

Yerevan's Cascade Memorial to Victims of Repression: Returning from Hilltop Marginalisation

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Abstract

There is an extraordinary monument to the victims of Soviet-era repressions in a landmark location above Yerevan about which hardly anyone in Armenia knows. On 14 June 2022, a handful of activists gathered at this Cascade Memorial to pay their respects in a moving event. Fitting as that event was, it had limited reach. Fewer than thirty people attended, illustrating how marginalised the history of Soviet repression remains in public engagement.

An Ethics of Political Commemoration can help to reconceptualize this approach to commemoration. With a focus on the Cascade Memorial and the memorial day of June 14, Armenians, led and supported by memorial activists, could make this outstanding location come more alive. Linking visits to the experience of being part of a larger chain of evoking the names of victims is another strategy. In addition, researchers could contribute more insight and document their findings through Wikipedia. This effort could highlight the challenges of the authoritarian legacy in the country and, perhaps, also contribute to a more civil tone as Armenia moves towards more democracy amidst geopolitical uncertainty. This article also shows the viability of the Ethics of Political Commemoration as an ethical framework for reflecting on questions of remembrance.

Keywords

Armenia, Soviet Union, commemoration, history, ethics, Yerevan

Everyone in Armenia knows the Cascade complex — a landmark stairway that connects Yerevan’s downtown centre with Victory Park above the city. Five terraces at various levels offer views over Yerevan’s streets and across, to Mount Ararat. Nestled inside the complex is an art museum with event halls served by elevators and escalators. The Cascade’s broad limestone band, over 300 meters long and 50 meters wide, also marks the city’s main north-south axis that runs through the pedestrian Northern Avenue and the imposing opera theatre, the focal point of Yerevan’s cultural scene. Practically every visitor to Armenia’s capital will drop by the garden courtyard at the base of the Cascade, with its cafés, restaurants, and sculptures.

Yet hardly anyone in Yerevan knows that the Cascade also contains a major memorial to the victims of Soviet repression on its very top terrace. Like the history of the Soviet repressions itself, this Cascade Memorial remains largely neglected, while aspects of Armenia’s authoritarian past continue to haunt its often-confrontational politics.

A handful of Armenians are now trying to restore and recover the memory of the repressions. They see proper commemoration as a step Armenians must take on their path to democracy. Individual victims feature prominently in their remembrance. With the remarkable Cascade Memorial already in place, they have a chance to engage a broader audience in the country, as a visit to their annual commemoration ceremony suggests.

This article describes the Armenian commemoration of the victims of Soviet repression from the perspective of participant observation; puts commemoration into the context of Yerevan’s charismatic architecture; applies the Ethics of Political Commemoration to review the practices and suggest some tweaks to overcome marginalisation; and situates this particular commemoration amidst the calls – also from academics – for wider engagement with the past. It also highlights how fragmented knowledge around the Soviet repressions and the creation of the Cascade Memorial is, draws out implications for some state institutions and universities, and connects the commemoration to Armenia’s current political context.¹

¹ Next to the authors mentioned here, the author wishes to thank numerous researchers and colleagues in Armenia, including those at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and at the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC) - Armenia, where a draft version of this paper was presented in October 2022. Over many years, Arpine Porsughyan and Tigran Matosyan have provided insights that helped to establish the larger context. Graduate students from the ‘Turning Points of Georgian History’ seminar at Ilia State University suggested several improvements. Colleagues too numerous to mention individually have helped develop the Ethics of Political Commemoration as a framework. Special thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their exceedingly generous comments and suggestions.

Cascade Memorial, 14 June 2022

On June 14 this year, a group of commemorators assembled at the Cascade Memorial. Having walked up the Cascade stairway, I approached the building, a rectangular box that almost seems as if it is in a crouch, with a slit as a window running on all four sides, two hands high, under a high and forbidding forehead. If you squint, the building resembles a head: the slit as the eyes, the entrance as the nose. At the same time, with its concrete, hard edges, and the opening that in fortifications would be called an embrasure, the Cascade Memorial also evokes a bunker. Five steps gird the monument's base, again on all four sides, and each has its own narrow entrance in the middle.

Inside, about twenty-five people gathered in the large hall that deepens to its centre over six levels. A man in a dark shirt was giving a speech amplified with a small loudspeaker. In Russian, the man described why we were here. 'People didn't want to talk about it, but we must not be silent because these were crimes.' The commemoration, organized by researcher and activist Gayane Shagoyan with some support from the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, was dedicated to the victims of the repressions. In Armenia, this focuses mainly on the victims of the 1936-1938 purges, as well as the deportations of 1949.²

Next, descendants of the deported spoke, almost all of them elderly ladies. Several seemed unsure of their command of the microphone. Many families had spent a generation or more in Siberia. In a bitter twist, some Armenians who had left Greece or the Middle East after 1945 to

² A standard reference to this period remains Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Soviet Armenia', in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times. Vol 2: Foreign Dominion to Statehood: The 15th to 20th Century*, ed. by Hovannisian, Richard G. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). Recent academic literature on the deportations, which are less widely known, includes Jo Laycock, 'Survivor or Soviet Stories? Repatriate Narratives in Armenian Histories, Memories and Identities', *History and Memory*, 28 (2016), 123. Also, Joanne Laycock, 'The Repatriation of Armenians to Soviet Armenia, 1945-49', in *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50*, ed. by Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 140-61. For a moving essay with compelling photography, see Gayane Mkrtchyan and Nelli Shishmanyany, 'Armenia's Hidden Memory: Stalin's Great Terror' (2018), *Chai Khana* <<https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/668/armenias-hidden-memory-stalins-great-terror>>. Another good summary on the deportations, with several source documents, is Mikael Yalanuzyan, *Exile to Siberia*, *EVN Report* (2021), <<https://evnreport.com/magazine-issues/exile-to-siberia/>>.

repatriate had been deported. Shortly after reaching their homeland, these hopeful arrivals had been shipped to their freezing exile.³

Central to the monument is a large memorial stone, right in the middle, inscribed with the words of Yeghishe Charents, widely considered one of Armenia's most eminent poets of the twentieth century:

'To all your Souls on Fire'

from Charents' poem 'The Frenzied Masses'.⁴ Two big wreaths flanked this central slab, with slightly different wordings: 'In memory of state repression victims', from the Armenian National Congress, and 'In memory of the victims of Communism', from the Conservative Party.⁵

The central stone is illuminated by light that falls in from above through a small cupola that is marked by distinctive Armenian *khachkar*-style stone carvings, some of which are also outside the Cascade Memorial. Peering upward while standing next to the slab, the cupola is reminiscent of a church.

Looking out from within, you see a cinematic sliver through the narrow embrasure: nearby buildings, trees, a Yerevan hillside, and, on this clear day, a sideways slice of Mount Ararat. Encased as one is inside this memorial bunker, the outside world still resonates, as the traffic from a nearby street provides a constant hum, punctured by the occasional siren. Perhaps the proximity to the road adds to the dust into which the one lone boy in the group drew shapes with his feet. I tried to photograph my footprints on the ground, but, against the concrete, the tracks in the dust remained indistinct.

Taken together — a large structure, forbidding yet engaging; containing and preserving the painful memory; brutalist where this style accurately conveys rupture — it was hard to imagine how a memorial could be more fitting. It had been placed prominently, too, right next to a large

³ See also Jo Laycock, 'Belongings: People and Possessions in the Armenian Repatriations, 1945–49', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 18, No. 3 (2017), 511–37. A website with many testimonies on repatriation is <https://hayrenadardz.org/>.

⁴ There are a number of translations of this poem, this one is cited in Armine Matevosyan and Philip Poladyan, 'The Problem of Equivalence on Charents's Poems', *Yerevan State University*, 2015.

⁵ Beyond the scope of this paper, the different wordings underscore different emphases in how the past is seen.

obelisk, visible across Yerevan, that celebrates fifty years of the Armenian Socialist Republic, atop the overall Cascade complex.⁶

Testing the Ethics of Political Commemoration

In Armenia, June 14 has been established as the ‘Day of Remembrance of the Repressed’ by a 2006 law.⁷ This was the day on which the 1949 deportations from Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to Siberia began.⁸ Coincidentally, in the Baltics, too, June 14 of 1941 is associated with mass deportations to Siberia.⁹

I had travelled to Yerevan specifically for this day. Looking at debates on commemoration, it had been striking that, while we have strong theories of political representation in the present and for future purposes, we do not seem to have many cogent approaches for how to think about such representation in relation to the past. In conversation with various colleagues, an Ethics of Political Commemoration developed which seeks to improve how we remember. This approach applies ideas from the Just War Theory to questions of remembrance. The framework should help citizens feel represented in public accounts of the past, while allowing others to be presented as well.¹⁰

Suggesting such a framework is an ambitious undertaking and needs to be tested in and possibly against the world, which is why I had decided to come to Armenia, after previously writing on other contexts. The core contention of the Ethics of Political Commemoration is that

⁶ For more information, see <https://architectuul.com/architecture/yerevan-cascade>. Unless otherwise noted, all sources here were last retrieved in mid-November 2022.

⁷ Article in Armenian, translated: Ruzanna Stepanyan and Shake Avoyan, *The Remembrance Day of the Oppressed was Celebrated for the First time in Armenia* (2006). *Radio Free Europe* <<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1582499.html>>.

⁸ The decree ordering the deportation is available at <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1022942>.

⁹ Next to the extensive academic literature, this brief photo essay gives a good overview on these deportations in the Baltics: ‘Estonia Remembers the Soviet Deportations’ (2022), *Estonian World* <<https://estonianworld.com/life/estonia-remembers-the-soviet-deportations/>>.

¹⁰ A brief overview of the approach is at Hans Gutbrod and David Wood, ‘Ethics of Political Commemoration - An Overview on the Concept’, Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, Seton Hall University, May 2021, <https://www.shu-cpcs.org/ethics-of-political-commemoration>.

we need a multidimensional framework that is akin to the Just War tradition and uses a set of criteria similar to *Ius ad Bellum* and *Ius in Bello*.¹¹

Ius ad Memoriam primarily considers merit and how we justify commemoration, based on cause, intention, legitimate authority, and reasonable chance of success. *Ius in Memoria* offers guidance on how to apply restraint in commemoration, with the core criteria of transcending collective ascriptions, exiting circular narratives, asserting moral autonomy, and emphasizing contained unfathomability.¹²

To take the first criterion of *Ius ad Memoriam*, the event at the Cascade Memorial had a solid cause: in Armenia, several thousand were executed in the purges of the 1930s, and tens of thousands were deported in the decades of repression. By joining the commemoration, I wanted to see for myself whether the other criteria were relevant.

Testing the framework has larger implications. The issue of commemoration matters in the Caucasus region, as one overview article by Aykan Sever, Christina Soloyan, Namiq Abdullayev, and Sevil Huseynova in *Caucasus Edition* found in 2018.¹³ An introduction to a recent collection of essays on memory management noted, too, that there are ‘disturbing tendencies to control and politicize the past in several countries of the region’, from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean.¹⁴ At a time when some Russian soldiers are flying Soviet flags while invading a sovereign country, the question of how to deal with the legacies of a violent past may be particularly pressing.¹⁵

¹¹ For more on the connection between Just War Theory and the Ethics of Political Commemoration, see Hans Gutbrod, *Just War Theory: The Only Winner Across Four Grim Conflicts* (2022), *Opinio Juris* <<https://opiniojuris.org/2022/06/27/just-war-theory-the-only-winner-across-four-grim-conflicts/>>.

¹² A detailed discussion on these criteria is in a forthcoming publication, Hans Gutbrod and David Wood, *Ethics of Political Commemoration: Towards a New Paradigm* (Palgrave, 2023)

¹³ Aykan Sever et al., ‘What and How Do We Remember? The Politics of Official Commemoration in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey’ (2018), *Caucasus Edition, Journal of Conflict Transformation*, <<https://caucasusedition.net/the-politics-of-official-commemoration-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-turkey/>>.

¹⁴ Ulla Manns and Joakim Ekman in an introduction to a wide-ranging collection of essays, see Ninna Mörrner, ed., *Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past: A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region* (Center for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEs): Södertörn University, 2020). p.7.

¹⁵ There is extensive literature on the mobilization of history in Russia, for a recent overview, see Hubertus Jahn, ‘A War on History? Patriotism and Propaganda in Contemporary Russia’ (2022), *History Workshop*, <<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/a-war-on-history-patriotism-and-propaganda-in-contemporary-russia/>>. On the specific mobilization for war (pre-2022) see Jade McGlynn, ‘Historical Framing of the Ukraine Crisis through the Great Patriotic War: Performativity, Cultural Consciousness and Shared Remembering’, *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6 (2020), 1058–80. On the presence of Soviet flags, Ishaan Tharoor, ‘Soviet Flags Keep Rising over Russian-

Reading Names of the Repressed

On entering the Cascade Memorial, I spotted Isabella Sargsyan, a civil rights activist and former colleague, who had let me know about the event.¹⁶ As I joined the small group, she turned to me, asked whether I read Russian, and, after I nodded, gave me a sheet of paper with two names. I assumed, at first, that the Russian speaker was speaking about the fate of these two people, as representatives of a larger collective of victims.

Keen to observe what I could, I took notes on the empty side of the sheet, and, when that side had been filled and I flipped it over, I noted a small number '15' written by hand on the top left. Why would anyone write a number on papers to be handed out? The obvious became clear: the question had been whether I could read out the names aloud. The people stepping forward had been speaking in Armenian, which is why I had not understood that they, too, had been reading names. Probably I had also been a bit dazed at arrival, from climbing the 572 steps of the Cascade.

Soon enough it was my turn. I stepped down the stairs to the central square, took the microphone, and began to read:

Konstantin Birramu

31 years

Farmer from village Dvin-Aisor

Kamarlinskov district

Occupied Ukraine' (2022), *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2022, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/02/soviet-putin-russia-revenge-of-history/>>.

¹⁶ Regarding positionality, this piece is written from the perspective of familiarity with the region without being of or from it. I have been visiting Armenia regularly since 1999 and from 2006 to 2012 was Regional Director of the Caucasus Research Resource Center with offices in Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, overseeing dozens of research projects on economic, political, and social issues, with an emphasis on focus groups and surveys. I have conducted evaluations and other consulting in Armenia, including in rural areas, from 2004 onward, and have regularly published on Caucasus and Armenian issues. I speak Russian at a conversational level, but not Armenian. I have been based in Tbilisi most of the last 20 plus years.

Shot 10 May 1938

Sogomon Boiakhjian

66 years

Kolkhoznik, village Basargejar

Basargejar district

Shot 2 December 1937

As these things go and perhaps should be, I stumbled over the names. How do you stress Sogomon? In Russian, only the one stressed ‘o’ would be pronounced as such, and the others would pronounce like the ‘a’ in, say, Armenia. Yet this was an Armenian name, transliterated into Cyrillic. As I got stuck, again, on Basargejar, a helpful voice from the audience suggested the right pronunciation.

To me, these moments of hesitation accentuated the individuality of the particular names, no longer just part of a broader collective. They also made an attempt at distant observation even more participatory than I had intended.

Shagoyan later mentioned that, in the past, attendees had not read names at these events. Now, in part as a gesture towards the Russian organization *Memorial*, the initiators in Yerevan had adopted their ‘Return of the Names’ style of remembrance for Yerevan at a time when efforts at such commemoration in Moscow had been shut down.¹⁷ As a ritual, this approach

¹⁷ On the reading of names (*vozvrashhenie imen*) by the Solovetsky Stone, see Leyla Giniatulina, 'Tak vozvrashchayutsya imena / How to Return the Names', *Радио Свобода*, 29 October 2010, <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/2204499.html>> and also Margaret Comer, 'Uncovering Violent Narratives: The Heritage of Stalinist Repression in Russia since 1991', in *Heritage of Death* (Routledge, 2017). On the closing of Memorial, see Rachel Denber, 'In Closing Memorial, Russia Heralds a New, Grimmer Era of Repression', *The Moscow Times*, 30 December 2021, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/30/closing-memorial-russia-heralds-new-grimmer-era-repression>>. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that in 2022 the reading of names was conducted virtually, with contributions from around the world, and can be viewed on Instagram at @topos.memo.ru.

seems to offer what many would want commemoration to achieve: to reassert people's individuality in the face of totalitarian repression.¹⁸

A Mostly Marginalised Monument

The Lithuanian Ambassador, Inga Stanytė-Toločkienė, arrived to pay her respects. Sargsyan and Shagoyan, who also works at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, welcomed her, and explained the building and the context. The Cascade Memorial had apparently been designed at the private initiative of Jim Torosyan, Yerevan's chief architect. The authorities granted him permission to include this building as part of the larger Cascade project that he was overseeing. Constructing the memorial aligned with the agenda of de-Stalinization in a period of relative thaw.¹⁹ Formally, the monument opened in 2008.²⁰

Now, however, the Cascade Memorial was mostly orphaned. So far, other than for its opening, no senior government representative had come to the monument, although they had been invited repeatedly. As Sargsyan explained, when they had called around state institutions to establish who was responsible for the building, it had been a struggle. Between the State Cultural Commission, the Ministry of Education, the City Hall, and other institutions, people had not been clear about who actually owned the building. A colleague had spent a week making inquiries: 'No one particularly wants it on their budget, with all the responsibilities also for maintenance.'

Most of the time, the monument stood locked. Dust and dirt accumulated. The Ministry of Justice had, as part of its annual *subotnik* (previously a Soviet tradition of once-monthly Saturday communal conscription), volunteered to clean the monument earlier in the year, but, otherwise, the activists were still in the process of organizing regular upkeep. Dust, it turned out, was not part of the commemorative design. At least pupils from the Mkhitar Sebastatsi school across town had taken an interest and helped from time to time. Their teacher had

¹⁸ See also the description of 'Return of Names' at <http://october29.ru/about/>. I am again obliged to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting contexts of memorialization in Russia.

¹⁹ On Armenia's role in the Soviet thaw, see Pietro Shakarian, 'Yerevan 1954: Anastas Mikoyan and Nationality Reform in the Thaw, 1954–1964', *Peripheral Histories* (2021), <<https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/yerevan-1954-anastas-mikoyan-and-nationality-reform-in-the-thaw-1954-1964>>.

²⁰ See news article in Armenian, translated as: 'The Memorial of the Oppressed was opened', 3 December 2008, *Radio Free Europe* <<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1598689.html>>.

engaged his classes. ‘This is how it often goes’, was one of the comments. ‘If you have someone with initiative take the lead, this begins to make a difference.’

Getting the key to the gate was a major challenge. The Cascade Memorial needed to be locked, so that people would not come in and use this site of mourning as a shelter or for partying. Where did all the cigarette butts come from? ‘People who sit outside on the steps around the building throw them in.’

The monument, in the words of one of the criteria of the Ethics of Political Commemoration framework, has legitimacy but little authority.²¹ It is an apt site of commemoration with limited reach. Most Yerevan citizens have never heard of it. Few pay a visit. Some people treat it as an ashtray. I watched as the Lithuanian Ambassador put down the flowers she had brought. No other diplomat came.

Relevance to the Rule of Law

When we left, I turned back. What had looked like the central cupola from within appeared more like a turret from outside. Later on this sunny 14 June, one of the supporters of the commemoration event, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, put on a book presentation and discussion connected to victims of political persecution, including some in Armenia’s more recent past.²² The event was part of the programming on judiciary reform that is supported by the Swedish government, with the argument that it is hard to build a society that respects rules if there is not an underlying effort to redress — or at least acknowledge — the wrongs that were done through state authority. The ‘criminal mentality’, often seen as a central obstacle to effective reform, also originated from the sprawling Soviet penal system, as several speakers emphasized. One of the speakers had advocated for political prisoners after Armenia’s independence and cited the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights against Armenia as evidence for many recent transgressions, which he felt continued a tradition of repression.²³

²¹ For a more detailed discussion on ‘legitimate authority’ see the forthcoming book on Ethics of Political Commemoration, authored together with David Wood, to be published with Palgrave in 2023.

²² See <https://www.epfarmeria.am/> for more information.

²³ See for example https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/cp_armenia_eng.pdf.

A book on ‘Four Stories about Power’ (only in Armenian) was the theme of the second session.²⁴ Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, the director of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, highlighted, among other issues, how the previous governments of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan had fed an aggrandizing historical discourse of Tigran the Great, a temporary rival to ancient Rome, to distract ‘away from reflecting on the Soviet Union’.²⁵ Connecting the historical past to the political and social present was a fitting end to that day of commemoration.

Many observers seem to think that some of Armenia’s ‘multilayered past’ remains underaddressed. Gerard Libaridian, a leading Armenian historian and advisor to the Armenian president in the 1990s, has stressed the high degree of continuity and pointed out that there was,

No evaluation of the impact of Soviet rule on the economy, political culture, morals, and intellectual health of the society. The ‘intellectual’ class failed to examine the values by which intellectuals, writers, and artists were promoted and the impact of the values they represented on the spiritual and cultural wellbeing of society.²⁶

Across various sectors, according to Libaridian, the Soviet system was ‘rotten to the core’.²⁷

Writing in 2018, Oana-Valentina Suci, a Romanian historian, has argued that next to the ‘legacies of the Genocide’ and issues surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the ‘biggest challenge for Armenians going forward is to reconcile and address the competing pasts, to be able to engage memories of Stalinist repression and deportations’, and that even an informal agenda of transitional justice could ‘prove a productive means of educating both the public and the political body about these layered traumas and promoting broader state-building goals’, including ‘both conflict-resolution processes and the larger democratization process’.²⁸

²⁴ Naira Mkrtchyan et al., *Chors Patmowt’yown Ishxanowt’yan Masin / Four Stories about Power*, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (2022), <<https://epfarmeria.am/hy/document/Four-Stories-About-Power-2022>>.

²⁵ On this new emphasis on Tigran Mets, see Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 42.

²⁶ Gerard Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (Routledge, 2007), p. 211.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Oana-Valentina Suci, ‘Confronting Multiple Pasts in Post-Soviet Armenia’, in *Transitional Justice and the Former Soviet Union: Reviewing the Past, Looking toward the Future*, ed. by Cynthia M. Horne and Lavinia Stan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 282–302, p. 297.

Similarly, writing about his collaboration with Turkish historians, a different context but arguably one with broad applicability, Ronald Suny, has urged that one needs to exit circular narratives by saying that,

The simplicities of national myths, themselves the handiwork of historians as well as politicians, must continually be challenged so that ‘realities’ created instrumentally to defend particular power and knowledge structures may be replaced by shared, subversive narratives that move us beyond nationalism toward truer understanding.²⁹

More specific on the Soviet repressions, Jo Laycock has suggested that ‘repatriate narratives also challenge dominant narratives of Armenian history and highlight the variety and complexity of Armenian experiences in the aftermath of genocide’.³⁰

There is, hence, no shortage of voices that suggest that the Soviet chapters of Armenian history deserve more consideration. However, as Suciú puts it, ‘for the time being, Armenia remains a prisoner of its history and geography’.³¹ Consequently, as Isabella Sargsyan had said at the beginning of the event: ‘It hurts to note that many are not aware of this chapter of our past, many don’t come, and the government does not give it any attention.’

Recovering Attention to Political Repression

With the Cascade Memorial as a hilltop anchor, the marginalised memory of Soviet repression has a reasonable chance of recovering due attention. The Cascade complex itself is so intimately connected with the history of Yerevan as a created city that commemoration already has its landmark *lieu de mémoire*.³² The complex had originally been conceived under the architect Alexander Tamanyan, who was more to Yerevan than what Georges-Eugène Haussmann has been to Paris.³³

²⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p.11.

³⁰ Laycock, ‘Survivor or Soviet Stories?’, p.123; Laycock, ‘The Repatriation of Armenians to Soviet Armenia, 1945–49.’

³¹ Suciú, p. 297.

³² Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,’ *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

³³ There is limited literature on Tamanyan in English. The family maintains an informative website at <http://www.alexandertamanyan.com/>. The Wikipedia page renders the information from the Armenian Soviet Encyclopaedia of 1974, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Tamanyan. A scholarly discussion on some of his

As the state of Armenia constituted itself in the 1920s, Tamanyan designed the city that its people would inhabit. Tamanyan's statue, too, stands at the little park that marks the beginning of the Cascade. The idea of building this giant stairway, however, had languished until the early 1970s, when the project was driven forward by Yerevan's then-chief architect, Jim Torosyan, together with Sargis Gurzadyan and Aslan Mkhitryan. While the top terrace with the obelisk was in place by the early 1970s, significant parts of the complex would take another decade to finish.

Yet, despite this prominent history, and readable as the modern world has become — via maps, reviews, fingertip expeditions across search engines — much around both the Cascade Memorial and the repressions remains hard to learn and retrieve.³⁴ In researching the background for my visit, I opened almost as many tabs as the Cascade has steps.

In English, the memorial building even seems to lack an agreed-upon name. In direct translation, the name is typically described as 'The Monument Complex for Violently Repressed People'.³⁵ Another tag can be rendered as 'The Memorial of the Victims'. The naming in this article — 'Cascade Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression' or 'Cascade Memorial' for short — is an attempt to move beyond the stage where, as Gabriel García Márquez put it in the first lines of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the 'world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point'.

An informal survey of well-connected Yerevan residents and visitors found that only a quarter had ever been to the memorial, even though many respondents were activists and prominent figures in research and civil society, and more than 77% had said that they knew the city at least fairly well, while several mentioned that they had lost family members to Soviet repressions.³⁶

role is in Levon Abrahamian, 'Yerevan: Memory and Forgetting in the Organisation of Post-Soviet Urban Space', in *Russian Cultural Anthropology after the Collapse of Communism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012).

³⁴ On 'panoptic legibility' of locations, see also Hans Gutbrod, 'Brijuni or Brioni: Reviewing Tito's Luxury Island', *Baltic Worlds*, 18 October 2022, <<https://balticworlds.com/brijuni-or-brioni-reviewing-titos-luxury-island/>>.

³⁵ Illustrating the difficulties of translation across scripts, this link needs to be rendered with a commercial shortener, as otherwise it runs over multiple lines: <https://bit.ly/WikipediaRemembranceDay-ARM>

³⁶ Informal online survey in English with 55 respondents, to elicit impressions and short comments, conducted July 2022, distributed via snowball sample through CRRC Armenia's networks and via email, supplemented by some Tbilisi residents who have visited Yerevan. Survey participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Of the few that know of the building, many believed it was constructed in the 2000s, as the Cascade Memorial was only officially opened in 2008. At the same time, historic Google Earth imagery shows that the building already was in place by the year 2000, even if the cupola (or drum) on its top only is in evidence from spring 2009 onward. (A provisional review of satellite imagery appears to suggest that the main building activity took place between 1985 and 1999).³⁷

Many also struggled to name the obelisk that is visible across much of Yerevan and that stands next to the Cascade Memorial. Less than 10% of the survey respondents – already a select group – accurately identified the obelisk as a celebration of Soviet Armenia. Several, falsely, believed it connected to victory in the Second World War.³⁸

This shows how this prominent location still has not managed to put itself distinctly on the mental map of Yerevan's citizens. As one long-term resident who works nearby put it:

Today, nobody knows that [the obelisk] is devoted to fifty years of Sovietization of Armenia. Explaining that place to people, including taxists, is quite difficult. I usually say 'the top of Cascade' but they don't understand. 'In front of the Monument Park' is not enough. 'Observation deck on the top of Cascade' is not enough. Now that the Arabic Emirates' Embassy is there, the easiest for the taxists is if I say, 'next to the Emirates Embassy'. I can add 'where these colourful sculptures for children are'.³⁹

The history of the Cascade Memorial, when exactly it was constructed, with what decision-making, how it languished before its 2008 official opening, the adding of features such as the central slab and the cupola/drum – there is a treasure of research waiting to be lifted in Yerevan's city archives.

Even basic information remains buried. There is no Wikipedia entry for the Cascade Memorial in English, nor one for Jim Torosyan, though he was one of the main designers of this dominant architectural feature that is a playful constellation of art, lifestyle, urban connection, and

³⁷ This tentative conclusion derives from Landsat-5 imagery, retrieved via Google Earth, and with close-up analysis (in the author's notes). Imagery remains too grainy, and intervals too large to come to definite conclusions. There appears to be a dearth of declassified imagery for the 1990s, though the 1970s to mid-1980s are covered by the KH-9 Hexagon satellite, which researchers have used for Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Gyumri. I am grateful to Lori Khatchadourian for her insights on what satellite imagery is available.

³⁸ The respondents were recruited through English-language research networks and are not representative of a wider population. Future research could focus on the mental and memorial maps of Yerevan citizens.

³⁹ 'Taxists' here refers to taxi drivers. Preserved for original tone, directly from contribution to survey.

symbolic import as it looks out over Yerevan and across to Mount Ararat's vast cap of ice.⁴⁰ (More than two thirds of the respondents of the informal survey thought the Cascade Complex at least a good addition to Yerevan, and one third considered it a landmark feature that they loved.)

So far, recollection around much of Torosyan's creation of the Cascade Memorial remains personal. Ter-Gabrielyan provided some context: his father had been friends with Torosyan from childhood days, as the families lived in the same building. His father had also been present, at age 12, when Torosyan's father had been arrested by the NKVD, Soviet secret police. Petik Torosyan had, apparently, been 'a prosecutor, maybe Prosecutor General, who was killed in 1937'. Ter-Gabrielyan, in turn, has synthesized some of his parents' recollections on his personal website, now available in a book.⁴¹ That text 'won't be prose literature but it'll do for a screenplay. Because it will probably never be made into a movie, and as it is long, I suggest that you imagine it and watch it unfold in your mind'.

In a key scene of *The 'Godless' Movie Theatre*, the protagonist goes up to the boy whose father has just been led away, 'his arm twisted behind his back'. The forlorn son stands in the yard, and 'Vram walks up to him and tries to play with him, tries to get him to talk. But he doesn't make a sound. His mother comes and takes him by the hand, leading him home. He doesn't seem to have the will to walk, his mother drags him behind her.'

Ter-Gabrielyan's screenplay ends in the 1950s, with a bigger movie that cannot be made and a smaller documentary about American visitors that are marching in the snow between Garni and Geghart, the must-see historic locations outside Yerevan. The repressions have faded, but the past continues to haunt, and the individuals are far from free.

These recollections, arguably, deserve to be connected and be given a more central place. Wikipedia is the obvious destination as it is a place of accrual that can link out to original texts and contributions, including to repositories that otherwise risk being marginalized or even

⁴⁰ See <https://architectuul.com/architect/jim-torosyan>.

⁴¹ See Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, 'The "Godless" Movie Theatre – Armenia, Twentieth Century: Blockbuster', in *A Drop in the Sea – Armenian Contemporary Prose* (Yerevan: Grakan Kayaran NGO, 2022), <<https://www.gtergab.com/en/news/books/the-godless-movie-theater/162/>>.

lost.⁴² On the page of Stalin's repressions in Armenia, various sections are marked as 'This section is not complete. You can participate in the project by completing and correcting it.'⁴³

Envisaging a Rolling Reading of Names

Accrual is also how one could reconceptualize access to the mostly locked Cascade Memorial. Right now, a visit is episodic and, if one manages to get in, will merely leave a track in the dust. In an updated version, one could think of an automated entrance system in which visitors need to read out the name of one victim of the repressions — name, age, profession, location, date of execution — to gain entry. This roll call could show, too, how many names still remain to be read to complete the remembrance of all the victims and when, at current levels of visits, that cycle is likely to be completed and the current name will be read and remembered again.⁴⁴ (In an expanded version, visitors could be notified once a name has been read and, in a way, has been passed into another visitor's custody.)

With access through remembrance, each visit would connect to one fate and invite individuals to reflect at least for one moment on a life, as I did on reading the two names. A monument that is recording would connect to some contemporary concerns on surveillance. Do we want ourselves to be known and our voices stored? A visit, for a school class, would be a memorable experience.

From the view of commemoration, it arguably would not matter whether completing this roll call would take one or ten years once it was assured that these names would not be forgotten. If one were to view it as conceptual art, paying for entrance with one's name would fit with other exhibits — by Fernando Botero, Jaume Plensa, Joana Vasconcelos, and others — around

⁴² For memory work via Wikipedia see Christian Pentzold, 'Fixing the Floating Gap: The Online Encyclopaedia Wikipedia as a Global Memory Place', *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 1, 2009): 255–72, . The potential role of Wikipedia in countries and languages that have a less developed publishing sector so far has received comparatively little attention.

⁴³ Again, link shortener required to render the link across alphabets, see: <https://bit.ly/WikipediaARMRepressions-Link> .

⁴⁴ The invocation of names, of course, is at the core of many rituals of mourning and remembrance and has been traced back to Mesopotamia. See Miranda Bayliss, 'The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia' *Iraq* 35, no. 2 (1973), 115–25, p. 117.

the Cascade and its Cafesjian Center for the Arts.⁴⁵ A competition to develop details could draw attention from artists and designers in Armenia and beyond.

In the most expansive version of updating the city's commemoration, the statue of Tamanyan could move to the central Republic Square which mostly stands empty, since the statue of Lenin has been removed, and place the architect there to represent all those who helped to build Armenia and recreate a new home under the most difficult circumstances. Tamanyan designed the square, its key buildings, and has sufficient standing, as indicated by him being featured on Armenia's 500-dram banknote.

Currently, Republic Square, as Diana Ter-Ghazaryan has pointed out in a remarkable analysis, is 'a place that represents the ambivalence Armenians have about their collective identity, and one that shows vividly the discord between the official narrative of identity and its contestations by the residents of Armenia'.⁴⁶ Other attempts at filling Republic Square seem to have struggled. Bringing the creator of Yerevan's design to the symbolic heart of the capital would fill that void.

A statue of Jim Torosyan could take the place of Tamanyan at the foot of the Cascade, with a model of the entire complex, and reference the Cascade Memorial, too, to highlight the experience of loss in Torosyan's own family. The relocation could be undertaken on 14 June, to emphasize the relevance of the date. As Shagoyan has documented in an excellent article, a previous discussion on placing a statue has provoked a spirited debate in Yerevan.⁴⁷ Even just the process of discussing such potential changes could offer citizens the opportunity to participate and reflect on where they want their past to be and how it is to be shown.

Towards a More Civil Tone

⁴⁵ For more information on the art centre, see: <https://www.cmf.am/Artists>. A search for similar practices – access through reading – so far has not revealed that such systems of access have been put in place, though some memorial museums do give visitors a biography to follow. A volume exploring the connection between museums and biographies is Alexandra Stara et al., *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*, ed. by Kate Hill (Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ Diana K. Ter-Ghazaryan, "'Civilizing the City Center': Symbolic Spaces and Narratives of the Nation in Yerevan's Post-Soviet Landscape', *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 4 (July 2013), 570–89.

⁴⁷ Gayane A. Shagoyan, 'Between Memory and Memorial: Anastas Mikoyan and "Social Lustration" in Armenia', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 80 (2016), <<https://www.laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest80.pdf>>.

What is at stake here, though, is more than memorial locations, but arguably a deeper challenge for Armenia's contested democracy. In the afternoon panel on that 14 June, there seemed agreement that the country's history of violence remains a difficult legacy. It was understandable that the issue could not be addressed head-on in Soviet Armenia, but, after independence, the lack of reflection fed into a culture of violence and allowed too much of the past to seep into the present. 'We failed to build a wall that keeps the past out.' Not everyone would be comfortable with the idea that such a wall can and needs to be erected, but the Cascade Memorial itself provided its own imagery: the past has not remained tethered to the largely unknown location designed to contain it.

Though the panellists stressed that the genocide cannot be compared directly, they also agreed that the history of Soviet repressions remains marginalised. In part to deflect from a reckoning with its record, the communist leadership from the mid-1960s put an emphasis on the genocide, or at least could find this new consciousness convenient.⁴⁸ Through that frame, one could say that many Armenians see history primarily as a lesson in what was done to them.⁴⁹ That trauma is very real and runs in almost every Armenian family.

It is not just a trauma of memory. Azerbaijan's September 2020 attack on Armenian-controlled Karabakh lacked good intention, legitimate authority, proportionality, and restraint.⁵⁰ Armenians, especially women, are targeted by hateful rhetoric.⁵¹ In September 2022, another Azerbaijani attack across the recognized border made even sober-minded Yerevan residents

⁴⁸ For a detailed study of this reimagination of community in the 1960s, see Maike Lehmann, 'Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia', *Slavic Review* 74, no. 1 (ed. 2015): 9–31, <<https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.1.9>>

⁴⁹ On master narratives, see Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman Naimark, 'Introduction: Leaving It to the Historians', in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3–11 (p. 11).

⁵⁰ On the ethics of the September 2020 conflict, see Hans Gutbrod, 'Assembling the Moral Puzzle – Just War Tradition and Karabakh', *Global Policy Journal*, 25 February 2021, <<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/25/02/2021/assembling-moral-puzzle-just-war-tradition-and-karabakh>>.

⁵¹ Even a female Azerbaijani journalist that urged restraint experienced intensive harassment, see Aneeta Mathur-Ashton, 'Campaign of Hate Forces Azeri Journalist Offline', *VOA*, 8 January 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_campaign-hate-forces-azeri-journalist-offline/6200504.html> [accessed 19 November 2022]

worry whether they should pack their bags, just in case.⁵² In sum: survival is a concern about which Armenians rightly need to be alert.⁵³

What Armenians seem less aware about is the history of what their supposed allies were doing to them, and what they have done to each other. The repressions were instigated from Moscow, driven also by Lavrenti Beria, who is believed to have personally murdered the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia, Aghasi Khanjian, in Tbilisi in mid-1936, while the day-to-day repression was done by local authorities and perpetrators, as Ter-Gabrielyan also emphasizes in his screenplay.⁵⁴

Survivors of trauma are not as kind to each other as one might hope. In recent months, an open letter by Serj Tankian, musician, activist, and not a mincer-of-words, has decried the ‘divisions within Armenian society. That division, violence and treasonous condemnations have over time metastasized and gotten way out of hand. They are creating disunity and hate in Armenia and the diaspora. It is time to stop it.’⁵⁵ His opponents countered by pointing out the harsh tone that Tankian has used against others.⁵⁶ Other critics suggest that Tankian understands politics from the prism of rallying a captive audience, rather than from a civic vision.⁵⁷

Whatever view one takes, few doubt that divisions run deep. Ani Poghosyan, a prominent social media figure who focuses on human rights, education, and art, has also remarked, ‘Reason 16,963 as to why I don’t come to Twitter as often: random fellow Armenian hates me without knowing me in person. I can live without that kind of energy to be honest.’⁵⁸ Data bears out that

⁵² Conversations with three U.S. diplomats, who reported these concerns from local embassy staff, October 2022.

⁵³ While various war crimes against Armenian civilians and Prisoners of War were documented in detail, it appears that none of the Azerbaijani perpetrators have been held to account. On this, my exchange with a former Azerbaijani ambassador to Canada and the Czech Republic is at <https://twitter.com/shafiyev_farid/status/1576651130854993920?s=20&t=AY3HQULiXe-2Sifq-cbGMA> (also in Web Archive).

⁵⁴ See Suny, ‘Soviet Armenia’, p. 362; also, not mentioned by Ter-Gabrielyan, but familiar to his interlocutors in Yerevan, is that a relation of his was a senior politician in the 1930s and also a victim of the purges, see Shakarian, ‘Yerevan 1954: Anastas Mikoyan and Nationality Reform in the Thaw, 1954–1964’.

⁵⁵ Tankian is referring mainly to divisions on foreign policy, but also to the general tone of political debate. See <https://twitter.com/serjtankian/status/1535730495585017857?s=20&t=UqEOsaYSBgY5HOaPZ7zCg>, also saved in Web Archive.

⁵⁶ See <<https://thearmenite.com/2022/06/serj-tankian-unleashes-vulgar-tirade-on-fellow-armenians/>>.

⁵⁷ Comment in an email conversation. See also Kevin EG Perry, ‘System of a Down’s Serj Tankian: “If Something Is True, It Should Be Said,”’ *The Guardian*, 24 March 2021, sec. Music, <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/mar/24/serj-tankian-system-of-a-down-armenia>>.

⁵⁸ See <https://twitter.com/aniboghoss/status/1540337935400243202?s=20&t=UqEOsaYSBgY5HOaPZ7zCg> (screenshot in Internet Archive).

this viciousness is a concern. Fifty-two percent of Armenians believe that ‘online social media’ has a mostly negative impact on ‘how things are going’, compared with 27% who see a negative impact in neighbouring Georgia, according to CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer.⁵⁹

While the challenge of a harsh tone in online debates is not unique to Armenia, Tankian remarks that ‘[w]e are a small nation with little in natural resources’ and that unity is the ‘only salvation’ for Armenia in its precarious position. ‘We need to break our millennia old genetic code of intransigence once and for all.’ Is it really plausible, though, to claim that the intransigence is genetic?

Unless one believes that more silence is the solution, perhaps focusing more on the Soviet era repressions and dislocations could be a way of reframing the internal discussion in Armenia in substance and tone. In an optimistic scenario, this reframing would happen, in part, out of respect for those whose lives were upended by previous surges of authoritarian subjugation (‘he doesn’t make a sound. His mother comes and takes him by the hand, leading him home’), but also in reflection on how circumstances can push us to the wrong side of history and that, while restraint will not guard us against error, it is likely to lessen the harm we do when we happen to be wrong.

The life of the fiery poet Yeghishe Charents, whose words are quoted on the Cascade Memorial, mirrors the larger arc of early twentieth-century Armenian history. He was born in Kars in 1897, became an early Bolshevik, and took a central role in publishing and among writers in the 1920s.⁶⁰ Eventually, he would become a victim of Soviet repressions, being arrested in 1937 and dying in prison in unclear circumstances in November of that year. The presumption is that he was killed.

⁵⁹ From Caucasus Barometer, 2021 survey, Caucasus Research Resource Center Armenia, fieldwork dates: December 18, 2021 to February 28, 2022, see <https://twitter.com/HansGutbrod/status/1544703617348902914?s=20&t=UqEOsaYSBgyG5HOaPZ7zCg>, screenshot also saved in Internet Archive. Most observers seem to agree that the tone of social media became more negative after Azerbaijan’s 2020 attack on Karabakh. Trolls seem to play a role, too, though so far there appear to be no larger studies on the online space over time.

⁶⁰ More on Charents in relation to other poets of his time is at James R Russell, ‘The Black Dervish of Armenian Futurism’, *Journal of Armenian Studies*, 2014. A book that I could not obtain, in the constraints of the Caucasus, though it is searchable on Google Books, is Marc Nichanian, *Yeghishe Charents: Poet of the Revolution*, Armenian Studies Series. 5 (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2003), <<http://www.mazdapublishers.com/book/yeghishe-charentspoet-of-the-revolution>>.

Today, Charents is featured on Armenia's 1000-dram banknote, but his prominence can obscure that the suffering is not just the story of a single man. What happened to the women in Charents' family is illustrative of the ferocity of repression. After his death, his wife was arrested and exiled to Siberia for many years, and, as a descendant of the family recently described during a tour of Charents' museum, the grandmother could only take care of one of her nieces, having to give up the other to an orphanage.⁶¹ The family now regularly visit Charents' statue in central Yerevan – 'we have no other place to go, we do not know where he was buried.'⁶²

Charents' own name experienced a remarkable return. As the historian Pietro Shakaryan has highlighted, Anastas Mikoyan, a senior Soviet politician of agile allegiance and then-ally of Nikita Khrushchev's reformist course, invoked Charents in a speech in March 1954 in which he first outlined his idea for a less repressive nationalities policy.⁶³ When Mikoyan said that Charents' arrest had been 'incorrect', loud applause in the room broke out and lasted for nearly 30 seconds.

It was, apparently, after this point that a friend dared to dig up a suitcase with Charents' unpublished manuscripts. A year later, Charents would be rehabilitated.⁶⁴ Marking this moment, too, Ter-Gabrielyan's screenplay opens 'around 1954' with the scene of a schoolteacher sharing 'a very good piece of news' with her pupils about the 'amazing poet, very talented, named Yeghishe Charents. [...] We haven't spoken about him until now, but we can finally do so.'⁶⁵

⁶¹ This was Charents' second wife Isabella, the first wife Arpenik died in 1927, as one blog claims after complications in pregnancy. Vigen Avetisyan, 'The Love Story of Yeghishe and Arpenik Charents', *Art-A-Tsolum* (blog), 1 March 2019, <<https://allinnet.info/culture/the-love-story-of-yeghishe-and-arpenik-charents/>>. On the arrest and mistreatment of family members, some more detail in Arpine Haroyan, 'From the Forgotten Pages of History: The Tragedy of Maro Alazan', *EVN Report*, 15 July 2017, <<https://evnreport.com/arts-and-culture/from-the-forgotten-pages-of-history-the-tragedy-of-mar-alazan/>>.

⁶² Visit to Charents Museum in Yerevan with guided tour by Gohar Charents, the poet's granddaughter in October 2022.

⁶³ The Soviet-era joke on Mikoyan was 'from Ilyich [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin] to Ilyich [Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev] without a heart attack or paralysis' (*Ot Ilyicha do Ilyicha bez infarkta i paralicha*), as an Armenian colleague pointed out. He had actively participated in organizing the 1937 purges. 'Anastas Mikoyan: Soviet First Responder and Smiling Diplomat', *National Security Archive* (2020) <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba-russia-programs/2020-12-18/anastas-mikoyan-soviet-first-responder-smiling-diplomat>> [accessed 19 November 2022]

⁶⁴ This account again in Shakarian, 'Yerevan 1954: Anastas Mikoyan and Nationality Reform in the Thaw, 1954–1964', who also links to a recording of Mikoyan's March 1954 speech.

⁶⁵ Ter-Gabrielyan, 'The "Godless" Movie Theater -- Armenia, Twentieth Century: Blockbuster'.

Activists in Armenia could lead a broader effort to recover the names and memories of hundreds or thousands of fates similar to Charents' that are largely forgotten. Yet a central role also comes to Armenia's president. Since the constitutional reforms of 2018, which in turn set off the Velvet Revolution, the office has primarily had a ceremonial role.⁶⁶ This is not only a limitation but also a responsibility to address questions that are symbolically so central that they can and should not be taken over by politicians in the midst of their day-to-day fray.⁶⁷

Role of Universities and Research

Local universities could do more than they do now to recover knowledge and awareness from marginalisation, via Wikipedia. Widespread scepticism against this collaborative platform is misplaced and short-changes students and societies.

In the now dominant tradition, we have become used to universities being engaged in teaching and research. Yet that Humboldtian mantra is too narrow. The research is usually the invention of the new and advanced, published in far-away, hard-to-access journals. Even with academic credentials, accessing one journal article that pertains directly to this essay cost \$47 (the entire journal issue could be downloaded for \$386).⁶⁸ The more pressing task at hand, in many cases, is the provision of local and accessible knowledge that helps citizens locate their past, present, and future.⁶⁹ Put differently: much research, to the extent that it gets done, is similar to complex material science. Providing local and accessible knowledge is like making furniture. Complex material science can help with that task but restricting universities to that mission short-changes students and ultimately societies.

If one thinks of universities as institutions of production, it is not surprising that students can appear alienated and disenfranchised, as they study theories and texts that have little to do

⁶⁶ Laurence Broers, 'In Armenia, a Constitutional Power Grab Backfires', *Chatham House* (2018), <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/04/armenia-constitutional-power-grab-backfires>>.

⁶⁷ For a similar argument regarding the Stalin Museum in Georgia, see Hans Gutbrod, 'The Ethics of Political Commemoration: The Stalin Museum and Thorny Legacies in the Post-Soviet Space – PONARS Eurasia', *PONARS Eurasia* (2022), <<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-ethics-of-political-commemoration-the-stalin-museum-and-thorny-legacies-in-the-post-soviet-space/>>.

⁶⁸ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546545.2015.1097091>.

⁶⁹ On this, see also the discussion on engaging the public through archaeology, Katherine M. Grillo and Daniel A. Contreras, 'Public Archaeology's Mammoth in the Room: Engaging Wikipedia as a Tool for Teaching and Outreach', *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 7, no. 4 (2019) 435–42, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.8>>.

with what is around them, with what happened to their families, and with what shaped social habits and structures leading up to the present day.⁷⁰

The lack of more direct engagement is wasteful, not just in foregone potential, but in hours and days spent preparing homework or writing exams that will be skimmed and thereafter forever discarded, in an organized destruction of human effort that remains curiously unchallenged. That level of loss had little alternative at a time when the means of academic production offered few opportunities for, again, accrual and collaborative improvement. With the Internet, the world of productive relations, however, has changed, and as the gaps in Wikipedia show, students can participate by completing and correcting.⁷¹

The ideas for increasing engagement through such models are already around. As some researchers put it, Wikipedia through its online participation can be a 'unique space [...] for the construction of knowledge, memory, and culture'.⁷² The media scholar Christian Pentzold has also argued that Wikipedia 'provides an ideal example of the discursive organization of remembrance and the different observable steps of memory work as they evolve online'.⁷³ Based on this, Pentzold described Wikipedia as a 'global memory place [...] where memorable elements are negotiated'.⁷⁴ More attention could now be given to how it can serve as a *local* memory place, especially in contexts of marginalisation.⁷⁵

In that light, it seems fitting, too, that the Ministry of Education might be considered as an institutional home for the Cascade Memorial. A radical approach would require all social sciences and humanities, as a default, to contribute to the ongoing explication of sites of heritage. It is great to learn, say, French as part of studies at university. It is, arguably, even

⁷⁰ On knowledge production and Wikipedia, see Roy Rosenzweig, 'Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past', *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006), 117–46, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/4486062>>.

⁷¹ A structured approach to bringing Wikipedia into academic teaching is promoted by <https://wikiedu.org/>, with various resources on their webpage, though at this point the effort is focused on the U.S. and Canada.

⁷² Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin, 'Beyond the Legacy of the Enlightenment? Online Encyclopaedias as Digital Heterotopias', *First Monday* 15, no. 1 (2010).

⁷³ See Pentzold, 'Fixing the Floating Gap', p. 267.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 255.

⁷⁵ For an overview on the scholarship on Wikipedia, see Chitu Okoli et al., 'The People's Encyclopedia Under the Gaze of the Sages: A Systematic Review of Scholarly Research on Wikipedia', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2012), <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2021326>>.

better if those skills are honed further by contributing to the Wikipedia entry about Charents in French, with lecturers and fellow students working together to get the wording just right.⁷⁶

Students, through micro-contributions, can be authors and not just consumers of knowledge, in a collaborative process. Taking care of heritage is about asserting moral autonomy, not just about constructing knowledge.⁷⁷ At a closer look, many of the lifelines and stories resist compression. Charents? By contemporary standards, he is a complicated figure, having, apparently, shot and wounded a woman who spurned his advances.⁷⁸ His wife? Her exile was, in one version in which the story is told, prolonged in part due to her marrying again while in Siberia.⁷⁹

Mikoyan, who helped rehabilitate Charents? He was so directly involved in the murders of 1937 that there was an outcry when his family wanted to put up a statue in Yerevan in 2014.⁸⁰ Tamanyan? Some see his style as 'neo-colonialist architecture' that replaced the original 'vernacular' of Yerevan. The Cascade Complex? Before the stairs from its base were added, the hill was covered by a dense forest. For all the glory of the stairway, it was preceded by another upward path that was not only not taken, but around which all trees were cut down.

Some will not want to follow the invitation to reflect on such complications. But micro-contributions are an opportunity to embrace complexity. Recognizing the grandness of history

⁷⁶ Eventually, such memory work can also become measurable. For the Western context, see Michela Ferron and Paolo Massa, 'Beyond the Encyclopedia: Collective Memories in Wikipedia', *Memory Studies* 7, no. 1 (2014), 22–45, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698013490590>>.

⁷⁷ The concept of moral autonomy is developed in more detail in the *Ius in Memoria* chapter of our forthcoming book, which also outlines how the idea is essential to various philosophical approaches, including those of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill.

⁷⁸ See http://www.fortgreenefilmworks.com/charents_review_Krikor-Yeghia.pdf, also described in tour at the Charents museum. See also Avetisyan, 'The Love Story of Yeghishe and Arpenik Charents', and especially the comments for a contemporary reaction.

⁷⁹ Communication in tour at the Charents museum, see also the recollections of Charents' daughter, with details of publication somewhat unclear, recovered from Web Archive. Lusine Topouzyan, "'Five Thousand Lines from Underground" - Recollections of Arpine Charents,' Aniv Magazine, 24 January 2007, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070124173636/http://www.aniv.ru/view.php?number=3&st=15&rub=15>> as well as Chingiz Huseynov, 'Faces of Betrayal', *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 16 October 2012, <<https://en.vestikavkaza.ru/articles/society/32631.html>>.

⁸⁰ Again for this, Shagoyan, 'Between Memory and Memorial: Anastas Mikoyan and "Social Lustration" in Armenia', and Yekaterina Poghosyan, 'Stalin's Man Mikoyan to Get Statue in Yerevan', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, (2014), <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/stalins-man-mikoyan-get-statue-yerevan>>.

in these additional layers provides an attractive alternative to authoritative affirmations that often are used, top-down, to marginalise other voices.

Political Identity and the Ethics of Political Commemoration

Through all these connections, the commemoration of 14 June and the Cascade Memorial are about the country's broader political identity. The connections considered here – monuments, architecture, political contest, the killing of a poet, education, and beyond – touch many aspects of what Armenia is and will or can be. The stakes for citizens are real. In all their specificity, some of the challenges of dealing with the past run parallel to those in other countries. Márquez's famous first line in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* underscores that around the world, there are firing squads to be remembered.⁸¹

From visiting that day in Yerevan, my impression was that the Ethics of Political Commemoration can help illuminate and maybe even guide such processes of grounding citizenship in the past: it shows the justness of the cause; the reasonable intention of making memory work for democracy; the aptness of naming and of stumbling over names; it also underlines the challenge of gaining authority. Based on this framework, ideas emerge on how to give commemoration a better chance of returning from marginalisation, by focusing even more on individual names and reenvisioning a major relocation of statues. Such a rearrangement could engage citizens and promote the kind of participation that locates moral authority where it should be: in the discussions that citizens have with each other.

The case of the Cascade Memorial reinforces the findings from other contexts that the Ethics of Political Commemoration can be applied directly, as in the case of the Stalin and Bolnisi Museums in Georgia, or Tito's Museum in Brijuni in Croatia, with further studies forthcoming soon.⁸²

To you, Comrades Near and Far

⁸¹ 'Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.'

⁸² See Gutbrod, 'The Ethics of Political Commemoration: The Stalin Museum and Thorny Legacies in the Post-Soviet Space – PONARS Eurasia'; Hans Gutbrod, 'Bolnisi Museum — the Longest Human Journey', *OC Media*, 1 August 2022, <https://oc-media.org/features/bolnisi-museum-the-longest-human-journey/>; Gutbrod, 'Brijuni or Brioni', and book forthcoming in 2023.

One surprise, as you walk up the Cascade staircase, is that a sizeable portion below its top part remains unfinished — a huge hole you only discover as you level with the yawning gap unseen when looking up from below.⁸³ Rudimentary foundations are visible, rebar sticking out from concrete.

In ascending towards the Cascade's highest platform, you have to take a major detour. At the end of that June day, after dinner in a café at the Cascade's base, a friend who lives close to its top by the Victory Park said, that she would take a taxi home. 'That one stretch is just not safe to walk', she commented.

From the outside, at least, it appears that there remains a gap as well in how Armenians remember their past. Here, too, it may be time to build on the already existing foundations, and connect more directly with the past, as a way of charting a way towards a more viable and inclusive future, one in which Charents' 'frenzied masse' can be read and enjoyed as poetry, rather than as its own screenplay of how history in more than one hundred years of a particular solitude subsumed and extinguished lives:

To you, comrades near and far, to you, other suns.

In other worlds, to all your souls on fire,

To all you burning fires,

To you burnished spirits

Who light this untamed darkness called life, and death,

To you all who are sacrificed for the sake of light,

Greetings.

Greetings indeed, Konstantin, and greetings, Sogomon.

⁸³ See <https://www.yerevan.am/en/news/anavart-kaskad-hamaliri-shinararowt-yownn-avartelow-hamar-hamaynk-e-banakts-owm-e-gafeschean-t-angar/>.

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