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“We are a small nation, but...”: The image of the self, the image of the other, and the image of the enemy in school text books about Armenia.

Based on an analysis of school history textbooks, this article illustrates the process of transformation of the narrative of national history in post-Soviet Armenia. The transformation of perceptions of history is largely dictated by the post-Soviet context, in which a process of building the nation-state is under way, and also the presence in the region of ethno-political factors. In the last 20 years, significant changes have taken place in the study and teaching of history; many previously suppressed topics have been raised and many events reconceived. Thus, in contemporary history textbooks, episodes of history are reviewed which previously were omitted or were presented in a rather one-sided manner, as for example, the history of the Armenian political parties of the First Republic from 1918-1920. On the other hand, this transformation had rather more an evolutionary than a revolutionary nature. The main thematic scheme of the narrative of national history has been preserved in texts of contemporary textbooks of the history of Armenia, which harks back to the pre-Soviet period and which, co-existing with the official Soviet ideology, was mainly conserved even in the Soviet period. This scheme is based on the opposition between the Armenian people fighting for independence, and external forces trying to enslave or destroy it.

The Post-Soviet Context: From the History of the Empire to the History of the National States

Much has been written on the role of history books in the formation of perceptions of history and, as a consequence, the formation of national identities. Much has been written on the role of intellectuals, and in particular historians, and how the state or political elites influence these processes, and in some cases strives to instrumentalize them. Finally, conflict situations, in particular ethno-political conflicts leave their imprint on the formation of perceptions of history. In this article we will look at some aspects of these processes through the example of how images of the self and images of others are constructed in history textbooks in post-Soviet Armenia.

The countries of the South Caucasus, just like some other post-Soviet states, after the fall of the Soviet Union, found themselves in a fairly peculiar position. On the one hand, the process of building a nation-state became a real one, a process which for the majority of European countries took place in the late 19th or early 20th century. On the other hand, post-Soviet countries could not ignore the processes of globalization or regional integration which often entered into conflict with the process of building the nation state. Finally, in the countries of the South Caucasus, the influences of the imperial state remained quite significant. The term “empire” is used by us in a strictly neutral sense (“a centralized multinational state”). These three vectors -- national, global and post-imperial -- largely determined the processes of transformation of the identity of the countries of the South Caucasus.

The processes taking place in our time in Armenia, just as in other countries of the South Caucasus and the former USSR, on the whole are not somehow unique. Essentially, this is the continuation of the process of the formation of the nation-states which Europe underwent for

almost 200 years. The period from pre-modern forms of statehood to the nation-state, characteristic for the era of the modernity, passed in various parts of Europe in different ways and at a different time. In some parts of Europe, this process was practically completed by the second half of the 19th century; in other regions the system of national states acquired a more or less finished form only after World War II, and in some places this process is not complete (as, for example, the Balkans).

The countries of Southern Caucasus, just like other post-Soviet states passed through this process with some “delay” (it was for this reason that E. Gellner called this region “the fourth time zone of Europe”). The first attempt to realize national projects in this region took place from 1918-1921. After this attempt followed a peculiar compromise between the multinational empire and national state, embodied in the ethno-federal structure of the USSR, where the quasi-national state formations (“union republics”) were in strict subordination to the central government.¹ Finally, with the fall of the USSR, quasi-national state units began to survive the stormy process of transformation into full-fledged national governments. Even so, practically everywhere there were certain contradictions between various national projects which in some cases, in particular in the South Caucasus, spilled into ethno-political conflicts.

With the building of the national state was closely connected the transformation of notions about history. In this context, as a result, there was a rejection of the narrative of history of the multinational state (“empire”) and transition to the narrative of national history. In the countries of the Southern Caucasus, a process is underway from the historical narrative, which constructed the history of each of these countries in the context of a common Soviet history, to the nationally oriented narrative of history.

In speaking of the transition from the Soviet narrative of history to the national states we must make one important caveat. This transition was hardly revolutionary, but was rather evolutionary: national narratives of history did not appear at one moment after the USSR ceased to exist. In many cases, including in Armenia, important traits of the national narrative of history were formed even in the pre-Soviet period. In the Soviet period, these narratives, or at least certain elements of them, existed and developed despite the fact that they were forced to “survive” in conditions when the Soviet historical narrative dominated. If the ethno-federal structure of the USSR was a kind of compromise between the “imperial” project of the center and the “national projects” of the local elites, then the conceptions of history formulated as a result of an analogous compromise between the common Soviet historical narrative and the local “national histories”. On the one hand, the common state Soviet narrative of history was actively inculcated by the center, and serious deviations from this model were not permitted (in particular, this affected new and most current history). On the other hand, in the framework of the prevailing Soviet paradigms, the preservation and development of elements, it was possible to preserve and develop elements of the parallel national narrative, if they did not openly contradict the basic scheme of the official Soviet narrative.² After the fall of the USSR, it was these semi-official narratives of national history that became the basis for the formation of notions of history in the post-Soviet states.

1 On the ethno-federalism of the USSR see Slezkine, 1996, pp. 203-239.

2 See Dadrian, 1977; Jones, 1994; for how national history narratives were preserved and developed in Armenia and Georgia in the Soviet period.

Study and Teaching of History in Post-Soviet Armenia

Just as in some other republics of the USSR (for example, in the Baltics and Georgia), in Armenia the official Soviet narrative began to waver before the fall of the USSR. Moreover, deconstructing the basic mythologemes of Soviet official historiography became one of the factors which led to the collapse of the Soviet system. Thus, to the extent that the movement for independence develops, the topic of public discussion becomes episodes of history which earlier were suppressed or were covered one-sidedly, without going beyond the framework of the official Soviet version. Among these topics was the activity of the Armenian political parties in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (in particular, the party of the Dashnatsutun); the history of the independent Armenian republic in 1918-1920; the activity of the “fidains” (“Haiduks”) in the late 19th/early 20th centuries; the rebellion against the Bolsheviks in February 1921; (“February rebellion”), the resistance of the Bolsheviks in the region of Zangezur in 1920-1921, Stalin repressions in the 1930s and so on. If for the countries of the Baltics, the question of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had a fundamental significance, then in Armenia, an analogous role was played by the discussion of the cooperation of the Bolsheviks and the Kemalist movement in Turkey in 1920-1921, which, in particular, was reflected in the “Moscow Agreement Between Russian and Turkey” in 1921.

Since these episodes were taboo for historians and the broader public in the Soviet years, their public discussion in the late 1980s dealt a serious blow to the positions of official ideology and prepared the ground for the removal of the Communists from power.

The problems of the history of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations gained a particular significance in this period. Armenian and Azerbaijani historians had sharp disagreements about the past of this region in the Soviet period, when such discussions were limited to the frameworks of the Soviet official narrative. At those times, these discussions basically concerned the ancient and medieval periods. After 1988, the arena of the “memory wars” (in V. Shnirelman’s expression) affected new and most current history.

At the same time, we should not overestimate the meaning of the changes that brought independence with them, for the area of student and research of history in Armenia. As has been indicated, despite significant limitations, in the framework of the Soviet system there existed and developed narratives of national history. This concerned Armenia in particular, where many fundamental traits of the modern national narrative were formed back in the period of “national renaissance” in the late 19th century and somewhat later - in the first quarter of the 20th century, under the influence of the catastrophic events of this period (of course the genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire played a special role). On the whole, in Armenia, the degree of succession between the historiography of the Soviet period and the post-Soviet period was fairly high, unlike several other post-Soviet states, where a cardinal transformation of the conception of national history took place.

The preservation of a certain degree of succession in the teaching and study of history is related also to the position of the Armenian state elites. Of course, generally, the state policy in questions of collective memory conducted by the post-Soviet elites of Armenia is placed within the framework of a common body of behavior of post-Soviet national elites. Here as well state support for the “nationalization” of concepts of history takes place, which is reflected in the most diverse spheres: from the re-naming of streets and the replacement of statues to the support of research and the development of a “national” set of topics. Nevertheless, the political elites of Armenia, unlike several other post-Soviet countries rather

cautiously regarded projects of radical revision of history “in the national spirit,” despite the fact that such projects were greatly in demand among the “patriotically” minded circles of society. In the studies of nationalism, a mechanism is described well, when political elites set the task of revision of history in the “national” vein, and intellectuals and broad segments of society follow after them in the direction indicated by the state policy. The situation in the late Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia does not quite fit into this scheme: in conditions of a struggle for political independence with the Union center and the ethno-political conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan, here was formulated a broad public demand for historical revisionism. And the political elite sometimes tried to “swim with the tide” using this demand in their efforts to build a national state, and sometimes, just the opposite, trying to resist these trends.

In this regard, the position of the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosian, was indicative. Coming to power on the wave of a movement which combined within it elements of both nationalism as well as the struggle for democracy, Ter-Petrosian, after becoming president, tried to position himself as a liberal leader, but accused his political opponents of radical nationalism. Moreover, Ter-Petrosian, a historian and Orientalist by training, sometimes expressed ideas that were completely unexpected coming out of the mouth of a leader building a national state: for example, he would say that “national ideology” is a “false category”. Such statements were greeted with hostility by the broad public and became the basis for accusations of the president in “treason” and “anti-national policy”.

Taking into account the bitter experience of Ter-Petrosian, the second president of Armenia, Robert Kocharian, took a more cautious position of a politician and pragmatic, not so much bringing to life a certain conception of “the politics of memory,” so much as reacting to the current political situation. Nevertheless, even under Kocharian, struggles to radically revise the historical narrative did not find government support. The current president, Serj Sarkisian, took office recently, in 2008, and it is still early to make any such conclusions on his conception of “the politics of memory”; however at the present time there is no basis to consider that his policy can be more inclined to be supported by nationalist revisionism in history, than the politics of his predecessors.

Succession with regard to the past in the post-Soviet Armenian historiography found its reflection in the work on the history textbooks of Armenia.³ Representatives of the old and middle generations of historians predominate in the authors’ collective of history textbooks, the leading specialists of the Institute for the History of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and the Faculty of History of Yerevan State University. They represent a generation of specialists whose formation as historians passed back in the Soviet years and which at that time continued the tradition of the pre-Soviet period of national historiography. This explains the conservatism of the textbooks which have both positive as well as negative sides. The positive includes a high level of professionalism and scholarly accuracy, good knowledge of primary sources, and the restrained and generally “politically correct” style of the textbooks. The flaws include an excessive scholarly narration, an overloading of the text with information and scholarly language which makes the comprehension for school-age children somewhat difficult and opens the way for “improvisation” by school teachers.

3 All the textbooks reviewed in this research are in the Armenian language. The name of the subject and the textbooks in Armenian are as follows: “Ayots Patmutiun,” a term that harks back to the ancient Armenian language (“grabar”) and traditionally used in Armenian historiography since the Middle Ages. The phrase “Ayots patmutiu” can equally be translated as “History of Armenia” (that is, of the country) and also “History of the Armenians” (i.e. the people).

The selection of history textbooks passes through the following process: the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia declares a competition in which the publishing houses take part, each of which collaborates with a certain collective of authors. The textbooks selected as a result of the contest are compulsory for all schools in Armenia, the use of alternative textbooks on the history of Armenia is not a practice.

The absence of alternative textbooks is unquestionably a minus, since it deprives students of access to an alternative perspective on the historical process. On the other hand, taking into account the popularity of the radical-revolutionary and dilettantish approaches among the reading public (including among school teachers), we cannot doubt but that if alternative textbooks were permitted to be used in schools, these approaches would be broadly represented in them. Moreover, given the popularity of the dilettante historians in the media, it cannot be ruled out the literature based on these approaches could be more popular than the “boring” academic literature

Taking all this into account, it must be noted that at this stage, the fact that schools are closed to alternative literature in history is to a certain extent understandable, given that it is trying to shield schools from the influence of radical revisionism.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that the lack of alternative textbooks cannot be seen as an effective resolution of this problem. As is known, “forbidden fruit is sweetest,” and the dilettante and revisionist interpretations of history, one way or another forge a way through to the minds of youth. In this situation, as it seems to us, a far more effective decision would be to create alternative textbooks by the Ministry of Education itself by drawing in an alternative professional team of historians (possibly with the participation of some of the authors of the basic textbooks). In order that the basic textbooks not duplicate each other, the alternatives could suggest a somewhat different view of history, giving preference not to political but social and cultural history, the history of everyday life, using the methods of micro-history in this.

The Image of the Self and Image of the Other in Ancient and Medieval History

In general terms, the image of the self in the modern textbooks of the history of Armenia does not contain radical changes by comparison with the traditional narrative of the Armenian history, about which Mark Ferro wrote.⁴ The image of the Armenian is resolved in the framework of a model which was formulated back in the 19th century, during the period of the “national renaissance,” based on several elements of medieval Armenian historiography. Moreover, you can even trace a certain succession regarding the classic Armenian historiography, right up to the 5th century, the “father of Armenian historiography” Movses Khorenatsi. The image of the self which is proposed by contemporary history textbooks is built in accordance with the famous formulation by Khorenatsi: “although we are a small people, very small in number, weak and often under foreign reign, even so in our country many courageous exploits have been made, worthy of inclusion in the annals.”⁵

One of the important elements of the narrative of Armenian national history is the mythologeme, going back again to Movses Khorenatsi, about Armenians as descendents of Ayk, a freedom-loving leader, who led his people out of Babylon to the mountainous areas of Armenia, where Ayk and his kin were free from the tyranny of Bel, the ruler of Babylon.

⁴ Ferro, 2003, c. 210-245.

⁵ *Istoriya Armenii*, 7th grade, Macmillan, 2009, p. 56. Original: Movses Khorenatsi, 1991, p. 10.

According to the legend, Bel tried to subordinate his former vassal and undertake a crusade against him, however he was defeated. In the context of the “national renaissance” and the struggle for the realization of the Armenian national state, the legend told by Khorenatsi acquired new life, since the mythologeme of a small people which wages an unequal battle against superior forces of conquerors fit in perfectly with the national discourse of the modern era. Modern textbooks, following tradition, thus retell the legend of Ayk and Bel as one of the ancient legends on the origins of the Armenian people. Along with the history of Ayk and Bel, the authors also tell the “Greek” version of the origins of Armenians from one of the Argonauts, told by Strabon, and the “Georgian” version, on the origin of the peoples of the Caucasus from the mythical personage Torgom and his sons.⁶

An important characterization of the image of oneself is the emphasis on the high level of cultural development and richness of the cultural heritage. Inevitably the importance is emphasized of certain elements of culture for the preservation of the national identity and “survival of the nation” under conditions of absence of statehood. Thus, the creation of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots is interpreted not only as a significant cultural achievement but also the acquiring of the Armenians of a “new and powerful weapon for the survival of the nation”. Thus, the students gain the impression that the creator of the alphabet was led in fact by national considerations, including the need to secure “the culture independence of the Armenians”.⁷

It seems to us that such an interpretation, which reflects the generally accepted traditional narrative is somewhat disputed, since it presupposes that the figures of the 5th century acted in the spirit of the intellectuals of the modern era. In defense of the textbook authors it should be noted that the same chapter based on primary sources, explains in a fair amount of details the religious motivations for the creator of the alphabet, Mesrop Mashtots: as a Christian preacher, Mashtots became convinced based on his own experience of the need to translate Christian literature into the Armenian language, and in fact it was this that inspired him to set the task of creating Armenian literacy.⁸

According to the traditional image of the self in the Armenian historical narrative, the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church is accentuated. The roots of this perception go back to the medieval models of identity, when affiliation to a certain religion or denomination served as a basic marker for identity, overshadowing such markers for identity as ethnic origin language. In the traditional narrative of national history, the Armenian Apostolic Church is given the role of instrument for preserving the national identity, and furthermore, it is perceived as a kind of “substitute” for a national state. The textbooks talk about the “indisputable” role of the Armenian church in the history of the Armenians:

“when Armenian was stripped of its independent statehood, the church took it upon itself to preserve and develop Armenian culture and the great mission of the leadership of the liberation movements.”⁹

Of course, such notions about the significant place of the Armenian Church in the history of Armenia reflects historical reality to an obvious degree. On the other hand, like any mythologizing of history, the mythologizing of the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church

6 *Istoriya Armenii*, 6th grade, Macmillan, 2007, pp. 34-35

7 *Istoriya Armenii*, 7th grade, Macmillan, 2009, p. 51.

8 *ibid.*, p. 52.

9 *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

leads does not lead to an entirely full and adequate depiction of historical realities. Thus, one of the consequences of this tendency is that in the modern Armenian historical narrative and the reflection of it in the textbooks, the history of the Armenians, who left the Armenian Apostolic Church for various reasons is marginalized. Thus, those groups which by origin and culture belong to the Armenian ethnic community, but by confession to other denominations (for example, the Armenian Chaledonians in the early and mature Middle Ages and the Armenian Catholics in the late Middle Ages, not to mention the Armenians who have accepted Islam).

On the whole, the image of the self portrayed in textbooks fits into the framework of the “ethno-cultural” conception of identity, so to speak. This explains as well the attention to the problems of ethno-genesis which is peculiar to historiography of the post-Soviet countries in general. The problems of the ethnogenesis of Armenians takes up a significant part of the account on the most ancient period of history of Armenian; given that this is a textbook for the 6th grade, all of this is fairly complicated for the students to comprehend.¹⁰

The narrative on which the text of the of the history books is based is built on a subject outline which is one of the most widespread in the narratives of national history. This is the story of the opposition of a numerically-small people, fighting for their freedom, and the powerful external forces which try to enslave it, or even destroy it. In keeping with this outline, the function of the “negative personage” in various periods is reduced to various external forces. Sometimes this is an empire, which tries for a long time methodically to subject Armenia to its rule (Iran of the Akhemenidov dynasty; the Roman Empire; Iran of the Sasanidov dynasty; Byzantine Empire); sometimes its nomads whose brief but destructive invasion deals an irreparable blow to Armenia (the Tatar Mongolians; Tamerlane; the Turkish tribes of Ak-Koyunlu and Kara-Koyunlu). In some cases the image of the “conqueror” combines traits of both; the invasion of the nomads gradually turns into imperial reign (for example, from the Arab raids to the Caliphate, from the invasions of the Turkish-Seldjuks to the Ottoman Empire. By comparison with the significance given to the role of forces external to the Southern Caucasus, the role which is given to the neighbors in the Southern Caucasus is fairly modest. In recounting the events of ancient and medieval history, this role largely has a positive or neutral nature. Thus, it is emphasized that in the 5th century, Georgia and Caucasian Albania became allies in the struggle against Sasanid Iran.¹¹

The idea of union relations and the coincidence of interests between Armenians and Georgians is present in the sections devoted to the “joint struggle” against the Arabs, Byzantine and Seldjuk conquerors.¹²

The Image of the Self and Other in the New and Latest History

The closer to our time the historical period in question, the greater the historical narrative acquires political relevance. The modern (or latest) history is that part of the national narrative which has suffered the most changes over a period of the last 20 years. Moreover, on a number of issues, fierce sharp disputes continue which are often immediately connected to current issues of foreign and domestic policy. Moreover, to this day, the consequences of the “schism” are still felt between the narrative which prevailed in Armenia proper, and the approaches which existed in the communities of the Diaspora.

10 *Istoriya Armenii*, 6th grade, Macmillan, 2009, pp. 33-44.

11 *Istoriya Armenii*, 5th grade, Louise, pp. 101, 105

12 *Istoriya Armenii*, 6th grade, Louise, 2005, pp. 15, 42-43, 58-61.

A vivid example is the history of the first republic of Armenia in which the ruling party was the Dashnaktsutium, which to this day remains as one of the most influential Armenian parties, particularly in the Diaspora communities. In the Soviet years, historiography of Soviet Armenia depicted the republic of 1918-1920 as “a satellite of imperialism” and the Dashnaktsutium Party was demonized as a “bourgeois nationalist party”. Accordingly, the Sovietization of Armenia is conceived as a result of the uprising of the Armenian working class and peasantry, to which the Red Army “came to help”. For their part, in the Diaspora communities, which are under the influence of the Dashnaktsutian Party, a completely different version of history reigned in which the heroization of the republic takes place from 1918-1920 in whole, and Dashnaktsutium in part, even as mistakes and flaws of the leadership of the first republic are ignored or suppressed. Finally, yet another tendency was found which prevailed among the opponents of Dashnaktsutium in the communities of the Diaspora, and which was more critical regarding Dashnaktsutium.

In Armenia, in the last years of the USSR, the Soviet version of history of 1918-1920 fell apart under the influence of new facts and sources opened up to the broader public. Along with the new facts and sources, however came new myths as well. The mythologizing and heroization of the period 1918-1920 which had taken place in the Diaspora now became characteristic for Armenia. Only gradually, after the euphoria of the first years passed, did the history of the first Armenian republic begin to be perceived by Armenian society as more balanced.¹³

An interesting example of the perception of history of that period in modern Armenian society is the fact that textbooks interpret the so-called “May uprising” of 1920. In early May 1920, after the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, the Armenian Bolsheviks organized a protest, which was supported by part of the army. The Bolsheviks managed for a time to seize power in some districts of Armenia; however, soon after, the protest was crushed. If in the Soviet period the “May uprising” was interpreted in the context of class warfare, as an episode of the “heroic struggle for the establishment of soviet power in Armenia,” then today it is already viewed as an action aimed at the independence of Armenia. Nevertheless, the tone of the account remains fairly restrained and neutral, a certain interpretation of the events is not imposed on the students. Furthermore, the very use of the term “uprising” and not “rebellion” is very illustrative, especially given that the protests of the Muslim population against the authorities of independent Armenia in the same chapter are called “rebellions”¹⁴. Meanwhile, the protest against soviet power in the chapter on Dashnaktsutium in February 1921 is also called an “uprising,” and it is emphasized that this relies on “the support of broad popular masses”.¹⁵ On the whole, both “uprisings” were depicted in a neutral tone, without clear sympathies to one of the sides, and the chief leitmotif was to emphasize the tragedy of the situation in which Armenians battled against their fellow countrymen.¹⁶

If the history of 1918-1920 is a subject of sharp political discussion, then one can imagine how sharp the discussions become in Armenian society regarding the events of the 1980s and 1990s. Discussions about the recent past continue to remain heated throughout the whole post-Soviet space, however the situation in Armenia stands out against this background. The fact is, many of the leading politicians of that time continue to remain the chief figures in politics

13 A comprehensive and fairly objective research of the history of the Republic of Armenia in 1918-1920 has been written Richard Ovannisian, an American historian of Armenian heritage, whose works are often translated into Armenian and are now available to historians in Armenia (Hovannisian, 1971-1996).

14 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, pp. 20-21.

15 *ibid.*, 2008, c. 42.

16 *ibid.*, 2008, c. 43.

even today, including the first, second and current presidents of the country, and the relationships between the political forces which they represent are rather strained. Taking into account the heat of political passions in modern Armenia, writing the history of post-Soviet Armenia is not an easy task. Even so, the authors on the whole coped fairly well with this task: the text on the history of 1991-2008 is kept in a neutral tone and is a dry exposition of the facts, with a minimum of evaluations and interpretations.¹⁷

To be sure, this is achieved in part because many sharp corners are cut off and some problems of political life in modern Armenia are not touched upon at all, or are only mentioned in passing (as, for example, the problem of disputed elections).

The coverage of the history of the Armenian Diaspora occupies a separate place in the narrative of contemporary history. The history of the Diaspora is closely connected to the history of the genocide of 1915. It is emphasized that the formation of the Armenian Diaspora is a direct consequence of the genocide of 1915. In this context, the Diaspora is counterposed to the existence until 1915 of Armenian communities (or “colonies”). It is stressed that unlike the previous historical periods, the resettlement of Armenians in other countries was forcible, and they were deprived of the opportunity to return to their historic homeland. In the same context it is stated that until 1915, the term “diaspora” was not applied regarding Armenian communities outside the territory of Armenia.¹⁸ The history of the Diaspora is presented in great detail -- it occupies a whole section of the textbook of the latest history. Such topics are represented as the structure of the Diaspora, the communities of different countries, and also the relations of Armenia and the Diaspora.¹⁹ The chapter devoted to the ties between Armenia and the Diaspora also speaks of the partial repatriation of Armenians in 1920-1930s and from 1946-1948. Also noted is the exile of some of the repatriated Armenians to Siberia in 1949, which notes that among those deported were not only the repatriated but local Armenians as well.²⁰

As can be expected, Turkey and Russia (after the 1920s, the Soviet Union) take on a particular significance in the exposition of the modern history of Armenia by the external authors. The account of the history of Armenia from the end of the 19th century is practically inseparable from the history of the collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires and the process of geopolitical rivalry between the great powers related to this. Turkey is assigned the function of the main “enemy”. It should be noted that taking into account the factor of the genocide and the current tense relations with Turkey, it would be hard to expect another approach to the role of Turkey in the period under review. Nevertheless, in the account of the genocide of 1915, and the events of recent years, the authors have largely refrained from the temptation of emotionally rendering historical material. The style of exposition is calm and relatively neutral. There are no extremely detailed descriptions of violence, which could psychologically traumatize young people. Although from time to time expressions are encountered of the type “Turkish gangs,” however, guilt for the destruction of the Armenians is placed on the “government,” “the Young Turks,” and personally on the rulers of Turkey in this period under review, and not on the entire Turkish ethnos as a whole (unlike the approaches peculiar to the radical-nationalist circles).²¹

17 *ibid.*, 2008, c. 132-147.

18 *ibid.*, 2008, p. 169.

19 *ibid.*, 2008, pp. 168-197.

20 *ibid.*, 2008, p. 185.

21 *Istoriya Armenii v kontekste mirovoy istorii*, 10th grade, Zangak-97, p. 146 and ff.

There are much greater nuances in the interpretation of the image of Russia. Armenian history textbooks provide a fairly balanced assessment of the facts of the annexation of Eastern Armenia to Russia, which could be characterized as “positive, but with some caveats”. It is noted that “transitioning to Russian dominion, the people of Eastern Armenia were liberated from the threat of assimilation and physical annihilation. “Its fate was connected to a powerful centralized state, in which it obtained the guarantees of security of life and property”. Later it is said that although Russia “was also a backward state,” it was “more progressive than Persia,” thanks to which “the Armenian people received more bearable conditions for economic and cultural development,” and “Russian culture enabled the development of Armenian art and science.” At the same time it is noted that “even with all the positive achievements, the Armenian people have not acquired freedom, and it was subjected to national-colonial oppression.»²².

If in the exposition of history of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the description of the annexation of Eastern Armenian to Russia, Russia generally appears in a positive role, then in the exposition of events of the late 19th century, the textbook authors in a number of cases emphasize the negative aspects of the policy of Russia. In the story of the Armenian pogroms in Turkey under Sultan Abdul-Gamid II it is noted that Russia during this period came out against the Armenian liberation movement and supported the Ottoman sultan.²³ In one of the textbooks there is a special sub-chapter in which is discussed the “colonial policy of tsarism” in Eastern Armenia.²⁴

In the context of the Russian imperial and colonial policy, the oppression of the Armenians in the late 19th and early 20th century is described, in particular the confiscation of the property of the Armenian Church, and the struggle of the Armenians against those actions of the tsarist government noted, that “popular unrest essentially grew into the national-liberation struggle.²⁵ The negative role of the tsarist authorities, who incited inter-ethnic hatred, is emphasized in this section, which is devoted to the so called “Armenian-Tatar Clashes” of 1905-1906.²⁶ A topic that was for understandable reasons taboo in Soviet Armenian historiography is exposed, the persecution of the members of the Dashnaktsutiun Party.²⁷

On the whole, the textbooks reframe from a singular appraisal of the role of the Russian Empire in the history of Armenia and strive to show both the positive and the negative aspects of Armenian-Russian relations. It should be noted that in this issue as well, we should not exaggerate the degree of differences between the post-Soviet narrative of history and the narrative which existed earlier. During the Soviet period it was “allowed” to criticize certain aspects of the policy of Tsarist Russia, including its colonial nature. On the other hand, the generally positive image of Russia existing in the historical narrative of the Soviet period is preserved in the textbooks in highlighting a number of historical episodes. Thus, it is a question not so much of radical revision so much as a changing of the accents in a partial transformation of the narrative of history.

The effort “not to put all the eggs in one basket” is notable in describing the Sovietization of Armenia. If in some post-Soviet countries after the fall of the USSR, the Sovietization was

22 *Istoriya Armenii*, 8th grade, Macmillan, 2007, pp. 51-52.

23 *ibid*, pp. 97-98, 114.

24 *ibid*, pp. 107-108.

25 *Istoriya Armenii v kontekste mirovoy istorii*, 10th grade, Zangak-97, 2001, p. 131.

26 *Istoriya Armenii*, 8th grade, Macmillan, 2007, p. 126.

27 *ibid*, 2007, p. 129.

reconceived as “occupation,” then the Armenian textbooks do not offer a singular appraisal of this event. On the one hand, the events of late 1920 are described as the “fall” of the independent Republic of Armenia, on the other hand it is said that Armenia was Sovietized “peacefully” (a claim that is entirely disputable, in the opinion of many today in modern Armenia, at any rate), and it is emphasized that “there was no alternative in the situation at that time in Armenia.”²⁸

Yet another important factor of the narrative represented in textbooks is represented by the “great powers” which, despite the promises given to Armenians, do not provide the necessary aid to the Armenian people and leave it alone with its enemy in the most critical moment. The countries of the West appear in this role above all, and in some episodes, Russia. In that context is viewer, for example, the behavior of the great powers during the Armenian pogroms in the Ottoman Empire in 1894-1896 and during the uprising in the Sasun region and the subsequent pogroms in 1904.²⁹ In the context of the story of the 1915 genocide, mention is made of the assistance provided Turkey of its allies, primarily Germany, and also the inaction of the countries of the Entente which after giving numerous promises to the Armenian people, did not keep them. As for the catastrophe during the Turkish-Armenian war of 1920, it is noted that the countries of the Entente and the U.S. left Armenia defenseless against Kemalist Turkey and Soviet Russia, and also the shortsightedness of the leading circles of independent Armenia is acknowledged, which placed excessive hopes on help from outside.³⁰

The role of France in the events of 1920-1921 is also subjected to criticism in the events in Cilicia, as a result of which a part of the local Armenian population that had survived after the 1915 genocide was subjected to new ethnic cleansing. It is emphasized that despite the fact that World War I, 5,000 Armenians fought in the ranks of the French Army, the French authorities not only did not try to defend the Armenians, but disarmed them and halted their attempt to create Armenian autonomy in Cilicia.³¹

Unlike the previous periods, where neighbors in the South Caucasus were accorded the role of “walk-on players” in the context of events of the first quarter of the 20th century, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are described in fairly great detail, and Armenian-Georgian relations in less detail in this period. As for Armenian-Georgian relations, during the Soviet period, the Armenian-Georgian conflict of December 1918 was downplayed, especially since it did not fit into the narrative of “the eternal friends of two fraternal peoples”. Now this is spoken about openly, although even now this conflict places in the narrative of national history a secondary role contrasted with the tragic events which happened in Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Modern textbooks do not avoid references to Armenian-Georgian relations in 1918-1920, however the tonality of the description of these events remains restrained; the mention of Georgia in the context of the events of 1917-1920 is generally neutral, but the description of the Armenian-Georgian territorial conflict of 1918 is given little space. Furthermore, the authors of one of the textbooks even avoided the term “Armenian-Georgian war” using the milder term “Armenian-Georgian clashes”.³² In a newer textbook, the events of 1918 are still termed “a war,” but here, too, the description takes up only a few lines.³³

28 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 38.

29 *Istoriya Armenii*, 8th grade, Macmillan, 2007, p. 97-98, 114

30 *Istoriya Armenii*, 8th grade, Louise, 2005, p. 30.

31 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 30.

32 *Istoriya Armenii*, 10th grade, Zangak-97, 2001, p. 195.

33 *History of Armenia*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 25.

Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are treated differently in the period under review. The clashes of 1905-1906 are depicted in fairly great detail. The Armenian perspective dominates in the account of these events, and there is no attempt to represent how these events are perceived by the opposite side. Nevertheless, the accounts of 1905-1906 are notable for their restraint, especially if we take into account the situation of the unresolved conflict and the dissemination of negative stereotypes in society. The tsarist authorities almost exclusively are accused of organizing the pogroms, and in striving to distract the popular masses from taking part in revolutionary movements, “embarked on such a crime as incitement of religious and ethnic hatred between peoples.”³⁴ Just like the story of the genocide of 1915, the authors refrain from detailed description of acts of violence. Also notable is that “during the Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes, many progressive representatives of the societies of both peoples spoke up with calls to peace, including Ovanes Tumanian and the Azerbaijani writer Mirza Sabir.”³⁵

A similar outline was used in the story of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in 1918-1920. On the one hand, Azerbaijan here is absolutely unambiguously portrayed in the image of the enemy. On the other hand, the chief subject opposing Armenia is not so much Azerbaijan as “external” forces. Thus it is emphasized that England stopped the advance of Armenian forces to the city of Shush in November 1918, and “the great powers, with a vested interest in Baku oil, more often put pressure on Armenia, so that it would make concessions to Azerbaijan.”³⁶

Later it is said that after the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, “Soviet Russia began to conduct a pro-Azerbaijani policy,” and “Azerbaijan took possession of Nagorno-Karabakh with the help of the Red Army,” and in 1921, “with the connivance of the highest leadership of Soviet Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh was forcibly annexed to Azerbaijan as an autonomous republic.”³⁷ It is also stressed that Turkey helped Azerbaijan in every way. Such an interpretation relates to the fact that generally, within the framework of the Armenian national narrative, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts of this period take a secondary role compared to events in Western Armenia, and the Azerbaijanis appear not as an independent actor but as allies of the Turks.

Azerbaijan appears almost exclusively in a negative context in these sections devoted to the period of the fall of the USSR and “the Third Republic.”³⁸ Here Azerbaijan already appears as the chief enemy in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The conflict is viewed within the framework of a narrative of national-liberation struggle in which the role of the oppressors is played by Azerbaijan and the leadership of the USSR (in the period until 1991). The role of the union “center” is of significant interest in the description of the events of 1988-1991. The role of the “center” is interpreted essentially as negative, with an emphasis that the union authorities supplied all sorts of support to the Azerbaijani side. Thus, responsibility for the pogroms in Sumgait in 1988 is divided between the authorities of Azerbaijan and the union republic which tried to “portray what occurred as the acts of a group of hooligans” and derailed the court trial of the perpetrators of the pogrom, so that “the true organizers remained unpunished.”³⁹

34 *Istoriya Armenii*, 8th grade, Macmillan, 2007, p. 126.

35 *ibid.*, p. 127.

36 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, pp. 25-26.

37 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 26.

38 It is customary to call modern Armenia the “third republic,” the first is the republic which existed from 1918-1920, the second is the Armenian USSR.

39 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 113.

Regarding the events of 1991, when Armenia refused to take part in the all-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR, it is said that “retaliatory measures by the center were swift,” and further it becomes clear that “retaliatory measures of the center” mean joint operations by Soviet forces and Azerbaijani sub-divisions against Armenian villages in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁰ Azerbaijan in this context appears not only as the chief rival to Armenia so much as an ally of the “center”. It would be interesting to compare this narrative with the interpretation of the subsequent events in Azerbaijan, where, as far as is known, the Karabakh conflict was also interpreted in the context of a struggle for independence against the union “center,” but in the role of “accomplices of Moscow” now the Armenians appear.

As for the phase of the conflict after 1991, the textbook of the latest history describes in a fair amount of detail the military actions in a rather dry style of dispatches from the front. The paragraph devoted to the peace talks is quite interesting on the problem of Nagorno Karabakh, where the OSCE Minsk Group and its efforts to resolve the conflict are described, and where essentially the official position of the Armenian side in the talks is presented. It is also said that “unfortunately, all the meetings and negotiations have not led to any tangible results.”⁴¹

Instead of a Conclusion: Paths to Improvement

Such are the fundamental features of the images of the self and others in the textbooks of the history of Armenia. It should be noted that on the whole, especially if you do not take into consideration the post-Soviet context, the history textbooks of Armenia are notable for their high professionalism and relative “political correctness”. Nevertheless, even with all their virtues, the history textbooks of Armenia are fairly conservative: they reproduce long-rooted schemes which do not enable the formation in students of a critical and analytical view on the events of the past. They also provide little sense of the neighbors of the region which enter the historical stage only in the role of “secondary players” (in the positive or often in the negative context. Moreover, in studying the Armenian view of the events of the past, the students essentially do not gain any conception of events of how the same events of the past look in the eyes of others.

Thus, what are the possible paths to improvement? One of the obvious paths to the modernization of the teaching of history in the Armenian context as has been noted is work in the direction of creating alternative textbooks. It is important that the authors of Armenian textbooks use such modern methodology for teaching history as the “multiperspective approach”. In this regard it can be useful to see the experience of the Council of Europe, in particular, such projects as the “European Dimension in the Teaching of History,” the result of which was a joint work by historians from different countries with different perspectives on a number of crucial moments in European history.⁴² Yet another similar project which immediately concerns the subject matter of history teaching in schools under conditions of an unresolved conflict is a joint project in Cyprus in which organizations representative teachers of Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus.⁴³

Of course in such projects it is important to get a general regional scope and have symmetry in innovation initiatives: it is impossible to inculcate tolerance on only one side of the border. In

40 *Istoriya Armenii v kontekste mirovoy istorii*, 10th grade, Zangak-97, 2001, p. 268.

41 *Istoriya Armenii*, 9th grade, Macmillan, 2008, p. 158.

42 Stradling, 2006.

43 CoE http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/historyteaching/Cooperation/Cyprus/CyprusPublication_en.asp

that regard, it should be noted that we encounter a certain vicious circle: the presence of unregulated conflicts in the South Caucasus makes realization of such projects extremely complicated; moreover, it is these conflicts which make the task of incorporation of multi-perspective approaches so vitally important. An interesting example of cooperation under conditions of irreconcilable conflict is the joint work of Israel and Palestinian historians in which the problem of the incompatibility of historical narratives is resolved in a rather original fashion. The authors do not even try to create a joint narrative: the pages of the book are divided into three parts: on the left, the Israeli narrative, on the right the Palestinian narrative and in the center, a free space where the student can write the conclusions to which he has come having acquainted himself with both texts.⁴⁴

It seems to us that at this stage, it is impossible to create alternative textbooks which would devote attention not such much to the political as the social and cultural history, the history of everyday life. Moreover, the creation of such textbooks is possible not only in the Armenian context, but also in a broader Caucasus-wide context. Such an approach would enable us to move the emphasis from political history, where the disagreements between sides are the most sharp to where there are less disputes. Of course, people familiar with the reality of the South Caucasus know full well that often the disputes about the “ethnic provenance” of a certain popular song or traditional dish can be more sharper than disagreements about politics. Nevertheless, perhaps it is time to apply the contemporary multi-perspective approaches to such “eternal questions” preoccupying the inhabitants of the South Caucasus and help them become aware that what separates them can also unite them.

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In the research that formed the basis for this article were used the following textbooks:

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