

Studying Through War

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Prologue	3
Introduction	7
Literature Review	8
Research questions	12
Methodology	12
Research findings and analysis	14
1. Studying in an Online Environment	15
2. Artsakh Movement in the '90s	16
3. Initial Reaction to the 2020 Artsakh War	18
4. Studying during War	19
5. The Conclusion of the War and the Aftermath	21
Limitations and avenues for future research	23
Conclusion	23
Epilogue	24
References	28
Appendix	29

Abstract

The following research study is all about the struggle of studying for a university degree during a time of war. The idea came to me in a form of reflection, as I realized how much struggle I was enduring receiving an online-based education when my country was caught in a war in fall 2020. My feelings and emotional status were overwhelming me everyday up until the end of the 2020 Artsakh war in November, but the conclusion of the war only brought more anxiety and despair with it. The conflict broke out on September 27, 2020 which was roughly a month in during my senior year as a student at the American University of Armenia. Up until this point, everything was normal, considering how the country was struggling dealing with a global pandemic. However, ever since the morning of September 27, life was simply not the same – this war brought so much pain that every Armenian has felt and it probably scarred our already tragic national history. I wanted to hear others’ feelings and emotions and I felt that the best way to convey them would be through a form of a narrative, in order to highlight a very tiny proportion of an entire nation sharing the same grief.

Prologue

I am a 22-year-old student in the English & Communications program, at the American University of Armenia.. I was born and raised in Yerevan, Armenia, and had a relatively fun and cheerful childhood for the most part. I had a general care-free attitude towards life and thought that it is simply devoid of any challenges, difficulties, and fear-inducing moments. Over the course of time, I was proven wrong again and again, which I considered only to be a reality-check process that everyone goes through. However, one thing that I learned in the past half a year, is that everything has a chance of becoming *too real*...

I was able to live a care-free life only thanks to my mother and father, who were so fixated on the idea of providing me with maximum comfort that they forgot to take care of themselves sometimes. They really cared about my life, sending me to what they believed was one of the best middle-schools in Yerevan, Number 55 named after Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, so that I could get a quality education. This was prominent in the case of high-school and even university as well. While I was already an adult and had a say in which university I would want to attend, they still wanted to make sure that I did not stray off the path to getting quality education.

Growing up, I found myself heavily invested in video games. I have been playing video games for as long as I can remember. These were the one thing that would help me get distracted from whatever would be bothering me; seeking refuge from reality in a virtual world one might say. I wasn't shy of sports either. In just 10 years I have tried and tested a whole bunch of different sports such as swimming, sambo (a Soviet martial arts), aikido, and lastly water polo. This fact confused me a lot back in the day. I didn't seem to fit in the 'introverted' standard with video games, nor did I entirely see myself as an 'extrovert' through my sports. I was a mixture of shy and talkative, quiet and loud. I suppose there's no need to use the past tense here, as I still feel this notion about myself nowadays.

I was a happy kid. I loved what I did. I didn't love studying much but it did not restrict me from having fun at school. I really, really hated math related subjects such as algebra and geometry (probably explains why I chose to go with English & Communications later on). However, what I really loved at school was learning languages - English, Russian, and my native Armenian. In fact, I found languages to be the only thing that I enjoyed back at school. I still have that love for languages now. I wasn't too keen on learning history, although I did love

learning about a much more contemporary, 20th century history surrounding Armenia. I might have missed on a few things, as I made an accidental discovery about a historical period in Armenia that would come to haunt me 10 years later.

When I was around 13 years old, during my last years at middle school, I was in the midst of playing an online video game during my free time one day, as usual, when I messaged someone I met in game. We were having a relatively friendly, calm conversation about the game and having fun together, when suddenly the person on the other end of the screen asked where I was from. "I am Armenian," I replied immediately. His response, to say the least, was one of the most shocking things I have ever heard in my life. The person who was having a friendly conversation with me seconds ago started to insult me, wish death upon me and my people, and even to go as far as to curse me and my entire nation. In the midst of this confusion, I asked him why he would insult me so suddenly, what did I do to wrong him.

"Why are you insulting me?! I was having a calm, normal conversation with you."

"I am from Azerbaijan," was the terse response.

I asked a question to clarify my confusion, but I only ended up getting more and more confused. I was told that my nation is full of devils, who slaughtered and killed innocent people. Needless to say, it was a complete shock that someone would portray me and my people as absolute evil. I disconnected from the game and went to my mom who was in the kitchen, making food for us at that time. "Mom, what is Azerbaijan and why do they hate us so much?" This was the moment when I was informed about the region, Artsakh, and all the conflict surrounding it. I was told about the Artsakh war and the liberation of the region in the early '90s, how courageously the Armenians fought against the injustice that the Azeris imposed and how they are no better than the Turks, who infamously committed genocide against my people in

early 20th century, and I was taught that the Azeris are nothing more than just Turks in a different state, under a different name.

Fast forward to 2016, it was time for me to prepare for the fact that I need to graduate high school and enter the university era in my life. The enrollment process was quite a journey for me, despite my efforts to score high and ultimately get accepted into American University of Armenia, I was unfortunately a bit short of meeting the target scores and the overall desired qualifications in the application process. Hence, I had to process the fact that I had received a letter of rejection from the university's admissions office on April 29, 2016. It was incredibly demoralizing, frustrating, and saddening. I felt as if I took a step backwards rather than moving forward as I was doing up until that point in my life.

Regardless of that, I am glad that I found the strength to move forward with it, rather than move on from the idea that I wanted to be admitted to AUA. My efforts were finally rewarded in May of the following year, when I finally received a letter of acceptance from the university. Thus began a new chapter in my life, I had to enter a completely new environment. If in the past I was reluctant to study, I was filled with excitement and joy of what I was going to experience at the university, all the things that I was going to learn. I met wonderful people throughout my journey, and went through a pleasant struggle of finishing a semester at a time at the university.

In early 2020, something unexpected happened, the situation with COVID-19 completely turned everything upside down. The lockdown, the new normal of online-based learning was, or rather is, something that I can't get used to even more than a year after it was introduced. The lack of physical presence makes you feel disconnected and isolated to the point where you question if you are actually learning something through this method. This isolated online

learning process would take up the entirety of the semester. And while I began the academic semester normally, I ended it with a whole lot of confusion in my head.

Summer wasn't fun at all that year, lack of online classes somehow turned out to be worse than originally thought. So, with all the flaws that came with online learning, I still looked forward to the fall semester hoping that at least there would be a way to communicate with anyone. However, nothing could have prepared me for what was going to happen during that semester. The struggles were amplified while sorrow grew prominently.

Introduction

It's not a surprise that the world is full of uncertainties. We like to think that life is going to be perfectly normal for the next 50,100, 1000 years, but in reality, we don't know what might happen in the coming hours as of this moment. So is the case with war, you never know why or more importantly when your country would be thrown into a war scenario. Some will have to abandon their normal way of life to go and directly participate in the war. Others, ironically enough, will have to continue to live their life normally.

Being a university student during a time of war means to be a subject of stress and anxiety coming from two directions. Stressing about your work and the fact that your country is engaged in war is draining to say the least. Of course, each person experiences the stress individually. Having recently lived through such an experience, I am curious to explore what people do to somehow manage their stress, so as to not overwhelm themselves with it.

The recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in fall 2020, which lasted over 44 days prompted me to reflect on how I was coping with the fact that there are battles a couple of hundreds of kilometers from where I live, as I would routinely get up in the mornings and listen to my professors' lectures on Zoom. Reflecting on my own behavior subsequently directed me to

think about how my friends, even people whom I do not know, coped with the war that so drastically impacted our society. That is why I decided to take it upon myself to research how exactly wars impact students; and how do students manage to study in a time of war.

I want this research study to be about individuality and include personal views, feelings, and experiences. That is why my focus is on in-person interviews with individuals who unfortunately got to experience war at first hand during their times as a university student, be it either in the past or with much more recent examples.

Literature Review

My research includes a special emphasis on comparison and taking notes from past analyses conducted on this topic. Ahmad Oweini's "Stress and Coping: The Experience of Students at the American University of Beirut During the Lebanese Civil War," was published in 1996. It focuses on the effects of the Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975-1991, on university students and how the students coped with studying in a war-torn country. When you hear about a country that endured civil war for more than a decade it would be logical to assume that psychological symptoms such as anxiety, PTSD, depression, paranoia would be widespread among the general population. Although it didn't stop people from living their lives normally (with all things considered) and to be able to have an optimistic mindset and be able to focus on other things, such as university studies. The reason behind that is the way war was carried out in general. When people think about war, they assume a massive barrage of bullets and artillery being fired non-stop. That was not the case with the Lebanese civil war. Of course, artillery, shoot-outs, car bombings, sniper fire, and many other events did happen, but they were not happening in constant motion, or at the same time. As for the effect on university students, 20 AUB (American University of Beirut) alumni including 10 men and 10 women were interviewed

in open-ended and forced-answer questions, revealing more of what it's like to study in a war-torn country (Oweini, 1996). Although the students managed to mostly complete their studies and live their lives normally, going on about their lives like they would before the war by taking walks, organizing house parties, and just generally spending time with each other. There was, however, some form of disturbance in academics and in normal life by the war, to the point of life-threatening situations. Nevertheless, regardless of the situation, the participants managed to push through and complete their studies and earn their degrees.

Following up on the case of the Lebanese civil war, "The War Generation and the Student Elections at the American University of Beirut" by Judith Harik and Lokman Meho (1996) offers insight on student protest movements that were organized by the members of the student council. The movements were pro Arab and pro Muslim, often clashing with Christian students, and were famous for their disapproval of the university's policies. In other words, members of the student council used their medium to make a difference due to the impact of the war on them. In a way, the situation prompted a response of extreme interest in students, within the field of politics that is present even nowadays, 30 years after the war ended. It's worth mentioning that both Oweini's and Harik and Meho's articles were written in the immediate aftermath of the war (1994 and 1996). It would be interesting to know how the impact of the war on students is felt even today. There's no question about the fact that the impact exists, but it would be interesting to find out in what form it exists.

Student protests were not limited to the case of the Lebanese civil war. Years before the war had even started in Lebanon, there had been student protests in the US regarding various aspects of the Vietnam war (from drafting lottery to the war itself).

In the mid 20th century US, student protests were prominent and widespread ever since the beginning of the Vietnam war (1955-1975). In the article “*Opposition to the Vietnam War among American University Students and Faculty*” by E. M. Schreiber, written just two years prior to the end of the Vietnam war, the author shows how students reacted to a completely different kind of war in a completely different country. The Vietnam war was vastly different from the Lebanese civil war, in a sense that soldiers were not fighting on American soil, and the intensity of the war was far greater. This material is great for comparison between the Lebanese student response and the American student response to acts of war and violence.

Kimberly Renk’s and Tara Smith’s 2007 article “*Predictors of Academic-Related Stress in College Students: An Examination of Coping, Social Support, Parenting, and Anxiety,*” is generally an article that gives in-depth information about how students cope with the university stress of managing assignments and meeting academic requirements. In the study, there were mentions of two types of coping strategies implemented - emotion-focused and problem-focused each with its detailed sub-topics.

Mark A. Uhlig’s “*The Karabakh War*” (1993) is a detailed chronology of the first war in the Karabakh (Artsakh) region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict itself has deep and complex roots of national identity which prompted the two countries to wage a long, bloody conflict spanning from 1988 to 1994 and resulted in Armenian victory. The case of the Karabakh war is all about self-determination; an act of redemption for the Armenian people, to fight the injustice that they have been facing in the region at the hands of Azerbaijan. It is impossible to find someone above the age of 30 in Armenia who wasn’t affected by the first Karabakh war in one way or another. The situation with the war resulted in very limited amounts of electricity and

gas being distributed daily (sometimes once in a couple of days) and it is a good insight on how the general population of Armenia had lived and coped with the war for several years.

In fact, Hovsep Kanadyan's (2020) online news article published for EVN Report titled "*The Real Perpetrator of the 2020 Artsakh War*" includes great detail of events that unfolded in recent times. The first Karabakh war has its fair share of differences with the recent conflict, and although the situation and circumstances were completely different, 30 years apart, the outcome proved to be devastating for Armenia, and this article highlights some of the horrendous and tragic events Armenians had to face from September 27-November 9, 2020.

"*Attitudes about War: Implications of the War with Iraq*" written by over 4 different authors including Aleza Spalter Greene, Elizabeth Tighe, Regina Conti, and Leonard Saxe (1991) as its name suggests, is largely focused on the war with Iraq, particularly about student attitude toward the war itself. For the purpose of unveiling the reason behind a shift in attitude towards the war in the public, a study was conducted involving student groups from 2 US universities. The context of the Gulf war shares some similarities with the Vietnam war, in the sense that the fighting did not take place on American soil, and regardless of that, it still impacted people from thousands of kilometers away.

Lastly, David DiRamio's Robert Ackerman's, and Regina L. Mitchell's article "*From Combat to Campus: Voices of the Student-Veterans*" (2008) deals with something different than the general pattern that previous articles were following. This one focuses more on post-war cases of students who actually got to serve in the army first before they were admitted to a university to pursue their degree and all the challenges that were associated with it. This article is great to contrast with our reality since so many people who participated in the recent Karabakh war were university students who had to temporarily halt their studies in order to serve the

mandatory 2-year military service. Since the war has ended, a lot of people will undoubtedly return to continue their studies, and the article highlights some of the possible struggles students could face as they finish their military service and resume their academic journey.

Research Questions

For this research study, the central idea revolves around the following question: How do university students cope with war? The special emphasis is on the educational process. I was also interested in several sub-questions: How did these students react to the war initially? Since all three of my participants happened to experience the effects of the Artsakh war in Armenia, it was also important to know whether the participants knew about the historical conflict that came before the war, and how they learned about it. Lastly, how did the participants react to the conclusion of the war and its aftermath?

Methodology

Although I had the idea of what the project should be about, there was still a question regarding the implementation of it. That is when I decided to use a narrative-based approach, inspired by Daphne Carr's *Pretty Hate Machine*. The book is about a very popular industrial band called Nine Inch Nails (NIN). It explores the impact of the band's first album, *Pretty Hate Machine*, on some of the fans from around the US. The individual stories and experiences of each participant is what inspired me the most, and I found value in each section of the book, dedicated to different participants. Hence, I decided to implement this model of structure in my research process as well.

The research was conducted primarily through in-depth interviews with a selected group of people. There were three participants during the interview process, two of which happened to

be fellow students from my university, and the third one was my mother, who happened to be a student in the past, during another war scenario. I also decided to include myself in this research, as I believe that I am also eligible as a participant to share my experiences and feelings regarding the situation that I went through. Additionally, the participants were given the option of disclosing their identity, or keeping their identity hidden throughout the interview. As such, those who chose not to disclose their identity were given a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

I decided to focus on qualitative research rather than surveys in order to draw maximum amount of character and emotional value out of the interviews. In other words, this research was meant to tell people's individual stories and perspectives on the situations that they went through, and share their experiences of coping with the situations. The organizational structure of the interviews was created to be in the form of a narrative, and it maintains that form up until the very end, as I believe that it is the best way to present this type of research. Surveying, for instance, would probably diminish the emotional impact that the research aims to achieve, hence the narrative form proved to be the perfect medium for this study.

Since the topic is so sensitive, I had to take into account that the interviewees might feel uncomfortable sharing details of their experiences and emotional state at the very least. Hence, they were given the option of refusing to answer any given question and/or asking not to include their interviews in the research process later on. Furthermore, the interviews had to be conducted in a quiet, isolated environment so as not to be distracted by outside noises and to give the interviewees a comfortable environment where they wouldn't have to worry about being overheard. Given the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, I opted to conduct Zoom-based interviews with the first two participants to ensure a quiet, comfortable environment for them that is also devoid of any health risks. Furthermore, Zoom proved to be convenient in a

sense that it also included a built-in function of recording your meetings, which ensured high quality audio recordings with less disruptions.

The process of creating questions for the interviewees was mostly structured, with some additional room for impromptu questions. Furthermore, all of the participants were asked a general set of questions, although some questions varied from participant to participant due to circumstantial differences. The questions were created to begin with the person's early life, including school and subsequently university enrollment process. The other sections were meant to highlight the general knowledge regarding the conflict that they lived through and the struggles they faced as they studied during a war. The last portion of the interview was dedicated to the aftermath of the war(s) and how the participants envisioned their future at that particular moment. The narratives are meant to highlight the struggles of people who were met with the challenge of receiving a university degree during a time of war. Although I managed to interview only three people for this project, in reality, the number of people who went through (or are unfortunately going through) this kind of experience is immense. At the end of the day, what brings them together is this common struggle to attempt to live normally and attend their day to day responsibilities during the daunting times of war and conflict.

Research Findings and Analysis

The purpose of my qualitative research was to find out the emotional and traumatic impact of living in a country that is actively at war with another. Furthermore, I specifically targeted those people who also happened to be university students or were studying to enroll at a university during a time of war, and how they manage to focus on their challenges while being caught in a war simultaneously. In order to understand these questions better and to find the appropriate answer to them, I carried out in-depth interviews with three participants, two of

which belonged to more-or-less the same situation, while the third person was in a different situation than the former. The first two participants were students of the American University of Armenia during the 2020 Artsakh war, while the latter was going through her university enrollment process in 1994, the year when the first Artsakh war would come to an end on May 9.

With the conclusion of the interviews, five themes stood out the most, that best described the situation at hand and gave adequate answers to aforementioned questions surrounding the topic. The following themes cover the reactions and feelings of the participants upon hearing about the war(s) and additionally their feelings on the context of the conflict: how they managed to study under war circumstances; what was their reaction upon hearing about the conflict closure. Additionally, since two of the participants happened to be university students during the global pandemic of COVID-19, a special theme was dedicated to these participants in order to further understand what challenges they faced as they studied during a time of war.

Studying in an Online-Environment

Two of my participants happened to be university students during the COVID-19 pandemic and they both had to resort to an online-form of learning which was a drastic change for their academic career. Armine, in particular, enrolled into the university during the pandemic, so she only got to experience the online aspect of university education. When she was asked for her opinion on online-based learning, she simply responded with “it’s just sad.” For her, it was incredibly hard to keep up with the lectures, and she would be very inattentive to the lectures due to the exhaustion from listening to hours of lectures whilst sitting in front of the computer. “This computer is not an actual person and you lose your attention quite quickly and my productivity suffered as a result” (Armine, interview, March 13,2021).

Marina, on the other hand, was a junior student at the university when things went online. Her experience wasn't much different from Armine's. She stated that she also had a lot of trouble with adapting to the new method, and it felt like for her, that she is "staring at the computer screen for the rest of her life" (Marina, interview, March 18,2021). Constantly sitting at home due to the pandemic only worsened the situation. The online lectures would tire her eyes due to constant staring at the screen. Furthermore, she also had to complete her assignments and dedicate time to work, which is also done on the computer. For her, it was 'staring at the computer screen all day long' and a person can only bear so much screen time everyday. This resulted in her having worse time-management, because of constant fatigue from running around from one online meeting to another. In addition to that, she was also having trouble concentrating on the lectures, because of aforementioned reasons. Back in the day, she used to doodle around her notes which helped her concentrate on the material and remember it more vividly later. Once courses went an online, that effect wasn't possible to replicate anymore, so she had also lost her one and only reliable way of interpreting class material (M. Alojants,interview, March 18, 2021).

Learning first about the Artsakh movement in the '90s

Marina, one of the interviewees, mentioned that she had learned about the war completely by random chance, when she was around 10-11 years old. She was visiting her grandmother's house where she saw a poster of a relative hanging on a wall who was dressed in a military uniform. Upon seeing this picture Marina asked "why is uncle dressed in a military uniform?" Her grandmother explained to her the story behind her uncle, who participated in the Artsakh war of the '90s, and that was the first time she found out about the region and the conflict. She didn't really understand it at first, she stated "When I first heard about it, I didn't

really know much about the reasons behind it. It was more to me like two sides fighting after they came to a disagreement about something” (Marina, interview, March 18,2021).

Diana, the other interviewee, stated that she knew nothing about the region prior to the movement. When tensions were on the rise, she was on vacation with her family members and friends in Dilijan, in the northern territory of Armenia, where she overheard strangers singing a song about Artsakh. The lyrics were something along these lines - “Armenia, I am your little brother...what should I do in order for us to unite...” According to her, this event was when she truly understood the meaning of Artsakh and its significance. After that, the movement started to take off, there were protest gatherings all over the country and in Artsakh. Seeing how inaccurately and almost indifferently would the Soviet Union depict the events on national television, it only amplified her anger and her desire for justice in the region. Afterwards came the Spitak earthquake of 1988, the Sumgait pogroms (1988) and other atrocities. Her passion for the land and for justice to her people only kept growing stronger (D. Simonyan, interview, April 10, 2021).

As for Armine, she remembers the Artsakh movement from her middle-school history class. It particularly stood out to her because of how passionate her teacher was when it came to that subject. She would also read from her history books about the movement but she was very skeptical about what she perceived to be the one-sided, biased approach towards the situation. Since she had no way of analyzing the material further, she had to satisfy herself with what she had. She remembers how inspiring some of the events were, like the planning of the operation designed to capture the historical city of Shushi. Although the recent war completely shattered her perception of the entire situation and she had to start with a blank page (Armine, interview, March 13, 2021).

Initial Reaction to the 2020 Artsakh War

Marina stated that she did not understand what to think or what to feel. Because attacks happened so frequently and all the time, she asked herself “should I be worried? Is this *the* war?” For her, it was a similar situation with the 2016 April war, she had no idea how to feel about it. Furthermore, in the year of the April war, she was going to graduate from high school in Italy and later come to Yerevan, but for her “it was one kind of fear of living in a country that is at risk of war, in contrast to actually living in a country during a time of war.” She wholeheartedly hoped that it would be very short-lived and would come to an end at any moment... (Marina, interview, March 18, 2021).

For Diana, it wasn't the first time she would find herself in a war situation. She remembers waking up early in the morning on Sunday. As part of her morning habits, she reached for her phone and checked the news to see what's going on around the world. She saw posts on social media about fighting and escalation, but she didn't think of it much, since the phenomenon is unfortunately a common occurrence for her and for pretty much everyone. However, once she saw one of her school teachers', Mark Grigorian's post on social media that simply stated “This is war...” then it hit her with the realization of how serious everything is. She would hope, just like Marina, that it all would come to pass quickly. However, she couldn't leave her phone aside for one minute during those 44 days, hoping that some good news would come in at any moment. As she stated “It was all just horror and terror, and everything ended on the same note...” (D. Simonyan, interview, April 10, 2021).

Following Marina's and Diana's initial reactions, Armine would also hope in similar fashion that the war would last around as long as the 2016 4-day April war did. Prior to the September war, there were clashes in July 2020 around the Tavush region, and ever since the

clashes ceased, she would hear people talking about how there will be a war soon in the near future. July clashes were never branded as “war.” However, on September 27, the word “war” was being highlighted by pretty much everyone, but she just couldn’t believe it. She was very skeptical at first and thought that it won’t be much of a big deal in the end. As time went on, she gradually started realizing how serious it is. At one point, her brother, who was serving at the time and was participating in the war, stopped calling her which got her really worried. Also, seeing how the war is being dragged out and more and more people started to volunteer, she started to realize the severity of the situation (Armine, interview, March 13, 2021).

Focusing on Studies During the War

All of the research participants happened to be university students during a time of war, meaning they had to bear the challenge of getting a degree on top of the war scenario.

Marina gave a pretty simple answer to this complicated question - “I have no idea.” She was already mostly stuck at home, having to take care of her grandma and not risking infecting her with COVID-19. The process was exhausting, because she had to run around the house a lot, taking care of chores and her grandmother. War was something that really started to drain her during these processes. As such, sometimes she would join her Zoom classes from her phone and leave it aside as she was relaxing or busy with chores. This constant urge to check her phone for the news, anxiety surrounding the war, having to do physical chores - all at the same time while she was studying, really started to take its toll on her overall performance and wellbeing. She realized at one point that she can’t just skip her classes, she was not that type of student, especially that skipping her classes would mean her being more and more involved with the news and all the depressing information surrounding the war. So, she finally opted to join her Zoom classes to just be in this supportive environment of her classmates and her professors, who

were also generously cutting some slack for their students and extending deadlines as much as they could. Classes wouldn't always go smoothly, unfortunately. At times, Marina struggled with learning the material, so she had to get back to it later by herself and learn everything from scratch. What made everything tougher were the announcements from the professors when one of their students would be killed in battle. "That was the big hit in the face, the realization that comes with it," she recounted, and these moments would often force her to skip classes for days on end. "I think I skipped classes twice after that happened. Even though I wasn't friends with the person, it was still incredibly hard to accept that it happened, that they are not around anymore, and it was really brave on the professors' end to inform us of this news"(Marina, interview, March 18,2021).

Armine described how she would gradually lose her motivation to study and not see a reason to continue her studies at all. But at the same time, she realized that she is part of the future and she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she wasn't be able to contribute to society in the future. "Did I want this situation? No, but I had to." Similar to Marina's case, she was also generously given extended deadlines and less-difficult assignments. "I just had a responsibility that I had to do, I sucked it up and pushed through however I could" (Armine, interview, March 13, 2021).

Diana's case was a little different, as she was enrolling into a university during the '90s, when the first Artsakh war broke out. She also mentioned how different these two wars were. In the '90s, the war was much slower paced and it lasted much longer as a result, while this one was going through at a lightning fast pace. In the '90s, she could go on for days without hearing about the war, as there were days on end when both sides weren't fighting at all. "Yes, there was a war but it wasn't as demoralizing as this recent one. Information was shared from person to

person and was generally devoid of clutter. As for this one, now that we had access to the internet, things took a turn for the worse, with constant bombardment of news from here and there” (D. Simonyan, interview, April 10, 2021).

Emotions at the Conclusion of the War

In Marina’s case, at the time the news came, she was peacefully asleep in the night. She woke up in the morning and checked her phone immediately as she usually did, and she noticed people going what she described as “berserk” over the situation,. Her grandmother was asleep at that time and there was no one at home to talk about it to, so she just thought to herself “it’s over.” She didn’t know the circumstances yet, all she knew was that the war came to a stop/ Only after she learned the situation did she realize the severity of everything. At the end of the day, she was glad that the fighting came to an end, because of how scary and excruciating the thought of it was. There were cases when Azerbaijani drones were shot over the region of Armenia, one of which happened to be over Marina’s town, where she was residing at that time. Living in constant fear of the war escalating to an unknown level and having to sleep fully clothed in case an emergency siren would be activated in order for her to run to a shelter was enough to throw her into an exhausted and scared state. The worst part of it all was the fact that in case the sirens would be activated, she would have no choice but to leave her grandmother behind, and this was probably the single worst aspect for her/ She was glad that with the conclusion of the war she would have to rule out that situation altogether (M. Alojants, interview, March 18, 2021).

Diana was in complete disarray when the news came in. She heard the news completely by accident, when she was listening to the Prime Minister’s live transmission on Facebook. It was the night of November 9, the Prime Minister announced that he would sign the document that would put an end to the war and also bring the terrible repercussions to Armenia with it.

After that, came the news of all the rioting and anarchy that was going on in the city. There was so much confusion that she stated,

at one point, I thought that the Prime Minister was gone. I thought that this is just a blatant lie and they forced him to sign this document. And I even thought that the government is gone; that it was overthrown militarily...but on the other hand, it gave me a sense of relief that the war was over and the continuous rise of the death toll would be put to a stop. (D. Simonyan, interview, April 10, 2021)

The following day was much more clear, calmer for her to process the reality, but it did not mean that she was devoid of any questions. Diana still wondered what was really going on, as things were still not 100% clear to her:

Every time I see the faces of deceased children, my hands just lose all their strength in them. I feel an incredible sense of injustice towards us, why did this have to happen in the first place? Why did so many children have to die? This pain is even sensed for the Azeri side as well. This pain - is the kind of pain that lingers; it will remain a part of this generation forever. I only recently understood the whole idea behind Armenians carrying the feeling of being a subject to genocide in 1915. This was present during the '90s war as well, I just didn't understand it because of how little I was, but now I do...when people would depart every single day and end up disappearing. A person leaves and suddenly, an hour later, they are gone forever... (Diana, interview, April 10, 2021)

As for Armine's case, she mentioned how in the back of her mind, she was somewhat expecting this outcome to happen, but it still did not save her from the disbelief she felt when she heard the news. She was partly happy, however, due to the fact that people wouldn't have to go to war and kill each other anymore, and potentially not engage in the skirmishes that were a

persistent problem for over three decades. “We saved lives through this and it made me happy. The grief was immense, but knowing this factor kept me from succumbing to the grief.” As for how she found out about the news, - “Well, I remember it was in the morning, I was just checking the news as usual when I read about the updates and well... you know the rest” (Armine, interview, March 13, 2021).

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

It goes without saying that there were several limitations concerning this research, namely the number of people who participated in it. Of course, in this case, if more people had the opportunity to participate in the project, a larger picture could be sketched given that only two of the participants were students from the American University of Armenia, and the third one was going through the enrollment process of the Yerevan State Medical University. I believe that it would be of significant value to also include participants from different universities, as well as different age groups in order to explore more on the subject of the legacy of living through two conflict periods, and the generational aspect on the conflict in its entirety.

Since my research study so far was within the scopes of Armenia, it would be also very interesting to see how students from other countries coped with a similar situation, since educational standards and teaching can vary not just from university to university, but from country to country, and this would help distinguish some of the more common issues that students face despite their differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study was aimed at shedding light and raising awareness on issues that people faced during their educational journeys at a time of war. The three in-depth interviews conducted regarding this matter were very helpful in understanding specifically what

type of issues people faced, and also highlighted their emotions and feelings throughout this process. Whether it's studying under the candle-light and having to wear multiple layers of clothing just so the person won't succumb to the cold, or being physically isolated from everyone else and being stuck at home during a global pandemic - these are all just a small fraction of the possible issues people faced when they were caught in a war during their educational journey. Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to interview more people that most certainly have their own unique experiences and backgrounds that would be invaluable to the overall research. However, given the scope of the project, I chose to limit myself with the three participants – Marina, Armine, and Diana, whom I have to thank for helping me realize this project. Moreover, since I wanted this project to also be a form of self-reflection, I decided to include my narrative along the participants' stories, since I was also a university student who went through war. My narratives bookends this capstone project through the prologue and epilogue segments, bringing my own lived experience into perspective too.

Epilogue

While I did find out about the first Artsakh war through the aforementioned encounter with an Azeri person online during a video game when I was barely a teen, I never really understood what was going on and why we were fighting. I kept hearing how our struggle was justified, that the Azeris were in the wrong, and that they were the ones who started all of it. I had skepticism towards these arguments, I believed that a lot of people would be biased towards their country. After all, who wouldn't have bias towards their homeland. It wasn't until the Spring semester of 2020 when I truly learned about the overall conflict and the Artsakh movement in general, unexpectedly, through researching for a project for one of my classes. I thought our struggle was more or less justified, hearing about all the atrocities committed against

Armenians who resided in Azerbaijan in the times of the Artsakh movement. And so I moved on with this fact in mind, wondering if this conflict would ever come to an end. I never believed that the conflict could be resolved without a serious governmental reform on the Azerbaijani side. We had ours back in 2018, it was time for them to do the same and strive towards resolving the conflict, rather than keeping it around and using it for political purposes.

During the summer, the attacks on Tavush region were quite frightening and worrisome, mainly because it was a fight on the territory of the Armenian republic, rather than in the Artsakh region. It just went into a sudden pause which sparked even more confusion as to why ultimately this even happened. As months went by, I pretty much forgot about the conflict, considered it as just yet another attack on the territory, as it was unfortunately a common phenomenon for us. I moved on, along with a lot of people I believe, and looked forward to the fall semester of university. The term started off great - reunions, although not physical, were valued nevertheless between students and professors. It was going normal (considering the situation with the pandemic) for the most part. I went to sleep in the evening of September 26, thinking about all the things that I had to do on the following day. Little did I know that it was the last time I could sleep so calmly for the next 3-4 months...

I woke up on the morning of September 27, went to check my phone for news as I usually did, and found something rather unusual. "Large-scale attacks along the entire border of Artsakh" - I would read from various news sources. It was concerning, but I just shrugged it off thinking it is one of those "usual" scenarios where Azerbaijan would attack us for a short amount of time, we would defend ourselves until the enemy can't keep up with the attacks and ceases all attacks, kind of like the scenario we had back in July of the same year. As the day went on, things seemed a bit more serious than initially thought. The word "war" was tossed around here

and there, probably the most concerning point of any news article and talk show. By midday I was convinced that it's more than just a skirmish, it's something on par with the April war of 2016, maybe even worse than that. However, I firmly believed the fact that this war would be over in a couple of days, just like the April one. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months.

The entire experience was simply devastating, soul-crushing. Everything just turned gray, constant fear and anxiety wouldn't leave me alone for even a moment. "What is going to happen? When is this going to be over?" I found myself asking these questions everyday. I would check the news channels every single day with hopes that I would see an update stating that the war is over, or just anything in a positive manner, but all I could see were devastating news of soldiers sacrificing their lives to defend the region. Sometimes I would see names of people I knew and I wouldn't be able to wrap my head around the fact that the person whom I said "hi" to, with whom I had small talk about how our lives are going, had suddenly died.

It was just complete terror for months on end. I found myself unable to concentrate on any studies whatsoever. I just couldn't find the strength to distract myself from what was going on a couple of hundred of kilometers from me. I was only thankful to my professors and to the university for being so supportive and so understanding of what I and my fellow peers were going through. Extended deadlines, moral support - these things were priceless, and I don't know what I would've done if not for these gestures.

I went to sleep on the night of September 27 feeling devastated, but I somehow managed to feel worse than that on the night of November 9. It was a "usual" day in this war-scenario - I was preparing for sleep when suddenly my entire phone was exploding with news from all directions about the conflict. A little bit of digging and I found out what was really going on and

I only wished that I didn't. The fact that we had to lose our territories on such a large scale was something I can't even describe now, I only remember how I simply couldn't sleep through the night properly that day. The next day was just plain bleak, just as gray as the first day of the war. Exhaustion, frustration, and sorrow - these were the things that I felt and perhaps shared this with a lot of people at that time. I can't deny that among those feelings there was a faint sense of calmness that was telling me "at least it's over...for now at least." At the end of the day, people died, and at least this meant that people will not be killing each other on the battlefield anymore.

Roughly 6-7 months have passed since. I still feel the pain as do so many people around me. It's like a scar that is going to be forever embedded in us. At this point, we can only hope to work towards preventing this type of situation occurring in the future...or at least be ready for it in case it does. If we wait for the grief to fade, we will wait our entire lives. Instead, we must allow hope to inspire us to see the brighter side of life, and for us to cling towards it.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Consent Form in Armenian

Չամաձայնութեան հավաստագիր

Չամաձայնագիր մասնակցելու դիպլոմային ծրագրի իրականացման Չայաստանի ամերիկյան համալսարանում: Սույնով հավաստում եմ, որ համաձայն եմ մասնակցել ՉԱՐ Չումանիտար և հասարակական գիտությունների ֆակուլտետի դասախոս դոկտոր Չուրիկ Ադդարեանի (հեռ. 060 612769, Էլ. հասցե hourig.attarian@aua.am) ղեկավարությամբ Արթուր Պողոսյանի կողմից դիպլոմային աշխատանքի նախագծի հարցազրույցին:

Նախագծի նպատակը

Տեղյակ եմ, որ այս նախագծի նպատակն է հասկանալ, թե ինչպիսի ազդեցություն ունեն պատերազմական իրավիճակները համալսարանի ուսանողների վրա: Արթուր Պողոսյանի անցկացրած հարցազրույցի նպատակն է լուսաբանել պատերազմական իրավիճակում ապրած և համալսարանային կրթություն ստանալիս իրադարձությունները և զգացմունքները:

Ընթացակարգը

Չասկանում եմ, որ հարցազրույցը անցկացվելու է մասնակցի տանը կամ մեկ այլ պատշաճ վայրում, և տեսագրվելու և/կամ ձայնագրվելու է: Բացի այդ, ես հասկանում եմ, որ հարցազրույցը կարող է անցկացվել այլ տարբերակով, ավելի կոնկետ՝ օնլայն հարթակներում (Zoom/Google Meet): Որպես մասնակից ես պատմելու եմ անձնական իրադարձություններից և զգացմունքներից որոնք կապված են համալսարանային կրթությունը պատերազմական իրավիճակում ստանալիս թեմայի հետ: Տեղյակ եմ, որ հարցազրույցները տևելու են մոտ մեկ ժամ, բայց այդուհանդերձ մասնակիցները կարող են որևէ պահի դադարեցնել հարցազրույցը, հրաժարվել պատասխանել որևէ հարցի, կամ որևէ պահի դուրս գալ նախագծից: Չասկանում եմ, որ եթե ցանկանամ հարցազրույցը մեկ ժամից ավելի երկարաձգել, ինձ այդ հնարավորությունը կընձեռվի:

Ռիսկեր և օգուտներ

Տեղյակ եմ, որ որևէ պահի կարող եմ դադարեցնել հարցազրույցը, ընդմիջել կամ հրաժարվել շարունակել: Չաշվի առնելով, որ ուսանողների նախագծերը ներլսարանային ցուցադրման մաս են կազմելու (կայքով և/կամ հրատարակումներով), իմ պատմությունը և կարծիքները, իմ թույլտվությամբ, նույնպես ներկայացվելու է:

Մասնակցության պայմանները

Որպես մասնակից ինձ հասանելի կլինեն ձայնագրված և գրի առնված տվյալները՝ դրանք ստուգելու նպատակով: Նախագծի ամբողջ տևողության ընթացքում, ես

հնարավորություն կունենամ վերանայել ու հաստատել անգլերեն թարգմանությունը, եթե նյութը հայերեն է:

___ Հասկանում եմ, որ որևէ պահի կարող եմ հետ վերցնել համաձայնությունս ու հրաժարվել մասնակցել նախագծին՝ առանց բացասական հետևանքների:

___ Հասկանում եմ, որ այս նախագծի տվյալները գիտաուսումնական նպատակներով կարող են հրատարակվել՝ տպագիր կամ թվային տարբերակներով:

Իմ հարցազրույցի **ինքնության բացահայտման և վերարտադրման առումով**

___ Համաձայն եմ, որ **ինքնությունս հայտնի լինի**: Հասկանում եմ, որ ինքնությունս կարող է բացահայտվել այս հարցազրույցի արդյունքում հրատարակված նյութերում:

___ Համաձայն եմ գիտաուսումնական նպատակներով այս հարցազրույցի նկարների ու ձայնագրությունների վերարտադրմանը որևէ հաղորդամիջոցով (վեբ կայքեր, և այլն):

ԿԱՍ

___ Հասկանում եմ, որ իմ մասնակցությունն այս ուսումնասիրությանը **գաղտնի** է: Ես հասկանում եմ, որ իմ ինքնությունը չի բացահայտվի այլ ցանկացած հրապարակման կամ ներկայացման մեջ, որոնք կլինեն այս հարցազրույցի արդյունքը, կօգտագործվի ծածկանուն:

___ Համաձայն եմ, որ չնայած իմ հարցազրույցից որոշ նյութեր կարող են հրատարակվել, սակայն ոչ մի ձայնագրություն չի կարող վերարտադրվել:

Այն դեպքում, երբ լուսանկարներ, իրեր կամ փաստաթղթեր են նկարվել կամ սկանավորվել

___ Համաձայն եմ, որ ուսումնասիրությունն անող ուսանողը պատճենահանի լուսանկարներ ու փաստաթղթեր նախագծի շրջանակներում օգտագործելու համար:

ՈՒՇԱԴԻՐ ԿԱՐԴԱՑԵԼ ԵՄ ՎԵՐԸ ՇԱՐԱԴՐՎԱԾԸ և ՀԱՍԿԱՆՈՒՄ ԵՄ ԱՅՍ ՀԱՄԱՁԱՅՆԱԳՐԻ ԿԵՏԵՐԸ: ՀՈԺԱՐԱԿԱՄ ՀԱՄԱՁԱՅՆՈՒՄ ԵՄ ՄԱՍՆԱԿՑԵԼ ԱՅՍ ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅԱՆԸ:

Մասնակից՝
Անուն ազգանուն (խնդրում ենք գրել տպատառ)

Ստորագրություն _____ Ամսաթիվ

Հարցազրույց վարող՝
Անուն ազգանուն (խնդրում ենք գրել տպատառ)

Ստորագրություն _____ Ամսաթիվ

Եթե որպես բանավոր պատմության նախագծի մասնակից որևէ պահի հարցեր կունենաք ձեր իրավունքների վերաբերյալ, կարող եք կապվել ՀԱՀ Հումանիտար և հասարակական գիտությունների ֆակուլտետի դասախոս դոկտոր Հուրիկ Ադդարեանի հետ (հեռ. 060 612769, Էլ.հասցե՝ hourig.attarian@aua.am):

Appendix B - Consent Form in English

CONSENT FORM

Consent to participate in a capstone project conducted at the American University of Armenia (AUA). This is to state that I agree to participate in the capstone project conducted by Arthur Poghosyan. The capstone director is Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@ua.am).

PURPOSE: I have been informed that the purpose of the project is to compile personal stories and experiences from people who were university students during a time of war. Within the bigger context of the project, the interview conducted by Arthur Poghosyan is meant to focus on in-depth interviews exploring personal experiences of living and studying through times of war and conflict

PROCEDURES: I understand that the interview will be conducted in participants' homes or another appropriate place, and might be recorded on video. Alternatively, the interview may be conducted on Zoom or another online platform. As a participant, I will be asked to explore personal experiences and feelings regarding my experiences of studying at the university through times of conflict. The interview will last from one to two hours, however, as a participant I am free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the focus group for more than two hours, I will be provided that opportunity.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I understand that the interview involves the sharing of my personal views and opinions, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration. I have been informed that I am free to stop, take a break or discontinue at any time. There are no risks involved in partaking in this interview.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded material for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of **identification and reproduction** of my participation:

I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

I agree to the reproduction of sound and images from this interview by any method and in any media for academic purposes (which may include webpages, documentary clips, etc..)

OR

I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential**. My identity will be concealed. I will be given a pseudonym in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

I agree that while data from my interview may be published, no sound or images from it may be reproduced.

When photographs, artifacts or documents are scanned or photographed

I agree to let the student researcher copy family photographs and documents for use in the student project only.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

INTERVIEWER:

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a capstone project participant, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

Appendix C - General Interview Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself
 1. What is your name?
 2. Where were you born?
 3. Tell me about your family - parents, siblings
 4. What hobbies do you have?
 5. What do you do now in terms of studying and/or work?

- Early life
 1. Where did you grow up?
 2. What was it like growing up?
 3. What significant memories do you have of your childhood?
 4. What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word "childhood"?
 5. Tell me about a significant person from your childhood
 6. Did you have any family traditions that you took part in during your childhood?

- Schooling
 1. What school did you go to?
 2. What did you like to study?
 3. What were some of your favorite subjects at school?
 4. What did you learn about the artsakh movement in the 90s?
 5. Tell me what future career you envisioned at the time

- University life
 1. What was it like going through the enrollment process? Was it easy to adapt to a new environment?
 2. Do you have any close friends that you've met only after you were enrolled into the university? Could you tell me a little bit about them?
 3. Considering you enrolled in an already-established temporary online-learning platform, what was your impression of it?
 4. Were you able to attend the university physically, outside of classes for any occasion to familiarize yourself with the environment? If so, what was the experience like?

- Artsakh
 1. Can you approximately recall the moment when you heard about Artsakh and the significance of the region to Armenia?
 2. When did you understand the conflict? The roots, the reasons behind the countries constantly clashing
 3. Given how frequently conflicts, mainly skirmishes with full-scale offensives like this, happened throughout the past 30 years, what parallels did you draw with past events? (namely 4-day war in 2016; July of the same year)

- War period
 1. What did you feel when you heard the news that a full-scale fighting was going on in Artsakh?
 2. Have you ever been to Artsakh before; what kind of a connection do you have with the region?
 3. Tell me about some of your possible friends or relatives that have participated in the war (if they participated before 2020 conflicts, what was it like for them to go to the borders yet again in 2020)
 4. How did you spend the 27th of September of the year 2020

- Studying during the war
 1. Tell me about your emotional state during the war, what did you feel?
 2. Given that the war lasted for a good portion of the Fall semester, how did you manage to study under these conditions?
 3. If anything, what helped you distract yourself from the war?
 4. Involvement with the war's informational warfare
 5. Did you do any volunteering work?
 6. How involved were you with the media?

- The aftermath of the war and present days
 1. How did you feel when you heard that the war was over? Could you describe your feelings?
 2. Describe how did your first class the following day go - what conversations did you have with your fellow students or professors?
 3. Looking back at the situation, how much of the experiences and the emotional sorrow were you able to process?
 4. How do you feel now, given that the war ended approximately 4 months ago, does it still continue to impact you in any way?
 5. There's no denying that the situation is horrible, but in the midst of this grief, were there certain things that have relieved you in this situation? (e.g. soldiers coming back home)
 6. Did you have any impactful conversations with your friends or relatives after the war?
 7. How do you imagine yourself in 5 years? Do you see your future in Armenia? What is your vision regarding the country?
 8. How does the current political tension affect you and/or your studies in any way?