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THE IMAGE OF GAREGIN NZHDEH IN ARMENIAN AND RUSSIAN COLLECTIVE MEMORY: SYMBOLIC CONFLICT IN URBAN SPACE (BASED ON RESEARCH IN ARMAVIR AND KRASNODAR)

Abstract. The article analyzes the symbolic aspects of the conflict that occurred in Armavir between the city authorities and the leadership of Armavir branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia (from 2012 to 2019) regarding the installation of a memorial plaque near the Armenian church in honor of the political figure Garegin Nzhdeh. The analysis of the conflict from the perspective of the concept of “symbolic politics” allowed us to identify some specifics of the policy of commemoration carried out by the Armenian diaspora in Russia. The conflict was caused by the different perception of Garegin Nzhdeh’s image in the Russian and Armenian cultural memory. For the collective memory of the Russian Armenians Nzhdeh is primarily a national hero, who fought for the independence of Armenia. In the Russian collective memory Nzhdeh is only a politician, who collaborated with the Nazi Germany during the Second World War. As the study shows, during the conflict Armenian and Russian activists used different kinds of memory policy strategies (“symbolic erasure”, “symbolic camouflage” and “reformatting” of the previously created memorial space). The study also reveals some structural peculiarities of the collective, cultural and functional memory of Russian Armenians. In particular, the study demonstrates that the collective memory of Russian Armenians has the character of an amalgam, which combines divergent elements of Russian and Armenian collective, cultural memory.

Keywords: Caucasus; Krasnodar Krai; Armavir; symbolic politics; collective memory; Garegin Nzhdeh; Armenian Diaspora.

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Исследовательская статья

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ОБРАЗ ГАРЕГИНА НЖДЕ В АРМЯНСКОЙ И РОССИЙСКОЙ КОЛЛЕКТИВНОЙ ПАМЯТИ: СИМВОЛИЧЕСКИЙ КОНФЛИКТ В ГОРОДСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ (НА МАТЕРИАЛАХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ В г. АРМАВИР И г. КРАСНОДАР)

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена анализу символических аспектов возникшего в г. Армавир между городскими властями и руководством армавирского отделения «Союза армян России» затяжного по времени конфликта (с 2012 по 2019 гг.) в связи с установкой возле армянского храма памятной доски в честь Гарегина Нжде, политического деятеля Первой Республики Армении, а также армянской диаспоры в 1920-е – 1940-е гг. Анализ конфликта с точки зрения концепции «символической политики» позволил выявить некоторые особенности политики памяти, проводимой армянской диаспорой в России. Конфликт был вызван разным восприятием образа Гарегина Нжде в российской и армянской культурной памяти. Для коллективной памяти российских армян Нжде в первую очередь является национальным героем, боровшимся в 1918–1921 гг. за создание независимого государства Армении. Для российской коллективной памяти Нжде является только политиком, сотрудничавшим в годы Второй мировой войны с руководством нацистской Германии. Как показало исследование, в ходе конфликта армянские и русские активисты применяли разного рода стратегии политики памяти («символическое стирание», «символический камуфляж» и «переформатирование» ранее созданного мемориального пространства). Проведенное исследование также позволило выявить некоторые структурные особенности коллективной, культурной, функциональной памяти российских армян. В частности, исследование показало, что коллективная память российских армян имеет характер амальгамы, сочетающей в себе не комплементарные друг другу элементы российской и армянской коллективной, культурной памяти.

Ключевые слова: Кавказ; Краснодарский край; Армавир; символическая политика; коллективная память; Гарегин Нжде; армянская диаспора

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Introduction

On November 13, 2019, Alexey Vinogradov, a deputy of the Legislative Assembly of Armavir, Krasnodar Krai, publicly covered with black paint a memorial plaque dedicated to Garegin Nzhdeh, installed in 2012 on the territory of the Verapohumn Surb Astvatsatsin (Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The deputy's actions were the culmination of the discussions that unfolded since 2016 in the public political space of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia about whether the facts of the installation of monuments to Garegin Nzhdeh could be considered as evidence of the symbolic policy carried out by the officials of Yerevan, as well as representatives of the Armenian diaspora in Russia, aimed at glorifying Nazi criminals. The painting of the memorial plaque provoked an angry response from the Armenian Diaspora and the Armenian Embassy in Russia ¹. In Armenia itself, on December 2, 2019, an activist of the Armenian nationalist Tsegakron party, Shagen Harutyunyan, poured red paint over the monument to A.S. Griboyedov in Yerevan in retaliation. "I splattered over the monument to the ambassador of the Russian Empire, the writer Griboyedov red paint in response to the spoiling of the Nzhdeh memorial plaque," – he commented on his actions on Facebook ².

At first glance, it was a typical urban local conflict, implying consistent public interactions between city authorities, activists, developers or other interested parties whose purpose is to challenge planned or implemented physical or symbolic changes in urban space [1, p. 153]. However, this conflict caused a loud public outcry and received wide coverage in the federal media. In the media, the conflict was presented as one of the episodes that unfolded in the last two decades in the post-Soviet space, the wars of historical memory.

All this prompted the authors of the present article to carefully analyze this conflict from the perspective of the concept of "symbolic politics". This article is devoted to the analysis of symbolic aspects of the protracted conflict that arose in Armavir between the city authorities, Russian activists and the leadership of the Armavir branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia (from 2012 to 2019) regarding the installation of a memorial plaque in honor of the Armenian politician Garegin Nzhdeh.

Methodology

The study applies the conceptual apparatus developed in the works of O.Yu. Malinova and other Russian and foreign researchers who understand the "symbolic politics" as "activities related to the production of certain ways of interpreting reality and the struggle for their dominance" [2, p. 10].

With such a theoretical understanding, within the boundaries of the field of symbolic politics, one can see many actors inventing, promoting and defending diverse

1. In Kuban, a deputy painted over a plaque to Hitler's accomplice Garegin Nzhdeh. Online resource. Available at: <https://regnum.ru/news/2777874.html?ysclid=l7ehffvti9o266588o>

2. In Yerevan, a national activist desecrated a monument to Griboyedov because of Nzhdeh. Online resource. Available at: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2019/12/02/v-erevane-nacional-aktivist-oskvernil-pamyatnik-griboedovu-iz-za-nzhde>

interpretations of various aspects of social reality. The interpretations promoted by them can either compete or be interfaced with each other with varying degrees of intensity. At the same time, actors can use a diverse arsenal of resources and ways to influence social reality. These can be both classical verbally formed “ideas” (principles, concepts, programs, etc.) and non-verbal, figurative, material, activity-based ways of signifying meanings – symbolic images, graphic and artistic images, three-dimensional material objects or a set of actions that have a predominant symbolic meaning and are carried out by an individual, a social group or even by the state [3, p. 30–35].

In most cases, the object of symbolic politics is the past, which serves as a “building material” for constructing different interpretations of social reality (for example, social identities). In the last decade, many studies have covered to various theoretical issues of studying the practices of using the past for political purposes [4; 5; 6]. Despite the continuing diversity in the conceptual apparatus used by researchers dealing with these issues, it is still possible to talk about a certain consensus on such basic concepts as: “collective memory”, “cultural memory”, “politics of memory”, “myth”, etc.

It has become generally accepted for researchers studying “symbolic politics” to understand that by pursuing a policy of memory, actors work with social representations of the past, but not in the form of “history” (systematic scientific reconstruction of the past), but with the so-called “collective memory”, i.e. with socially shared cultural knowledge about the past, the main distinguishing features of which are incompleteness and selectivity [3, p. 30–35]. The main function of this memory in modern society is to create, by constructing the past, a foundation for collective identities, social and political subjects. Memory itself is a set of historical events, figures and symbols, usually united within a certain “myth”.

Notably, in modern political journalism there is a widespread understanding of the “myth” as a conscious distortion of reality, a tool for manipulating people’s consciousness. However, from the point of view of modern social sciences, a “myth” is defined as a special kind of narrative or message containing a set of ideas about the surrounding reality, values and norms that justify acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for members of a certain community [7, p. 80]. Thus, according to Aleida Assman’s definition, “myths separate historical experience from the specific conditions of its formation, transforming it into timeless narratives that are passed down from generation to generation” [8, p. 38].

In this case, the main goal of the “politics of memory” is the formation and affirmation in the collective memory of society of certain ideas about the shared past. The construction and, most importantly, the maintenance of collective cultural memory in an updated state is achieved through the creation of a special cultural material infrastructure (articles, books, films, graphic and artistic images, various kinds of material monuments), the implementation of educational policy, as well as the adoption of special legislative acts [3, p. 30–35; 4, p. 19].

Despite the abundance of works devoted to theoretical issues of politics of memory, there are still few studies of real cases of its implementation, in particular, in urban space [9; 10; 11; 12; 13]. Nevertheless, the experience of such studies already obtained allows us to conclude that their conduct involves obtaining answers to the following questions: 1. Who acts as mnemonic actors? 2. What originates from the past and how is it reconstructed? 3. What is the motivation and what goals do the actors pursue when offering their reconstructions of the past? 4. What resources the actors use? 5. What kind

of cultural infrastructure are the actors building around the fragment of the past they are reconstructing? 6. How does the social environment, including other actors, react to the memory policy? 7. Where are the semantic breaks between different reconstructions of the same fragment of the common past? 8. How are the conflicts resolved?

The main conclusions of this work are based on the analysis, firstly, of publications in the media, and secondly, of materials obtained following the results of 10 in-depth interviews with activists of the Armenian community and the Russian population of Armavir and Krasnodar, who directly participated or observed this conflict.

The image of Garegin Nzhdeh in the Armenian collective memory

The key mnemonic actor in the conflict was the Armenian community of Armavir, which is part of the Armenian Diaspora in Russia. In itself, the fact of the erection of commemorative signs by representatives of the Armenian community is not surprising, since the Armenian Diaspora in general is very active in the field of the politics of memory on the territory of Russia, which manifests itself in the form of publications and books, the release of films, holding commemorative events, the installation of various monuments. The conflict was clearly caused not by the installation of the commemorative sign itself, but by its semantic, symbolic content. Therefore, the key to this study is the answer to the following two questions: Why is Garegin Nzhdeh so important for the collective, cultural memory of the Armenian people? Why does his image have a negative connotation within the framework of Russian cultural memory?

Garegin Nzhdeh (Ter-Harutyunyan) (1886-1955) was born in 1886 in the village of Kznut, Nakhichevan county, Erivan province, in the family of a priest. He received primary education at the Russian school of Nakhichevan, and then at the Tiflis gymnasium. In 1902, he entered the Law Faculty of St. Petersburg University, but two years later he dropped out of it in order to become a part of the Armenian national liberation movement. In 1906, he moved to Bulgaria, where he graduated from the Sofia Officer School. Since that time, his revolutionary name or pseudonym “Nzhdeh” (which means “wanderer” or “emigrant”) appears. In 1907 Nzhdeh joined the ranks of the Armenian Revolutionary Union – Dashnaktsutyun (ARD) party – and took an active part in the Iranian Revolution. Returning to Russia (probably to purchase weapons and ammunition in Transcaucasia), in 1908 he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to imprisonment, after which he spent three years in various prisons. In 1912, he participated in the First Balkan War, gaining military experience and public fame. During the First World War, Nzhdeh fought on the Caucasian Front as part of the Armenian volunteer units of the Russian army and was awarded several orders. After the collapse of the front in 1918, he became one of the leaders of the defense of Transcaucasia from the advancing Turkish troops. During the existence of the First Armenian Republic, Nzhdeh headed the self-defense forces in Syunik, where he participated successively in battles against Azerbaijani, Turkish troops, and then against units of the 11th Red Army. In mid-1921, he was forced to leave for Iran with the remnants of his detachment, after which he emigrated to Bulgaria [14, p. 3–10; 15, p. 238–239].

After moving to the USA, in 1933 he created the ultranationalist movement

“Tsegakronutyun” (from Armenian – “ethic fate” or “religion of the kin”). Branches of the organization were opened in many countries – Bulgaria, Germany, Romania, Greece, France. In the second half of the 1930s Nzhdeh established contacts with the leadership of Nazi Germany, as he later explained, in order to convince the Nazis of the Aryan origin of the Armenians in order to prevent the planned repressions against them [16, p. 120–121]. He also hoped to involve the Nazis in the fight against Turkey. In 1942, he joined the Armenian National Council, created on the initiative of the Nazi Ministry of Eastern Lands, and also became deputy editor of its print body “Azat Hayastan” (“Free Armenia”). Together with General Dro (Drastamat Kanayan), he participated in agitation among Soviet Armenian prisoners of war, in order to recruit volunteers to the Armenian Legion. In addition, he was involved in the training of Armenian saboteurs on the territory of Bulgaria in order to throw them into the rear of the red army [17; 18, p. 32–33, 43–45, 51, 156–157; 16, p. 120–121]. In 1944, he was arrested by SMERSH officers, and in 1948, after investigation and trial, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for counter-revolutionary activities. In 1955, he died in a Vladimir prison.

Based on this brief biography, it can be concluded that Garegin Nzhdeh really was an extraordinary person. The myth of him in the Armenian collective, cultural memory, apparently, is quite complex and requires a separate study. However, it is already possible to distinguish two main images of Nzhdeh, which, having merged into a single one, became the basis of the myth about him as one of the main modern national heroes of Armenia.

The first is that the image of an indomitable, uncompromising, deeply moral fighter against the enemies of independent Armenia was formed during his political activity in Transcaucasia in 1917–1921. The outlines of this image were set by Nzhdeh himself in his autobiography, written in 1944 in Bulgaria: “I always appeared in moments of danger”, – he wrote, – “In peacetime I did not aspire to positions because I did not feel attracted to them. ...I followed the Mamikonian vow, was a man of deep faith and morality, so I often had to drain the cup to the dregs. In my temple of faith and worship, God and the Motherland have always been in the first place” [15, p. 239].

The second image – the image of the philosopher and the main ideologue of Armenian nationalism, – was formed in 1922–1933 during the period of Nzhdeh’s activity in exile. In his works during this period, he formulated a kind of philosophy or even a quasi-religion of Armenian nationalism. The doctrine of “tsegakronutyun” was based on the idea of worshiping the “Armenian kin” of the hard-to-define quintessence of the Armenian national character or mentality. The cult of the “Armenian kin” included: 1. The cult of the Motherland – the worship of the land on which the Armenian nation naturally originated; 2. The cult of blood – in the purity of blood, the future of the Armenian nation; 3. The cult of language – it is necessary to preserve the Armenian language; 4. The cult of ancestors – it is necessary to maintain communication between generations to preserve existing values and shrines of the kin; 5. The cult of power – as the world gives way to the strong; 6. The cult of the leader – the leader determines the fate of the nation, to which it owes its ups and downs [19, p. 138–140].

Undoubtedly, the teachings of Nzhdeh had much in common with the extreme nationalist, fascist teachings that were actively spreading in Europe at that time. It is characteristic that Nzhdeh himself was fully aware of this. Here is a quote from his essay: “In order for a class to live, a personality must die,” – Bolshevism proclaims. “Die, class,

so that the people may live,” – says Hitlerism. “Let both class and personality die, so that the race lives,” – says fascism. You see, this is Germany, hardened by the philosophy of Eternity of Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche, trying to raise its nation to its feet. And what about the Armenians?” [16, p. 95]. Nevertheless, we can agree that, despite the proclamation of the Turks as the destroyers and main enemies of the Armenian people, the key idea in the teaching of Nzhdeh was not aggression and expansion, but self-defense and preservation of the Armenian people [19, pp. 138–140].

Formation of the tradition of veneration of Garegin Nzhdeh

The teaching of Nzhdeh, despite the neo-pagan elements included in it, as well as the obvious connection with European fascist ideological trends, was accepted by most of the elite of the Armenian diaspora. The image of the warrior-philosopher who sacrificed himself for the benefit of the Armenian people has firmly fixed in the pantheon of Armenian national heroes. This, first of all, is indicated by the facts of the veneration of Garegin Nzhdeh, which began in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, in September 1963, the opening of his bust, created in Beirut by the sculptor Zaven Htshyan, took place in the Boston club “Ayrenik”. And in 1968, in Beirut, the publishing house “Amazgain” published a voluminous study dedicated to Nzhdeh [14, p. 21–22].

Starting from the second half of the 1980s, the cult of Garegin Nzhdeh began to form in Armenia itself. In 1983, his remains were secretly transported from Vladimir to Yerevan. Since 1990, the teachings of Garegin Nzhdeh have become the official ideology of the Republican Party of Armenia, which has been constantly involved in the formation of the republic’s governments since 1999. In March 1992, Nzhdeh was acquitted by the Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Armenia. In the same year, a metro station and a square were renamed in Yerevan in his honor. In the following year, his work “Reflections”, written by him during the years of imprisonment, was published in Armenia [14, p. 21–22]. In 2001, at the initiative of Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan, the 115th anniversary of Garegin Nzhdeh was solemnly celebrated at the state level. A two-volume edition of his works was published specifically for the anniversary. The culmination of creating the cult of Nzhdeh in Armenia can be considered the installation of a monument to him on May 28, 2016 in Yerevan in the park on Republic Street, on the pedestal of which the words “God, Nation, Homeland” were carved.

Taking into account the cult of Garegin Nzhdeh that has developed in Armenia thanks to the activities of the Republican Party, it could be assumed that the appearance of a memorial plaque in Armavir is also connected with the activities of this party among the Armenian diaspora in Russia. However, the reality turned out to be more complicated. When asked about the possible participation in the installation of the memorial plaque of official Yerevan, local Armenian activists unequivocally answered in the negative³. To some extent, this was confirmed by the more than modest appearance of the memorial plaque itself.

As a result, it turned out that the main initiator of the installation of commemorative plaques to Garegin Nzhdeh and Andranik Ozanyan in 2012 was the youth organization

3. Field materials of the authors (hereafter: FMA). Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar), No. 7 (22.10.2021, Krasnodar)

of the Armavir branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia ⁴. It should be noted that the Armenian activists of the older generation during the interview repeatedly stressed that it was very difficult to attract young people to public work. But the figure of Garegin Nzhdeh, a warrior-philosopher who created a philosophical and political doctrine, should have impressed a certain part of modern Armenian youth. The figure of the military General Andranik (Ozanyan) also turned out to be attractive to young activists who came up with the idea of installing commemorative plaques near the Armenian temple. It was obviously impossible to reject the initiative of the youth wing for the leadership of the Armavir branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia.

It is important to note that the plaque to Garegin Nzhdeh and Andranik Ozanyan was installed on the territory of the Armenian temple. It is interesting that one of our Armenian respondents spoke negatively about the very fact of the installation of commemorative plaques near the temple: “It was not necessary to put these boards on the territory of the temple. What Nzhdeh or Bagramyan, Babajanyan have to do with the church?” ⁵. The last remark made us wonder why memorial plaques were installed on the territory of the temple in the first place?

An analysis of the controversy that unfolded in the media immediately after the action of Deputy Alexei Vinogradov showed that the Armenian community of Armavir considered the territory around the temple to have a kind of extraterritoriality ⁶. In other words, the Armenian activists considered that the construction of the monument near the temple was purely an internal matter of their community. At the same time, according to one of the Armenian activists, the community asked for permission from the city administration, but did not receive a response, which was interpreted as consent ⁷. It is conceivable that the idea perceived by Armenian activists that the fenced area around the temple was not part of a citywide symbolic space strengthened them in their intention to defend their right to erect monuments to their heroes on it without special permission.

Images of Garegin Nzhdeh in Russian and Armenian cultural memory

As a rule, conflicts in the sphere of symbolic politics, in this case, the politics of memory, are initiated at the moment when two conflicting variants of collective, cultural memory about the same historical event or figure are exposed. The conflict begins when one of the parties sees and understands that the interpretation of a historical event or personality denied by it could receive symbolic materialized confirmation (publication of a book, release of films, broadcasts, installation of a monument, etc.).

The peculiarity of the conflict over the memorial plaque to Nzhdeh in Armavir was that here we are talking about the clash of two different types of collective, cultural

4. Youth Committee of the Armenian Community. Online resource. Available at: // <http://sararmavir.ru/content/molodeg-org.php>

5. FMA. Interview No. 6 (22.10.2021, Krasnodar).

6. Naira Baghdasaryan. A memorial plaque to Garegin Nzhdeh was dismantled in Armavir. Online resource. Available at: <https://oar.ru/novosti/vse-novosti/diaspora/v-armavire-demontirovali-pamyatnuyu-tablichku-garegina-nzhde>

7. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

memory. Using the concepts introduced into scientific circulation by Aleida Assman, we can say that the memory of Garegin Nzhdeh in Russian society refers to cumulative memory, which, as a rule, contains “memories of the past that have become unusable and alien” [8, p. 34]. This is evidenced by the fact that in modern Russia, knowledge about him is very fragmentary and abrupt. One can count only a few works and publications in Russian in which the life and activities of Nzhdeh are covered.

His figure is not important for the Russian cultural, functional memory, which contains only actualized, significant for the maintenance of state, national identity, historical events and figures. Moreover, the memory of him is not actualized either in a positive or negative way. Characteristically, until 2016 (when a monument to him was erected in Yerevan), the figure of Nzhdeh was not even clearly considered in the zone of the well-known antiheroes of Russian cultural memory from among the collaborators and accomplices of the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War.

Having no significance for the Russian collective, cultural memory, the image of Garegin Nzhdeh was ignored. Therefore, the nature of the reaction of Russian society to the appearance of a commemorative plaque is quite understandable, which was reduced only to the requirement that Nzhdeh again go into oblivion of cultural, accumulative memory. It is also understandable why, on the one hand, the Russian public did not respond in any way to the calls of the Armenian side to study the circumstances of Nzhdeh’s activities more thoroughly, and on the other hand, after the dismantling of the plaque, the conflict subsided.

On the contrary, for the Armenian side, the image of Garegin Nzhdeh belongs to the type of functional, actualized cultural memory, from which it is impossible to throw out a single event, not a single hero without causing serious psychological and moral damage to the collective identity. At the same time, only two positive images of Garegin Nzhdeh are important for the Armenian society – a warrior and a philosopher who defended the interests of the Armenian people and the state.

As for the fact of his cooperation with the Nazis, it is not relevant for the Armenian cultural memory, as it has no special significance. Nevertheless, this third negative image of Nzhdeh is still retained in the Armenian cultural memory. At the same time, the ambivalent image of Nzhdeh, which develops largely under the influence of Russian cultural memory, pushes, at least, Russian Armenians to try to find logically and ethically acceptable explanations for the fact of his cooperation with the Nazis in order to remove the contradiction that has arisen (a national hero and an accomplice of the Nazis at the same time).

During the interview, Armenian activists repeatedly articulated such explanations. “I want to say that we do not understand why Nzhdeh provokes such a reaction. – one of the activists noted, – He was not against the Russian people, he fought against the Soviet government. He had Russian awards. He fought for Russia in the First World War. ... Look, in tsarist Russia, Garegin Nzhdeh is a hero, in the USSR he is an enemy. But the Union collapsed. What does modern Russia have to do with Nzhdeh? What wrong did he do to it?”⁸. Thus, the activist focuses on the fact that Nzhdeh was an enemy of the Soviet government, and not Russia, and, consequently, modern Russian society cannot bring any charges against him.

8. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

As for Nzhdeh's relations with the Nazis, here, according to activists, he made a kind of "deal with the devil" for the sake of saving the Armenian people. In this case, Nzhdeh is already perceived as a kind of victim of circumstances. One of the activists stated bluntly: "Nzhdeh acted in a specific situation. He tried to convey to Hitler the idea that it was not necessary to attack Armenia. He tried to help the Armenian Red Army soldiers who were captured by the Germans."⁹ Another respondent in Krasnodar during an interview stated: "And what wrong did Nzhdeh do? He wrote to one of these fascist leaders there that Armenians are not Semites, that they should not be eliminated. And then he tried to rescue the captured Armenians. Is this a crime!? He wasn't executed after all! They even brought him to Armenia to show what it had become."¹⁰

However, the above explanations of the inconsistency of the image of Nzhdeh could be accepted only within the framework of Armenian cultural memory, but not the Russian one. It is important to note that the conflict in Armavir coincided with the peak of the growing aggravation of relations between Russia and a number of Eastern European states since 2005 on the issue of preserving the memory of the key role of the Soviet Union and Soviet soldiers in the liberation of Europe from Nazism [20, p. 115–124]. In the conditions of the agitation of Russian society by the facts of the demolition of monuments to Soviet soldiers in Poland, honoring veterans of SS units in the Baltic states, the installation of a memorial plaque to Garegin Nzhdeh could not go unnoticed.

One of the activists of the Russian population in Armavir noted: "The plaque itself appeared somewhere in May 2012. At first there were only two plaques – to Nzhdeh and Andranika; after a while two more appeared, dedicated to Marshals Bagramyan and Babajanyan. The plaques were installed on the sides of the khachkar. This khachkar had been installed earlier, in 2001, in connection with the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity by Armenia. The plaque to Nzhdeh, obviously, surprised everyone. There were appeals regarding it. People appealed to the administration, to the branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia, but to no avail. Somehow it all dragged on for a long and sluggish few years."¹¹

Features of collective memory of Russian Armenians

During the study of the aspects of the symbolic conflict in Armavir, special attention was drawn to the fact that Armenian activists installed several more plaques dedicated to Soviet military leaders next to the plaques to Nzhdeh and Andranik¹². At first glance, this may look strange and contradictory. But this confusion is largely explained by the fact that the collective, cultural memory of Russian Armenians has the character of an amalgam, since it contains both elements of Armenian and Russian cultural memory, which in meaning are not always complementary to each other.

The common, most important thing for all Armenians in the world is the memory of the Genocide of 1915. At the same time, for the population of the Republic of Armenia,

9. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

10. FMA. Interview No. 6 (22.10.2021, Krasnodar).

11. FMA. Interview No. 4 (21.10.2021, Armavir)

12. Ibid

as recent studies have shown, the pivotal paradigm of Armenian history is the struggle of Armenians for independence. Exploring the modern Armenian historical narrative, A. Iskandaryan came to the following conclusion: “The entire Armenian history, from ancient times to modern days, is interpreted in the context of the ongoing struggle of the Armenian people and/or the state for independence. ... In the mass perception of history, there are several nodal points that are perceived as the most important. ... For example, the period of the reign of Tigran the Great in the I century BC, which is very atypical for Armenian history, becomes extremely important for the Armenian historical narrative. Similarly, the plot of the First Republic of 1918-1920 stands out as the first experience of an independent state in the 20th century and, accordingly, as a pivotal moment in Armenian history” [21, p. 233–234].

Taking into account the above, it is clear why the image of Garegin Nzhdeh, one of the main heroes of the First Armenian Republic, is of such great importance for the Armenian collective, cultural memory. A study conducted relatively recently by Krasnodar sociologists has shown that 25% of respondents in Armenia and 12% of respondents among the Armenian diaspora of the Krasnodar Krai were ready to call Garegin Nzhdeh “the personification of the Armenian people”. [22, p. 203–204].

The memory of the Great Patriotic War occupies an equally important place in the collective, cultural memory of the Russian Armenians. Thus, when asked how the historical memory of Russian Armenians comes into contact with the all-Russian one, one of the activists replied: “Of course, the main point of contact, what unites us with all the peoples of Russia is the Great Patriotic War. Especially here in the Krasnodar Krai. We remember the soldiers of the Armenian 89th Infantry Division. A lot of Armenians died here, many disappeared, and have not been found yet. We are searching, restoring names and fates.”¹³

The collective, cultural memory of Russian Armenians is based on three memories that play the role of supporting structures: memories of the Genocide of 1915, the First Armenian Republic and the Great Patriotic War. Two of these central memories, which have the status of the main myths (about the Genocide and the First Armenian Republic), unite Russian Armenians within the framework of the common Armenian cultural memory with the population of Armenia and other Armenian diasporas of the world, and the memory of the Great Patriotic War unites them with Russian society.

Therefore, there is no contradiction for the Russian Armenians to place busts or commemorative plaques dedicated, for example, to the heroes of the First Armenian Republic and the Armenian heroes of the Great Patriotic War next to each other. In an interview, one of the Armenian activists, when asked which historical figures are key for Russian Armenians, replied: “Different, diverse personalities and heroes. The selection is contradictory, of course! There are those who fought in the Great Patriotic War, our generals Baghramyan, Babajanyan. And there are heroes who established and preserved our republic after the First World War, who defended it from the Turks in 1920, so to speak, heroes of the national liberation struggle. Both are dear to us and are our heroes.”¹⁴

13. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

14. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

Memory Policy Strategies of Armenian activists

However, in the case of the memorial plaque to Nzhdeh in Armavir, the installation of similar commemorative plaques to Soviet marshals next to it in the near future was undoubtedly the implementation of the “symbolic camouflage” strategy by Armenian activists. In a situation when already in the spring of 2013 representatives of the Russian population of the city began to demand that the memorial plaque to Garegin Nzhdeh be removed, Armenian activists tried to symbolically camouflage (cover) the image of Nzhdeh, inconvenient for Russian cultural memory, with images of Soviet military leaders.

An example of the same “symbolic camouflage” is, for example, the installation in Krasnodar, near the building of the “National-Cultural Autonomy of the Armenians of Kuban”, in 2020, three busts – to General Andranik (A.T. Ozanyan), Field Marshal I.F. Paskevich and A.S. Griboyedov. When asked if the memorial would have to be dismantled because of the bust of General Andranik, as it was in Adler in 2015, one of the Armenian activists half-jokingly replied: “No, Paskevich and Griboyedov were put next to Andranik here. Then they will also have to be demolished.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, the strategy used by the Armenian activists did not help resolve the conflict that had been dragging on for several years. Moreover, in 2019, in the context of the next mobilization of the Russian collective memory of the Great Patriotic War, on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the victory, the conflict escalated. Thanks to the efforts of Russian and especially Azerbaijani media, the image of Garegin Nzhdeh became more and more clearly visible in the sector of anti-hero collaborators and Nazi collaborators in the Russian cultural memory of the war. Therefore, the logical outcome of the conflict was a symbolic action to paint over the memorial plaque (a symbolic erasing of the image of Garegin Nzhdeh in the symbolic space of the city), undertaken by Deputy Alexei Vinogradov, which, in turn, prompted the city administration to submit a demand to the Armavir branch of the Union of Armenians of Russia in November 2019 to dismantle the memorial plaque.

Clearly, it was extremely important for the Armenian community of Armavir to get out of the conflict without losing face. Direct fulfillment of the city administration’s demand to demolish the memorial plaque would mean a symbolic surrender, which was unacceptable. Therefore, Armenian activists applied a strategy of completely reformatting the memorial space, where commemorative plaques had been previously installed. According to one of the activists of the Russian population, it was unexpected: “The Armenians fenced the boards and the khachkar with a blind fence, you know, made of corrugated iron. So, it stood there for several months. Then, when they dismantled it, they saw that the plaques were removed, and two more khachkars were put in their place.”¹⁶

For his part, one of the Armenian activists described the situation as follows: “When the plaque was painted over, the new leadership of our department decided to remove all the plaques and put two khachkars. One to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War, and the other to the heroes of the national liberation struggle. So that there would not be

15. FMA. Interview No. 6 (22.10. 2021. Krasnodar)

16. FMA. Interview No. 4 (21.10.2021. Armavir)

someone specific, to satisfy everyone!”¹⁷. Thus, the Armenian activists decided, on the one hand, to preserve the former historical event of dedicating monuments, and on the other, to abandon the principle of personal dedication of monuments in the memorial space around the temple in order to avoid new conflicts.

Regarding the figure of Garegin Nzhdeh directly among the Armenian diaspora of the Krasnodar Krai, an unspoken decision was probably made on the need to refrain from replicating his image in the regional public symbolic space. One of the Armenian activists in Krasnodar commented on the outcomes of the conflict in Armavir: “Nzhdeh is our national hero. We have a photo of him hanging on one of the floors with our other heroes in the building of the national cultural autonomy. In other public places, we do not display images with him.”¹⁸

Conclusion

The analysis of the conflict that unfolded around the installation in 2012 and then the dismantling in 2019 of a memorial plaque dedicated to Garegin Nzhdeh in Armavir revealed some features of the politics of memory pursued by the Armenian Diaspora in Russia. Analysis of the causes of the conflict demonstrate that it was caused by a different perception of the image of Garegin Nzhdeh within the framework of Russian cultural memory on the one hand, and Armenian on the other. During the conflict, the parties applied various strategies of symbolic memory policy. The resolution of the conflict situation for Russian activists was found in the strategy of ousting the image of Nzhdeh from the symbolic, memorial space of the city, which manifested itself in the demand to dismantle the memorial plaque. The Armenian activists of Armavir tried to resolve the conflict first by implementing the strategy of “symbolic camouflage”, and then by refusing to personally dedicate the installed monuments, while preserving the previous historical event dedication. The conducted research also made it possible to identify some structural features of the collective, cultural memory of Russian Armenians.

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17. FMA. Interview No. 3 (20.10.2021, Krasnodar).

18. FMA. Interview No. 7 (22.10.2021, Krasnodar)

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