many neo Nazi bands, even in Armenia (bands like Rahvira) but there are also many black metal fans that hate those bands.”

One of the metalheads, on the contrary claimed that it is **“cancel culture”** that is **“annoying”**, as well as **“crybabies in the scene”**, perhaps referring to those who criticize far-right bands.

For the note, “cancel culture” is the practice of refraining from supporting, or canceling public figures after they have done or said something that is generally considered offensive.

Religion has also been described as a cause for conflicts; however the latter has rather been interpreted as an external conflict rather than an internal one (e.g Christian Black Metal vs Satanic Black Metal). The idea was expressed the following way:

“The Armenian metal community is having a lot of trouble with the religious people both inside and outside of Armenia, the latter considering metalheads as satan worshipers. Typical story, but causes a lot of problems mainly with the touring bands. Yeah, it sucks. But the metal community in Armenia overall is pretty cool, the people I've met are really far out.”

Interestingly enough, most of the participants in the first survey (for non-metalheads) did not agree with the statement claiming that their negative attitude towards the band is due to their religious background.

Last but not least, some metalheads disregarded the question saying that **“the biggest problem in Armenia is that we don’t have a metal community.”** While there certainly is a metal community in Armenia, the members of it are very small in numbers. The reason why this could be seen as a problem for the metalheads is due to a number of popular Western bands not considering to visit the country with a concert, as well as the community being more vulnerable to external criticism, be silenced or disregarded. In fact, to this day, all metal concerts in Armenia are organized by Zhesht Events, a one-man organization run by Arsen Hakobyan.

Drawing parallels with the political and musical events of the 20th century, this project attempted to demonstrate how music, being a powerful tool of communicating a particular belief system, whether political or religious, can often be attempted to be subjected to censorship. Providing the reader with the thorough analysis of lyrics of the chosen bands, as well as a research demonstrating both the attitude of the general public in Armenia and the insights into the community and its problems as according to metalheads, the paper shows that the black metal genre has the capacity not only to spark controversy but also unite people around a particular idea, despite being misanthropic and anti-human at its core. For further research, however, it would be necessary to conduct a larger scale survey, which could give a better understanding of the attitude of the general public. As for the metal community, considering its small amount of people identifying as metalheads, an attempt to reach out to more people would be necessary to see the bigger picture regarding the metal scene and the community in Armenia.

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Appendix

Below is the full Interview with the frontman of Iran-based Armenian Black Metal band Avarayr Narek Avedyan.

- Do you think there is prejudice towards metal in Armenia?

Yeah!

- Why?

Well, I would blame the soviets. But then again, our first couple of bands were in the Soviet era

so it doesn't make sense. I don't know, it feels like it kind of threatens people's everyday lifestyle, of what they've been used to for a very long time. Then in comes metal, which they look at as a threat.

- Do you think it's because of the lyrics or is it the sound, the music itself?

I think it's the music itself, because the lyrics...nobody bothers reading them anyway. Especially when you're an extreme metal band, you use growls...basically nobody knows what you're singing about. So, I am pretty sure it is either the music or the imagery, and the combination. So, they see that...and when I say "it's the music", they don't actually hear the music, they hear the noise. And I was like that once. First time I heard an Emperor album in my life, I didn't have any idea what was going on...

-So, how did you get into black metal?

What happened was – I had these VHS tape, there was a Batman movie on that, Mask of the Phantasm, and then at the end when the credits roll, my nephew had recorded one of Emperor's music videos (2:06) ...so that was on there and it was shit quality, the sound was bad, it's already shit quality on the album, you know. And the video had all these static stuff (because VHS)...and I liked the imagery, it reminded me of KISS because of the make-up, but I didn't understand the music.

- What does it (black metal) mean to you now?

I grew into it. I didn't even know what that genre was. My first gateway into black metal was actually Cradle of Filth. They have a DVD called *Peace through Superior Firepower* (2005).

- ... and everyone kind of hates Cradle of Filth now.

Yes, but I love Cradle of Filth. You gotta keep the context in mind. I was living in Iran back then, and this was an era when we didn't even have AVSL Internet, it was all "dial-up". We didn't have any access to any material, so what happened was...people would bring CDs from outside, they would give it to you, or there were these bootleggers that had different collections of different types of music that they would sell. Like bad quality videos recorded off "VIVA Polska". So, my nephew got me that DVD as a gift. At first I didn't understand the lyrics, although you can understand the lyrics after quite a while...but at first, I didn't. I liked the imagery, I liked the music, the extremity of it was very interesting to me...and then I figured out the lyrics, and still to this day I think Cradle of Filth are one of the best lyricists out there. The way that he writes... and it is completely related to my major, because I study literature. I can see the effort that he puts into his lyrics. So, I started through Cradle of Filth and then I rediscovered Immortal, then it was Burzum that I found – Dunkelheit was probably my first real Black Metal song that I listened to. Other band that was very influential was a German band called Empyrium. They're not black metal per se, but the vocal style was really interesting to me. At the same CD that had Empyrium bootlegs, there also was the Emperor. I remember that I played one song from Emperor - "I Am the Black Wizards" it was – and I couldn't understand what was going on because the quality was terrible. So, when somebody asks me what they think people find threatening, I would probably say it's the music and the noise that they hear, because nobody dissects to see the melodies, or the chord progressions, all they hear is *imitates noise*...and with drums it becomes more amplified.

- So, they dislike the music and then they don't even have the desire to see what they're singing about.

Yeah, they don't care. They just see it as this ugly kind of thing, even if the production is really well done, they still hear noise. And then they combine it with the imagery – most metal bands

look different: these are guys who have long hair, they wear leather...it's even worse when it's a band like Divahar, when it's girls doing the same thing... That's why I always say, if people who want to go into feminism, they should start with Divahar, in Armenia at least, 'cause when they did that it was very new. Back then, Divahar went on stage and played black metal, there were no female-fronted bands in Armenia, let alone an entire group of people. There was probably Degh, the only hard rock band, then there was Eva, but Eva was more pop-rock, or goth-rock, like Evanescence. It was all "pupush" (Armenian word for Cute). But when Divahar went on stage for the first time, they opened for Sworn – people went batshit crazy. They were already batshit crazy seeing bands like Sworn play, and then when they saw the same thing done by girls..."What the hell? Go to the kitchen, make a sandwich, what are you doing on stage?"

- You've mentioned Iran. How safe it is to be a metalhead in Iran? What can you say about the metal scene in Iran and compare it to Armenia?

It's pretty closed off. The metal scene there is kind of like an island. Lately, it's been opened up because of the Internet, but before when we were circulating the music, it was a closed-off scene. That's why at early stages Iranian metal music kind of sounds exactly like copies of the music from outside, which is why I personally don't have many favorite Iranian metal bands. Then, some people started to innovate. They had Persian instruments, folk music in there...stuff that's cutting-edge. They did it before it was cool. Now, everybody does it. Back then, not a lot of people did it. We had a guy who played a seven string guitar when nobody else did. He added a lot of Persian elements to it. In terms of safety, you have to be very careful how you circulate your music, how you promote yourself. You have to be apprehensive sometimes. For Avarayr, it's been easy as we usually only play for the Armenian centers, no Persians allowed. These are organizations and big stadiums which are for Armenians, run by Armenians, founded by Armenians. We usually play there. Pretty safe, but the negative side is – we can't play for our Persian fans. They can't come in. If they come in, there is going to be trouble. For us, it's okay.

For Persian metal bands to play outside, they have to play safe. If you want to look like Gorgoroth, just forget it. It's not going to cut it. If you want to be "edgy", you'll see what happens. Iranian Security Intelligence is very strong. They'll find out at some point and they'll pinch you for it. We have had cases like this. The area you play in is also very important, there are bands from the Northern part of Iran – the Caspian Sea – 3 or 4 of them, it is a very secluded area. These are black metal bands that sound as evil, more like extreme as the Norwegian bands, and the environment is kind of the same. They do their own stuff, they don't care because no one is going to bother them anyway. But if you do the same thing in the middle of Tehran, which is the capital city and is very controlled, you're gonna get dinged at some point. We've had shows being cancelled...the main problem they have is with the vocals. If it's screaming – no. If it's English – no. It's a no-go. By the way, the Iranian metal scene was kick-started by Armenians. I am pretty sure not a lot of Iranians are going to like hearing this but it's true. The first band, actually...the videos are on YouTube, everyone can go and research, it's called STS – Senate of the Sins – which was founded by Armenians, and only the bass player was Iranian. These guys, back in 2004 – the DVD is called The Fist of Brutality, a DVD that they released – played in the "AUA" of Tehran, the biggest university, they played original songs plus covers but with no vocals. They played extreme stuff like Immortal, Satyricon, Mayhem, Darkthrone, Death, Morbid Angel. No vocals, the audience is always seated, you can't headbang, you can't throw the devil horn – it's a big no-no.

- So, the religion plays a huge role in all that.

Yes, of course, it's all religion-based. It has nothing to do with anything else. Lately, it's opened up a bit, people can play live, like my friend's band that had original songs, they played covers mostly but they were very controlled on stage. I remember he once in a while started to headbang, and then I saw the head of security standing there and told him to stop headbanging...It's a long story, but *someone*, a competitor, let's say, went to the authorities and accused these guys of Satanism. They got all their shows cancelled and now they are banned

from playing live.

- What's the big deal with headbanging though?

They don't headbang, they sit and they watch like they would do in a theatre. Here, I remember the Rotting Christ show and the Sepultura show, people kept complaining "this is terrible, this is a seated area!" and I'm like "these are the only places where we play [in Iran], it doesn't bother me, you can just go stand in front of the stage and headbang." Right? In Iran, you have to be seated. Of course, people do headbang in their seats but it's really weird. Still, it's pretty safe in that way. Though, it's common sense, if you're in Iran, you don't just walk in the street with a Gorgoroth shirt with an inverted cross on the back, the band's corpse-painted faces...you have to play it safe. I wear my HIGHLAND hoodie all the time and nobody gives a shit, they don't even know what it is. I can't wear my Chainsaw Baby Gutfuck from that freaking grindcore band that came to play here...I just can't do that. You have to know the area; you have to keep it safe. That's it.

- How did your band come together? What's the philosophy behind your band? Does it reflect your personal beliefs lyrically?

I had a band...the story behind Avarayr includes two other bands. The first one is a band called Zor. When I joined Zor, I was 13 years old. It was a death metal band but with symphonic elements, kind of like Thereon but the old Thereon, the first two albums. When I joined, I wasn't even supposed to sing. I only joined because I knew the bass player. One day their vocalist didn't show up so they gave me the lyrics and I just started to sing to Cannibal Corpse. I started to emulate the sounds, and they liked it for whatever reason so they kept me in the band. We've continued for two years, we have one song out, a shitty recording, electronic drums, midi keyboards, terrible... and then the band dissolved, after which there was a band called Symphony of Silence, like a gothic doom band. It also got disbanded as everybody left Iran except me. I was just by myself. I struggled. The first Avarayr song "To Motherland" was released as Symphony of Silence single, which is something that I recorded in my room, by

myself. I decided to end Symphony of Silence and start a new band as I had this vision of what I wanted to do – to make very moody, atmospheric music, black metal music. I needed a name. I had an idea about how to write the songs, what type of music I was going to play...I hadn't found the sound that Avarayr has now, so I just emulated other bands, which is something other bands do all the time. If you want to do something creative, you just copy other bands at first and then you find your own. So, I had everything laid out. I remember, I picked up an Armenian history book from my shelf...I needed a name. At first it was Khor Virap but I didn't want to do that because it was too Christian. And then I just randomly opened the book and there was "The Battle of Avarayr", a picture of Vardan Mamikonyan. And I thought "Okay, this is a good name because it reflects both the Armenian side of me and the Persian side – that battle was between Armenians and Persians – and it represented that duality. It's also a name of a battleground which is pretty cool. It's still in Iran which I am going to visit when I go back. So, I named the band Avarayr just because of that. There are some Armenian bands who claim that I took the name from one of their songs, which is ridiculous. They didn't even have that song out yet when I picked the name Avarayr.

At first it was just me because I couldn't find anybody else who was into that type of music among Armenians. Everybody liked progressive metal, thrash metal...but nobody really liked black metal. I was part of a team that started a music festival in the Armenian center called Kaskad. There were bands of different genres that would come and play. My first live band Andor also played there. There was supposed to be one main band and the opening band. There was this band that wanted to do covers and I wanted to do Avarayr just by myself, the backing tracks, the guitar, the vocals... But I couldn't do it with one guitar. I knew this kid Emin, and I knew that Emin at least listened to Slayer, the darker stuff... I talked to him and he said "Sure, I'll do it." Then, Emin introduced me to this other guy, Edwin. I didn't even know about Edwin's existence. His Facebook page was called something like "Edwin Black", and I went to his page, saw the likes – Burzum, Emperor... I was like "Oh, shit! This guy!" We became friends. He

played drums in his basement but he sucked. He just played for himself, he never wanted to be a drummer anyways. What I actually did once I found out this guy was a drummer, I asked him to play Enter Sandman. He said he could do it. So, I wrote a song and I wrote the drum line that I was sure he could play. Even I could play that drum part. That song eventually became “Rituals in a Dungeon White” which we usually play at the end of our shows. Avarayr suddenly became a live band and continued two years like that until we had some creative differences, and Emin and Edwin left. Eventually, Emin got back so now he’s our drummer. As for the lyrics, I always wanted to do mythology and paganism, heathenism. Even the first album, the EP, has all of these elements. It’s nature-based as I am huge fan of Romantic poetry, and it dealt with nature mostly. Then I wanted to bring in the Armenian side of things. The first album, it mentions Tsovinar, Astghik...so, I liked playing with mythology and combining different things. The band is all mythology based, but the way that I do it, I don’t approach mythology the way most Armenian bands do. I have a very critical way of looking at things. For example, the song Vahagn, it is about the death of Vahagn – a Yeghishe Charents poem – I interpret it as letting these gods die metaphorically, we’re damaging our own culture. We have a chisel and a hammer, and we’re chiseling what is the base of our culture, what creates our culture.

- Would you say that there is a rebellion against Christianity in your music?

Not a rebellion against Christianity per se, I never wrote anti-Christian lyrics because for me... I am not a practicing Christian but I also recognize [Christianity], and this is an issue I have with many other bands and people, we’ve talked about this many times. We’ve had discussions over this with a band like Highland. I have no issues with Christianity in the Armenian context, even though it destroyed 95% of our pre-Christian culture, in Armenia Christianity is not separate from culture like in other countries. In Germany, it is very easy to distinguish culture and religion. In Armenia, it is kind of melded into each other. We were the first Christian country; it is woven into the culture. You cannot separate those.

- Interesting point. A lot of bands chose pagan lyricism/paganism as a counter-culture.

I never chose...well, I am not Varg Vikeners. I am not Gaahl. I don't want to destroy traces of Christianity in Armenia because it's part of our culture. If I did something, I would be counter-productive as I would contribute to the destruction of the culture, I don't want to do that. For me, paganism is mostly the lyrics that I write to educate people on the older culture, not to replace the new one. "Don't forget, we had all these deities." I also want to introduce it to non-Armenians. Like "Hey, it's not all about Ragnar, Vikings...there is other stuff, other people were also pagans. Maybe have a look over here?" I also do it to somehow voice my critical opinion of Armenia, even though I am a nationalist, I love Armenia, there are a lot of issues that Armenia has, and I talk about those in my lyrics, and I do it through paganism.

- What are your views on National Socialist Black Metal? A lot of people in the black metal community have a problem with that because it targets a specific ethnic group of people.

What do you think?

I have been accused of being a NSBM artist. Avarayr has been accused many-many times. My music has been used more than once by people who are pushing that ideology. Avarayr has never been a NSBM band. I am not a fan of their lyrics, but again, it depends on the context. I am a huge fan of many NSBM bands music-wise. I'm not a retard. If I like the music of a certain band, I don't care if they're singing about burning Jews and the Holocaust. I know, this is going to sound very arrogant but I know that 90% of NSBM bands lyrically are at the same level as kindergarten children. I don't care, honestly. If the music is nice I am going to keep listening to that. If we're talking about NSBM, there are two types. One type directly attacks Semitic religions or specific demographic of people, and then there are the bands who are not typically NSBM because they just sing about their own culture and are perceived as NSBM bands because they like their own culture better than other cultures, which I think is okay. So, if you want to categorize Avarayr, push the limits and put it in that category... it's one of the bands that just

preach their own culture. I never tell anyone “Go worship Vahagn!”, I say “Hey, this is a song about Vahagn. If you like it – good, if you don’t like it – I don’t give a shit. Go listen to something else.” For me, it has never been about pushing an Armenian ideology. Even though I am a nationalist, I am not a Nazi. There is a distinct difference between that. I do like my own culture, my history more than other people’s without hating others’ history and culture. I actually use other people’s history and culture in my music, or different outlets. I have a project now with Mark from the band Ildaruni, and I’ve used anything from Vedic mythology, Greek mythology to Persian mythology. I like everyone’s culture. Each culture has something interesting to offer, be it music-wise or idea-based. There is no point to attack any of them. I just like my own better because it is a culture that I’ve lived in and it is a culture that is dying, and I am doing my best to keep it alive. I don’t think there is an issue with that.

- Do you believe there should be no censorship in music at all and you should be able to basically sing about whatever you want?

Honestly, I don’t think by censoring NSBM bands people aren’t contributing to any positive change, at least in my understanding. When you censor a band, even a band which is not NSBM, like Mglá, are you really contributing to the betterment of society? Probably not. You are just pissing everybody off. There are a lot of bands whose lyrics I don’t approve of. I am very against lyrics about child molestation, rape, shit like that, which is what 90% of grindcore bands do these days, but you know what? If they want to sing about that, they are going to sing about that. The only time I am going to have a problem is when they actually start acting out the lyrics I will have a problem with that. But it’s just art. If you want to censor art, you should be censoring Shakespeare, the Bible, fairy tales, Vedic mythologies... how different is the season of Game of Thrones from a band that has misogynist lyrics? Honestly. It is hypocritical. How come that doesn’t get censored but then shows get cancelled? If a band wants to come play Nazi lyrics, let them have fun, I don’t care. I am not going to get pissed like the band NADIA at the metal gig

here...they were pissed off; they said “We’re not going to play until you kick these Nazi guys out.”

- What band were they referring to?

MERIAL had this song “Aryan Supremacy” and NADIA got pissed off. I am like “Dude, really? Is it making life that difficult for you? Just walk away if you don’t like listening to it, it’s very easy.” I have the same issue with Armenian NSBM bands like Rahvira. I honestly don’t like their approach but I want to cover “Srtits Aravin” because it is a really cool song. I have been asked by some members of Rahvira to perform some of their newer music, but I declined because I had a personal issue with the lyrics. So, while I wouldn’t do it myself...if somebody wants to do go and sing their lyrics...if it’s a good song, I will listen to it. At most, I will get a laugh out of it because it just sounds stupid. I have the same issue with other NSBM bands like Satanic Warmaster. I like the music but the lyrics are so hilarious, so bad, so bad... At least if they did it indirectly and wrote good lyrics that had symbolism in there, I would actually think that these guys are making an effort. But these guys are just stupid.

- Or Goatmoon...

Actually, the last Goatmoon album, I read the lyrics for their newer single and I really liked it because it wasn’t like their other lyrics. Then, Narek from HIGHLAND told me that it’s because somebody else wrote it. I was like “Okay, that makes sense.” It wasn’t the same guy.

- Let’s go back to Iran. Are there any cases when someone got arrested for playing metal music? Does it happen often?

No, it doesn’t happen too often. But there is this case about this guy from the band Confess, and it made headlines. The new singer from Arch Enemy, the singer of Lamb of God, Randy, and some other people made a huge deal out of it, it made international news. And you know what happened to Confess after that? They left Iran. For a guy like me...when I see a case like that –

and I hope they weren't arrested for playing metal, I hope it wasn't the case - there had to have been something else. This is a person that lived in Iran from 27 years. I have seen every type of arrest. I have seen people get run over by cars. When Confess got arrested and the news got exploded, I was skeptical. There are bands with lyrical themes worse than Confess that are still active and still playing music. And they are much more open. More people know these guys, and not Confess. I didn't even know Confess, and I have been kept in touch with the Iranian metal scene for a long time and pretty much know every band. So, it felt fabricated, because I know people have created issues such as transgender issues, LGBT issues, religious issues, so that they can get amnesty and leave Iran. It was just too perfectly orchestrated. But there have been arrests of course. I have narrowly escaped an arrest myself at a house show.

- How did that happen?

The police came... There was this band Headless Children, named after an album by W.A.S.P. , a lot of people there. Then someone called and said "the cops are coming." And then there was another band Dawn of Rage. It was a big event. It was their fault as they didn't have the paperwork. They had harsh vocals. They publicized the event and had the names of all the bands they were going to cover, like Dimmu Borgir... I was supposed to go to their show but I felt like something was off. They were playing two gigs in one day. At the first gig, the cops showed up and they took everybody, all the gear, which was incidentally before the first Avarayr show, and the equipment at the show belonged to the same Armenian guy that did the sound for our show. So they took all the equipment away, and we ended up having shit sound because there was not equipment, thanks to these guys.

- It seems like they really believe in the negative influence the music can have on people.

They see it as demoralizing. In Iran there is a division - and everyone knows this already and I am not scared to talk about this - called "The Moral Police" that reprehends people from not behaving the way they should behave, depending on the country's rules. Of course they are

going to look at it negatively. It shouldn't come as a surprise. It's an Islamic Republic. It's in the NAME. Why are people surprised when they hear news like these? For us, it's just another day. The same happened in the Soviet era. More people got arrested for playing music in Armenia during the Soviet era than in Iran, like Arthur Meschian who was probably arrested and tortured thousands of times, his band Arakial...Even classical music was outlawed during the Soviet era, like Loris Tjeknavorian had a huge issue performing with the orchestra...There was a specific set of pieces he couldn't perform, so he was like the "heavy metal" of his own generation I think... That's it...