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# Humanizing the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Legacy across the Generations

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Photo credit: Zaven Khachikyan "A photo of Sarkis Hatspanian with an elderly Azeri woman abandoned during the first NK war"

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# Outline

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- The Nagorno-Karabakh movement and the first war has been **an integral part of Armenian identity**. The notions of "victory" and "winners" were inseparable from Armenian upbringing system. The choice of the capstone topic corresponded with **the start of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war**. Overnight, I realized that my capstone in this or that way should be connected with Artsakh; however, I had quite a hard time understanding what it should be about.
- Throughout the war being involved in volunteering activities, I came to the realization that my experience of war could not be compared with those who were forced to flee their homes, not to mention the soldiers and their families. This was eye opening for me, how the same reality can have thousands of **perspectives and interpretations**.
- Thus, I decided **to research and examine the experiences of people from various cultural and social backgrounds**, regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. I found some other aspects of interconnectedness between **conflict, identity and history**, which became the pillars of this research.

# Introduction



Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan (1988)

# Literature Review

For my research, it is vital to understand the background of the conflict and how it has evolved into a full-scale war (First Nagorno-Karabakh War: 1988-1994); furthermore, how the memory of it has been passed into future generations and become a foundation for identity shaping.

# Nationalism and the Emergence of the Conflict

According to Anatoly Yamskov the "ethnic revivals" and following conflicts in the USSR, including the NK conflict, have been inspired by the crisis in the official state ideology. Systematically, the Soviet regime favoured group identification over individual identification, which shifted the awareness of people to nationalistic appeals. Many groups saw the strengthening and deepening of national self-consciousness as the only way to persevere as a nation (Yamskov 1991, p. 654).

“...in a situation of rapidly increasing national self-consciousness and an increased attention to the history of their people, age-old victories and defeats are becoming widely known and are being actively discussed by the broad masses of the population” (Yamskov 1991, p. 656).

Ohannes Geukjian claims that Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia shared strong attachment to their ethnic identity and determined their actions towards gaining socio-economic and political advantages, thus aiming to unify Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (Geukjian 2007, p. 236).

# MEMORY, INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY SHAPING

**“Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (Hirsch 1997, p. 18).**

As Andras Keszei puts it, the interrelated nature of memory, history and identity are vital aspects for all societies in past and present. Thus, these three dimensions of study are central for the analysis of social groups' behavior in the present and the past (Keszei, 2017, p. 817).

Each beginning of a nation is not only the creation of a new order but also the trauma of a failure and the destruction of an older one. Memory here plays the role of exorcising the conflict (Portelli, 2014, p. 46).

As Judith Herman in her *Trauma and Recovery* (2015) insists, the knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness, but it's rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level. Similar to the traumatized people, it is vital to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. In the aftermath of systematic violence, entire communities can display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while being trapped in alternating cycles of numbing and intrusion, silence and reenactment. Recovery from this requires remembrance and mourning (Herman 2015, p. 115; 175).

Jaak Rakfeldt (2015) and Astri Erll (2008, 2011), discussing collective cultural memory both agree that although members of the group perceive themselves as relating to the same community of remembrance, the actualization of their identities as individuals is a necessity, without which the collective and cultural memory will be lost. That is to say, collective cultural memory is shaped by individual memories, and originates from individuals within a sociocultural context.

Erll, discussing Jan and Aleida Assmanns' findings on collective memory and cultural identity, points out the qualitative differences between a collective memory based on everyday communication and a collective memory, which is more institutionalized and defined by symbolic objectivities, such as monuments, memorials. Thus, Assmanns differentiate two categories of memory frameworks: communicative and cultural memories (Assmann as cited in Erll, 2011, p. 311).

The family memories should be discussed in the framework of communicative memories, with its emphasis on everyday life, face-to-face communication, oral narratives, and its time-limited nature of 3 to 4 generations. Nonetheless, it should be clearly understood that communicative memory is intertwined and linked to cultural memory, thus becoming a part of the broader memory-building process (Erll, 2011, p. 312).

**“Family memory is, thus, a dynamic, context-dependent construction that can change considerably over time as well as according to different settings and audiences” (Erll 2011, p. 314).**

# **MEMORY, INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY SHAPING**

# Oral History as a Source and Method

One of the most prominent oral historians, Alessandro Portelli (1981), put it this way: “Oral histories tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did” (Portelli quoted in Freund, 2009, p. 26).

Patrick Ryan (2008) notes that consciously or subconsciously, awareness of causes for human actions and emotion in stories, cognitively result in the combination of real and imagined experiences held in memory (p. 68). The self-reflexive nature of the storytelling experience may create so-called mega-identities that are exaggerated expressions of the respondents’ true self, or possibly, false, self-chosen stereotypical representations designed to feed one's ego and meet the societal standards (Ryan, 2008, p. 74).

“The ultimate purpose of the oral historian should be to embrace the genuine connection between the interviewee and interviewer, thus being patient enough to ‘give voice’ to those who have been socially sidelined, becoming a medium for them to express their unique perspectives” (Wali, 2018, p. 74).



Photo Credit: Oleg Klimov "Madonna with Kalashnikov"

# Research Questions

The main purpose of this capstone project was to study how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has influenced the development of personal and collective identities and became the cornerstone for the mobilization of national consciousness in Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia.

**This capstone tries to answer the following secondary questions:**



Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan



Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan

**1.**

**How has intergenerational communication helped to preserve and transfer war narratives between generations?**

**2.**

**How did the war and intergenerational communication shape attitudes towards the conflict and motherland in general?**



n.d., Shushi Liberation

# Methodology

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS



- In order to explore my primary research question, I have conducted eleven in-depth interviews with people who had distinct social, psychological, and economic war experiences and with their children. The interviews consisted of two parts.
- Firstly, I interviewed the older generation (parents), aiming to reconstruct their stories relating to the first Artsakh war. Only afterwards, I approached the representatives of the younger generation (post-war), and based on the personal narratives of their family members, I tried to understand the influence those stories have had on my interviewees' identity shaping, as well as on their attitude towards the concept of motherland. I have explored more thoroughly the themes of nation, patriotism and conflict.
- In addition, I gave my respondents from both older and younger generations the same standard questions regarding family relations, being Armenian, feeling Armenian, the attitude towards Armenia, Artsakh, Karabakh conflict, etc.

**The research is based on five family narratives, where the older generation has different experiences regarding the first NK war. All my respondents agreed to disclose their identities in this capstone project and allowed the use of data for academic purposes.**

## **FAMILY 1**

**Poghos Khamoyan** (born in 1961) - war veteran; **Mkrtich Khamoyan** (born in 1998) - his son, future doctor, was increasingly involved in the second NK war as a member of ambulance staff.

## **FAMILY 4**

**Armen Hadimosyan** (born in 1968) - left Armenia for France in 2012; **Narine Arakelyan-Hadimosyan** (born in 1974) - her father is a war-veteran, Armen's wife; **Karen Hadimosyan** (born in 2003) - their son, he has lived half his life in France and half in Armenia.

## **FAMILY 2**

**Gayane Asaturian** (born in 1974) - repat from Syria, Aleppo; **Shahen Mutafian** (born in 2002) - her son, insisted on moving to Armenia at the age of three-four, future (script-)writer.

## **FAMILY 3**

**Minas Ivanov** (born in 1969) - he has lived in Georgia all his life, in a heavily-Azerbaijani populated region; **Armen Ivanov** (born in 1995) - his son, heavily involved in the organizational activities of the local Armenian community.

## **FAMILY 5**

**Arthur Ivanyan** (born in 1976) - a teenager during the first war, volunteered in the 2016 war; **Monika Ivanyan** (born in 2007) - his daughter, a teenager during the second NK war.

# Mapping the Oral Histories

For better representation and doing justice to the narratives entrusted to me, this capstone has an additional component - a mapping of the stories. In the digitized maps, one may see the trajectories of the family narratives, such as where they come from, where they live, how far away they are from Artsakh. This will help to understand better the complex and intertwined nature of the concepts of motherland and identity.

<https://arcg.is/1rT9KD>

Photo Credit: Armineh Johanness/United Nations Photo,  
A 106-year old Armenian woman protecting her home with an AKM,  
1990

# RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

# The research analysis is divided into three parts:



## **NK CONFLICT: TWO GENERATIONS THROUGH AND BEYOND THE WAR**

Main concentration on how respondents remember the NK first and second wars.



## **ARMENIANNNESS: RECOLLECTING AND RESHAPING ARMENIAN IDENTITY**

This section aims to more broadly discuss what is it to be an Armenian, and what one may understand by national identity.



## **MOTHERLAND: SET OF VALUES RATHER THAN A MERE TERRITORY**

The premise of this part of the research is to understand how people perceive the concept of homeland.

# NK CONFLICT: TWO GENERATIONS THROUGH AND BEYOND THE WAR

“Before the recent war, the triumph of Artsakh was the symbol of victory of the Armenian nation, our pride, dignity and self-respect- now it has transformed into a huge wound, pain, becoming a symbol of struggle and future endeavour to bring back what has been lost” (M. Khamoyan, interview, March 29, 2021).”

## Main points discussed in this section:

- The Karabakh Movement
- From the protests to the war
- 90's 'cold' and 'dark' years
- the unification of the nation as one entity
- Artsakh (NK) as a guarantee of security
- New war-new realities



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Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan's  
"On the road to Independence" documentary project



Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan,  
Yerevan, summer of 1988.

## ARMENIANNES: RECOLLECTING AND RESHAPING ARMENIAN IDENTITY

### Main points discussed:

- Being Armenian in Syria
- Identity clash between repats and locals
- Being Armenian in Georgia
- Identity crisis as a result of the inter-ethnic conflicts
- Armenianness as a choice
- 'Nahapet' as collective image



Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan,  
"On the road to Independence" documentary project

## **MOTHERLAND: SET OF VALUES RATHER THAN A MERE TERRITORY**

“The homeland, for me, is not defined by a specific geographical location; rather, the homeland is the sum of those values, which are acceptable, normal, and natural.”

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What is homeland?  
What is Patriotism?



# Limitations and avenues for future research

The research conducted for this capstone project was limited by time, thus, the participants of this research were mainly friends and relatives of my family. In this sense, all of them have quite a similar view on debatable topics, particularly regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, its importance and influence on Armenia, as well as on parenting experiences. Hence, one may argue, this paper lacks diversity of opinions.

- for the avenues of future research, the geographical scope should be enlarged and more diversified.
- it would be much substantial if similar research would be conducted on the Azerbaijani side or Azerbaijani respondents would be engaged in this same research.

Photo Credit: Ruben Mangasaryan,  
"On the road to Independence" documentary project

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# Thank You

