COLLECTIVE VICTIMHOOD AND MEMORY IN AZERBAIJAN: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

by

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Abstract

The present thesis examines the transmission of memory and political implications of victimized identity in Azerbaijan. It focuses on the strategies of victimization that shape society's discourse of Nagorno-Karabakh, which in turn underpins national identity. Collective remembrance strategies place Azerbaijanis at a point of impasse in relation to the conflict and pose a further obstacle to post-war peace negotiation, thus contributing to the intractability of the conflict. Using ethnographic interviews and incorporating evidence from official government bodies, this study demonstrates that the Azerbaijani discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been articulated through strategies of self-victimization that are transmitted through collective memory. These strategies function in two directions: *selective and biased information-processing*, *justification and rationalization of negative group behavior*, *self-pity*, and *denial* are directed at the in-group; whereas *attribution of blame*, *moral superiority and paternalism*, and *moral disengagement* are addressed to the out-group. By analyzing the disparate treatment of the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre in collective memory, this study offers empirical evidence that the Azerbaijani discourse selectively focuses on particular events and builds on the memory narrative in a way that fits its self-victimization framework. The institutionalization and widespread remembrance of the Khojaly massacre further solidifies this aspect. This paper further argues that the government instrumentalizes victimized memory abroad as a political currency and domestically to divert attention from its own wrongdoings, such as lack of freedoms. Finally, it points out the importance of memory in conflict resolution and that a young society becoming more and more disaffected by protracted conflict can lead to disengagement, instead of the active participation of civil society needed to work towards a stable and lasting peace.

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Introduction

This section establishes the knowledge necessary to understand the context and significance of the study. It sets out the antecedents of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, placing emphasis on its longevity and the intricate forces at play. By examining the historical and socio-political environment, I intend to provide a solid basis for arguing that there is a need for further assessment of the Azerbaijani stance on the conflict. I will also outline the precise research objectives of this study. My main objective is to study the memory transmission and political implications of victimhood identity in Azerbaijan. I intend to demonstrate how in-group and out-group self-victimization tactics are transmitted through collective memory using ethnographic interviews and data from official government agencies. This section will lay the groundwork for the later analysis and conclusions.

On the morning of September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in order to reclaim the southern territories. Nagorno-Karabakh is an ethnic Armenian enclave within the territory of Azerbaijan, to which it belongs *de jure*, but which is governed by the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh since the First Karabakh War that ended in 1994. This latest attack led to six weeks of war in which many people died from both sides. Azerbaijan took over the territories that Armenia had previously occupied, but also held a significant part of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. After the capture of Shushi, a city located inside the disputed territory and of great strategic value due to its proximity with the enclave's capital Stepanakert, Russia mediated a ceasefire that was signed by both Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The 2020 War, also called 44-day War, was the second full-scale war of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that started during the collapse of the Soviet Union, and from then until now hostilities have not ceased. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, often

referred to as intractable, has caused bewilderment to many scholars, who have turned to numerous disciplines to try to find a solution to this seemingly hopeless “frozen conflict”.

My intention is to go beyond the characterization of “frozen conflict” to understand what contributes to the conflict remaining intractable and why reconciliation has not been possible. It is important that more studies be conducted on the inhibitors of peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis from standpoints other that geopolitics or international relations, since, despite numerous studies and attempts to negotiate, tension still exists and the situation is extremely volatile. Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh is not only imperative for the Armenian residents of the territory to stop living under the threat of ethnic cleansing, but it is also necessary for the Armenian diaspora, who also conceive this conflict situation as a matter of survival of a community that already experienced genocide in 1915 under the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Peace is also an urgent matter for many young Azerbaijanis who have inherited a “problem” that is not theirs and of which they are growing increasingly jaded. The dangers of a young society becoming more and more disaffected by protracted conflict can lead to disengagement instead of the active participation of civil society needed to work towards a stable and lasting peace.

My study is located at the nexus of collective memory, collective victimhood and national identity, demonstrating that the Azerbaijani discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, shaped by collective victimhood, contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of the conflict and poses an obstacle to the resolution of the conflict and peace negotiation between the two sides. I argue that Azerbaijan has articulated its narrative on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which underpins the basis of its national identity, using strategies of victimization that are transmitted through collective memory. These strategies function in two directions: *selective and biased information-processing*, *justification and rationalization of negative group behavior*, *self-pity*, and *denial* are directed at the in-group; whereas *attribution*

of blame, *moral superiority and paternalism*, and *moral disengagement* are addressed to the out-group. Using the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre as cases, I show how Azerbaijanis articulate the memory narrative to fit their self-victimization framework. In Azerbaijani society, the conflict is understood and framed in a manner that makes its own group the victimized. This way of presenting the conflict significantly affects how Azerbaijanis justify and rationalize in-group behavior towards the out-group, how they select and process information about the events that occurred and how they construct the narrative on the conflict.

Collective victimhood in Azerbaijan primarily serves two functions. The government instrumentalizes strategies of victimhood abroad to carry out its foreign policy, especially with respect to the military conflict with the Armenians, framing it as the number one national security threat. At the same time, the government also employs inward-facing victim narratives domestically, as they serve to divert attention from the government's wrong-doings, such as corruption or lack of freedoms in the country, and thus assert political authority and maintain Ilham Aliyev in power. In addition, it helps Azerbaijanis understand their existence in the post-colonial period by creating a narrative that transcends Russia's involvement.

I consider my work as a contribution to the field of conflict and memory studies that adds a new layer to the intractability of the conflict, namely the self-perceived victimization of Azerbaijanis. While Nagorno-Karabakh remains an important topic in social and political studies, collective memory and victimized identity, as well as their social and political consequences, are still overlooked issues. In that sense, I aim to offer insight into Azerbaijani victimhood-based identity and its political implications as representing a further obstacle to conflict resolution efforts., a perspective that has been neglected in the body of knowledge of discourses on Nagorno-Karabakh. My research seeks to bridge this gap by providing evidence on the treatment of the memory of the Khojaly massacre and the Sumgait pogroms. While

both events have been extensively studied, there is insufficient attention to how these elements of the past contribute to the understanding of conflict dynamics today. In that sense, my research is unique in that it brings together and uses the various existing literatures on the conflict and in the field of collective memory and victimhood, as well as national identity, and evidences how Azerbaijanis shape collective memory using strategies of victimization directed at the out-group and the in-group, which has a significant impact on their behavior towards the conflict. Hence, my study adds a new perspective to the scholarly conversation on Nagorno-Karabakh and expands the literature on memory and conflict, further underscoring the importance of dealing with the past in peace negotiations.

Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to Eurasian studies by demonstrating that in Azerbaijan the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict opens a space for post-colonial discourse. The systematic blaming of Russia for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by the Azerbaijanis only points to the colonial failures of the Soviet Union. That Nagorno-Karabakh has shaped Azerbaijani national identity and not so much its Soviet past hints at a break with the "post-Soviet" categorization attributed to it in search of an identity no longer dominated by Russia.

The thesis is structured as follows: I start by reviewing the academic literature on Nagorno-Karabakh from different disciplines and also delve into the literature on collective victimhood, stating why it is significant to study the conflict through this approach that has been neglected. In *Research Methodology* I describe the methodology I have used for my research, all the steps I have taken in detail to analyze the data and the logic behind all the decisions, as well as a brief reflection on the limitations of my study and address some ethical considerations I took into account during my fieldwork. This is followed by two empirical chapters: *Strategies Of Victimization In The Formation Of National Identity* and *The Collective Remembrance Of The Sumgait Pogroms And The Khojaly Massacre In Azerbaijan*.

In the first one I examine the strategies of victimization used by Azerbaijanis and how collective victimhood shapes the discourse that underpins national identity. I identified seven mechanisms that work in two directions: *selective and biased information-processing*, *justification and rationalization of negative group behavior*, *self-pity*, and *denial* are directed at the in-group; whereas *attribution of blame*, *moral superiority and paternalism*, and *moral disengagement* are addressed to the out-group. In the second substantive chapter, I reconstruct and analyze the disparate treatment of the memory of the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre, demonstrating that the Azerbaijani discourse selectively focuses on particular events and builds on the memory narrative in a way that fits its self-victimization framework using in-group and out-group strategies. The government's instrumentalization of the Khojaly massacre further solidifies this aspect.

Finally, I end with a concluding chapter in which I address the importance of examining the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through collective victimhood in order to deeper understand the underlying psychological dynamics that influence Azerbaijan's attitudes towards the conflict and highlight the significance of reconciliation of the past between two communities for the resolution of the conflict.

Literature review

In this chapter I will elaborate a critical review of the literature on collective victimhood and also of the range of angles from which the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been studied. In establishing the scholarly conversation on this topic, my intention is to offer a deeper understanding of the existing knowledge on the conflict and to find the gap that I intend to address in order to advance the body of scholarship in the field of conflict and memory studies. More precisely, my main objective is to identify the limitations in understanding the role of collective victimhood and memory in the Azerbaijani experience of the conflict.

Many different academic disciplines have discussed and attempted to better comprehend the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including international relations and political science, security, peace and conflict studies, as well as interdisciplinary studies, such as sociology or memory studies. The former prioritizes analyzing, especially through case studies, the conflict historically and geopolitically, looking at the factors that have brought the conflict to the current situation, what is its role in the security of the region or why peace negotiations have not been fruitful. Interdisciplinary studies have focused on exploring the socio-cultural dimensions of the conflict. None of these studies have explored the national identity of Azerbaijanis through collective victimhood. While scholars have focused on addressing collective memory and historical narratives within the framework of the ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the only studies conducted on collective victimhood focus on Armenia, mostly related to Turkey and the Armenian Genocide. While it is true that Armenia has achieved the status of historical victim through its campaign to recognize the atrocities they were subjected to as genocide, Azerbaijanis have also built their national identity based on self-perceived victimization. This phenomenon, however, has been overlooked in the academic literature.

In the following, I will evaluate the literature necessary to unfold my argument, which focuses on Nagorno Karabakh through the prism of ethnic conflict and historical narratives, and also collective victimhood and memory. This academic literature helps me to identify the possible cause of the violence, as well as the narrative patterns to which Armenians and Azerbaijanis have resorted since the beginning of the conflict and what is the role of collective memory. These approaches are important because regardless of the events that have occurred, it is the perception of events that determines the behavior of societies in relation to the conflict and the warring party.

One of the most complex issues in territorial ethnic conflicts is the historical claims and competing narratives each party develop about the territory. The main Armenian perspective draws on national identity and sees the conflict as a fight for survival justified by a common history of genocide, whereas the need of upholding international norms of territorial integrity is emphasized in the major Azerbaijani stance on the conflict (O'Lear & Whiting, 2008; Toal, 2019; Broers, 2019).

Although Azerbaijanis frame their territorial claim to Nagorno-Karabakh mainly in terms of international law, they also use certain historical claims to legitimize their presence in the territory, asserting that Armenians were brought by the Russian Empire from Persia. Avdoyan (1993) attempted to shed light on this issue by drawing on ancient and mediaeval Armenian primary source materials, that proof that Armenian occupation in Nagorno-Karabakh extends far back in time. According to the author, "the Armenians have been in the area now called Nagorno-Karabakh since c. 370 A.D., if not before" (citation needed). While the Russian government introduced Armenians from Persia into Nagorno-Karabakh after the Second Persian War of 1828, Armenians were already living in the area of Artsakh (the tenth province of the former Armenian kingdom) in the *Upper* Karabakh ("Nagorno" means high, while "Karabakh" is a word of Turkish origin meaning Black Garden) since before the 5th

century at the earliest, when the Armenian culture spread in Artsakh after the creation of the Armenian language by Mesrop Mashtotz. This territory, Upper Karabakh was inhabited by Armenians but also by Caucasian Albanians. The Lower Karabakh area, on the other hand, has been populated by the Azeris, descendants of nomadic Turkic tribes who migrated from Central Asia, since the 11th century (Rasizade, 2011).

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have always been subject to the rule of other empires, including the Soviet Union. Many authors (Cornell, 2005; Suny, 1993; Altstadt, 1992; De Waal, 2013) have tried to shed light on the origins of the conflict and attribute the Nagorno Karabakh “problem”, like the rest of the conflicts in the Caucasus, to the political cartography of the early Soviet Union. The origins and nature of the conflict as well as its interpretation is also a matter of disagreement not only between the conflicting parties, but also among many scholars. What most do agree on is that these conflicts were not the cause of the collapse of the USSR, but rather a by-product. For Zürcher (2007), ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus were inevitable because of the ethno-federalist system built by the Soviets. Ethnic tensions were growing because of the different groups fighting for power and privileges granted by the autonomous republics within the union republics. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the fragmentation became more manifest. Hughes and Sasse (2001) point out that these conflicts arose from the collapse of communism and are, in part, an echo of past struggles. They add that the USSR regime cynically manipulated nationalism using “quasi-federal institutional devices”, and blame the Soviet border-making for the 1920 Karabakh conflict, as it failed to connect the Armenians with their homeland, which triggered the nationalist irredentist sentiment in Artsakh (p. 29). Such is also the opinion of Kolossov (1999), according to whom the collapse of the USSR rendered evident the disjunction between the political organization of the territory and various ethnic identities.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power and inherited the territories of the Russian Empire. Members of the Caucasus section of the Communist Party met in 1920 to determine the status of Karabakh and assign it to Soviet Armenia, but soon after the decision was reversed and Karabakh was transferred to Azerbaijan under the pretext of its economic dependence with this republic. Karabakh kept its status as an autonomous oblast within the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan. However, Karabakh Armenians lost their link with Armenia, as they did not enjoy their national symbols or education and means of communication in their native language. These unfavorable conditions resulted in the emigration of Armenians from the territory, while Azerbaijanis immigrated.

Eventually, after the Stalin era, Karabakh Armenians began to claim to be transferred to Armenia and finally the first ethno-political conflict of the Soviet Union emerged (Zürcher, 2007). Babayev (2020), however, notes that Karabakh Armenians were allowed to keep their cultural autonomy and adds that the reason for granting autonomy to Karabakh lay in the need to maintain peace between Muslims and Armenians as well as economic ties between Upper and Lower Karabakh. Following the decision of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh to hold a referendum and finally declare itself an independent state in 1992, war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan which lasted until 1994 and resulted in hundreds of deaths. The secession of the hitherto Azerbaijani-held territory was successful thanks to Russian military assistance and Armenian intervention. As a result of the first war, not only many people died, as Azerbaijan had also to accommodate around 610,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Kuburas, 2011).

Determining the cause of the conflict is not such a simple task. Attention should be paid to factors that influence ethnic relations and can ignite violence, such as the historical past, cultural or religious differences, but also direct causes of aggravation of relations, such as national, territorial, linguistic or socio-economic factors. In economic terms, Azerbaijan

enjoyed lower living standards than Armenia during Soviet times, while at the socio-cultural level, Karabakh Armenians were in an unequal position because their cultural and educational ties with Armenia were severed. The ethnic make-up of the region also played an important role, with Armenians accounting for the majority of the population (Yamskov, 1991). The religious factor, however, does not seem to have been important in the conflict, and early research (Yamskov, 1991; Cornell, 1998; Vaserman & Ginat, 1994) rules out this element as influential in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. While it is true that religion is an intrinsic component of Armenian identity, Cornell (1998) argues that, although Armenian and Azeri religious leaders supported the causes of their respective sides, they were never at the forefront of the movements and religion was never appealed to.

Geukjian (2016) agrees that the conflict is rooted in the legacy of the Soviet Union and its nationalities policy, but considers that other factors have contributed to the conflict, such as the geopolitical interests of regional powers, economic competition and historical grievances, as well as the interference of external powers such as Russia, Turkey or Iran. The role of external factors, especially Russia, is also emphasized by Melander (2001), who notes that the violence flared up because of nationalism. Thus, although ethnic conflicts usually have a territorial dimension (Milanova, 2003), part of it must be understood in terms of national identity, which is based on historical ideas and collective myths.

Despite being “scattered”, Armenia is a strong nation whose culture and identity is well defined in historical and linguistic terms and also possesses a cohesive and productive diaspora; Azerbaijan, however, is rather “weak” in terms of national identity (O'Lear & Whiting, 2008). O'Loughlin and Kolosov (2017) also pointed out Armenian’s heightened ethnic nationalism by examining Nagorno-Karabakh’s pantheon of national heroes, which in addition evidences their collective trauma. The Armenian nation, though dispersed, forms an

exclusive community that uniquely fights for its survival in the face of possible external threats, such as hostility from Turkey or Azerbaijan.

Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have created different national discourses to claim their exclusivity over the territory and, in the case of Armenians from Karabakh, also the right to self-determination. In many cases, the different interpretations are conflicting and opposing, which in many occasions has fueled violence. The “Karabakh problem” is deeply rooted in the past for both parties. The historical claims date back to three distinct periods: the nationalist movements in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the nineteenth century, the consequences of territorial decisions in the Soviet era, and the rise of nationalist sentiment again in the 1980s (Milanova, 2003). Since the Soviet era, in order to justify their aims, ideologues of the conflicting antagonist parties have decisively pushed back in time the question of when the conflict started, which has been drifting into the question of “we were here first”. Although this question generally concerns the legitimacy of the territorial boundaries determined by the colonial powers, the question of “who came first” has been raised by both sides as a fundamental claim to ownership of the ethnically defined territory (Zürcher, 2007).

Tensions between Azeris and Armenians are further based on mutual distrust and rooted in hostile historical memories that have ended up forming an “us against them” rhetoric that permeates institutions and media, to the point where they blame each other for any present tragedy. There are some differences in the nature of the claims of the warring parties. O'Loughlin and Kolosov (2017) argue that for Armenians the narrative on Nagorno-Karabakh focuses on national identity, while Azerbaijanis stress the importance of respecting international standards of territorial integrity. It seems more necessary for *de facto* states such as Nagorno-Karabakh to construct and “over-enhance” identities, surely as a reaction to the lack of legitimacy at the international level. This differentiation is also emphasized by Gamaghelyan (2010), according to whom for Armenians the conflict is motivated by national

identity, because along with language, culture and history, Nagorno-Karabakh is part of their historical territory over which they consider to have the right to self-determination. Losing Nagorno-Karabakh would mean losing part of their identity. Moreover, it represents a national symbol that was liberated from the “Turks”, who have oppressed Armenians for centuries. Armenians associate Azeris with Turks and link them with the Genocide of 1915, so in their collective imagination Azeris are part of the “genocidal Turkish nation”. For Azerbaijanis, that Armenians occupy Nagorno-Karabakh is a violation of national heritage, and the war was a traumatic event in which they not only lost territory, but ended with a large number of victims and IDPs (Gamaghelyan, 2010).

The narrative about the genocide should not be overlooked, as it is not possible to understand the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan without integrating the discourse of “genocide denial” that was produced in Turkey and later adapted by Azerbaijan (Cheterian, 2018). Moreover, Azerbaijan has developed its own state discourse on the genocide, categorically denying that the genocide took place and presenting Azerbaijan itself as the victim (Rauf Garagozov, 2012). Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey have referred to the events of 1915 to formulate their policies towards the conflict and the trauma of the past, although repressed, was present in the mass psychology of both conflicting sides (Cheterian, 2018).

Political elites have legitimized these narratives to implement their political agenda (Voronkova, 2013), but so have intellectual elites through different strategies of war and myth-making. Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and the way it presented its victory as the unequivocal success of Ilham Aliyev's authoritarian regime have compromised the position of peacebuilders and democracy advocates, which was already fragile in itself. The discourse makers discursively transformed this contemporary conflict into a historical one with roots in antiquity, giving primacy to the primordialist ethno-nationalist vocabulary. Both Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev adopted an historical

narrative of the conflict from radicalized positions, increased animosity and invested in war, thus becoming two of the most militarized societies in the world and portraying the other as the mortal enemy to be destroyed instead of learning to coexist with it and truncating opportunities for democratization and regional integration (Gambaghelyan & Rumyantsev, 2021). Indeed, the leaders are largely responsible for perpetuating the discourses, but they are not the only ones to blame. For example, anti-Armenian propaganda in Azerbaijan has been instigated by journalists as well as by commentators, historians or high-level officials, so that the negative image of Armenians has become institutionalized. The state uses the "enemy image" through mechanisms that embed it in society and help divert attention from the government's own failures (Novikova, 2012).

While not diminishing the responsibility of the authorities, it is necessary to mention how societies contribute to the perpetuation of the conflict because of the collective remembrance of events. Even if the new generations have not experienced certain events, such as the Karabakh war or in the case of Azerbaijan the Khojaly massacre, it remains a painful issue for them because the collective memory is oriented towards social norms and social representations (Garagozov, 2016). Without some changes to historical narratives, it is impossible to effectively address a contentious past, especially in societies that are divided and increasingly alienated from each other (Cheterian, 2018). Collective memory can be the inhibitor of peace, but it can potentially become the opposite. The narration reconfiguration and modification of the collective remembrance of a conflict can contribute to peacemaking (Paez & Lui, 2015).

Since collective victimhood is a powerful psychological construct that can shape group identity and behaviors, it is a relevant approach that can help us unravel the complexity of the processes that influence the perceptions of individuals and groups in a conflict-ridden society, as well as their demands and policies. Moreover, because collective victimhood

intersects with collective memory, this approach offers insights into the selective construction of the memory narrative.

The relationship between memory and the identity of a society is not a new phenomenon. Already in the 1930s, the art historian Aby Warburg and the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, moving away from theories that framed the collective memory in biological terms, elaborated their theories on "cultural memory" which conceives of behavior and experience within a social framework and which is transmitted from generation to generation as well as through social practices (Assman, 1995). Memory has the capacity to transform individual memories into collective memories. Collective memories, in turn, are depictions of the past that shape collective identity, and for this to be the case, the memory must be shared and must define a broad group in society (Brown, Kouri & Hirst, 2012). Likewise, members of society maintain collective identity by identifying with the past through collective memories (Gongaware, 2011).

While it is true that societies look to the past as a source for identification and unity and in order to make sense of the present, it is not so much the past itself, but the way in which it is built into the psyche of the nation that says the most about what a society is like today and why things are the way they are. Past experiences are often interpreted, crafted and spread through discourses that conform the memory if a nation. Traumatic past events are one of the most difficult to process and the way they are handled has serious implications in the present and the future. This is the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, who after nearly 35 years of conflict and two full-scale wars have not found a way to cease hostilities.

The sense of collective self-perceived victimhood is a crucial part of the narrative about shared discourse in conflict societies. This collective phenomenon, again, has dangerous consequences in conflict, as it can act as an inhibitor of peacemaking (Bar-Tal,

Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009). Azerbaijanis have come to deny and belittle Armenian's experiences even though they have suffered them too, or rather, precisely because they have suffered them and Armenians were the perpetrators. The victim status that Armenia has managed to secure through its campaign to classify Turkish crimes as genocide has not only given them some moral cover in the region when they in turn victimize their neighbors but also poses a risk to Azerbaijan. Because Armenians made them suffer, in the Azerbaijani psyche, they no longer have the right to be victims, as the political currency of victimization has been fundamental for regional politics.

Sometimes in conflicts both parties believe that they are the victims, and this self-perception is an inseparable part of the narrative that societies construct to make sense of the conflict and forms part of the collective memory. However, to better understand the conflict ethos and consider potential strategies to mitigate hostilities, it is necessary to identify what tools society uses to create victimization discourses and why they work the way they do. Because collective victimhood is the result of collective violence towards a targeted group, the consequences of such harm shape not only the group identity, but also the interaction with other groups (Noor et al., 2017).

Groups experience a sense of victimhood that is often the result of an event that has affected a significant portion of that group. Just as an individual may perceive a sense of victimhood indirectly, people who belong to the group against which harm has occurred may consider themselves victims because of their membership in that group. This implies that the members of the collective share a set of beliefs that unite them and reaffirm their collective sense of victimhood or may even be the basis of their identification with the group, since sharing beliefs is one of the basic elements of group formation. The sense of victimhood consists not only of shared beliefs, but of a whole system of attitudes and emotions that behave with respect to the type of harm the collective has suffered, such as oppression,

humiliation or loss. Because, emotionally, the sense of victimhood is associated with feelings such as fear or anger, it leads to the urge to want revenge for the harm suffered. The sense of collective self-perceived victimhood is based on and reflects shared beliefs that serve as a foundation for the creation of a common reality and culture. Within this reality are located past traumatic events, which end up becoming intrinsic narratives of that social identity.

The sense of collective self-perceived victimhood is based on and reflects shared beliefs that serve as a foundation for the creation of a common reality and identity. Within this reality are located past traumatic events, which end up becoming intrinsic narratives of social identity (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009). Shared beliefs often serve to educate people about the past and present through moral lessons, as in the case of the Hutus (Malkki, 1995), but also to identify enemies and have a frame of reference through which to interpret the conflict, which can lead to a kind of *siege mentality* in which the group believes that the world is against them (Bilali & Ross, 2012). Victimhood has become for some nations a desired status, especially in the context of conflict, to demonstrate that the ingroup has suffered more than the outgroup.

Noor et al. (2017) define this phenomenon as competitive victimhood and argue that its motivation is underpinned by the intergroup relations, which are inherently competitive. Competitive victimhood is prevalent in historical asymmetric conflicts in which one party has inflicted considerable harm on the other, and sometimes the perpetrators are precisely those who claim victim status (Bilali & Dasgupta, 2012), as the sense of victimhood is necessarily related to the power of collectives, but in fact collectives that are more powerful militarily, economically or politically also perceive themselves as victims in the conflict (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009).

In their study on anti-Semitism and competitive victimhood, Bilewicz and Stefaniak (2013) suggest that there is a positive correlation between ingroup victimhood and the

tendency to justify negative ingroup actions. The authors demonstrate a positive relationship between victimization (which they call "absolute") and anti-Semitic feelings, thus suggesting that the notion of victimhood within the group impairs the relationship with other victimized groups (a historical victim does not feel responsible for other victims) as well as the attitude towards other historically perpetrator groups. The effect that Polish identification has on anti-Semitic beliefs is due to the narrative of victimhood. Additionally, competitive victimhood encompasses another form of moral dimension, more specifically regarding the moral significance of suffering and the perceived legitimacy of who qualifies as a victim. Even when a group experiences objectively more pain, the opposing group may still contest the legitimacy of each other's experiences and question whether the victim group itself was to blame for the suffering (Noor et al., 2017).

As I have already mentioned, societies elaborate discourses about past experiences to make sense of the reality around them but also, among other things, to reinforce the positive image of the group to which they belong (Paez & Liu, 2015). Thus, elements of the violent past that are crucial for the elaboration of outgroup victimization are "forgotten," but other parts that are crucial for ingroup victimization "survive" (Green et al. 2017). But forgetting and the strategic selection of elements from the past-and on many occasions, also from the present, is only one of the mechanisms used to elaborate victimization discourses. Victims, because of their status as victims, often feel moral superiority and their right to receive the sympathy of others, they believe they are exempt from criticism, and this leads them to justify the actions committed by their group. This is common in societies that have experienced past conflict and also in societies that find themselves dealing with intractable conflict. Memories of group victimization help members to legitimize their actions but also to feel less sympathy for the suffering of the outgroup (Bilali & Ross, 2012).

The attribution of responsibility is usually towards the outgroup, although the researchers Bilali and Dasgupta (2012) speak of three targets of responsibility, which include the ingroup, the outgroup, but also external factors. Blaming external agents is another mechanism for denying self-responsibility and it is usually the individuals who most identify with the group who strive to maintain the positive image of the group. As the conflict drags on, the harm becomes more intense and is perceived as more unjust and undeserved, so the self-perception of victimhood becomes more ingrained in the collective and cycles of violence continue through acts of revenge and preemption (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009) to protect themselves from the outgroup they see as a threat (Bilali & Ross, 2012). The sense of victimhood serves several functions in the conflict-ridden society. On the one hand, it provides a frame of reference through which to understand the conflict, as it identifies foes and allies and provides information and explanations. It also serves as a moral justification and as a form of differentiation and superiority. The ingroup frames the outgroup in delegitimizing terms that illustrate the immoral and unjust acts it has perpetrated, and considers the conflict irrational. The sense of collective victimhood is also a good patriotic mobilizing agent (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009).

The sense of victimhood serves several functions in the conflict-ridden society. On the one hand, it provides a frame of reference through which to understand the conflict, as it identifies foes and allies and provides information and explanations. It also serves as a moral justification and as a form of differentiation and superiority. The in-group frames the out-group in delegitimizing terms that illustrate the immoral and unjust acts it has perpetrated, and considers the conflict irrational. As mentioned above, the sense of collective victimhood can mobilize the population. Edward Said (2000) points out that the Palestinian self-determination project has not worked because of the lack of a powerful historical narrative, as opposed to the narrative presented by the Zionist movement in Israel. It is therefore relevant to mention

here also the campaign by Armenians for the recognition of the genocide committed by Turkey, which demonstrates the strength of national narratives.

Although perhaps more fragile as a state, having to rely on Russia for many affairs, Armenia exhibits the characteristics of a strong nation if we take into account its powerful historical narrative and its cohesive international diaspora. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has failed for example to find an international status for the Khojaly massacre which they qualify as genocide, and also generally to position itself as the victims of the conflict, Armenia being the one who has received this status in the eyes of the international community. Although the narratives about Khojaly and the loss and occupation of territories in Karabakh may be strong collective memories, perhaps the difficulty in turning such narratives into powerful mobilizing agents that achieve international status is due to the vulnerability of the nation, which may be the result of a lack of a cohesive diaspora, multi-ethnicity, multiple languages and alphabet changes, and, in general, the lack of a shared identity (O'Lear & Whiting, 2008).

As we can see, collective memory is a topic integrated in the literature on Nagorno-Karabakh, however, it focuses more on Armenia and it makes little to no reference to the role it plays in transmitting specific behaviors. Although the conversation on disparate historical narratives between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as well as the importance of the reconfiguration of the past in order to build a more peaceful present, are still relevant topics, it is necessary to improve our understanding of what attitudes are conveyed through memory, how is the memory narrative constructed, and what are the implications. A critical review of the literature on collective victimhood suggests that this focus is relevant to the study of conflicts, as it can reveal attitudes, behaviors and patterns that can help us uncover barriers to conflict resolution.

Because it is Armenia who gained its status as a victim, this perspective from the Azerbaijani side has been neglected and scholars have paid little attention to how collective

victimhood affects their discourse and, therefore, their identity and attitudes towards the conflict. Groups that consider themselves as victims may become morally entitled, seek retaliation, and will be reluctant to compromise. Yet, the literature has failed to explain how collective victimhood in Azerbaijan contributes to the longevity and intractability of the conflict. I fill that gap in the subsequent chapters by delving into the Azerbaijani societal discourse in order to better comprehend the mechanisms of self-victimization that people use to build the memory narrative and that ultimately hinder peace process.

Research Methodology

In this chapter I explain in detail the methodology followed in my research. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my research aim was to find out what civil society discourses in Azerbaijan could tell us about the intractability of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. I explored societal narratives through qualitative interviews I conducted in Baku in the summer of 2022. My data revealed that Azerbaijanis have articulated their narrative on the conflict, which shapes their national identity, using in-group and out-group strategies of self-victimization that are transmitted through collective memory. Using the memory of the Khojaly tragedy and the Sumgait pogroms as case studies, the data also proved that the Azerbaijani discourse selectively focuses on specific events and constructs the memory narrative in a way that fits its self-victimization framework, which is supported by the government's intervention. My data analysis focused on axial coding, grouping related concepts together into categories and ultimately into themes that provided an explanatory framework for how Azerbaijanis understand their experience of conflict. I used state narratives sourced from government agencies to contrast official and unofficial discourses and to understand how and to what extent victimized collective memory has been transmitted.

I will first explain in detail the research design, which is based mainly on ethnographic interviews but also on content analysis of newspaper articles, and I will also explain the key design choices, such as how I selected the newspaper articles I analyzed, why I chose broad and open-ended questions for the interviews, and the age range of the participants from 18 to 40 years old. Next I will describe the data collection process, in which I used NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software, to transcribe the interviews that I had previously recorded with my cell phone. I then expound the process of data analysis, in which I also used NVIVO to perform axial coding, extracting subcategories, categories and themes. I will finally reflect on the treatment of my data, as well as the methodological shortcomings and limitations, such as

the lack of time or trust with my participants, and how I have tried to mitigate the impacts of these. I conclude by discussing some ethical considerations I took into consideration to ensure that my participants were comfortable taking part in my study.

I conducted qualitative research for my thesis, focusing on exploring the intractability of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the potential explanations provided by the discourses of civic society. Azerbaijan being an authoritarian country, I also wanted to take into account the state discourses to know to what extent they resonate with that of the population and how they converge and interact with societal discourses. To achieve my research goals, I conducted ethnographic interviews to gather data and relied on them for the bulk of my research. I conducted the interviews in Baku, mainly in English but also in Azerbaijani, and in this case another participant would help be by acting as a translator. Before conducting the interviews, I conducted a preliminary study in order to formulate the right questions. For this study, I performed discourse analysis on news articles in English sourced from the State News Agency (AZERTAC). I chose AZERTAC for this analysis because it is the only official source of the official government news, so in addition to releasing government statements, it publishes news articles, contains official documents such as orders and letters from the president and it is possible to find a wide range of information, including commemorative days or special projects such as “Armenian vandalism in photos” concerning the destruction of cultural heritage. Moreover, all this information is available in English. I considered that this website alone housed enough information for my purpose.

I performed a preliminary analysis of the texts in order to make an assessment of the content and to elaborate a series of categories about the persistent narratives in the discourse. I considered the narratives persistent when I saw them framed in several articles about various topics. For example, “Armenian aggression” is used on multiple occasions to talk about border skirmishes, an “ethnic cleansing operation” or a possible occupation; “native lands”

also constitutes a narrative because it is frequently used in different contexts, such as when talking about massacres, IDPs and refugees, or a military counterattack. I ascribed these categories to different fields of academic literature, which allowed me to give the narratives a formal framework through which to account for them.

The AZERTAC interface enables the selection of a date range to search for articles, but it is necessary to add a keyword to perform the search. I selected ranges of dates close to hostilities of major and minor severity, in 2010, 2016 and 2020 and used the term “Karabakh” as keyword for the search. The headlines guided me to see if the content of the article was going to be relevant, i.e. had something to do with the conflict. Once I selected the articles, I skimmed through them one by one, as they are generally short. I was interested in analyzing the official Azerbaijani discourse, therefore, articles about Azeri officials or institutions or official statements by the president were mainly what I looked for. If reading them I realized that the article was reproducing the opinion of, for instance, a non-Azerbaijani minister on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I would discard the article in preference to others that reproduce the opinion of Azerbaijani officials. Articles about foreign political personalities and their position on the conflict were also relevant because they serve to legitimize the official discourse, but are not themselves part of the official discourse I wanted to take into consideration for my analysis in that moment.

Once I selected the articles I was going to analyze, I read them more carefully and looked for fragments that told me what the position of the discourse on the conflict is. Knowing the historical and socio-cultural context allowed me to know that in an article, what I would emphasize are expressions like “the return of the displaced Azerbaijanis” because I know that for Azerbaijanis, Karabakh has always been theirs and it is a place to “return”. In this sense the methodology had both a deductive and an inductive approach, since I knew where to look first but I was open to what else the discourse was saying or, sometimes, to what it was not

saying. For example, on several occasions the Khojaly massacre against Azerbaijanis was mentioned, but at no time is there was any reference to the Sumgait pogrom committed by Azerbaijanis against Armenians. Sometimes, what the discourse does not mention is also part of the narrative. In those cases where I noticed a lack of information, I took it into account to contrast it with the popular discourse.

I developed a number of categories that constitute different narratives. I elaborated these categories once I read a considerable sample of texts and I saw that several elements were repeated quite often. Although the analysis was preliminary, this assessment already shed light on the most recurrent narratives in the discourse. This research was extremely valuable because it helped me to explore the official discourse in a more superficial way to know what to expect and to have a general idea. But more importantly, it allowed me to elaborate the questions for my interviews. Choosing several articles about Karabakh on different dates when the conflict escalated was enough to have a big picture of the most important narratives about the conflict.

As mentioned above, to constitute a narrative it had to be persistent, not an isolated element. For example, I elaborated a narrative of “appeal to norms of sovereignty” because there are multiple references to territory. In this category would fit “territorial integrity”, “occupied regions of Azerbaijan”, or “internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan”. The issue of IDPs by refugees was also constant, and therefore I elaborated a category of “migration and displacement” where I placed, for example, “the return of the displaced Azerbaijanis”. Other important expressions have to do with the status of Karabakh, thus “territorial integrity” and “native lands” were also important. Much of the conflict in Karabakh has to do with the relationship Azerbaijanis have with Armenians. The way the discourse portrays them is also relevant. For example, “occupiers” or “invaders”, again, tells us that according to them Armenians are alien to that territory. In discourse analysis the data

is not only composed of words, but more broadly, of expressions or fragments, because it depends on the context within the text. Thus, the data collected could be simply words like “IDPs” or “provocation”, but also longer phrases like “They (Armenians) threaten Azerbaijan with a new occupation”.

Different narratives can belong to several categories, for instance, “occupation” was often mentioned in the sense that a foreign people has occupied a territory that belonged to them before. In that case, “occupation” would be part of the category of “first occupancy”. On the other hand, “threaten Azerbaijan with a new occupation” would be part of the category “security dilemma”, since, although occupation is mentioned, it has a different meaning: while in the first case it refers to historical claims, in the second case the possible occupation of Armenia is used as a pretext for defense.

I elaborated eleven broad and open-ended questions based on the discourse analysis (see *Appendix*). I chose to approach this study through interviews because I considered that people's narratives, beyond the literal meaning we can draw from them, can say much more if we take into account the way people talk about a certain topic or what resources they use to explain a situation. My intention was that the interviews, in a way, would speak for themselves. Thus, I asked rather general questions of the type “Do you think Armenians and Azerbaijanis are enemies?” or “What can you tell me about the Shusha pogroms and the Khojaly massacre?”. This approach has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage is that, being broad questions sometimes the participants got a bit off topic and I had to resort to several follow-up questions to redirect them. At the same time, the upside is that broad questions allow participants to describe their experiences in a less restricted way. The more specific and concrete the question or the way it is phrased, the more the interviewee is being forced to make certain choices. In my case, I wanted to be open to everything the interviews could tell me.

For the interviews, I selected a sample of participants aged between 18 and 40. The only requirements to participate in the sample were to be of legal age and not older than 40 because I was more interested in knowing the narratives of those who have grown up after the first Karabakh war and who had not participated in those events. This was one of the most important points, as people who did not take part or witnessed the beginning of the conflict or were too little to realize what was going on, only have the discourse to rely on. Their narrative about the conflict is based on the experiences and memories their relatives and acquaintances passed on to them, on history textbooks or official state discourses. Interviewing people this age, I could assess how the discourse and identity of Azerbaijanis has been shaped with the beginning of the conflict as a starting point. The sampling strategy for the study involved the snowball method: I contacted potential interviewees, and they recommended other participants who might agree to participate in the study. I conducted 15 interviews with participants of various ages and backgrounds. The fieldwork took place in Baku, Azerbaijan, where I also conducted participant observation, which was crucial to better understand my work.

I transcribed the interviews with the assistance of NVIVO, a qualitative research software. Once transcribed them, I used axial coding as a technique to analyze them, identifying concepts in subcategories, categories and ultimately in themes. Axial coding is a technique closely linked to grounded theory that allows data to be related to each other, as it groups and combines the concepts into more comprehensive categories (Merriam, 2009). I chose to analyze the interviews using this technique rather than using, for example, discourse analysis, because I was not as interested only in the lexicon, keywords or occurrences of certain words or expressions, but rather how participants understood their experience and what resources they used to convey it in words. According to Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2015), the purpose of axial coding is to identify and define the central categories and concepts that

emerge from the data and to establish connections between them. In grounded theory, categories refer to a phenomenon, which can be, for example, a problem or question, a specific event or occurrence significant to the participants. Subcategories are also categories, but they provide greater explanatory value. As coding proceeds, the concepts that make up the categories and subcategories become clearer. When analyzing data axially, we seek answers to questions such as why, how, when or where and what are the consequences. By answering these questions, the categories reveal relationships between each other and provide greater context and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as a better understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of events (Corbin, J. & Strauss, 2015).

I developed the coding process in two phases, which in turn consisted of almost the same steps. In the first analysis, or the first phase, I identified "labels" line by line according to what the interviewee said, which constitute the subcategories. For example, if the interview said "We were friends with them and we shared our food", I would label it as "friends" and "sharing". If the interview said "We lived in peace, we married each other and have babies" I would label it "peace" and "intermarriage." Labels were not just single words, they were also expressions: I would label phrases like "The international discourse is that Armenians are the victims and the Azerbaijani past is not represented" as "victimhood" but also "lack of international recognition." After labeling all the interviews, I grouped the labels, i.e., the subcategories, into categories, which could well coincide with the subcategories. These categories were, for example, "peaceful methods", "friendship in the past", "victimhood", "Karabakh should be ours".

Once I elaborated the categories, I performed axial coding to identify the most representative and recurring themes. These themes are what ultimately constitute the common beliefs about the conflict, a whole system through which Azerbaijanis understand their present, past and future. These themes that emerged from my data became representative of

common beliefs among Azerbaijanis about the conflict because they were consistently repeated in interviews in one form or another and constitute common narratives. For instance, participants used different resources, opinions, and explanations that represented the common belief that “Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians should be Azerbaijanis.”, through opinions such as “[Armenians] can stay [in NK] with an Azerbaijani passport and abide by the law” or considering that “If they want to live in our lands they have to show us that they are worthy of it” and that “if they assimilate and become part of our society, [coexisting] will not be a problem for us.” Some other examples are: “We were friends”, which explains the narrative of living together in the past, in which Azerbaijanis do not understand why violence suddenly broke out if Armenians were treated well and were even friends; “We tried peacefully” is the belief that on the Azerbaijani side every attempt has been made to address the conflict peacefully; “Khojaly” sheds light on the deepest wound of the conflict for Azerbaijanis; and “Russia is to blame” is the belief that, as small countries they are, Armenia and Azerbaijan are victims of big geopolitics.

In this first phase I identified the belief system through which Azerbaijanis understand the conflict, but I had to narrow it down further. In a second analysis I realized that the common thread of all the beliefs was victimhood, therefore I re-coded the interviews trying to identify how participants used victimhood to explain their existence. The coding process was similar as in the same as in the first phase, identifying categories through labels and grouping them into themes, that is, the strategies of victimization most used by the respondents. In this case, since I took into account the victimization strategies that I extracted from the literature, the categories were less flexible because I stuck to the literature. Thus, for instance, “They shouldn't feel afraid of Azerbaijanis” I would label as “lack of understanding”; “From now it depends on the youth of Armenia” as “detachment” and subsequently placed both under the category of “moral disengagement”. Finally, I divided the strategies according to their

directionality, that is, whether they are directed to the out-group or the in-group. This helped me assess better Azerbaijanis behavior and discourse and therefore their stance on the conflict.

Since collective memory plays a crucial role in victimhood, I also focused on recomposing, using the interviews, the remembrance of Sumgait and Khojaly from the Azerbaijani perspective. I analyzed how the participants used in-group and out-group mechanisms of self-victimization in their memory narratives, which revealed a difference in the treatment of events and confirmed that Azerbaijanis construct their understanding of the conflict in a way that fits their self-victimization framework. This further highlighted the importance of victimization strategies in the construction of collective memory.

Although the fieldwork and data collection were satisfactory, I can only reflect on the methodological limitations and shortcomings of my study. First of all, I would like to reflect about the language barrier. Many young Azerbaijanis speak English and are replacing Russian as their foreign language, and I was able to communicate easily with them, but this also could mean that I was having access to a select group that had specific education. However, the English-speaking respondents had various backgrounds and did not share a specific profile, as among them there were a photograph, a programmer, a PhD student or an artist. I do not think this affected the interviews, but interviews in Azerbaijani with the help of a participant-translator might have been affected. I conducted four interviews in Azerbaijani, three with veterans from the 2020 Karabakh War and one with a historian. The same participant helped me with all of them but had a better relationship with the veterans. I think the interview with the historian might have been more precise, while the interviews with the veterans might not have been as accurate. My believe is that maybe the translator used a different, more familiar language with his friends when translating my questions and this might have affected the way in which the participants answered. Nonetheless, since the three interviews were completely

different in terms of responses and approach, I do not believe the translation was biased or the interviews totally compromised.

I would have liked to have had a more gender-balanced sample, but for various reasons, including my personal safety, I had to stop looking for more respondents and settle for fifteen interviews, an adequate number for a qualitative study. Nevertheless, I am aware that fifteen interviews might not be representative. In total I interviewed 4 women and 11 men. The women showed, although having different opinions, much more thoughtfulness in expressing themselves and were more retrospective, adding to their experiences also their feelings. Perhaps having more women in the sample would have changed the perspective of the analysis. Another point to keep in mind is what the interviews can and cannot say. One of the limitations, due to lack of time, was building trust with the participants, something I was not able to do well. This ensures that the interviews are more genuine and interviewees are less concerned about what I think about their opinion or position in the conflict, as well as paying less attention to language because they feel more relaxed when they are in trust.

On several occasions I noticed that the participants did not quite understand what my role was and I had to clarify it numerous times. Because of the limited relationship with them, I think many of the participants were self-censoring so that I would not have a bad image of them and Azerbaijanis in general. In other words, they saw these interviews as a way to give them a voice and show their truth. The opinion or the way they talked about Armenians did not coincide, in some cases, with what they had often read on social media, for example. The participants did not use discriminatory language beyond considering them enemies or occupants. I expected them to be more visceral and more explicitly show hatred or rancor, something inherent to ethnic conflict, but it did not happen in my interviews, except for one specific instance. It is possible that my participants were simply not that type of person, but we cannot rule out the possibility that, again, they were restraining themselves.

Adopting a broad, general questioning approach was a good decision to avoid bias. Sometimes, the participants themselves are very careful about their lexicon and what they do or do not want to say and do not pay attention to the resources they use to tell their experiences. My interpretation of the interviews did not take into account gender or lexicon as such, but ultimately focused on what the interviews could say, which revealed that Azerbaijanis have constructed their identity using the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a reference through strategies of victimization.

I believe it is also relevant to give an overview of my research progress and process. The first step of my research was to prepare for the interviews, which included building a questionnaire and find enough participants. The first step in my research was to develop the right questions, for which I used the Azerbaijani State News Agency (AZERTAC) to conduct discourse analysis. This process took place in March and April. I had to perform this task in order to present my research to the ethics committee that approved my fieldwork. In the summer semester, from June through August, I focused on interviews. I spent from mid-June to mid-July recruiting participants and doing the paperwork with my school for my three-week field trip to Azerbaijan. I traveled to Baku on July 22 and conducted most of the interviews the first week. The second week I visited the Military Trophies Park, a museum dedicated to displaying tanks, mines, uniforms and other Armenian military equipment "captured" in the Second Karabakh War. I conducted more interviews that week and the last interview took place on August 8, one day before the end of my fieldwork trip. All interviews were face-to-face at locations chosen by the participants and recorded on my cell phone with the consent of the interviewees. Since the data analysis process took place in several steps and parallel to the writing of the thesis, I was working on it from about September until January. Since January I focused mainly on the written work.

Finally, I believe that I should address certain ethical considerations that I took into account when conducting this research. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a sensitive issue for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It is also a topic that can cause bias for researchers, who are no strangers to the atrocities that are committed in a war. However, I did my best to not let my opinion on the conflict affect either the process or the results of my research. Regardless of my position on the conflict, my task as a researcher was to avoid any bias in order to obtain the most genuine responses from the participants. My participants came from different backgrounds, and whatever their opinion on this conflict, they have had to see their country fighting a war. Some of them would even tell me how their relatives or acquaintances had suffered the consequences.

The most important thing was to take into account the safety and confidentiality of my participants. For this reason, in order to guarantee their anonymity, I did not reveal any of their names or any other identifying information. To ensure that participants were making an informed decision to participate in my study, prior to the interviews I obtained their oral or written consent, where I explained to them the possible risks or benefits of their participation. In addition, to be completely transparent with them, I explained what their involvement in the study entailed and how their data would be treated. None of the participants had any problems with this.

I also wanted to make sure that the interviewees felt comfortable and could speak freely, so I asked everyone to choose a location that suited them best to conduct the interviews. To my surprise, all the participants chose crowded places, such as cafes or the office where they worked, and did not mind that other people could hear what they were saying, no matter how dissenting their opinion might be. This made me reflect on the role of popular discourse on Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and how important it is to the people,

so much so that there is room for dissenting opinions, as long as they do not compromise the government's plans.

Strategies Of Victimization In The Formation Of National Identity

In this chapter I attempt to shed light on the victimization strategies Azerbaijanis use to make sense of their experience. I use national identity and collective victimhood as a theoretical framework to explore how they converge, that is, to find out why and in what ways victimhood shapes or can become the basis of national identity, especially in tumultuous moments of history. This chapter establishes my main thesis statement, that Azerbaijanis use in-group and out-group victimization strategies to elaborate their discourse on Nagorno-Karabakh and to frame their memory narrative. Taking into account my typology of inward and outward functions, I identify seven victimization strategies that I try to illustrate with empirical evidence from my data, which reveals instances and patterns of self-victimization.

As I discussed in the first chapter, victimization is often attributed to Armenians, especially related to the Armenian Genocide, and collective victimhood in Azerbaijan has been overlooked. Overall, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of collective victimhood in Azerbaijan and its importance in the formation of national identity, how it is portrayed in discourse and its political implications. This chapter also serves as a foundation for the following analysis of the cases of the Khojaly massacre and the Sumgait pogroms that I will elaborate in the next chapter, where I illustrate how in-group and out-group strategies of self-victimization are used to elaborate the memory narrative.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent regime change and state-building were significantly conflictive processes. Between 1988 and 2005, forced to decide their future political status, borders and identity, some Soviet states became embroiled in wars that have not yet found a resolution. During the turbulent years preceding up to 1991, when events in distant Moscow determined that Azerbaijan would break away from the Soviet

Union, Azerbaijanis faced issues of identity. The collapse of the USSR made the need to break with the Soviet identity and create a new one a matter of urgency in a country that had little experience in statehood. Most members of the generation that were educated and raised in the Soviet Union are secular, speak Russian, or at the very least are at ease with the language. Following the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijanis had the freedom to view themselves as outside of the Soviet Union's political divisions and started looking for alternative forms of identification. Many gravitated to the larger Turkish community and started to perceive themselves as a part of a Turkic continuity on the continent. Additionally, the generation born after the fall of the Soviet empire has witnessed the transition from Cyrillic to Latin script and the emergence of their country as an oil state (Diuk, 2012).

Some authors (Yilmaz, 2013; Tokluogu, 2005) have pointed out that the process of nation-building began during the Soviet rule due to the ethno-federalist system; however, the generation that has participated in the creation of the Azerbaijani nationhood we know today grew up with little or no memory of the Soviet Union. If there is one event that has marked not only the starting point of development (Bolukbasi, 2011) but the foundation of nation-building in Azerbaijan, it is the on-going conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, probably because it transcends Soviet categorization. In the midst of the turmoil of the struggle for independence of the new republics, “The response to the events in Karabakh probably did more to galvanize a new Azerbaijani identity than any other event in the early years of independence” (Diuk, 2012 p. 70).

A time of power vacuum and substantial political, economic and social change is the perfect time to articulate a new identity. This process is not unique and it belongs to a wider phenomenon of development of new nations and states in the area. Nonetheless, it becomes a complex challenge when it comes to a society without much experience in nationhood. In the case of Azerbaijan, first came the creation of the state and then the nation (Tokluoglu, 2005).

Although my aim here is not to address the formation of the nation in Azerbaijan, I consider it important to mention in what context the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is formulated as the foundations of the emerging national identity, as it is an event that affected Azerbaijanis the most in the most decisive moment and through which everyone can identify. Within the broad narrative on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Khojaly massacre is perhaps the most important. While hostilities between Armenians and Azerbaijanis began long before the collapse of the USSR and the turmoil of the late 1980s and early 1990s (De Waal, 2003), the Khojaly massacre, which many call “genocide,” is the starting point of the otherization of Armenians as the enemy and the creation of a victim-centered narrative that ends up being the central element of their identity. From that moment until today, the quintessential discourse in Azerbaijan is that Armenians violated international law and that Azerbaijanis are victims of Armenians' aggressive and expansionist aims, thus threatening their identity.

My intention is to demonstrate that the narrative about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which is the basis of nation-building in Azerbaijan, is articulated through in-group and out-group strategies of victimization that contribute to the intractability of the conflict. The literature on collective memory and collective victimhood are particularly relevant to describe the mechanisms involved in the elaboration of the victimization discourses. Narratives about victimhood in Azerbaijan are necessary in order to provide them with a sense of justification over the territory, which otherwise is mainly sustained by international law. Their claim to the territory and its position in the conflict is not what it is by its own virtue, but because it cannot belong to the Armenians. The Khojaly massacre is one of the most important memories about the conflict that contributes to the self-victimization narrative and that positions Azerbaijan as the owner of the territory because of their suffering. These discourses are embedded in Azerbaijan’s national identity and have severe consequences, the

most dangerous being its contribution to the prolongation of the conflict because of the failure of dialogue between both parties.

In-group and out-group victimization strategies can be also used to frame collective memory, as it is able to construct the past in a way that fits the victimhood narrative and, more important, serves as a basis for national identity. For this purpose, the official discourse is fundamental, as the state manufactures and circulates the memory of past events to pursue its own political agenda. Because memory is articulated from below, personal experiences, such as the Khojaly massacre, can serve as raw material for constructing historical narratives in times of crisis and can eventually serve as a motor of society, as a narrative of unity, and an element with which to mobilize the population.

There are several strategies and mechanisms involved in the process of elaborating victimization discourses. In order to maintain their positive image, groups often resort to the glorification and cleansing of the past as well as justification and rationalization of negative group behavior so that, when looking back, they feel proud of the group's actions. This entails the strategic crafting of the accounts that are more favorable to the group, often omitting or distorting certain parts of the past. People also have a tendency to selective and biased information-processing, i.e. to select and interpret information about possible damage too lightly, which can distort it. Members of society may be ready to seek out information that is consistent with these beliefs while ignoring evidence that contradicts them. Every piece of information is examined for indications of malicious intent. In order to prepare them for potential harm, this processing is founded on the suspicion that society's members harbor toward the victimizing group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).

The dehumanization of the outgroup is also a mechanism that serves in part to maintain the positive image of the group, but through defending the status quo of the ingroup and seeing the opposing group as subhuman, thus justifying one's own wrong-doing. When

dehumanizing labels are applied to the outgroup, violence is legitimized and destroying it becomes a moral duty (Bilali & Ross, 2012). This was the case for example in Rwanda, where the Hutus appealed on the radio to kill "cockroaches", the label they applied to the Tutsis (Melvern, 2006). Dehumanization often leads to moral disengagement, as well as denial. Being able to accept the complete reality of certain traumatic events can be psychologically difficult, therefore people frequently deny horrible things have occurred. Perpetrators and bystanders often use denial as a form of self-defense to shield themselves from the unpleasant feelings and consequences that come with having to face uncomfortable realities. Denial can occur for a number of reasons, such as fear of the repercussions of accepting the truth, a desire to protect one's identity and beliefs, peer pressure to fit in with the group or ignorance of the facts. Denial can be particularly effective in the context of historical atrocities, such as genocide or mass violence, because it enables people and societies to avoid recognizing their own guilt or involvement in these events (Cohen, 2001).

The sense of morality functions not only to justify the harm, but the self-victimized group also applies a moral justification to delegate responsibility for the outbreak of conflict and the continuation of violence and often attribute the blame to others. This leads to a state of differentiation and moral superiority in which the victimized group presents itself as on the good side of the conflict and as the only victim. But international support is also important for this. Public support for a situation that the victimized group regards as unjustified violence by the aggressor outgroup puts the ingroup in an advantageous position because it can gain the moral support and assistance of other countries, especially when resorting to self-pity (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). However, claiming victim status, while it may serve to exonerate oneself from harmdoing, may also threaten powerful status and the consequent stigmatization that comes with it, and the group may be seen as weak. Thus, the adoption of victim status can be flexible and rhetorical and used according to the context. The only

element that remains unchanged from the victim's perspective is the target of responsibility, since for the ingroup it is always the outgroup that is the perpetrator of the violence and they usually attribute the blame to external factors to exculpate themselves and justify their actions as a reaction to the acts they are experiencing (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019).

Although many of these mechanisms are intertwined, I have drawn out seven major victimization strategies used in the narrative about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan. In order to perform this analysis, I have coded the interviews I conducted in Baku in August 2022, extracting the most repeated common beliefs and placing them over broader categories that I detail below. I have classified the strategies according to their directionality, based on whether they concern the in-group or the out-group. While some of the strategies can go both ways, they generally serve either to maintain the positive image of the group or to discredit the out-group.

Out-group

Attribution of blame. Blame can actually be attributed to the out-group, the in-group or to external circumstances. The primary target of responsibility from the Azerbaijani perspective is unambiguously Armenia, for several reasons, the main and most prominent being the threat to Azerbaijan's sovereignty, as absolutely all respondents considered it most heinous that Armenia violates international law by occupying Karabakh. Blaming the imbalance of power for the first Karabakh war would also be an example of blaming external circumstances for what happened, but unsurprisingly, the respondents generally blamed the Armenians:

> "They wanted to make the great Armenian empire. From there they tried to attack our lands, to take our lands, in the beginning of the war they did it. They tried to erase Azerbaijani heritage because they took our lands. Many people call it Nagorno-Karabakh. Do you know why? Because they didn't take this land as Armenian land.

> They only did it as an autonomous republic because our president Heydar Aliyev didn't let them take this lands as Armenian lands because he knew it would be the end of these problems, they will win and they will take these lands.” (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

Azerbaijanis consider themselves victims of the expansionist, aggressive and unjustifiable policies of the Armenians. Interestingly, however, many also attributed blame to Russia. A recurring response was that, as small countries, they are vulnerable to the geopolitical games of larger powers:

> “There’s a massive responsibility on Russia, the Russian government and the Soviet Empire, the Russian Empire… they supported both sides and provided arms to Armenia to make them stronger and then decided to meddle with us to. Its dirty. This meddling making fight with each other its dirty.” (Woman, 34, researcher)

> “All time we’re not fighting with Armenians, we’re fighting with Russia […] (it’s the fault of the) Soviet government because small countries like mine, Georgia, Moldova… it was planned to have these territories which you can use against each other so I think that was their politics. Soviet Union.” (Woman, 38, artist from Baku)

> “We are weak countries in this area and Russia was ruling all the time.” (Woman, 29, teacher from Nakhichevan)

> “It’s complicated and I think it's a trap by some countries, like Russia also, (they try to) divide Azerbaijan and Turkey and Russia has tried to do it, helping the Armenians to occupy Azerbaijan.” (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)

Curiously enough, but also displaying moral superiority, some of the respondents blamed the in-group for being too kind and letting Armenians close enough to the point of letting the latter take advantage of them:

> “We ourselves have given them the lands during the other president times and there was nothing stopping them so they are invaders and [at the same time] not. It was our fault.” (Woman, 21, from Baku)

> “It’s our fault because we let them too close to ourselves and they used it against us. We even married their women. They took advantage. It’s not Armenian’s fault, we let

> them close and they took advantage." (Man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly)

One would expect that the victimized collective would blame the main opponent for the conflict, but it should be noted that they blame the Soviet Union and Russia for a conflict they have with the Armenians, since in other victimization mechanisms, Russia is not mentioned at all.

Moral disengagement. A large part of the victimization process in Azerbaijan is that they disengage from the acts committed by their side, in the past and in the present, and do not understand why Armenians think and act the way they do like there was nothing that lead the situation to be like it is now. For instance, they fail to understand why it is so complicated to live together. When asked about possible Armenian-Azeri coexistence in Nagorno-Karabakh, most of them did not assess the situation from an empathetic position or taking into account past events that could have led to the impediment of dialogue and cooperation between them. Furthermore, they firmly believe that Armenians would be treated well under Azerbaijani rule and that they should not be afraid of Azeris:

> "They're (Armenians) not analyzing situation from the perspective of the law or the reality." (Woman, 38, artist, from Baku)

> "Of course they will be safe! If they don't do any dangers to us. I can say that if you will be friendly I will friendly. I you'll be enemy, I will be enemy too." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

> "Why wouldn't Armenians be safe? I never ask anyone if they're Azerbaijani. No one would care if they integrate into society. No one will tell them apart." (Woman, 21, from Baku)

> "They have to change this aggressive (approach)… this is also something that unite them, using this drama, drama, drama, all the time. They want to make something similar as Israel. We have genocide, everyone hates us, we are surrounded by

> enemies… this is not the way to collaborate with your neighbors.” (Woman, 38, artist, from Baku)

> “I think from all the brainwashing they don’t feel safe. Armenians are brought up from what I see in a culture that from the start they believe we and Turkey are their enemy. They need to stop bringing up their children like we’re enemies. If they stop they’ll stop feeling unsafe.” (Woman, 34, researcher)

From the Azerbaijani perspective, Armenians are irrational because they, Azerbaijanis, are willing to coexist but Armenians are aggressive and dramatic. Azerbaijanis are oblivious to the hostilities their own government creates in Nagorno-Karabakh, such as cutting off gas supplies (Mejlumyan, 2022), and the anti-Armenian rhetoric and sentiments in the country (de la Torre, 2021) which Armenians are well aware of. They compare the situation of coexistence with that of Georgia, without, again, taking into account that Georgia does not engage in ethnic cleansing policies towards Armenians.

Selective and biased information-processing. The information presented by the respondents is not always totally false, but it is often biased or interpreted in such a way that Armenians are portrayed as the irrational side of the conflict that wants to inflict harm and they, Azeris, are the ones who seek to resolve things in the best possible way, ignoring the acts committed by their own government that have hindered dialogue and negotiations with the other party:

> “We, our nation tried to solve this problem in peaceful ways, our president Mr. Ilham Aliyev tried to take our districts back with political ways and Sargsyan, old president of Armenia, and todays president of Armenia didn't agree with this way, they say “Karabakh is our land” but it's not true. We tried with political and peaceful ways. For 30 years our president and his father Heydar Aliyev tried peacefully. They met with Sargsyan, with Pashinyan, with different countries and at the end we took our lands with guns.” (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

> "Armenians are the main reason of the cause of the 2nd Karabakh war because Armenians didn't give any chance in the diplomatic sphere for that reason Azerbaijan started the 2nd war." (Man, 34, historian)

Another example is information regarding the Sumgait pogrom and the Khojaly massacre. Many of the respondents, and many people in Azerbaijan, including official sources from the government, attribute the blame for the Sumgait pogroms against Armenians to outsiders, claiming that the violence in Sumgait had been organized by Armenians who staged the disturbances (Zürcher, 2007). While it is true that an Armenian, Eduard Grigorian, was involved in the pogrom, the violence was mostly perpetrated by Azeris (De Waal, 2003):

> "An Armenian, was guilty for the Sumgait pogroms. His team killed the people but he was the leader. They were Armenians." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

> "What happened in Sumgait was the fault of the Armenians. A group of Armenians did it and killed the Armenians to make tension and make people believe Azerbaijanis were killing people." (Man, 30, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

> "I found a fact that actually the one who triggered all those actions was Armenian, but I don't know. It was a kind of set up." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

This strategy helps to maintain the positive image of the group. As mentioned earlier in multiple occasions, the collective tends to select information and interpret it in a way that fits their discourse and maintains their victim status, but also maintains the status of the out-group as the aggressor.

Moral superiority and paternalism. This strategy works primarily through glorification of the nation, which Roccas, Klar, and Liviatan (2006) define as "viewing the national in-group as superior to other groups and having a feeling of respect for the central symbols of the group such as its flag, rules, and leadership" (Roccas et. al., 2006, p. 700). In that sense, Azerbaijanis believe that the conflict should be handled on their terms because

they feel morally entitled, so much so that they believe that Armenians would even benefit from being Azerbaijani citizens:

> "Believe in me, Azerbaijanis are willing to live with Armenians. I have a theory. When Azerbaijani people will move to Karabakh, trade will start between both and, believe in me, everyone will forget in 25 years. Everything will change." (Man, 34, from Baku)

> "They get to live with our passports, we open borders, they start trading with Turkey and join international projects, they get more money. It's more beneficial, they shouldn't be fools and understand it." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

> "We need to make them feel ok living under our laws and they should make us believe that they won't create any problems for us. They're closer to us, not to Armenia. They should think about their future, their families. They want safety, they should make us feel safe too." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

> "Russian militaries are there for some period. I understand, they have to be protected, but if they want to stay in that city they have to accept the fact that they are going to be citizens of Azerbaijan. […] I think it depends on them. If they will want to assimilate to become part of the society then I don't think it's going be a problem for us. But if they will continue provoking people or idk trying to ignore the law of Azerbaijan then of course it will be a problem." (Woman, 38, artist from Baku)

They think so highly of their nation, especially in comparison to Armenia, that they do not take into account the reasons why Armenians would be unable to hold an Azerbaijani passport and the implications this would have on their social and even personal identity:

> "Yes, we can live in peaceful way but not like it. Because they came with wars, if they want to live here, they have to show us they are worthy of it. We have to believe them. They have to show to us they are worthy to live in Azerbaijan." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

However, even if according to them Armenians would benefit from living under Azerbaijani rule, they must prove that they are worthy enough to belong to their nation, as they are making the sacrifice of welcoming them even though they were not meant to.

In-group

Justification and rationalization of negative group behavior. The victimized collective tends to rationalize the wrong-doing of the ingroup because it considers that the actions taken by the ingroup are justified, since the harm to which they have been exposed by the outgroup is unjust. Thus, respondents consider the launching of a war, an atrocious act, totally justifiable because of the suffering they have endured in the conflict. Interviewees often saw the war as inevitable and fully legitimized because it was their last resort:

> "Our nation stood up, we made different meetings, demonstrations, we tried to tell our president we want war, we are not scared from them, we want to attack because we want to take our lands back and we want to take revenge of our general." (Man, 30, photographer from Sumgait)

> "There were protests in Baku asking for war. People asked to kill Armenians who occupy our lands. Also Pashinyan and the former minister of defense made a mistake. They claimed 'new war new territories' and they said they would get new lands and Pashinyan went to Shusha and danced there and said that they will move the capital from Stepanakert to Shusha. All this triggered people." (Man, 34, from Baku)

Not only do they see war as a justifiable deed, they see it as a necessary evil. They do not want to commit such an act, but they *have been forced to*, the Armenians have left them no choice. The same goes for massacres and ethnic cleansing:

> "What would you expect? We didn't have a proper government to manage this anger. We did it, unfortunately. But we have to look at the main reason for this. Because they were deported. Why don't we focus on that story? Khojaly was a response to Sumgait according to Sargsyan." (Man, 34, from Baku)

> "We killed Armenians, destroyed graves. All of them war crimes and ethnic cleansing. But, about ethnic cleansing, did they do ethnic cleansing or not? Or just Armenians do this? For example, when the Azerbaijani army entered Hadrut we opened a humanitarian corridor and Armenians stayed in Hadrut. We said we wouldn't do anything. I didn't participate but I know this story from one of my friends. He told

> me: ‘When we opened the human corridor, the Armenians said they wouldn't leave. We were shocked.’ They said look, we're here, all your army members are defeated, please just leave this place. You know what Armenians did? They tried to attack Azerbaijani soldiers and soldiers didn't shoot them. They were asked not to shoot civilians. Armenians were asked to move to Khankendi (Stepanakert, capital of Nagorno-Karabakh). Did we do ethnic cleansing? In the war? If you occupy a land, and no one wants to live under your rule, it's not ethnic cleansing. But did Armenia do ethnic cleansing? Of course. They didn't allow us to live in Khankendi, they didn't allow us to live in Armenia. And we did the same in Baku and Sumgait.” (Man, 34, from Baku)

According to this account, the pogroms are justified here because people experienced harm and it is necessary to understand that they were angry and that is why they did it, they were not in their right mind. Similarly, ethnic cleansing is rationalized by saying that Armenians were given the option of leaving.

The justification and rationalization of acts is often closely bound up with the glorification of the past. Cleansing or glorification of past events enables the formation of the collective memory in a way that makes the victimized group feel proud of them, which in turn are easier to legitimize because the group considers that the acts it has committed were for the benefit of the group. Since the collective memories are often perpetuated through elements such as commemoration days or museums, the Military Trophy Park in Baku is an excellent example of how the past is glorified. When I visited this museum during my field trip –visited also by several families with young children– I was able to see the display of “trophies” in the form of tanks, missiles and mines that had been recovered from Armenians in the “liberated territories” during the 2020 war, according to the museum's explanations. As expected, the museum portrays the war in an embellished and glorified way, without reference to the crimes or other horrors of war. The Military Trophy Park presents the war as a victory that had to be won and something to be proud of.

Self-pity. Empathy and compassion are feelings reserved for the in-group. This strategy is also necessary to maintain the positive vision of the group and is often based on elements of the past and relying on collective memory that remind the group of the suffering they have endured as a result of an unfair situation, as is the case of the First Karabakh War, in which Azerbaijan lost because Armenia was more powerful at that time:

> "We were friends with them (Armenians) and we shared our foods, we shared our friendships, our good days, bad days with them. But in 1992 they began to attack us and our army was so bad because we wanted to exit de USSR and our tanks and ammunition was so low. Think about that. Our nation attack to them with hunting rifles, axes, shovels, with garden tools. And of course they won because what can we do against tanks, AK-47 and these things." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)
>
> "On the first war we were weak because in the USSR times we didn't have any army and that kind of thing and we lost the first war. The government of that time, we didn't have powerful leaders and it was corrupted. It was complicated that's why we lost." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)
>
> "The Azerbaijani Army was so weak during the First War, we didn't have guns or anything and the government was ignoring people and was not capable to manage this issue." (Man, 34, from Baku)

Recent or present events are also taken into account as they make the current situation more difficult. When asked whether it is safe to return to Karabakh, nearly all respondents answered first that the territory is mined:

> "No it's not safe. Because they have traps. The Armenians planted mines. But Azerbaijani soldiers are clearing it." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)
>
> "Armenia planted mines that should be cleaned and it will take around 10 years (to clean the mines)." (Man, 34, from Baku)

If anything, this response places Armenians as the creators of hostilities who will not allow Azerbaijanis to return to their lands. Moreover, they feel sorry for themselves because

international community sees them as the aggressors in the conflict and display *siege mentality*:

> "It's a thirty-year-old would and about a million people were displaced. And the entire international discourse is that Armenians were victims, Azerbaijani part was not represented. We're still out of the picture. It's our land legally, it belongs to us and its occupied. […] I'm not pro war because they don't resolve anything, but in this situation where the entire world is against us, we're the victims but depicted as aggressors." (Woman, 34, researcher)

These respondents feel sorry that they have been suffering for thirty years from a conflict for which everyone blames them.

Denial. Although the elements that make up this category could also belong to any other category, it is relevant to keep it as one of its own because I think it is one of the most interesting strategies, due to its blatant character, and it says a lot about Azerbaijani society and its attitude towards conflict. The denial ranges from denying the Armenian genocide to not acknowledging the war crimes committed by Azerbaijan. Most of the respondents fail to see the roles of victim and perpetrator as interchangeable. Because Armenians are the outgroup in this conflict and only one of them can be the victim, they take this status away from Armenians, denying a historical fact recognized by the international community:

> "I don't know if you heard about that, Armenians were victims of genocide by Turkey, in Turkey. Did you hear about that? It's wrong, it's false, they are liars." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

Something that would deprive them of victim status would be to commit atrocities such as war crimes. It is almost impossible to believe that they would deny something that has been documented by journalists and NGOs (Lokshina, 2021) and whose information is accessible. The fact that Armenia has also committed war crimes does not mean that Azerbaijan has not

also committed war crimes, but Azerbaijanis deny it and focus on the wrong-doing of Armenians to maintain their victim status and not undermine their own:

> "I think Azerbaijan didn't (commit war crimes. Because we fight with soldiers, we didn't release any bomb to Yerevan or to Armenia. Our soldiers didn't kill any citizen." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)
>
> "In my opinion [there are] no war crimes from the Azerbaijani side." (Woman, 38, artist from Baku)
>
> "First hand I saw in the frontline passports of Dutch citizens, Spain, France, Belgium, Lebanon, Latvia… mercenaries in the Armenian side. They needed them to fight. But they can't find foreign passports in our martyrs because our people will always fight for our country. Even in the passports the names and surnames were not Armenian, they were European or from another countries. They were mercenaries. Our people are always ready but they cannot." (Man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly)
>
> "They said they were not there fighters, they were mercenaries. These are not ours, they said. There were mercenaries in the Armenian side. Regarding the Azerbaijani side, I haven't seen any mercenary. I haven't seen it. Can you call Brits fighting in Ukraine mercenaries? No, because they came on their own will. If they come on their own will they're not mercenaries, if you are paying money, those are mercenaries. They claim there were videos or something like that but at that time I didn't have access to internet. I heard about the Armenians'. Their appearance was different." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

They even deny the participation of mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan in the war (again, information publicly available (Butler, 2020) but explain thoroughly how they found out about mercenaries in the Armenian side. Interestingly, the two accounts above about mercenaries belong to two veterans of the 2020 Karabakh war, so it would make sense that, being closer to, or even direct perpetrators of the acts committed, they would deny this fact. Also, some respondents have denied not knowing about the events of Sumgait, where the Azeris engaged in a pogrom against the Armenians:

> "I don't know about Sumgait. I didn't know about it that much and I didn't hear that much." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)
>
> "I don't have enough information about Sumgait pogroms. I heard it because Armenians talk about it. Then I found a fact that actually the one who triggered all those actions was Armenian, but I don't know. It was a kind of set up." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)
>
> "I can't talk about Sumgait because I don't know." (Man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly)

However, Cohen (2001) in his book *States of Denial* speaks of the paradox that in order to deny something you must know what you are denying. This may be the case with these respondents, who simply show lack of interest in what happened.

The two most important dangers that can be drawn from these findings are an intransigent attitude blinded by victimhood, but also a disengaged attitude towards the conflict, which can undermine the necessary efforts of civil society needed to contribute to a lasting peace. As shown in the data, Azerbaijanis have taken an uncompromising stance on the conflict. They have elaborated a discourse emphasizing self-perceived victimhood, resorting to denying or manipulating events to maintain the group's positive image while diminishing or denying their own harm doing. This *siege mentality* prevents the population from empathizing with the outgroup and accepting their own share of blame, justifying wrong-doing towards Armenians.

Through the explanation of these mechanisms, illustrated by parts of my interviews, I demonstrate that Azerbaijanis articulate their discourse using in-group and out-group strategies of victimization. The interviews reveal patterns, behaviors and attitudes that show entitlement, resistance to compromise, and seek for retribution, which can be an inhibitor of peace. I have tried to shed light on how the narrative of victimization in Azerbaijan has been formed and that it is the narrative that underpins the broader discourse on the Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict. Also, it is important to note that if Nagorno-Karabakh has been successful as a basis for national identity, it is because a large part of the population has participated in the project, for the creation of nationhood is the work of the majority. Taking this into account, it is safe to say that an identity based on victimhood in the context of an on-going conflict is a fragile and volatile identity, as it depends on an event whose direction can change at any time.

The unsuccessful war and loss of territories was a humiliation for Azerbaijan, becoming sort of a curse for the nation and thus igniting the victimhood narrative, which contributes to the intractability of the conflict. Collective victimhood in this case works as a bottom-up phenomenon, i.e. it has been articulated from below. Collective memories based on victimhood have been created at the grassroots level as a result of outgroup harmdoing and traumatic experiences that have been passed down from generation to generation and have become embedded in the social fabric of the nation. In turn, victimized memory sustains national identity because it serves national interests and helps maintain the statehood. The government appropriates, adapts and promotes this memory by giving it an official status in order to pursue its political agenda. It becomes a circular phenomenon, in which narratives are articulated at the popular level and are used by the state, which in turn serve to create an official narrative that citizens use to comprehend their reality. Bearing this in mind, I consider that self-victimization strategies have a twofold function: It is out-facing, instrumentalized as political currency in foreign policy; and also works horizontally, as it serves the public to make sense of their own experience in the post-colonial period.

To promote nationalism and accomplish their own political goals, the government and political elites often use narratives about the victimized memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This includes using narratives of the suffering endured by Azerbaijani civilians and military personnel throughout the conflict in order to promote government initiatives and,

more especially, to keep President Ilham Aliyev in office. By portraying Azerbaijan as the victim and the conflict as a fight for justice and territorial integrity, the leadership is able to promote a sense of national unity and garner support for its policies.

Azerbaijan's national identity based on victimhood is shaped by the perception that Azerbaijan has suffered as a result of the loss of territories and that the country's pursuit of its national interests, such as becoming the strongest power in the region, has been hindered by these events. As a consequence, national identity influences Azerbaijan's foreign policy in several ways. Given that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the main threat to national security, Azerbaijan's overriding interest is to seek foreign support for recognition of its territorial integrity, mainly from Turkey and the EU and, to some extent, also from Washington. It turns to the West in an effort to secure the support of the international community, using victimization narratives to appeal to norms of sovereignty and international legitimacy. Additionally, this national identity can also impact Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards energy security, as the country is an important transit state for energy resources from the Caspian Sea region to Europe, and the conflict affects energy infrastructure and security in the area. Likewise, the relationship with Russia is also influenced by the ongoing conflict with Armenians. Although Azerbaijan has strived to improve cooperation with Russia, the presence of a regional power –a colonial one– poses a hindrance to the implementation of its policies in Karabakh on its own terms, which may put its government at risk. Thus, Azerbaijan's strong determination for maintaining national unity and the sense of national identity can serve as a key driver for foreign policy, impacting the country's priorities, goals, and decisions in the international arena.

One of my respondents mentioned that if they did not have a conflict with Armenians, their national identity would be based on hatred towards Russia. It is impossible to ignore the systematic attribution of blame towards the Russian empire, the Soviet Union and Russia in

the interviews, therefore it is reasonable to presume that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and post-colonial discourses in Azerbaijan, while often overlooked, are closely interconnected. These narratives and beliefs, which emphasize the nation's historical claim to the area and its right to reclaim the territory, began to appear in the aftermath of the country's independence from the Soviet. While focusing mainly on Azerbaijan's sovereignty, victimhood-based narratives also serve to point out colonial failures in the region and how both the Russian empire and the USSR contributed to creating this problem by "bringing in Armenians from Syria and Lebanon" and "giving them power during the Soviet era", and that Russia is now meddling as well. Russia's interference, both as a mediator and as a military ally of Armenia, has led to criticism of Russian imperialism and a questioning of the role of outside powers (De Waal, 2022). These discourses of victimization are also used to explain the country's struggles for independence, for justice and recognition, and therefore highlight the importance to maintaining and protecting national identity, which in turn reinforces the perception of self-victimization.

To conclude, it is in the government's interest to maintain the narratives of victimization that shape national identity because it manages to mobilize and unite the population, as well as to look outward and seek legitimacy from the international community. Moreover, for the population, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Russia's role in it has added a new layer to the post-colonial discourse in the country, as Azerbaijanis continue to grapple with the sequels of Soviet rule. The Nagorno-Karabakh is a matter of urgency for Azerbaijan because it puts its statehood at risk and the best way to stabilize it is to take control over the territory in order to reinforce its political authority. For the government, getting the Karabakh Armenians to hold a passport from the Republic of Azerbaijan would be a way to maintain its power, give closure and complete the national myth, as well as earn its reputation back. This would undoubtedly be a matter of nationwide pride and victory, but

also, for the public and, especially for the younger generation, it would imply getting rid of a curse, legacy of the Soviet empire, that haunts them to this day.

The Collective Remembrance Of The Sumgait Pogroms And The Khojaly Massacre In Azerbaijan

In February 1988, in the industrial seaside town of Sumgait, in the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, several groups of Azeris gathered to attack and kill Armenians in the streets and in their homes while the police stood by and watched indifferently. The violence that broke out during the Sumgait pogrom was unprecedented in the Soviet Union and attracted the attention of the Western press. But the violence had only just begun. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union in February 1992, in the town of Khojaly in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian forces engaged in the mass killing of Azerbaijanis. Amid all this turmoil, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was trying to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia, which eventually led to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War from xxx - 1994. In Azerbaijan, the tragic event of Khojaly is well remembered by all, even by those who were not yet born. Few, however, remember or even know about the Sumgait pogrom, which occurred in their own country a few miles away from the capital.

By examining the disparate treatment of the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre in collective memory, I offer empirical evidence that the Azerbaijani discourse selectively focuses on particular events and builds on the memory narrative in a way that fits its self-victimization framework. The institutionalization and widespread remembrance of the Khojaly massacre further solidifies this aspect. In this chapter I reconstruct the memory of Sumgait and Khojaly using ethnographic interviews and illustrate how Azerbaijanis use in-group and out-group self-victimization strategies to construct the memory narrative.

The collective memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict serves to transmit and perpetuate the victimhood discourse in Azerbaijan because collective memory is capable of harboring different strategies of victimization, such as cleansing the past, justification of in-group wrongdoings or moral disengagement. The government has selected and interpreted the

elements of the memory of Khojaly and Sumgait in such a way that Azerbaijanis are presented as the only victims and uses it as political currency. The unofficial memory of these events, i.e. the memory of the population, largely coincides with the official discourse because it expresses their victimized identity shaped through the Karabakh conflict.

The persistence of these discourses becomes easier when the collective memory is institutionalized and perpetuated through elements such as museums or memorial days. This is relevant to memory studies because it draws attention to the complicated connection between memory and identity as well as the possibility of using memory as a tool for political purposes. The manipulation and perpetuation victimization narratives in Azerbaijan has dangerous implications especially in the context of the conflict with Armenians, as the strategies that shape the discourse on the conflict and on their own identity place Azerbaijanis in a position of intransigence regarding their own role as the only victims in the conflict, thus making negotiation impossible. Understanding the significance of memory in forming societies requires an understanding of how collective memory is created, maintained, and how it can be utilized to shape identities and relationships. Similarly, understanding how memory is institutionalized is crucial to identifying the potential of memory to be used for political purposes.

What actually happens and how people remember it do not always coincide. Nonetheless, people need to remember the past in order to make sense of the present. Groups elaborate narratives that serve to recall these past events and are reinforced by passing them to other members of the group and the narratives are maintained by society and governments through elements that Pierre Nora (1989) calls *les lieux de mémoire*, which are those objects, events or places that have special value within the group's remembrance. When narratives are elaborated, counter-narratives always emerge, and often they create totally incompatible discourses and versions of history. However, there is always one that ends ups dominating

and that serves different functions. The social discourse of certain events can try to make sense of what happened, but also reinforce the positive image of the group to which one belongs, give a sense of continuity to the group, promote certain values or serve as a guide to behavior that characterizes the group, and of course can be framed by governments to pursue their political agendas, as these common beliefs are not transmitted through society in an through interpersonal relations but also comes from the institutions (Paez & Liu, 2015).

Mass violence and trauma is something that memory struggles to process because it is very emotionally loaded. The way in which collective memory functions is, in fact, quite curious, as it is constituted through the processes of both remembering and forgetting (Weedon & Jordan, 2012). But we must also bear in mind that collective memory plays a fundamental role in the creation of the nation and also in ethnic conflicts, so it can be easily instrumentalized by governments to build a framework that fits the official discourse and serves to legitimize power. During my interviews, participants demonstrated knowledge of the events in Khojaly, while, again, few had any idea of the Sumgait pogroms. This certainly raises the question of why some events are remembered and form part of the memory while there is a total collective amnesia about others. In this sense, we assume that in the case of an authoritarian country like Azerbaijan there is expected to be room for only one narrative, and that is the one the government allows. But is that so? What is the reason behind the construction of a memory or the total neglect of it?

Using the literature on official memories in authoritarian countries as well as memory studies as a theoretical framework, I analyzed the interviews I conducted in Baku regarding the events in Khojaly and Sumgait. In the following, I will reconstruct two different narratives, the official and the unofficial memories of the events. First, I will try to shed some light on the historical background, which is important to understand as accurately as possible the events that took place within their context. Academics are not exempt from being

subjective and biased, nonetheless, I believe it is better to elaborate the historical background relying on various scholars that are not a party to the conflict. *The regime's tale* is a compilation of several official narratives of the Azerbaijani government; and in *The peoples' tale* I have reconstructed the memory of the Khojaly massacre and the Sumgait pogrom using the interviews I conducted in Baku in the summer of 2022. With these two stories, my intention is to demonstrate how Azerbaijanis build their memory narrative in a way that fits their self-victimization framework. This is further supported by the intervention of the government, who has imposed an official memory on the events of Sumgait and Khojaly, instrumentalizing, exploiting and manipulating the elements of the collective memory that suit it most, which, again, portrays Azerbaijanis as the only victims of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The violence in context: Historical background of the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre

Although memory belongs to the people, there is always some history in it, however it may generally differ from people's remembrance of the events. Scholars, historians and others have tried to craft an accurate account to shed light on the events that occurred. However, as I mentioned above, even outsider academics can be biased. For that reason, I draw on the work several academics to construct the least subjective version of history possible.

De Waal (2003) recounts that the crisis in Karabakh began in February 1988. Specifically in the central square of Stepanakert, when the local Soviet of the NKAO (Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast) resolved the question of transferring the region from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR. From an Armenian point of view, however, it is the pogrom in Sumgait the starting point of the Karabakh conflict (Zürcher, 2007). Either way, the decision to transfer Karabakh to Armenia triggered unrest both in Armenia proper,

in NKAO, and in Azerbaijan. But Nagorno-Karabakh was not a uniquely Armenian region, for almost a quarter of its population were Azerbaijanis who had more affinity with Azerbaijan.

Gradually the violence between the communities was increasing in several places and the tension became more tangible in regions such as Meghri or Kafan, where there were many Azerbaijani villages, and refugees began to arrive in Baku. The story of these first refugees from Kafan, however, "has not been told, largely because the Azerbaijani authorities did their best to suppress information about them" (De Waal, 2003). Perhaps, looking at the situation in perspective, to accept that the refugees were arriving in Azerbaijan was to accept that these are the people who committed violence against Armenians. Meanwhile, mass demonstrations and strikes were occurring in Armenia, whose residents (many of whom did not even know much about Nagorno-Karabakh) began to become more aware of the cause. Moscow's message, however, was that Karabakh's status would not change.

These events were unexpected in Azerbaijan, whose population was more diverse than in Armenia, a practically monoethnic country. In Azerbaijan the Karabakh issue was not "an issue" because, "unaware that it was a potent theme for Armenians, they had simply taken for granted that Karabakh would always be theirs" (De Waal, 2003) and when in the NKAO the question of joining Armenia proper was raised, Azerbaijanis felt that their national identity and republic was being threatened. In Baku people began feeling the tension, and the situation was worsening due to the influx of refugees arriving wounded from Kafan. The situation in Baku was brought under control, while in Sumgait there was a lot of unrest waiting to boil over. But the focus was put on trying to calm Baku, and no attention was paid to the coastal city. Azerbaijanis who had recently fled Armenia began to gather and demonstrate and by February 27 there were several hundred people. That night the violence began, in front of the impassive gaze of the local police.

Gangs began to organize, looking for Armenians to attack, breaking windows, burning cars. They looted houses, but also tortured and killed. The terror lasted for three days. The pogromists (*pogromshchiki* in Russian), according to the account of one of De Waal's interviewees, were easy to identify, and explains that were usually from rural areas or refugees from Armenia, all young (De Waal, 2003). Broers (2019), in contrast, argues that there is no evidence that refugees played a greater role in interethnic violence, as “locals dominated in the small number of convictions arising from the trials relating to the February 1988 pogrom in Sumgait”. Yet, the fact that these refugees were not caught and prosecuted does not mean that their participation was no less significant. The violence was, moreover, planned to some extent, as many of the rioters carried improvised weapons (De Waal, 2003). The attackers had to find ways to identify the Armenians, since it was sometimes not possible for them to distinguish the enemy as many Armenians spoke Russian or good Azeri.

Many Azerbaijanis, not the police, tried to help their Armenian neighbors and hide them in their apartments. The authorities were generally late in responding. Gorbachev himself was slow to agree to send military forces and impose a curfew in Sumgait. This response by Moscow demonstrated that there was a policy void when addressing conflicts between ethnic groups (Broers, 2019). Both Azerbaijanis and Armenians called for an official investigation, and the lack of official information only gave rise to conspiracy theories. Among the Azerbaijanis, the wildest conspiracies arose, trying to exonerate their own people from the crimes that had been committed. The most common was that the attackers were outsiders or even that the violence in Sumgait had been organized by Armenians themselves (De Waal, 2003) and staged the disturbances (Zürcher, 2007). Supporting this conspiracy theory is the involvement of an Armenian in the pogrom, Eduard Grigorian, who in Azerbaijani mythology has become “the Armenian” behind the Sumgait pogroms (De Waal, 2003). After the terror, many Armenians fled Azerbaijan and began to interpret this violence

as a continuation of the genocide and placed the “Turks” of Azerbaijan alongside those of the Ottoman Empire (Zürcher, 2007).

Khojaly happened shortly after, in 1992. Karabakh Armenian forces began to capture Azerbaijani villages surrounding Stepanakert and expel Azerbaijanis. Their main goal was to reach Khojaly, as the only airport in the region was there. The only way to reach the town was by air, and the electricity had been cut off. The Armenians surrounded the city and on the night of 25 February they attacked, killing hundreds of Azerbaijanis as they were trying to escape (Broers, 2019). The date, according to De Waal (2003), was probably chosen because it coincided with the anniversary of the pogroms in Sumgait. During the night, in the middle of winter, people ran through the forests accompanied by Azerbaijani militiamen but when they arrived near Nakhichevanik, Armenians started shooting at them and overwhelmed the militiamen. The death toll of the massacre is today 613 (Broers, 2019), among them hundreds of civilians and children. When the world echoed what happened, many people did not believe it because the international media presented the Armenians as the victim of the conflict (De Waal, 2003).

The government’s tale

In this section, I draw on the official websites of bodies belonging to the government to construct the official memory of the government of Azerbaijan.

The website of the MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of Azerbaijan provides information on the “Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan”, and one of its sections is a “chronology of the aggression” in which they recount the events of the “Sumgayit provocation”. According to this story, Sumgait witnessed an unrest that claimed the lives of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It was a group of people peacefully protesting the killing

of Azerbaijanis by Armenians. This was the perfect opportunity for Armenian nationalists to carry out their provocation against Azerbaijan.

As reported by the MFA, some 20-25 well-prepared and violent provocateurs infiltrated the crowd pretending to be Azerbaijani refugees from Kafan, an Armenian city, shouting over loudspeakers that Azerbaijanis had been killed in Armenia and Karabakh. The "unknown instigators" unleashed violence against Sumgait Armenians and also among protesters. The main perpetrator behind the violence in Sumgait, in accordance with this report, was a man of Armenian origin, Eduard Robertovich Grigoryan, who had been called upon to recruit criminals and incite violence. According to the MFA account, Grigoryan had a list that he followed, going house to house, vandalizing apartments, killing and torturing.

The Soviet authorities did not intervene. The account explains that no one in the city could believe what was happening in a quiet, multi-ethnic city, and some Azerbaijani residents hid the Armenians in their apartments from the looters and attackers. Since the media had no access to the city because of the Soviet security forces, the international media relied solely on information provided by Armenian sources, so that only the Azerbaijani side was blamed for the events and they were compared to the "genocide" of the Armenians in early 1900s. The account states the following: "The exhaustive evaluation of the numerous investigative materials from the criminal case launched by the USSR General Prosecutor's Office lead us to believe that the unrest of 27-29 February 1988 in Sumgait was meticulously planned and skillfully executed by Armenian nationalists with support of the Soviet KGB (State Security Committee) to justify the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories and to weaken liberation movement in Azerbaijan accordingly". After three days of violence, 32 people (26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis) were killed.

AZERTAC, the Azerbaijani states news agency, has a section called "Days of sorrow" with three subsections dedicated to the most painful events of the Azerbaijani people, at least

according to the official state media. One of them is 20th January, 1990 also known as Black January, that commemorates the violent repression that took place in Baku during the collapse of the Soviet Union. The other one is March 31, 1980 the "Genocide of Azerbaijanis", when there was a period of inter-ethnic clashes that lead to the death of over ten thousand Azerbaijanis in Baku and its surroundings. In addition to these painful events is the Khojaly massacre. Apparently, the 2020 War was also a revenge for Khojaly:

> We wanted justice for Karabakh and Khojaly for many years. With the exception of a handful of American states, the international community remained tight-lipped.
>
> The US has not made as much investment in Azerbaijan as it has in Kuwait. But what about justice and international law? America and France, which recognize the fictional Armenian genocide that allegedly took place a hundred years ago but there is still no evidence of it, do not want to recognize the Khojaly massacre committed before the eyes of the whole world. (Azertac, 2022)

Searching for the word "pogrom" in this same web page, reveals only one result, a news item about an interview of Ilham Aliyev with the French newspaper Le Figaro. The only pogrom that is mentioned is the anti-Armenian Baku pogrom in a question asked by the interviewer. Aliyev answers as follows:

> Conflict started after separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh, sponsored by nationalists in Armenia launched a secession plan to secede from Azerbaijan. And they could not do it from legal point of view at the time of the Soviet Union. So, they started pogroms in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and in the territory of Armenia. The first victims of the war and clashes were Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh. (Azertac, 2020)

Apart from the official state newspaper articles, which usually deal with commemorations of the Khojaly massacre in other countries, the website of the Supreme Court of the Azerbaijani government has a section dedicated to explaining what happened in Khojaly called "Khojaly Genocide - The tragedy of the 20th Century". Other articles "Khojaly genocide as an

international crime", "World view of the Khojaly genocide" and "Extracts from evidences of the Khojaly witnesses" can be accessed in this section.

The tale begins: "The Khojaly genocide is one of the most terrible and tragic pages in the history of Azerbaijan". Certainly, the use of the term "genocide" is not accidental. The story goes on to quote former President Heydar Aliyev, who, on the 10th anniversary of the massacre, claimed that it was "the most dreadful mass terror act in the history of human kind". The article claims that this violence is not new but Azerbaijanis have been suffering ethnic cleansing and genocide by chauvinist and nationalist Armenians for 200 years. The government story is that ethnic cleansing has taken place through Armenian occupation and deportations of Azerbaijanis from historic lands, resulting in large numbers of refugees into Azerbaijan and internally displaced persons. As reported by this account, the expulsion of the Azerbaijani people from their native lands is part of the Armenian policy. Not only by occupying Nagorno-Karabakh (in the article they use the Azeri "Daghlig Garabagh") but, according to the website, Armenia's major project was to build a country from one side of the sea to the other, even if it meant the death of people and the destruction of cities. As a consequence of Armenia's policy, portrayed in the article as "chauvinistic and criminal", the Khojaly genocide occurred, the severity of which is compared to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For the Supreme Court, Khojaly is believed to be not only a crime against Azerbaijanis, but against humanity as a whole.

This account claims that Armenians have traditionally occupied more the upper part of Nagorno-Karabakh, while Azerbaijanis have occupied the lower areas. The article explains that, for Armenians, Azerbaijanis were a nuisance in this area, mostly populated by Armenians, and they had to be gotten rid of. But at the same time, Khojaly demonstrated the heritage of the Azerbaijani people in Karabakh, and Armenia destroyed all this material culture. Nonetheless, the greatest aggression was towards the people inhabiting Khojaly. This

story recalls the figures: out of seven thousand inhabitants, there were three thousand in the village of Khojaly when the Armenian military forces started attacking on February 26, 1992, as most of the population had left as a result of four months of blockade. “613 people were killed, 1000 peaceful people of different age became invalids during Khojaly genocide. 106 women, 63 children, 70 old men were killed. 8 families were completely annihilated, 130 children lost one parents, while 25 both of them. 1275 peace residents were taken hostages, the fate of 150 of them is still unknown”.

It is worth mentioning that this narrative blames the Armenian military forces. The account also recalls names: “2nd battalion of 366th regiment under the command of Major Oganyan Seyran Mushegovich (“defence minister” of illegal regime in Daghlig Garabagh at present time), 3rd battalion under the command of Yevgeniy Nabokhin, staff chief of 1st battalion Chitchyan Valeriy and more than 50 officers and ensigns, serving in regiment took part in the attack”.

Another government body that tells the story of Khojaly is the Commissioner For Human Rights Of The Republic Of Azerbaijan. The Ombudsman is generally appointed by the government or parliament, although they technically enjoy a certain degree of independence. According to this account, the attack on Khojaly was carried out by Armenians mainly for strategic reasons, as the village is located only ten kilometers from Stepanakert, the capital of the disputed territory, and the only airport in Nagorno-Karabakh was located there. The Armenian forces intended to blockade the airport, which was under Azerbaijani control, and thus also build a corridor connecting Askeran with Stepanakert through Khojaly.

This story tells that Khojaly had been under siege since October 1991, and apart from by helicopter, there was no way out of the city. Later, the electricity was cut off. The inhabitants had to protect the city: “The city lived due to the courage of population and

heroism of his defenders. Defense of the city was organized by local guard forces, militia and fighters of National Army armed mainly by submachine guns". On the night of February 25, 1992, the Armenian forces prepared to attack and the people tried to flee as best they could, but this was a trap to assault them.

The Azerbaijani parliament declared February 25 as the "Khojaly genocide day". The Ombudsman's account ends as follows:

> Khojaly inhabitants became refugees and took temporary refuge in 48 districts in Azerbaijan. They are waiting the peaceful resolution the of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, end of aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan, restoration of territorial integrity of the republic. They appeal to the people of the world, states and international organizations to protect the truth and justice, condemn facts of terrorism, ethnic cleaning implemented in Khojaly.
>
> Culprits of Khojaly tragedy, its organizers and executors must get deserved punishment. There is no and cannot be crime without punishment. XX century witnessed many bloody pages which are the history of genocide and ethnic cleaning. Khojaly is one of the most terrible tragedies among them. Everybody implicated in this terrible crime now has responsibility just before its conscience, but the day will come and they will answer for all before court of history. History remembers everything. (@Nasir, n.d.)

According to these official accounts, Azerbaijanis have been victims of Armenian aggressive and expansionist policies, as well as victims of ethnic cleansing. Even in the case where Azerbaijan is the perpetrator, the blame is attributed to Armenian infiltrators, of which Azerbaijanis themselves are also victims.

Azerbaijan seems to have granted the memory of Khojaly an official status. Not only is the information widespread in official government agencies, but the government has sought to institutionalize the Khojaly massacre by making its commemoration part of its foreign policy, as this event is featured in talks, exhibitions, campaigns, memorials or rallies in

different countries, such as Italy, the United States, Pakistan, Turkey and Germany (*KHOJALY TRAGEDY*, n.d.). In addition, the authorities initiated a project to erect a memorial in Baku dedicated to the victims of the massacre (*New Memorial to Khojaly Tragedy to Be Erected in Baku - PHOTO*, n.d.) and some members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe signed a written statement on its 20th anniversary (several Assembly members, 2012).

The peoples' tale

A question arises when dealing with the issue of collective or cultural memory. We understand that individual memory is different from collective memory, in that, individual memories constitute of autobiographical memories that shape an individual's identity and collective memories are a community's shared remembering of the past that help shape the collective identity (Brown et al., 2012). But then, why do we use the term "memory" when we talk about collective memory? Olick (2014) notes that the word "memory" is used to refer to collective memory because it reflects the social and cultural processes involved in remembering and forgetting events, while Poole (2008) argues that it is because of the moral component: The role of memory is not only to give us cognitive access to the past, but also to inform us of the responsibilities and obligations of that past that we must take into account in the present. Memory brings past events back to the present, but remembering also has a burden, since recalling the past has this moral implication. In other words, memory puts, or should put, the past on our current moral agenda (Poole, 2008).

If we take into account this aspect of memory, then cultural memory has as a key element the vindication of historical truth for a group. Of course, memory is emotionally loaded, and also constructed by or for such groups among whom they may find a form of identification (Weedon & Jordan, 2012). In the case of ethnic conflicts, memory plays a fundamental role precisely for this reason, because ethnic identities are often historically

constructed, which creates a sense of community with shared memories (Cairns & Roe, 2004) that can be fundamental to the construction of national identity. This was already stressed by Roudometof (2002) when he addressed the Macedonian question and speaks of “people's appropriation of the past” and that modern nations are intimately linked to the construction of national myths and other symbolic elements that help to build, but also to maintain, this sense of belonging, so that the collective memory of a nation forms an integral part of its cultural heritage.

If history is written by the victors, memory is told by the survivors, victims and victors alike. Only those who survive can bear witness. Memory, as I mentioned before, belongs to the people. In this section I try to reconstruct the collective memory of the Sumgait pogrom and the Khojaly massacre according to the memory of Azerbaijanis. To elaborate this account, I have relied on what Assmann (1995) calls “communicative memory”, which is the type of collective memory that is based on day-to-day communication and is characterized by a high level of non-specialization, disorganization and thematic instability. Scholar Alessandro Portelli (1988) used oral history as a methodology to reconstruct the memory of working-class people in Italy, collecting oral histories and analyzing them for themes and patterns. He believed that workers' memory constituted a counter-history that challenged the dominant narratives of the past (Portelli, 1988). Bearing these approaches in mind, I have treated the Sumgait and Khojaly accounts as a kind of oral history, extracting the relevant information from the interviews as if they were telling a story, as these accounts give us insight into the intricacies of collective memory.

Sumgait. Many of the participants had little or no information whatsoever about the Sumgait pogroms. This is shocking considering that, not only are the pogroms well known in the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but it is also one of the most important. The Sumgait pogroms were of significance because they constituted one of the first instances of

interethnic violence in a country that had hitherto placed great emphasis on multiethnic harmony and repressed nationalist sentiment. Simmering ethnic tensions and conflicts in the Soviet Union reached a turning point as a result of these events. These events served as a prelude to the more widespread violence and clashes that would erupt in the area in the following years, as was the case in Khojaly, something that all Azerbaijanis remember perfectly well:

> "I can't talk about Sumgait because I don't know about it." (Man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly)
>
> "I had never heard of Sumgait until I went to Turkey and discovered Wikipedia." (Man, 29, journalist)
>
> "I don't know about Sumgait. I didn't know about it that much and I didn't hear that much. I think the Armenians lived there because it was an industrial city during the Soviet period." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)

Some participants know what happened in detail, and can even relate personally:

> "The Sumgait pogroms were done by the people who was kicked out from Kafan region in Armenia. Armenians started deporting Azerbaijani people from this region and they're the main to blame. Also the National [Popular] Front of Azerbaijan, they had a huge impact and were very nationalistic. Azerbaijan SSR gave the legal approval for the Sumgait pogroms and they said it's not their fault, but the people's. And legally they accused one person, an Azerbaijani person, and executed [him]." (Man, 32, historian)

The Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) was a nationalist political group in Azerbaijan in the late 1980s and early 1990s that supported Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union and was a major player in the events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the PFA was founded as an organization dedicated to the advancement of democracy, pluralism, and human rights, it gained notoriety for taking an increasingly uncompromising stance on the Karabakh issue (Cornell, 2005).

> "Sumgait happened in 1988 in February. Committed by Azerbaijan of course. Who did it? Some of these people were arrested if I'm not mistaken. First, the Soviets arrested 400 people. Then 40-80 of them faced criminal charges, 2 in prison, 2 executed… the absolute majority of [those responsible] where Azerbaijanis, even Russians among them, but generally Azerbaijanis committed this crime in pogrom. They were ordinary people. Many were [Azerbaijani] refugees from Armenia." (Man, 27, PhD student from Baku)

> "I remember my uncle telling me that during the Sumgait pogroms when all was happening there were people in the streets and they weren't locals from Sumgait, no one could recognize them." (Woman, 34, researcher)

The Sumgait pogroms were carried out mainly by the people that was driven out from some regions in Armenia, therefore, according to many accounts, locals could not identify them. These three participants were amongst the ones who showed more knowledge on the topic.

As De Waal (2003) points out, all kinds of conspiracies have been created around Sumgait, and they are still alive to this day, even among younger respondents. According to these accounts, the reasons that led these people to carry out such a pogrom may be justifiable because they had been violently forced out of Armenia. In other cases, people say that it was the Armenians who did it to themselves:

> "I found a fact that actually the one who triggered all those actions was Armenian, but I don't know. It was a kind of set up." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

> "I'm from Sumgait. In 1988 Armenian people died in Sumgait. At this time Armenian people had different minds. One side of them didn't help the government and the other side helped the government. In Sumgait where those who didn't help the government. And it was the start of [the] Karabakh [conflict] because they planned with this as a start to attack Karabakh and they said Azerbaijanis killed their people [...] An Armenian was guilty for the Sumgait pogroms. His team killed the people but he was the leader. They were Armenians." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

> "What happened in Sumgait was the fault of the Armenians. A group of Armenians did it and killed the Armenians to create tension and make people believe Azerbaijanis were killing people and that the Soviet Union had to intervene and send the army. They

[unclear who] destroyed the archives and for that reason we don't have this kind of information." (Man, 30, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

"Both [Khojaly and Sumgait] happened. But who did this massacres or pogroms? In the beginning of the 1988 when Azerbaijanis where deported from Armenia, from Tovush etc they came to Azerbaijan, 400 thousand came to Baku, Sumgait... they were so angry, because they lost everything in Armenia. They run away. Even in 1988 they attacked Azeris in Kafan, 7 o 8 people killed. People who saw this and lost everything, what would you expect? We didn't have a proper government to manage this anger. We did it, unfortunately. But we have to look at the main reason for this. Because they were deported. Why don't we focus on that story?" (Man, 34, from Baku)

We can see a clear pattern that resonates with the government's narrative. What is interesting about Sumgait (and other pogroms) is that it is not very clear why there are people who know these facts. Those respondents who did not know about Sumgait do not have any specific profile but are people of different ages and backgrounds. Likewise, there were people who did know about this pogrom and could name other similar events. This only raises doubts about access to information or the willingness to want to access that information. The fact that there are people who do know this information implies that this information is available and accessible. "I don't know much about Sumgait" indicates that there is little willingness to know more about it and what happened.

Khojaly. Khojaly seems to be the deepest wound of the Karabakh conflict for Azerbaijanis. In the case of my interviewees, it is so both for those who are aware of the pogroms against Armenians and for those who are not. Everyone knows Khojaly, it is the national tragedy. Although not everyone calls it "genocide" and acknowledges that it is a massacre, they believe it is one of the most terrifying events in history. Many respondents from different ages resort to the same story to illustrate the brutality of the Armenians. Some were little when this happened and others were not even born:

"People were killing pregnant women with a knife." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)

> "One of the worst massacres in the history of human kind. Kill a pregnant woman and kill the baby […] Revenge shouldn't be like that, you shouldn't kill a pregnant woman." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran?

> "They cut open the belly of a pregnant woman with a knife and killed her." (Woman, 34, researcher)

> "I have a lot of proof even though I didn't see those things because I was a kid. I have proof from cassettes and videos from my parents who saw those things. They killed kids in their mother's wombs. [They] killed kids alive. I would kill them because I saw those videos." (man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly)

> "In Sumgait I don't think it was close to what happened in Khojaly. In Khojaly people were running through the forest, it was winter, they were killing kids, old people, I can understand now why they did it. They will tell us the stories [for us to] be scared and never try to protect ourselves. That's why they're [the Armenians] explaining [to] us that it was our government doing it to us. […] For example, I feel sorry [for] what happened in Sumgait but I can't even compare how many people died there [in Khojaly]." (Woman, 38, artist from Baku)

This scene is clearly etched in the psyche of every Azerbaijani. Even though in some cases respondents acknowledge the Sumgait pogroms, they do not think the violence is even comparable. Khojaly was much more barbaric. Unlike with Sumgait, too, they have no doubt that it was the Armenians who committed those crimes:

> "Khojaly was done by the Nagorno-Karabakh governors or generals." (Man, 34, historian)

Others have doubts but point out to the possibility of them being Armenian or Russian. It is possible that the respondent is referring to the fact that he does not know whether they were ordinary people or members of the army:

> "I don't know exactly who the marauders were, they were Armenians but I don't know the exact source of their identity. Maybe that was also Russian interference." (Woman, 34, researcher)

The reasons behind the massacre are unclear. People point to occupation and even revenge for Sumgait:

> "In their mind, they want to take revenge, but not revenge, they want to occupy and take our lands to revenge for this Sumgait problems." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)
>
> "I'm not sure if Khojaly was a revenge for Sumgait pogroms or not. Or so-called Sumgait pogroms." (Man, 32, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)
>
> "Khojaly was a response to Sumgait according to Sargsyan. Until Khojaly Azerbaijanis didn't believe the power of the Armenian army. When Khojaly happened they started to worry and ran away, they were so cruel. So they left. Khojaly was a reaction of course, but in Khojaly the motive? They were Karabakh Armenians. It's so hateful". (Man, 34, from Baku)
>
> "Khojaly of course if there's anything I can say to explain it… I don't understand. Such high level of brutality I don't know how a human can do that to another human. And I don't know how the survivors live throught that now. There are people who've done interviews. It's like Bucha in Ukraine, why would you that? The ultimate level of human brutality and I don't understand it." (Woman, 34, researcher)

People are frustrated because the international community does not pay attention to what happened to them and portray the Armenians as the only victims of the conflict. The narrative at the official level stresses that the Soviet authorities did not give access to the press and therefore the international media relied solely on what the Armenian side said:

> "About the Khojaly massacre, this happened but no one recognizes it. No one gives Azerbaijan any right to talk about the Khojaly massacre. There are videos about it but the world doesn't recognize it. I'm talking about the international community." (Man, 30, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

This is not entirely true. As I mention in the previous section, the Azerbaijani government has made efforts to institutionalize the Khojaly massacre, and one of the strategies has been making its commemoration part of its foreign policy and the event has been remembered in different kind of events such as talks, exhibitions, campaigns or memorials in not only ally

countries like Turkey, but also Estonia, the United States, and Germany (*KHOJALY TRAGEDY*, n.d.). Furthermore, some members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe signed a written statement on the 20th anniversary of the Khojaly massacre, among them Bulgarian, Georgian, Belgian and Polish assembly members (several Assembly members, 2012).

Whether it is a genocide or a massacre is also unclear and people use both terms interchangeably:

> "In Khojaly there was a genocide, they killed the citizens. You can see the videos. No soldiers." (Man, 23, programmer from Baku)
>
> "It's a massacre, but not a genocide." (Man, 34, from Baku)

Some interviewee responses indicate a greater effort by the government to keep the memory of the Khojaly massacre alive:

> "I grew up with these videos of Khojaly. We grew up with war movies. This is our childhood, a lot of Khojaly." (Man, 29, journalist from Baku)
>
> "We know what the government told us mostly." (Woman, 29, teacher from Nakhichevan)

As we can see, there is a disparate treatment of both memories. While the remembrance of Sumgait is more inconsistent and nuanced, everyone has a good knowledge about the events that occurred in Khojaly, this being a more cohesive memory among society. I discussed in the previous chapter how that Azerbaijanis use strategies of victimization that function in two directions: *selective and biased information-processing*, *justification and rationalization of negative group behavior*, *self-pity*, and *denial* are directed at the in-group; whereas *attribution of blame*, *moral superiority and paternalism*, and *moral disengagement* are addressed to the out-group. This inward and outward mechanisms serve the Azerbaijanis to construct the memory narrative. In the following, I will give some examples using the above interviews to situate these accounts in the in-group and out-group typology.

There is no systematic pattern of strategies that we can attribute to Sumgait's memory and Khojaly's memory. In both cases, the goal is to present themselves as victims, and both in-group and out-group tactics work for that purpose. One strategy used consistently in the case of the Sumgait pogroms is attribution of blame, which works outwardly. Although the pogrom occurred in Azerbaijan and was perpetrated by Azerbaijanis, they attribute blame to an external agent to exculpate themselves:

> "What happened in Sumgait was the fault of the Armenians. A group of Armenians did it and killed the Armenians to create tension and make people believe Azerbaijanis were killing people and that the Soviet Union had to intervene and send the army. They [unclear who] destroyed the archives and for that reason we don't have this kind of information." (Man, 30, 2020 Karabakh War veteran)

But attribution of blame is not the only strategy they use to exculpate themselves. The following mechanisms directed at the in-group also serve in some way to exculpate themselves and redirect responsibility to the out-group. In the first example, the participant justifies and rationalizes the harmdoing of the in-group by admitting that such a terrible event in Sumgait occurred, but that we must understand why; in the second, the interviewee distorts the information, attributing all the blame for the pogroms to an Armenian who participated but who, it is known, had no more responsibility than others:

> "Both [Khojaly and Sumgait] happened. But who did this massacres or pogroms? In the beginning of the 1988 when Azerbaijanis where deported from Armenia, from Tovush etc they came to Azerbaijan, 400 thousand came to Baku, Sumgait... they were so angry, because they lost everything in Armenia. They run away. Even in 1988 they attacked Azeris in Kafan, 7 o 8 people killed. People who saw this and lost everything, what would you expect? We didn't have a proper government to manage this anger. We did it, unfortunately. But we have to look at the main reason for this. Because they were deported. Why don't we focus on that story?" (Man, 34, from Baku)

> "An Armenian was guilty for the Sumgait pogroms. His team killed the people but he was the leader. They were Armenians." (Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait)

In Azerbaijan there is an official memory for both the Khojaly massacre and the Sumgait pogroms. The only memory where I have found deviations from the state orchestrated memory is about Sumgait. The government has endeavored to promote the narrative that suits it best, that of Khojaly, because it reinforces the positive image of the group and portrays them as victims. At the same time, it has drawn up an official memory of Sumgait which exonerates them of the acts committed because otherwise it would remind them that they have committed the same violence that has been committed against them because they do not conceive that it is possible to be victim and perpetrator at the same time. This might be a reactive position for the fact that they believe that the events that affected them have not been framed in the same way as the ones in which Armenians were the victims. Azerbaijanis feel frustration because the world portrays them as the perpetrators and this has certainly reinforced the need to remind themselves their good attributes as a nation and also as the victims of this whole situation. These findings demonstrate that Azerbaijanis use collective memory for the transmission of identity-based victimhood. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about the Sumgait pogroms reinforces my statement from the previous chapter that the population shows disengagement, which may be a hindrance to peace.

The memory of Khojaly enjoys the status of official memory, with which the collective memory coincides. All participants remember Khojaly and this event has been institutionalized. The case of Sumgait is different. Although there is no total suppression of the memory of the Sumgait pogroms, the information is not as explicit and it is manipulated. The information is available, but the memory is not maintained and promoted in the same way at the institutional level, therefore at first glance it seems that the memory does not exist. Some respondents knew about the events and some did not. Of those who did know, some coincided with the memory established by the government while others, a few, deviated from the official line. The strategic forgetting does not work because the memory has been totally

suppressed, but because the memory has been manufactured to fit into the official narrative and is not widely circulated. However, the fact that there are people who know information that matches that which academics offer means that this information is accessible and can be found. The results of my data show that people are generally uninformed about the Sumgait pogroms, rather than this memory being completely buried.

The dynamics of official and collective memories are more nuanced than the literature might suggest. Official memories function in a circular fashion, as they depend on the raw material that is created from below. At the same time, people perpetuate and maintain those official memories with the help of the authorities as long as those memories serve the government in maintaining the official narrative.

While it is the survivors who witness the events and construct memory, this memory "encompasses cross-generational oral transmission of events" (Paez & Liu, 2015) in the form of stories, rumors, or other cultural forms. Many of my interviewees were not yet born when Sumgait and Khojaly occurred and others were very young when the massacre in Khojaly occurred, as all the participants were younger than forty years old. Certainly, memory prevails in time, but it can also be a burden for future generations and for peace. In his work on postmemory, Larkin (2010) notes that these generations potentially struggle to "come to terms with a history that resists either explanation or annihilation, and to situate their life stories between an unredeemable past and an unimaginable future." This is clearly reflected in the interviews, when one of the respondents notes that he grew up watching videos of the Khojaly massacre and that Khojaly has been present since his childhood. It is a memory that cannot be forgotten or taken away and that is imposed on the new generations so that this does not happen. It is not only oral transmissions that contribute to the maintenance or suppression of memories, but they are generally institutionally mediated, either through commemoration or the teaching of history in public schools (Páez & Liu, 2015). As I have

demonstrated above, there are various means through which authorities maintain and institutionalize the memory of Khojaly. The motivations of governments to retain certain memories of the past are not, however, entirely accidental. By making sure to endorse or create dominant narratives, governments use collective memory to pursue their political agendas. In other words, the state creates “official memories” by framing memories articulated from below in ways that serve the interests of the nation (Banjeglav, 2012). The articulation of an official memory is easier in an authoritarian country where the regime has control over them and how they are expressed and where creating alternative narratives would imply an attack on power (Jović, 2004).

Just as governments carefully endorse and maintain certain memories through various means, it is also governments that are responsible, on many occasions, for contributing to collective amnesia. In the words of Jović (2004), the state is capable of depriving its citizens of their memory, of “taking away their memory”. Collective memories are not only built through what is remembered, but also through what is forgotten. Perhaps because the memory of these events leads to a development path opposite to the one the regime needs (Stanciu, 2008), the Azerbaijani government offers misleading information about the Sumgait pogrom (memory that is not maintained and spread in Azerbaijan) and not only constructs a narrative far from reality but also contributes to reinforce the conspiracy theories created at the time of the events such as the Armenian implication in Sumgait, as demonstrated in my data.

It is not in the Azerbaijani government's interest to promote the memory of the Sumgait pogroms because this would mean making that memory more visible. With this narrative more explicitly exposed, counter-narratives that challenge the carefully crafted official line could more easily emerge and undermine their victimhood. Furthermore, information about the real facts of Sumgait are accessible and easy to find, also for Azerbaijanis. That many of

them did not know the facts or knew inaccurate information may be a consequence of lack of interest in searching for that information. This, in turn, may be due to two equally potentially dangerous reasons. It may be due to the assumption that one belongs to the victimized group and feels responsible for maintaining that status by belonging to the group. Another reason is that rather than group membership and the pressure to maintain status, there may be disaffection. It is possible that there is no interest, especially by the younger generations, to continue to dig into a wound of the past that haunts them to this day and that has nothing to do with them because they feel that little can be done to change the situation. This attitude of disengagement, even if it does not show hatred or rancor, is just as harmful in a conflict situation in which the active participation of civil society is essential to move towards achieving sustainable peace.

The government instrumentalizes the memory of events that are extremely significant and sensitive to citizens in order to keep the population controlled in their victim status so that they will accept its policies and thus remain in power. If the discourse that Azerbaijan is the victim of the conflict is reinforced, citizens will support any policy on behalf of their safety. Moreover, if a certain degree of responsibility as a perpetrator is assumed, the consequences must also be assumed, and for the government this may mean losing political status in the international arena. If the foundational basis of the Azerbaijani nationhood is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Khojaly is, in turn, the greatest tragedy that occurred. Therefore, the memory of the massacre must be kept intact, polished, without anything undermining it, or else the Azerbaijani nationhood would tremble.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated that Azerbaijanis use in-group and out-group self-victimization strategies to construct their discourse on Nagorno-Karabakh. By examining the disparate treatment of the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre in collective memory, this study offered empirical evidence that the Azerbaijani discourse selectively focuses on particular events and builds on the memory narrative in a way that fits its self-victimization framework, which is supported by the intervention of the government. I argue that a victimized identity contributes to the failure of reconciliation efforts and places Azerbaijanis at a point of intransigence towards the conflict, which prevents them from empathizing with the outgroup or acknowledging their own harm doings and is one of the reasons why peace is unsuccessful. To do so, I delved into popular, i.e., civil society, discourses on the conflict in search of possible inhibitors of peace. In exploring this, I ultimately show how Azerbaijan's national identity has been constructed through the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, whose discourse is articulated on the basis of victimization strategies, why the government is interested in maintaining the status of victimhood and how the transmission of collective memory helps this purpose. It seems safe to state that a victim identity in the midst of a persistent conflict is a fragile and unstable identity that needs a lot of support from the citizens to be maintained over time.

I demonstrate that collective victimhood forms the basis of the larger narrative of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This narrative is constructed using various mechanisms or strategies of self-victimization that give Azerbaijan a sense of justification over the territory, which is otherwise sustained practically only by appealing to international law. In my interviews, respondents resorted to a number of self-victimization strategies to explain their experience of the conflict. These strategies function in two directions: *selective and biased information-processing*, *justification and rationalization of negative group behavior*, *self-*

pity, and *denial* are directed at the in-group; whereas *attribution of blame*, *moral superiority and paternalism*, and *moral disengagement* are addressed to the out-group. Generally, these various mechanisms serve to maintain and enhance the positive image of the in-group and to seek a sense of justification for the group's own wrong-doing. These strategies also serve the Azerbaijanis build the memory narrative of past traumatic events such as the Khojaly massacre on the Sumgait pogroms in a way that fits their self-victimization framework.

Additionally, the success of Nagorno-Karabakh as a foundation for national identity can be attributed to the involvement of a sizable portion of the population, as nationhood is something that is created by the majority. Azerbaijan feels the humiliation of a fruitless war and territory losses, which sparked the victimization narrative and made the country feel cursed. In this instance, collective victimhood is a bottom-up phenomenon in which the population creates a narrative through its own experience, but also through the transmitted memory. As a result of outgroup harmdoing and painful experiences that have been passed down from generation to generation and have been ingrained in the social fabric of the country, collective memories based on victimhood have been produced at the grassroots level. Victimized memory, in turn, upholds national identity since it promotes national objectives and helps maintain the statehood.

In order to further its political objectives, the government appropriates, modifies, and promotes the self-victimized memory by granting it official status. The government strives to promote the narrative that best serves its interests, such as the mass killing of Azerbaijanis by Armenian forces in the town of Khojaly in Nagorno-Karabakh in February 1992. The Khojaly massacre upholds the group's favorable reputation and portrays them as victims, while it needs to recreate a memory of certain events that absolves them of the crimes committed. One example of this is the memory of the pogroms carried out against Armenians in the city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan in February 1988. All my participants showed

knowledge about the Khojaly massacre, but only a few knew about the Sumgait pogroms, and some of the information they presented was biased or untrue. This could signal several points, such as difficulty of access to such information or unwillingness to seek it out. Since some respondents did know the facts and the information is available and accessible, also from Azerbaijan, it makes more sense to attribute the lack of knowledge to the unwillingness of some people to seek more information about it. That in turn can occur for a variety of reasons, such as fatigue about the issue, avoidance of discovering something that might alter the narrative they already have about the conflict, or simply disengagement.

Collective memory becomes a circular phenomenon where the population articulates narratives that are then instrumentalized by the state, who to establish an official narrative that the public uses to understand their reality. Acknowledging their own harm doing would serve to remind them that they themselves have committed the same acts of violence and their victim status would be jeopardized. In order to maintain control over the population and maintain its victim status so that it will accept its policies and therefore continue in power, the government uses the memory of events that are particularly important and sensitive to the public. People will support any policy for their safety if the narrative that Azerbaijan is the victim of the conflict is emphasized. However, if a certain level of blame as a perpetrator is accepted, then the repercussions must also be accepted. For the government, this could entail losing its standing in the eyes of other nations.

I claim that Azerbaijan’s victim-based identity serve two purposes: It is outward-looking, used as political capital in foreign policy, and also functions horizontally by helping the general public understand their own experiences in post-colonial terms. Victimhood-based narratives, while primarily emphasizing Azerbaijan's sovereignty, also serve to highlight the region's colonial failures and how Russia, by interfering, contributed to the emergence and perpetuation of the conflict. The government and political elites frequently

employ narratives about the victimized memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to advance nationalism and further their own political objectives. In order to promote government programs and, more specifically, to maintain President Ilham Aliyev in office, this includes utilizing accounts of the sufferings experienced by Azerbaijani civilians and military personnel throughout the conflict. The government is able to foster a sense of national unity and inspire support for its policies by portraying Azerbaijan as the victim and the conflict as a struggle for justice and territorial integrity.

The idea that Azerbaijan has suffered due to the loss of territory and that these events have prevented the country from pursuing its national interests, such as becoming the greatest power in the region, shapes the nation's victim-based identity. As a result, national identity has a variety of effects on Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The biggest threat to national security stems from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, hence Azerbaijan's overriding goal is to seek international support for the acknowledgment of its territorial integrity. With the help of victimization narratives and an appeal to the principles of sovereignty, it looks to the West in an effort to win over the support of the international community. Moreover, because Azerbaijan is a key transit nation for energy supplies from the Caspian Sea region to Europe and the conflict affects the region's energy infrastructure and security, this national identity may also have an impact on the country's foreign policy in regards to energy security. Furthermore, even while Azerbaijan has worked to strengthen its relationship with Russia, the presence of a colonial regional power makes it difficult for the country to implement its policies on its own terms.

Nagorno-Karabakh is an issue that the Azerbaijani government wants to resolve urgently because it compromises its statehood and political authority. To stabilize the situation, its only solution is to control the territory, which would also mean the completion of the national myth. in Karabakh on its own terms, which could endanger the stability of its

government. Therefore, the government has a strong interest in preserving the victimization narratives that serve to forge the nation's identity since they successfully organize and unite the public while also looking outside and gaining support from the international community.

However, the collective memory and victimhood, which shapes the view from which Azerbaijanis understand the conflict, is being another hindrance to reconciliation and dialogue efforts. This thesis has been an attempt to fill a gap in the academic literature by exploring such phenomena as inhibitors of peace, since collective victimhood is a psychological process powerful enough to shape group identity, which can influence the perceptions of conflict-ridden societies, their attitudes and motivations. Studying the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from the perspective of collective victimhood has also allowed us to expand existing knowledge about the discourses surrounding the conflict. Conflict narratives are not only composed of factual elements but also of subjective experiences and high emotional charge, and my approach helps us to understand how self-victimization is used to elaborate the memory narrative as well as the logic behind certain demands or policies.

Continuous harm or a significant traumatic incident experienced by a group can lead to or perpetuate a sense of collective victimhood. The ensuing assumptions about the group's victimhood have the power to alter one's worldview and preconceptions about how other groups and the world operate. Blaming the perpetrator and bystanders, cultivating retaliatory thoughts and intentions, and growing awareness of the group's vulnerability are all common effects of collective victimhood. This sense of victimhood reinforces the social assumption that one's own goals in a dispute are legitimate and delegitimizes the adversary, reinforcing the culture of conflict and inhibiting the start of any peacemaking process (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). Despite the fact that self-perceived collective suffering might contribute to the longevity of the conflict and prevent a peaceful resolution, acknowledging the victimization

is essential for healing. Again, this means admitting wrongdoing on both sides, taking accountability, and eventually looking for forgiveness and reconciliation. To be able to take the step of recognizing one's own wrongdoing requires an active civil society that wants to participate in the peace process and end the conflict. It is, however, impossible to generate such a society when the conflict is exploited to the point of exhaustion and the population grows jaded.

In conclusion, this thesis has attempted to shed light on the complex dynamics between national identity, memory and collective victimhood in Azerbaijan. My analysis of popular discourse through ethnographic interviews has revealed that Azerbaijani discourse on Nagorno-Karabakh, which underpins their national identity, is constructed through in-group and out-group victimization strategies that they also use to elaborate the memory narrative. These findings have important implications for conflict and memory studies, as they add a new perspective to be taken into account, and also for conflict policy, as they offer valuable insights into the underlying psychological dynamics that are contributing to the intractability of the conflict. It is essential to continue to study the intersection between memory and national identity in the context of conflict to further deepen our understanding of the attitudes of conflict-ridden societies and to better navigate their psychology during peacebuilding efforts.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Q1. Would you say that the Armenians are Azerbaijan's enemies? Why? Why not?

Q2. Why did the second Karabakh War start? Who do you consider to be to blame for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? Do you think there is responsibility on both sides?

Q3. Do you consider Nagorno-Karabakh to be ancestral land of Azerbaijan? Why? Do you think Armenians have occupied or invaded the territory?

Q4. Do you think it's safe for the displaced Azerbaijanis to return to the villages from which they had to flee because of the war? Why? Do you think Azerbaijanis are willing to live together with Armenians or they might feel resentment? What about the Armenians?

Q5. Should Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians stay or leave? How do you think the Armenians would be treated under Azerbaijani rule? Do you think Armenians would feel safe living among Azerbaijanis?

Q6. Do you think Armenia is violating international law? How?

Q7. What can you tell me about the Sumgait pogroms and the Khojaly massacre?

Q8. Do you think that Karabakh has been "Armenianized"? Is Armenia trying to erase Azerbaijani heritage from the region?

Q9. Do you think Armenians are preparing to attack Azerbaijan? Do you think there is provocation on their part?

Q10. Why is Shusha important for Azerbaijanis and for Armenians?

Q11. Do you think war crimes have been or are being committed by both Azerbaijanis and Armenians?

Participants

P. 1. Man, 20, photographer from Sumgait

P. 2. Man, 23, programmer from Baku

P. 3. Man, 32, historian

P. 4. Man, 30, 2020 Karabakh War veteran

P. 5. Man, 29, 2020 Karabakh War veteran from Khojaly

P 6. Man, 34, 2020 Karabakh War veteran

P. 7. Man, 27, PhD student from Baku

P. 8 Man, 20, activist from Baku

P. 9. Woman, 38, artist from Baku

P. 10. Woman, 21, from Baku

P. 11. Man, 29, journalist

P. 12. Man, 25, graphic designer from Baku

P. 13 Woman, 34, researcher from Baku

P. 14. Man, 34, from Baku

P. 15. Woman, 29, teacher from Nakhichevan