Quotidian Realms and Identity Negotiation In Post-War Azerbaijan: A Look Through the Symbols of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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Abstract

This work explores a set of elements of everyday life and identity negotiation in post-war Azerbaijan, using six symbols that gained prominence during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as an analytical tool. Through literature review, ethnographic observation, and testimonies of 12 interviewees this study presents an analysis of the symbols of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in Azerbaijan and of people's interactions with and attitudes towards these symbols and what they represent. By looking at individuals' testimonies about the symbols, war, and identity, this work makes a contribution to the studies of identity in Azerbaijan from below. The study indicates that in the post-war setting in Azerbaijan, individuals experience transformations in their identities that improve their vision of self and the nation; they also experience states that result in difficulty in ridding themselves of the previously established markers of identity, or, contrary to liberation from trauma, they acquire one; lastly, the research demonstrates individuals' struggle to establish or retain identity amidst and against the quotidian realms of post-war Azerbaijan. The overarching finding suggests that the interpretation of the symbols, the mode of interaction with them, and the potential influence the symbols have in identity negotiation depend on the internalized needs and demands of the individuals, either formulated independently or as a result of collective meaning-making processes.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, nationalism from below, banal nationalism, everyday nationhood, affective nationalism, identity

Acknowledgments and Dedication

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I dedicate this work to all the deceased and dispossessed in conflict, to their families and friends, in the Caucasus, Ukraine, and beyond.

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Introduction

The six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 upended the long-established status quo in the region. For Azerbaijan, some argue, the events are so consequential that they touch the processes that lie at the very core of the state's *raison d'etre* and signify a transition to a principally new stage of social and political life.[1] Unprecedented national unity, a rise in national consciousness, and a new outlook on the future of the state-people relationship mark the moment. Presumably, the grievances of the past that made Karabakh a central strand of the national identity were addressed with the victory and a brand-new path for the development of identity can be trodden.[2]

But how is the transformation of the identity and attitude in relation to the nation and the state in people happening, and what are the tools to pinpoint and track it? At the historical moment when there is a chance to de-construct prevailing national narratives rooted in mutual animosity of the two warring communities, studying respective identities, their markers, and actors involved in their formation is paramount for understanding the current moment and future developments.

In Azerbaijan, at the time of heated emotions brought about by war, deprivation, and loss, these changes were marked by a set of symbolic items and acts characteristic of the moment. It manifested in the rhetoric of the head of the state, in the cityscapes, the digital domain, and in intimate spaces like homes and personal relationships. Many traces of this "hot" stage remain to this day and continue their interaction with individuals on daily basis.

[1] Ataman and Pirinççi, *Karabakh: From Conflict to Resolution*; Samadov, "Politics in Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War: Actors and Shifting Internal Discourses"; Ahmadzada, "The Fourth Republic: The Transformation of Azerbaijani Identity"; "Post-War Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh"; Ergun et al., *Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives*.

[2] Ahmadzada, "The Fourth Republic: The Transformation of Azerbaijani Identity"; Kucera, "After Winning Back Nagorno-Karabakh, What Will Aliyev Do Next?"

Situated in a wide field of studies of "nationalism from below," this work bridges the state-produced discourses and popular attitudes through the symbols and symbolic practices produced by the Second Karabakh War – the moment of putative transformation in Azerbaijan. It explores the reception and interpretations of these symbols by the lay people and the role these interactions play in the formation and expression of identity in individuals inscribed into a national body, and some of the power-contestation dynamics taking place in the moment and three years after the war's end.

This work classically takes as a baseline the moment of a large-scale social change as a marker of putative transformation and then traces the manifestations of this change into the "settled times," which deserve no less, if not more, attention, as Bonikowski problematized.[3] To advance the argument, this work draws on studies of identity formation and the studies of quotidian realms, most advanced through the concepts of "hot" and "banal nationalism," "everyday nationhood," "national indifference," and some aspects of the affect theory. The paper explores the notion of "symbol" and its significance in identity. Symbols are both the object and the tool of research here. Emotions are viewed as an invigorating force that gives meaning to symbols and expresses identity.

This way, the work aims to explore and answer the following research questions: What are the symbols of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in Azerbaijan? What do they represent, and how are they used? What are people's attitudes to and interactions with the symbols? What does this tell about identity in post-war Azerbaijan as understood and enacted "from below"?

For this purpose, the study employs a qualitative approach to highlight the processes and dynamics that are impossible to capture through discourse analysis of elites' speech, surveys, or statistics. Given the limited use of such an approach in the existing literature on

[3] Bonikowski, "Nationalism in Settled Times." p. 443.

post-war Azerbaijan, this will allow to widen the literature on the topic and identify areas and methods for further research.

To provide the contextual setting of the problem, the first chapter discusses the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in two parts. Firstly, it introduces the central tenets of the Karabakh conflict and the implications of the First Karabakh War for the country. It also presents a brief overview of the main narratives that are at the center of the national identity and the prevalent narratives and dominating discourse until the 2020 war. The second part gives an account of the main events of the Second Karabakh War for Azerbaijan, including the event that preceded it and the episode that followed and created the new symbols and quotidian spaces in the country. This context is also indispensable for the understanding and interpretation of the interviews and ethnographic material collected for this study.

The second chapter presents the concepts and theoretical tenets that guide this work. It also discusses the literature that focuses specifically on identity in Azerbaijan studied through the everyday: schoolbooks, wedding traditions, toponyms, dances, flag-waving, and mourning. The chapter then introduces the most crucial discussions on identity and power contestations in Azerbaijan after the Nagorno-Karabakh War. This part introduced the few, but valuable works focusing on the everyday symbols, practices, and orders borne out of the Second Karabakh War: presidential speeches, housing and urban planning, the gender order, and specific items that are also the focus of this research.

The chapter after that describes the process of data collection and the methodological considerations that were involved in the gathering of the data and in its interpretation. This includes a brief discussion on positionality and establishing trust with the interview participants. Here I describe how the ethnographic method was applied, how the interviews were conducted, and what considerations went into the analysis. The penultimate chapter of the body documents the landscapes where the symbols are situated and the interpretations of

these symbols the respondents provided. This is followed by the analysis subpart, which focuses on the attitudes of individuals toward specific symbols and their interactions with them. Here an interpretation of how identity and power is shaped and negotiated in these manifestations is discussed. The overarching conclusions are presented in the final part of the text.

The thesis is supplemented with and supported by the Appendices. They contain the anonymized list of interviewees, the information sheet and the informed consent given out to the participants. Illustrative materials, either collected in the field or in the digital space, are also included.

Chapter 1: Context

1.1. The Karabakh Conflict and Identity of Independent Azerbaijan

"The history of Azerbaijan is determined by a series of traumatic and tragic events," were the opening words of the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Austria Rovshan Sadigbayli at a conference dedicated to the new prospects for regional cooperation in the post-conflict setting at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna in January 2024. This short sentence represents the country's dominating discourse on both the state and popular level. These words refer to the very process of the emergence of Azerbaijan as an independent state out of the Soviet Union – marked by mass violence, loss, destruction, and overall deprivation. These realities and their interpretations further on laid the ground for the future trajectory of the development of the political and social realities in the country.

A classification proposed by some researchers[4] will be useful in delineating the history of both the Karabakh conflict and the history of the identity of modern Azerbaijan: a separation into four Republics. Importantly, the periodization offered by this framework doesn't always correspond with the formal transitions from state to state or regime to regime but follows a logic that delineates the boundaries and character of national imaginaries.

The First Republic, according to this scheme, existed from 1918 to 1921 and created Azerbaijan's first territorially-defined nation-state and set the basis for its modern national identity. While not covered in this work, it must be remembered, that this period witnessed the first mass violence in the region and contestation of dominion over land, including Nagorno-Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan by the emerging nation-state and reforming empires. The implications of the conflict known today stretch well into the beginning of the

[4] Ahmadzada, "The Fourth Republic: The Transformation of Azerbaijani Identity"; Oruc, "İlham Əliyevin 4-cü Respublikası." (Ilham Aliyev's 4th Republic)

past century at least and the repercussions of these events are consequential for the present. Perhaps not so sharply defined, the memory remains.

The Second Republic in this periodization was born in 1921, with the formal inclusion of the formerly independent Nakhichevan ASSR into the Azerbaijani ASSR established a year earlier. Its end, in turn, is marked not by the 1991 Declaration of Independence, but by the 1994 Russia-brokered ceasefire between Baku government and the Armenian forces dominating Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. During the Soviet period, intercommunal disputes of the beginning of the century were muted by the abandonment of sovereign power over land by national republics and the imposition of a centralized government away from the region. While dumbed, the contestation did not disappear on the ideological level, mostly for a part of the Armenian community.[5] At the same time, for Azerbaijan Karabakh did not serve as an identity marker during the Soviet period. Polemics over where the Autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh Republic should belong to renewed with vehemence with the introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. A movement that began as a reaction "to spreading anxieties about the fates of fellow countrymen in Armenia and Azerbaijan"[6] highlighted the ethnic identities and local feuds surpassed all the potential for peaceful coexistence.

First mutual pogroms and expulsions began as early as 1987 according to some reports, in Kafan and Meghri in Armenia,[7] around the same time clashes took place in Chardakhly village in Shamshir district in northwest Azerbaijan. In February 1988 two youths were killed in the city of Aghdam near Karabakh, a few days later a large pogrom in Sumgait north of

[5] Malkasian, *Gha-Ra-Bagh!*
[6] Samadov, "Formation of Discourses of National Identity in Armenia and Azerbaijan: From the Path to Independence to Nationalist Hegemony."
[7] De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. p. 19.

Baku began.[8] These became the precursors of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.[9] Soviet central government's impotence and tardiness in addressing the situation, as well as internal feuds in the governments of the republics, left the violence unaddressed. Moscow's inadequate intervention to Baku in January 1990 not only failed to arrest a bout of anti-Armenian assaults in the city but also aggrieved the Azerbaijani population more. Some 200 people were killed and hundreds injured. As this advancement also targeted the nationalist movement represented by the Popular Front Party calling for cessation from the Union, the Soviets' full and final discrediting in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus as a whole became imminent. Azerbaijan adopted the Declaration of Independence on 18 October 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved later that year.

Just a few months after gaining independence Azerbaijan was shaken by the news of the massacre of Azerbaijanis in the town of Khojaly in the south-west of the country. [10] Violence raged on. Many more were killed, entire towns were wiped down into dust, and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. In the spring of 1993, Armenian forces captured territory outside the borders of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic, holding seven adjacent regions comprising an additional 9% of Azerbaijan's territory by the end of 1994. An estimate of 650,000 people were displaced within Azerbaijan from in and around Nagorno-Karabakh,[11] and around 188,000 were forced to flee from Armenia to Azerbaijan. Over 300,000 Armenians abandoned Azerbaijan, around two thirds of

[8] Souleimanov, *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict*. pp. 108-9.
[9] See: Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*; Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*; De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*.
[10] Ataman and Pirinççi, *Karabakh: From Conflict to Resolution*. p. 21.
[11] Abzavaty, "Unrecognized IV. Bitter Fruits of the 'Black Garden.'"

them going to Armenia, and others going abroad or fleeing to the Armenian forces-occupied territories within Azerbaijan.[12]

This context is crucial as it shows Azerbaijan's power struggle for independence and political power at the breakage point. The strife around Karabakh, be it on the political level or on the ground, ultimately was a question of territorial integrity and sovereignty. The extent to which modern Azerbaijan is defined by these events is difficult to overestimate. So much more decisive was the 1994 ceasefire agreement which sealed Azerbaijan's defeat and defined the trajectory of development for the state. Defeated, poor, and weakened Azerbaijan entered into the Third Republic period.

In suit, the messianic objective of the Third Republic became the liberation of Karabakh from the Armenian occupation and reversing the outcomes of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Its main narrative became isolation, tragedy, trauma, and humiliation. The declared means to rectify the wrongs were through national consolidation based on a combination of a particular form of unacknowledged victimhood and desired military vengeance. [13]

This regime became defined by the accession into power of the third president of the independent republic – Heydar Aliyev. He headed the country from 1993 until 2003, later succeeded by his son Ilham Aliyev. Unlike the ethnonationalist-leaning agenda under the second president Abulfaz Elchibey, the "Azerbaijanism" ideology that came to the fore under the two Aliyevs aimed to establish a common civic identity for the entire population.[14] The country's post-colonial legacy, multiethnicity, and geostrategic location – all were to be

[12] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "International Protection Considerations Regarding Azerbaijani Asylum-Seekers and Refugees."
[13] Ahmadzada, "The Fourth Republic: The Transformation of Azerbaijani Identity."
[14] See: Ergun et al., *Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives*; Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*; Van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity*; Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*.

incorporated into the domestic and foreign policy of the state.[15] More to that, the nationalist-irredentist strand of politics calling for unification with ethnic kin in the neighboring states was entirely abandoned to balance relations with Russia and Iran. Karabakh was placed at the center of everything. Arguably, reclaiming and returning to Karabakh is the sole political purpose of the Aliyevs' regime, as well as the source of its legitimacy. The "others" of the national narrative became Armenians, and Russians, though denominated differently.

Mass and violent displacement of population, dispossession, and blockage of access to family homeland left a heavy impression on the population. It is namely these events and sentiments Ambassador Sadigbayli refers to in his speech. State policies predominantly interpreted these events in the most pejorative terms and placed them at the center of domestic and foreign policy. At the same time, the state policies did little to alleviate the hardship for the affected, especially the IDPs and refugees.[16] On the contrary, pertinent housing and legal regulations (or absence thereof) resulted in marginalization, exclusion, and radicalization.[17]

A discourse of victimhood and the need "to restore justice" are those most frequently called upon. The "Black January"[18] commemorating the 1990 killings in Baku is a day of national mourning, the massacre in Khojaly is named genocide. Efforts to highlight and sediment the sense of victimhood are consistently made through symbolic sights and mass campaigns. One example is the memorial complex built at the sight of a mass grave in the town of Guba discovered in 2007. The grave is "clear evidence of the genocide of the Muslim population of Guba, committed by Armenian armed forces under Bolshevik name in May

[15] Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*.
[16] Yunusov, "Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Azerbaijan: Problems and Prospects."
[17] Ihar, "Properties of War."
[18] Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*. pp. 213-19.

1918," according to the official sources.[19] In the same vein, a wide-scale campaign "Justice for Khojaly"[20] launched in 2008 by Ilham Aliyev's eldest daughter targets both domestic and international audiences to perpetuate the narrative. The 2020 war in many respects became the culmination of the previous trajectory of politics. The victory supposedly addressed the grievances and opened space for a transformation.

1.2. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

The intense part of the military action of the 2020 Karabakh war started on 27 September and resulted in the signature of a Russia-brokered ceasefire between the sides on 10 November 2020, thus lasting for 44 days.[21] Yet, an important consideration in thinking about this event is in treating it not as an isolated course of military action, but as one that stretches back at least into the summer on the year 2020, and then into sometime after the announcement of the victory. This section traces the events along a continuum from a short but definitive flare-up in July to the time of the announcement of the victory, when Azerbaijanis across the world celebrated the country as a victor.

1.2.A. The Precursors

Incidents in two places go hand in hand when it comes to the accumulation of the pre-war tensions and morale, and are the reference to the prevailing sentiments. The first immediate precursor of the full-on war are the 12 July 2020 border clashes in the region of Tovuz. This was the gravest military incident since 2016,[22] taking the lives of civilians and

[19] "Quba Soyqırımı Memorial Kompleksi."
[20] "Justice For Khojaly."
[21] Meduza, "'Eto ne pobeda, no i porazheniya ne budet' Zayavleniya liderov Armenii, Azerbaydzhana i Rossii po povodu prekrashcheniya ognya v Nagornom Karabakhe." ('This is not a victory, but there will be no defeat either.' Declarations of the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh.)
[22] "Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border."

military personnel across the borders. At the same time, on 12 and 13 July protests started in the town of Qobu, not far from the capital.[23] Here many IDPs from Karabakh were settled and it is also where it is believed the first wave of the mass protests that followed took root. Yet the impetus for the movement is undoubtedly in the deaths of Maj-General Polad Hashimov and Colonel Ilgar Mirzayev on 14 July during the skirmishes on the border.[24]

This sparked a wave of protests and demonstrations in both Azerbaijan and in countries around the world. In the summer "Karabakh marches" took place in Ukraine,[25] Germany,[26] Turkey,[27] among other places. The protests in Baku, Sumgayit,[28] and smaller towns across the country on 14 July 2020 was an unprecedented event. It is notable not just by its mass character, but also by virtually no intrusion of the police into the rally – an unheard of in Azerbaijan. The 14 July assembly went uninterrupted until the crowd started an offense on the Parliament.[29] Under strict quarantine measures implemented in the country at the time[30] this event imbues only with more wonder about how this could be possible. The arrests that did take place were just a few.[31]

One interpretation to this is it being an outburst of indignation against the government, demanding to take action to finally release people of years of hardship never addressed adequately by the government. The effects of the COVID-19 lockdown that has

[23] Azadliq Radiosu, "'Qarabag' Telebi Ile Aksiya Kechirilib, Saxlananlar Var." (A demonstration with the demand for Karabakh took place. Arrests took place.)
[24] BBC, "Azerbaijan General among Troops Killed in Armenia Border Clash."
[25] "Kiyevde Umumukrayna Qarabağ Yurushu." (All-Ukrainian Karabakh march in Kyiv)
[26] Meydan TV, "Almaniyanin Paytakhti Berlin Sheherinde Qarabagh Yurushu"; Azerbaycan Saati, "Qarabagh Yurushu-Canli." (Karabakh march in Berlin)
[27] Xural TV, "İstanbulda 'Orduya Destek' Aksiyasi Kechirildi: 'Muharibe Isteyirik!'" ("Support to the army" demonstration took place in Istanbul; "We want war!")
[28] Kanal13, "Sumqayit Ayagha Qalxdi: 'Muharibe İsteyirik' - Generalin Shehid Donushu İnsanlari Coshdurdu - Canli." (Sumgayit went to the streets; "We want war" – A General's death enraged the people – Live.)
[29] Media, "Thousands of Pro-War Protesters Rally in Azerbaijan."
[30] Samadov, "Azerbaijan - Covid-19 and a Divided Opposition."
[31] Eurasianet, "Pro-War Azerbaijani Protesters Break into Parliament."

exacerbated social hardships and inequalities also should not be disregarded.[32] Some hints about the motivations of the crowd flooding the city streets and reference points for the discontent could be found in the chants pronounced by the crowd: *Qarabağ bizimdir, bizim olacaq!, Müharibə istəyirik!*[33]*, Ali baş komandan silah vər bizə!,* [34] *Karantin bitsin, döyüş başlasın!,*[35] *Şəhidlər ölməz, Vətən bölünməz!,*[36] *Ya Qarabağ, ya ölüm!,*[37] *Mübariz!,* [38] *Qalx ayağa Sumqayıt şəhidimiz var!* [39] Some recordings capture people shouting "*We have put up with enough!,*" "*We don't need money or jobs, let us go and fight!,*"[40] *"Freedom!."* These can be seen as an amalgam of belligerent discourses and exhaustion from the psychological and material load of an unending conflict manifesting themselves. A wide discontent with the military leadership was also evident as the crowd called for the resignation of Najmeddin Sadykov – Azerbaijani Colonel General, the Chief of the General Staff of Azerbaijani Armed Forces and the First Deputy Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan serving in the position since 1993 – accused of conspiring with Russia and the Armenian Army.

What is crucial, these events at least to an extent had an impact on the sense of collective self, which by the end of the war resulted in Azerbaijan witnessing an "unprecedented national unity,"[41] though in the moment took the government aback. Noone

[32] Samadov, "Azerbaijan - Covid-19 and a Divided Opposition."
[33] *We want war!*
[34] Supreme commander, give us weapons! Reaksiya TV, "Xalq Azadliq Meydanına Axishdi. Muharibe Isteyirik!" (People went to the Independence square. We want war!)
[35] *Let the quarantine end and the fighting start!*
[36] *Martyrs don't die, homeland won't be divided!* It is also a Turkish nationalist slogan chanted in support of the Turkish military.
[37] *Karabakh or death!*
[38] Refering to Mubariz Ibrahimov decorated as National Hero of Azerbaijan posthumously. He was killed in shootings along the border in June 2010. Memorial.az, "Mubariz Ibrahimov: Torpagi Vetendeshdiren Milli Qehreman."
[39] *Get up Sumgayit, one has fallen (we have a martyr)!*
[40] Eurasianet, "Pro-War Azerbaijani Protesters Break into Parliament."
[41] Samadov, "Politics in Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War: Actors and Shifting Internal Discourses."

from the officials or the opposition showed up before the crowd to listen or address the deeply-rooted frustration and indignation. Evidently, the war did not begin at the demand of the public, as the preparations had been going on for years, but the movement created an additional basis for mobilization and allowed to paint the decision as legitimate. President Aliyev all of a sudden became an effective manager and wise supreme leader. Armenian Prime Minister declaring "Artsakh[42] is Armenia, and that's it" in August,[43] only twisted the knife and added more rhetorical basis for the legitimation of belligerence in people and state officials in Azerbaijan.

1.2.B. The Military Action and Victory

The war broke out on 27 September 2020.[44] Over the course of the offensive, Azerbaijan gained control over five cities, four towns, and 286 villages[45] in Karabakh.[46] Azerbaijan records at least 2,900 fallen soldiers[47] and Armenia – some 4,000.[48] The high points of the war for Azerbaijan were the capture of several strategically and symbolically important sights (e.g. Hadrut). The capture of mountainous Shusha (or Shushi in Armenian) in direct proximity to Stepanakert (Khankendi in Azerbaijani), the capital of the de-facto republic, became the decisive development for the course of the fighting and instilling hope for a close resolution among the Azerbaijanis.

[42] The Armenian name of the Mountainous-Karabakh region.
[43] Kofman, "Armenia-Azerbaijan War: Military Dimensions of the Conflict."
[44] BBC, "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why Did Nagorno-Karabakh Spark a Conflict?"
[45] Azertac.az, "İşğaldan Azad Edilmiş Şəhər və Kəndlərimiz." (Our towns and villages liberated from occupation.)
[46] "Nagorno-Karabakh" refers specifically to the region within the borders of the autonomous oblast Soviet-times and the "upper" or "mountainous" Karabakh. Simply "Karabakh" is used to describe a wider region, that was among the adjacent regions occupied by the Armenian forces since 1994.
[47] "Azərbaycan İkinci Qarabağ Müharibəsində şəhid olmuş 2900 hərbi qulluqçusunun adını açıqlayıb." (Azerbaijan disclosed names of the 2900 soldiers fallen in the Second Karabakh War.)
[48] BBC News, "Armenia Country Profile."

Shusha holds a special place for the history of Karabakh of the past centuries and in both of the Nagorno-Karabakh wars of the past thirty years. Some call Shusha "the Azerbaijani Jerusalem."[49] It presents a high symbolic value for both Azerbaijanis and Armenians. In 1992 losing the city became the most painful thrust for Azerbaijanis, and in 2020 the announcement of its capture[50] by the state forces became the source of greatest joy. The day Shusha was taken under state control, 8 November, is celebrated as the victory day in Azerbaijan now.[51] The capture of Shusha also being the high point of the war in terms of military implications, led to the commencement of the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia to sign a ceasefire agreement, marking the end of the 2020 Karabakh war.

According to the agreement, the districts of Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin that were not taken in battle were to be handed over under the control of Azerbaijan by the end of 2020, and the Armenian Armed Forces were to withdraw.[52] One other condition was the deployment of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to Karabakh,[53] who would be particularly responsible for the control of the Lachin corridor – the road connecting the de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to Armenia. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the peacekeeping contingent has been questioned due to the absence of a clear mandate,[54] and for the Azerbaijani side presence of Russian troops in and of itself has been described as a source of major discontent. Non-capture of Stepanakert – the administrative center of the de-facto republic – was one major

[49] Shiriyev, "A Listening Tour of the Azerbaijani Front Lines."
[50] Meduza, "Armyane proigryvayut reshayushchee srazhenie v Karabakhe: azerbaydzhanskie voyska voshli v Shushu, samyy tsentr nepriznannoy respubliki. Armyanskoe naselenie pokidaet Karabakh." (Armenians are losing the decisive battle in Karabakh: Azerbaijani troops entered Shisha, the very center of the unrecognized republic. The Armenian population is leaving Karabakh.)
[51] Samadov, "Politics in Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War: Actors and Shifting Internal Discourses."
[52] Primeminister.am, "Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation."
[53] BBC, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia Deploys Peacekeeping Troops to Region."
[54] "Post-War Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh."

point of discontent among some. This is not to say that the war itself and the state rhetoric were cheered universally.[55]

1.2.C. Altered Spaces

The social upheaval, military advances, and victory entailed both joy and anxiety for all in Azerbaijan in some way or another. Anger, frustration, fear of the unknown, hope, isolation – all these had a transformative impact on the society, sometimes healing the past wounds, or opening new ones. At least for some time change came in behavior, self-image, and public activity, some of it remaining into the years since. The moment of an apparent transformation could be observed in mass manifestations of various symbols and symbolic actions, changing landscapes of cities and the countryside.

Several major additions and alterations to the thus far familiar landscapes in Azerbaijan came about. Most overtly, flamboyantly, and boldly appeared the flag, covering the skies, roads, and bodies. On the day of the capture of Shusha, the colors of the flag became most succulent and bright.[56] For many in the country, this was the most emotional day, for the observers – perhaps the most "hot" moment of a public emotion that took form. Other new artifacts, slogans, and official speeches turned memes that brewed during the war settled in – some for longer than others.

The most apparent and significant symbols are the flower *xarı bülbül* (khary bulbul)[57] representing Shusha and the shahids, the slogan "*Karabakh is Azerbaijan!*", and elements from the speeches and TV-performances of the President Aliyev. Namely, these are the so-

[55] Lefteast.org, "Anti-War Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth."
[56] Meduza, "Kak v Armenii i Azerbaydzhane vstretili okonchanie voyny v Nagornom Karabakhe. Fotografii." (How the war's end in Nagorno-Karabakh was met in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Photos.)
[57] See Pic. 2 in the Appendices

called "*iron fist*" and several enemy-degrading expressions[58] such as "*İti qovan kimi qovuruq*" [59] and "*ne oldu Paşinyan.*" [60] The former found its way into a variety of spaces both in digital domain, and widely as prints, paintings, stickers, sculptures, or even embroidery among artisans of traditional crafts.[61] The latter for the most part remained an internet phenomenon also inspiring lyrics for songs. A military kamikaze drone was named "Iti qovan," [62] with which the phrase found another way into materiality. Perhaps the most unfortunate – though spatially contained – state-produced invention became the Military Trophy Park in Baku, displaying military machines wreckage, pieces of ammunition, and other "trophies" collected from the defeated Armenian troops.[63]

[58] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War"; Sevinj Huseynova, "Why Do The Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in The Aftermath of The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War."
[59] *We banish [them] like dogs*
[60] *What happened Pashinyan?* This is an overtly mocking exclamation used by Mr. Aliyev with a continuation: "*You were going to go to Jabrayil. You were dancing there* (a reference to Armenia's PM dancing at a festival in Shusha": Armenia PM Joins Folk Dance in Karabakh's Shushi (Photos)."). *What happened to the status [demands of cultural autonomy for Karabakh]? It went to hell*.": TV100, "Aliyev: Yol Chekiyordun Cebrail'e, Ne Oldu Pashinyan?" The phrase and the respective video then was disseminated in the state-backed Turkish press with a celebratory tone: Rehimov, "Azerbaycan'ın Dağlık Karabağ'daki Zaferi Aliyev'in 'Ne Oldu Paşinyan' Sözleriyle Hafızalara Kazındı." (Azerbaijan's victory in Mountainous Karabakh remains imprinted in memory with Aliyev's words "What happened Pashinyan?")
[61] Several panels with the "iron fist" embroideries could be found at a traditional crafts bazaar in the town of Sheki (notes from the field in April 2024); see one the panels in Pic. 6 in the Appendices. Also see Pic. 4 for a poster designed by the Ministry of Education, that can be encountered in schools around the country. In February 2023 there still were stickers with Mr. Aliyev holding his fist up in the belligerent gesture around Baku, applied on the walls or shop windows without any apparent system or logic.
[62] "*The dog chaser*" Rehimov, "Azerbaycan'ın Dağlık Karabağ'daki Zaferi Aliyev'in 'Ne Oldu Paşinyan' Sözleriyle Hafızalara Kazındı." (Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh remembered with Aliyev's words 'What happened Pashinyan')
[63] Javid Agha, "On the Apologists of Baku's Military Trophy Park."

Chapter 2: Identity and the Everyday of the Nation

2.1. Situating the Study

By speaking about "identity in post-war Azerbaijan" this work immediately defines identity along national lines and presumes there are individual participants of the nation for whom such identity exists and has a degree of importance. The "members of the Azerbaijani society" are thus those, who regularly and extensively participate in the social life of the country – Azerbaijan is the place where individuals go to school, get married, forge their primary friendships, develop their taste in cuisine, and have an opportunity to participate in the social and political life of the country, thus also potentially defining it. For this very reason, the theoretical and conceptual apparatus applied in this work to a large extent sources from the studies of nations and nationalisms – of societies whose lives are defined by large political projects sharing structural and symbolic similarities around the globe, but also structurally and symbolically distinct or separated from the others alike.

Traditionally, nations and nationalisms have been studied as histories of dynasties, warring clans, and sovereign political formations presumed to be equals among each other. Their "naturality," and for that matter nature, would be rarely questioned, and the micro-processes would be almost or completely disregarded. This work acknowledges the factual realities of a nation exiting, alongside the routines it generates. Nonetheless, the aim here is to study how the nation seeps into the lives of individuals and defines the landscape of their imaginaries, their own routines and beliefs, and the potential modes of participation in the nation. It also may show how a nation is imagined by individuals and comes into being this way. With this, this work assumes studying nationalism with a greater account of the people's lived realities "from below."

The break from the past that now allows us to apply this approach perhaps most rightly can be ascribed to E. J. Hobsbawm, who acknowledged the two-way process of the

construction of the nation. For him, nationalism is "constructed essentially from above" *and* "which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below," with the "assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people."[64] The call to pay more attention to the non-elite view of nationalism also was voiced by A. Smith.[65] Together with other scholars like E. Gellner,[66] B. Anderson,[67] Ch. Tilly,[68] and J. Breuilly,[69] they spotlight the establishment of collective identities predominantly through practices introduced by modern states and social movements. These authors bring attention to the importance of shared practices, meanings, and ideas in creating real or perceived similarities that in turn can serve as a unifying (or differentiating) agent in nation-building.

2.1.A. Studying National Identity in Quotidian Realms

Another major thrust in the conceptual exploration of nationalism makes the scholars who highlight the dynamism of nation-building[70] – in the words of Mylonas and Tudor, they study nationalism as practice. The novelty and pertinence of this approach is in offering ways to examine how "individuals understand and practice national belonging." [71] Taking seriously people's practices and lived realities reveals meanings and attitudes inaccessible otherwise, it is argued.[72]

[64] Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. p. 10.
[65] Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*.
[66] Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.
[67] Anderson, "Imagined Communities."
[68] Castañeda and Schneider, *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change*.
[69] Breuilly, "Nationalism and the State."
[70] Wimmer and Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond"; Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*; Isaacs and Polese, "Between 'Imagined' and 'Real' Nation-Building."
[71] Mylonas and Tudor, "Nationalism: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know." pp. 119-20.
[72] Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*; Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*; Bonikowski, "Nationalism in Settled Times." p. 443

Largely, the groundwork for this crucial development should be credited to M. Billig and his concept of "banal nationalism," which in conceptualization stands in opposition to "hot" nationalism – the marker of the distinct and usually "extreme" forms of social expressions in national terms. He critiques the intellectual tradition which tends to render only somehow extraordinary events or contexts as nationalism and thus requires attention and concern; he rejects arguments heralding the decline of nation-state, and such that are inherent to the "civic vs. ethnic nationalism" debate.

Billig's theory helps to explain the phenomenon of the non-conscious impact of symbols like non- "hot" items or modes of nationalism on individuals and society as a whole. The theory suggests that national symbols represent group membership, and have an influence on both individual perceptions and processes that delineate the outlying group boundaries. With this, it is easy to see how this approach is pertinent to the present study as well.

Broadly speaking, symbols can be anything from flags, anthems, and embroidery motifs, to films, books, or landmark speeches of political leaders. Perhaps the important condition for them to be defined as symbols is to have a distinguishable size and shape, and be representative of a specific moment, period, event, or idea. They also must be widely recognizable and as containers of compressed meanings, serve as a meta-language through which memories, visions, and ideas are sustained and communicated. For "students of the nation," using Pal Kolstø's wording, symbols are "interactive aids through which they can participate in nation-building and nation-maintenance.[73] Scholars repeatedly point out that "symbolic activity is perhaps our most important means of bringing things together,"[74] and how great of a role symbols act in the creation of shared meanings and a sense of unity in a

[73] Kolstø, "National Symbols as Signs of Unity and Division." p. 676.
[74] Walzer, "On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought." p. 194.

collective identity.[75] In a sense, symbols are 'nodal points' around which individual and collective identities can be built.[76]

The concept of banal nationalism inspired scholars to engage closer with objects in the quotidian realms and everyday social practices. One of the early and then most debated approaches became that of "everyday nationhood."[77] In opposition to Billig's rather static and passive intake of nationalism, everyday nationalism diverts in its focus on human agency, to understand the meaning and experiences of nationhood from the perspective of those on the ground, as the co-constituents and participants of the nation, as consumers of national symbols, rituals, and identities. One other important contribution everyday nationalism makes is averting the assumption that nationhood is always being reproduced as a "pervasively relevant social category."[78] A similar perspective is also found in the works of feminist scholars[79] and scholars in political geography. They picked up Billig's concerns, further engaging with the concept to highlight how the nation emerges "through embodied gender performances." Studying dancing, dressing, or styling, they developed the notion of "embodied nationalism" and "affective nationalism"[80] What all these approaches do is allow human agency into the discussion. This in turn, has the power to critique the assumptions about the extent to which the nation and nationhood are consistently salient, or present, in everyday life. They allow to see where the nation and its symbols are irrelevant, ignored, disregarded, or even contested and rejected.

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[75] Alesina and Reich, "Nation Building." pp. 17, 23, 28.
[76] Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. pp. 31, 34.
[77] Fox and Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood."
[78] Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* p. 363; Fox and Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood."
[79] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*; Veltman, "The Promise of Happiness. By Sara Ahmed. Durham, NC."
[80] Militz and Schurr, "Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan" p. 55; Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists."

As lenses that account for in the interactive and dynamic way nation is built and reestablished on a daily basis, "everyday nationalism" and "affective nationalism" allow to study of collective and individual identities. Identities, being by definition social identities,[81] are characteristically dependable on the input and come about through a process of constant interaction and negotiation.[82] Identities are both a constant – so perceived or desired – and a material subject to change, which together constitute a mechanism to situate individuals in the social world. Fruitfully defined by Henry Hale, identity is the "set of personal references on which people rely to navigate the social world they inhabit,"[83] and "essentially a cognitive uncertainty-reducing mechanism, by the way of which the brain copes with the vast complexity of the social environment by breaking it down into meaningful categories."[84] Depending on the assumed identity individuals determine their personal preferences to ensure inner congruence and equilibrium, and to situate oneself on the coordinate plane of the complex social world, to then establish the potential for individual safety and engage in collective action.

This said, one of the most important characteristics of national identity, according to historian and sociologist Taner Akçam, is the emotional connection to the group we believe we can ally with.[85] This then hints that an identity is intrinsically an emotion-defined state of being. It is emotions that tell us what matters to us, and where to draw the border of interaction with other people, spaces, and ideas. Emotions signify what is acceptable and what challenges or perhaps even threatens the cognitive and social pathways that had ensured

[81] Jenkins, *Social Identity*. p. 18.
[82] Jenkins; Berger and Luckmann, "The Social Construction of Reality"; Hall, "Questions of Cultural Identity - Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" p. 4, 13.
[83] Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics*. p. 34.
[84] Onuch and Hale, "Capturing Ethnicity." p. 85.
[85] Akçam, *From Empire to Republic*. pp. 41, 245.

our survival thus far. Identifying emotions, therefore, can also aid in pinpointing the boundaries of individual and group identities.

Together, the lenses proposed by Billig, Miller-Idriss and Fox, and feminist scholars like Sara Ahmed propose a very useful set of tools for studying the quotidian realms of the nation and the negotiation of identity. First of all, both of these approaches glue our attention to the fact that the mundane and the banal do matter and should be made aware of. They bring up the potency of symbols and symbolic and ritualized behaviors in the conceptualization of the nation and boundary-making, even (and more so importantly!) if it is largely an unconscious process. At the same time, this vision allows us to notice and track dynamism in nation-building, including the place of emotions and how to engage them into research methodologically. To unite the approaches of "banal" nationalism and "everyday nationhood" this work refers to all the nation-defined routines and symbols as "quotidian realms."

2.2. State of the Art: Studies of the Quotidian in Azerbaijan

Studies on identity in Azerbaijan are ample; some of the main tenets that outline their contextual framework have already been introduced in the first chapter. Tadeusz Swietochowski,[86] Ayça Ergün,[87] Charles Van der Leeuw,[88] Ceyhun Mahmudlu,[89] Ceylan Tokluoğlu,[90] Orkhan Valiyev,[91] and Cengiz Çağla[92] are among the names who have made a major contribution to the study of identity and ideology in Azerbaijan in history, political

[86] Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*; Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of a National Identity in a Muslim Community*.
[87] Ergun et al., *Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives*.
[88] Van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity*.
[89] Ibid
[90] Tokluoglu, "Definitions of National Identity, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s."
[91] Valiyev, "Milletini ve Devletini Arayan Bir Etnik Grup"; Valiyev and Alptekin, "The First Republic of Azerbaijan."
[92] Çağla, "The Liberal and Socialist Influences on Azerbaijani Nationalism at the Beginning of the 20th Century."

science, and sociology. In this subchapter, I introduce some examples of studies exploring the state of Azerbaijan's identity through the study of the everyday.

Studies of the everyday in Azerbaijan have been very fruitful in discovering the aspects of identity that define the people's lives in the region. Arsene Saparov explored the use of place names and symbolic landscapes in the politics of national identity-making and political legitimization in Azerbaijan.[93] His research, based on the premise that there is a relationship between the state and language, demonstrates selective toponym manipulation, which resulted in symbolic language struggle and toponym contestation in specific areas of the country. These strategies, he argues, are both rooted in the Soviet legacy, but they undermine each other due to their different nature. A useful suggestion in the context of the present study, Saparov contends that political institutions play a largely symbolic role and that real political power and legitimacy are linked to a strong personality and informal clientele networks largely independent of formal political institutions. Anahit Hakobyan, another researcher exploring the role of language in banal settings, focused on propaganda in history textbooks in Azerbaijan and Armenia,[94] Viewing history schoolbooks is one of the instruments for the dissemination of hatred by way of creating negative images of one another between communities, Hakobyan attempts to uncover the impact of such propaganda on each society. Her conclusion underscores that both nations focus their attention intensely on the years of war, hatred, and confrontation in almost every sphere of life. At the same time, there is no strong relationship between exposure to such materials and expressed hatred towards the other group – sedimentation of antagonistic beliefs can and does happen through other ways as well. Lamiya Panahova conducts a case study with Azerbaijani school materials exploring state-led efforts to instill national identity in children.[95]

[93] Saparov, "Contested Spaces"; Saparov, "Place-Name Wars in Karabakh."
[94] Hakobyan, "State Propaganda through Public Education: Armenia and Azerbaijan."
[95] Ergun et al., *Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives*.

Lale Yalçın-Heckmann studied culture, and social and economic relations in Azerbaijan through wedding practices in regional towns.[96] Yalçın-Heckmann brings an insightful perspective on the role of one's position in the family, familial ties, employment status, and size of the town on everyday practices as manifested in performing weddings in the early post-Soviet period. Also studying weddings in one of her works, Elisabeth Militz contributes to the study of identity and nationalism in Azerbaijan utilizing the lenses of feminist political geography and affective studies.[97] Studying interrelations and interaction between bodies and objects, as well as using joy and anxiety as an analytical category Militz makes a unique and critical contribution to the literature and understanding of power relations between ethnic groups and persons of different genders in the country. At the same time, while unearthed in a very different location and setting, her findings echo those Saparov makes – that the strongest social attachments are to be found in encounters between bodies in everyday life, outside the elite-led ideological efforts.

2.2.A. The everyday of and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

While few, very insightful investigations about the everyday symbolic order brought about by the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War have been published. Zsuzsanna Ihar, for instance, explores how "temporal and material qualities of war seep into the quotidian, informing the ways in which individuals negotiate the intimate aftermaths of violence, injury, and severed relation."[98] In her analysis, she contends that the line between housing policy, military strategy, and the process of nation-building is blurred. "Militarism assumes a

[96] Yalçın-Heckmann, "The Political Economy of an Azeri Wedding"; Jafarova and Ozkaleli, "Wedding Rituals, Political Power and the Third Space in Soviet Azerbaijan."
[97] Militz and Schurr, "Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan"; Militz, "Killing the Joy, Feeling the Cruelty"; Militz, "Affective Nationalism. Bodies, Materials and Encounters with the Nation in Azerbaijan."
[98] Ihar, "Properties of War." p. 1.

quotidian form," manifesting in language, living spaces, and relationships, thus reaching the most private spaces and allowing the state inside them.

Ramil Zamanov, [99] Lamiya Panahova,[100] and Sevinj Samadzade[101] are among the few scholars who apply the gender perspective in social research in Azerbaijan. They also dedicate a lot of attention to the way militarism affects the social order and private relations. Namely, the challenges they observe are connected to the changes in the gender order along with various forms of discrimination and exclusion. The material of their analysis constitutes speeches of state-affiliated public figures, activist campaigns, and discourses on social media. Zamanov creates a valuable analysis of the slogans and "banal" items like flags and the Military Trophies Park in his work on masculinities during the war. Zamanov argues that masculinities shaped the dynamics of the war and discourse that emerged during that time. His analytical lenses are the themes of humiliation, war crimes, and martyrdom. He also studies the justification of war crimes and the subsequent normalization of violence. Through the concept of martyrdom soldiers' death is justified as a necessary sacrifice to "protect Azerbaijan from the enemy."[102] One considerable limitation weakening the arguments in this study, however, is that this study only analyses the material on the surface, without using any data from interviews or other types of close engagement with the members of the society.

A more conventional, but no less valuable, work by Dayana Shaybazyan analyzes the discourse of Ilham Aliyev's speeches where "narratives on the enemy group"[103] are present.

[99] Zamanov, "Gender, Ethnicity and Peacebuilding in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict"; Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War"; Zamanov, "Understanding Intersectionality through LGBTQIA+/Queer Narratives in Azerbaijan."
[100] Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War."
[103] Shaybazyan, "An Analysis of Ilham Aliyevs Addresses to the Nation: The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Enemy Image of Armenians." p. 35.

More specifically, she applies critical discourse and the discourse-historical approach to 10 presidential speeches published between September 27 and December 1, 2020. In this process, she focuses on three topics – topos of religion, topos of history, and topos of the nation. Shaybazyan concludes that in his speeches Ilham Aliyev uses language to spread the enemy image of Armenians and constructs "a narrative of Armenians as a dangerous 'other,'" dehumanizes "the outgroup through the argumentative topos of the nation," and "justifies his decision for military mobilization," while also boosting his own legitimacy in power. Crucially, Shaybazyan brings to attention that after the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, "the political elites in Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to engage in a discursive struggle over narratives," with mutual accusations and ascribing enemy images to one another. Some discourses produced by these performances are analyzed in the present study as well.

Another discourse analysis of the presidential speeches comes from Sevinj Huseynova, whose main question is "Why do winners of a war become angry?"[104] To find an answer, with the help of ontological security studies and "peace anxieties" concept Huseynova theorizes that it may be due to a disruption of old routines people develop during conflict. She highlights how the president keeps coming back to the old identity markers such as injustice and victimhood in his speeches and propels feelings of disgust, anger, and grief in the domestic public. Aliyev's inability to give up on the old routines, Huseynova contends, hampers confidence-building measures and prospects for peace. In a similar vein, Mahammad Mammadov explains the inability to move forward in the negotiation between

[104] Sevinj Huseynova, "Why Do The Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in The Aftermath of The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War."

the sides as “attachment to conflict,” by way of which a stable cognitive environment where making sense of the world is possible remains available to the actors.[105]

[105] Mammadov, “Attached to Conflict: How Armenia and Azerbaijan Feel Secure in a Security Dilemma?”

Chapter 3: Collecting and Handling the Data

In uncovering the underlying meanings behind symbols, cultural artifacts, slogans, and symbolic performances there is a rationale to seek interpretations with people who exercise, produce and consume the former. Following this assumption, the main body of empirical evidence for this work came to constitute interviews with members of the Azerbaijani society.[106] These testimonies are set with the support of ethnographic observation of the sights in the capital city of the country and, to a limited extent, in the regional setting. This section opens up how the data was collected and analyzed, including the theoretical and practical considerations that went into this process.

3.1. Data Collection

The principal empirical data used in this work was collected over the span of two weeks in Baku, in late February, early March 2023; additional ethnographic observations included here are from a week in April 2024. While not ideal for the presentation of a wide and diverse picture of the situation as experienced by the people throughout the country, carrying out research in Baku entails a valuable perspective on the state of things.

Firstly, Baku is the center of decision-making in matters of military, as well as interim and foreign affairs which are extremely relevant in the context of the present exploration. It is reasonable to stipulate that the fair share of symbolic action has happened and continues taking place in the capital. It is also the place of the dissemination and maintenance of the

[106] When I speak of "Azerbaijanis", this is to refer to all those people who do or are likely to have or express a tie to the country, myth, and land of Azerbaijan defined by the contemporary national institutions, as well as to the other people who are assumed to have a similar linkage. This consideration also lies with the methodological element of the work, where individuals of various linguistic, confessional or otherwise cultural background were engaged. While otherwise of various backgrounds, all the participants expressed their identification with Azerbaijan, or its people. This aspect was also reflected in the introductory information sheet distributed to the potential interviewees upon first engagement (see Appendices).

prevalent socio-political discourses. Secondly, it is the most populated area of the country, with a diverse population, including one of the largest number of people displaced since the late 1980s, living within the city and in its vicinities. Further research can be carried out in rural area, smaller cities, or with representatives of the diaspora in various countries. The timing of the fieldwork was aligned with Khojaly Remembrance Day. With this in mind, the expectation was that the setting this day creates would likely highlight some of the symbolic traditions related to the struggle and the remembrance of loss. This also should be considered as a limitation, as in a less "hot" moment the observations could have been different.

In eleven formal interviews, I spoke to twelve people, three males and nine females, as young as 28 and as senior as 64.[107] They are people of different professions and regional, linguistic, or confessional backgrounds, but all expressed a connection to Azerbaijan at large or sometimes to Baku more precisely. What constitutes particular value among this selection of interlocutors is that they are people of different generations. They are both those who the conflict since late 80s, and those who grew up in the midst of its implications, thus providing for a more holistic overview of the social transformations that took place. I couldn't speak to any of those who had first-hand flight and dispossession experience as a consequence of the turmoil of the conflict.

All of the respondents are people I had not known before the initiation of the study. The contact was initiated either directly, with on-site encounters[108] in different settings around the city, or with the help of pre-existing contacts. Three participants were invited through snowballing, and two attended as a couple. Each interview constituted a conversation, 45-

[107] See Appendices for Anonymized participants list and interview details.
[108] On the first day of the field-trip I visited a closed lecture of a local historian and public intellectual. This allowed me to gain an understanding how the topic of the future of Azerbaijan in the moment was being discussed by some. My assumption was also that I would meet lay people who are showing interest in the political and social affairs of the country, and our participation in an event would establish grounds to approach them to participate in my research.

minutes-long on average, with the shortest one being 30 minutes and the longest one of a little over one and a half hours. As determined by my linguistic skills at the time of the field research, most of the interviews were conducted in Russian, one in a mix of English and Russian, and one in Turkish. All the participants were provided with an information sheet and informed consent form, either in Azerbaijani, Russian, or English.[109]

Following my initial goal to discover what are the reasons for the emergence of an array of symbolic artifacts and performances during the period of the 2020 war on the one hand and what are the specific emotions people experienced at the time, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide tailored to serve the purpose. From the preparations for the research and conversations of the people, I identified the topics that would be necessary to address. The most significant ones are those of confidence, humiliation, "justice", a sense of consolidation and unity, anger and frustration, and attitude to specific artifacts and symbols. Along the way, topics of desire for resolution and hope came up. The structure of the interviews relied on three core elements, which I classified as "Symbols and symbolic practices", "Experience of war", and "Implications of the war and symbols." In the end, I would ask short questions about the age and ethnicity and/or origin of the participant. To the extent the scope of this work allows I touch upon them through and with the help of people's testimonies.

To account for the places where the identified symbols are located, what forms they take, and what are some of the forms of interaction with them I applied ethnographic observation. While the approaches to and definitions of ethnography are many, what they all agree on is that "ethnographies offer an "insider's" perspective on the social phenomena under consideration."[110] As my purpose is to learn people's own interpretations of their

[109] See Appendices for the English version.
[110] Leavy, *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. p. 170.

environments and their state since the war, this is an appropriate tool to utilize. The point is to offer a description of how people see and go about living in their social worlds. Following Wilson and Peterson, this study does not separate the "real" and "virtual" spaces.[111] Instead of separating these as two distinct forms of social life, we can study the continuum of communities, identities, and networks, which exist in different forms, regardless of the ways the community members engage with one another.

Therefore, in the selection of the material for analysis, I was initially guided by a general observation of the activity in both physical and digital spaces, and later on led by the responses of the research participants. Each time at first, I would give the initiative to the participants to suggest what are their associations with the recent war, to see what symbols or actions signify the war time and its outcomes for them. This was done in the first place to examine whether any of the symbols and performances identified prior to the fieldwork were relevant to the people within the environment saturated with these. Figurative associations the respondents suggested were many more than I had initially identified and went beyond those that are placed in the streets and the digital space. This work came to include those that are visible on the ground – in the streets, on the facades, and inside the buildings, and is in pervasive use by Azerbaijanis on social media.

Initially, the assumption was that the chosen symbolic items and manifestations would be known to all, and an attitude towards them is already formulated. As stories accumulated, it became evident that these often do not express the sentiments carried by the members of the Azerbaijani society, or are simply left outside focus and attention. This then became exactly the space for exploration of the parallel strand of the research – to examine the quotidian and how people (do not) relate to it. As the work progressed and the initial assumptions were enduring the test of relevance, some amendments to my analytical

[111] Wilson and Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities." p. 460.

approach had to be put in place. Namely, shifting from an attempt to capture some kind of collective emotions in relation to the war and their role in delineating the contours of the nation to individual modes of engagement with symbols, and challenging the very assumption that that seen to the eye indeed can give an observer a grasp of the situation without engaging with people of the studied group very closely.

While limited, my knowledge of the Azerbaijani language helped me to navigate the space with ease and take note of items of interest. In addition to the interviews, to capture more precisely the narratives and items spread around the city, I visited a number of events and took note of the surroundings. Occasionally I would engage in conversations with the people in these locations, asking questions directly or indirectly connected to the subject of my investigation. While not mentioned in this paper, these encounters become an integral part of my knowledge and judgment. In this respect, the most significant comments I received were from the tour guides at the National Historical Museum of Azerbaijan (*Milli Azerbaycan Tarixi Muzeyi*) and the Museum of Independence of Azerbaijan (*Azerbaycan İstiqlal Muzeyi*). This communication also was one of the ways to find contacts and reach out to potential interviewees.

3.2. On Positionality and Establishing Trust

Conducting this analysis in full appears not feasible without consideration of some aspects of my background. Especially since data collection was happening through one-on-one interviews, where I placed emotional experience and opinions related to a highly sensitive socio-political issue at the center. Such encounters could not be devoid of the element of closer personal engagement, where I had to expose aspects of my own experience and knowledge to forge a connection. The responses I received and my reading of the information also may have been influenced, even in ways I cannot be fully aware of.

This is why taking account of positionality is imperative. Positionality implies noting one's identity, aspects of which are presented as inherent and unchanging factors that influence the knowledge created by the research. Crucially, since there is no objectivity that is omniscient, it is the researcher's knowledge of their own structural position – that is, limitations and points of access – that contributes to the creation of objectivity.[112] Through this acknowledgment, the micropolitics of a research endeavor can be brought to light and accounted for. In the process of data collection, this aspect appears to have had an impact on the information that was transmitted to me, or even their willingness to participate in a formal interview.

In some instances, the respondents' answers appear to have been framed in a specific manner depending on the knowledge or assumption about my social and cultural experience. Some would speak directly to what they'd assume I may know and understand, while in other cases the interviewees would undertake the task of deciphering to me some of the cultural phenomena or context-specific knowledge to which I would be assumed to have no previous exposure. This way, when the interviewee possessed the knowledge of my background as a Ukrainian, some explanations were carried out through a direct reference to the devastating human and territorial loss of Ukraine since 2014. When perceived "to have come from Moscow,"[113] the engagement appeared to have been more reserved, and the language sounded rendered accordingly. All these consequently determined the style and form of the language the respondents used in their answers.[114] At the same time, I acknowledge that it is

[112] Leavy, *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. pp. 171-2.
[113] I was met with this question by almost every new person I would speak to, be it with the intention to recruit for research or in casual circumstances.
[114] I also note that the described features of interaction are likely to have an impact on my interpretations of the situation and subsequent analysis because of the influence these encounters could have had on me. My positionality as a Ukrainian (though with knowledge of Turkish) specifically could have had an impact in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, both on me and the respondents.

my own discomfort to be categorized in such a way that may have contributed to a perception of distance and dissonance. To reduce it and to position myself into a category that feels to correspond with my sense of self I made sure to provide all the relevant information about myself and the purposes of the study ahead of the conversation. My advanced knowledge of the Turkish language and expression of previous connections to Baku and Azerbaijan could have aided in establishing an impression that I am not too foreign to be fairly candid with and that I can listen with sympathy.

I dedicate this much special consideration to the positionality aspect due to an apparent sensitivity of doing research in Azerbaijan and the topic of inquiry. It is widely known that researching emotions, collective victimhood or trauma, or topics that are adjacent, in particular, can be challenging since "cultures of secrecy" may develop, and discussing such sensitive issues may be challenging to individuals.[115] Krista Goff, for instance, describes how much she would encounter silence and avoidance in her research on nationalism in the Caucasus, and in Azerbaijan in particular.[116] I too on several occasions was met with skepticism or distrust, resulting in direct rejection to engage in a conversation on tape, or in visibly cautious choice of wording. At the same time, my position as a "familiar outsider" could have been influential in accessing information otherwise unavailable. Researchers (both from Azerbaijan) who previously studied the realities I do in this study, explicitly say that "for ethical reasons"[117] or restrictions on mobility and internet connection[118] they did not conduct interviews. This reality constitutes a considerable limitation to this earlier work. Perhaps, my position as a "familiar outsider" is one that can allow me to enter people's

[115] Vollhardt, *The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood*. p. 426.
[116] Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus*. p. 12.
[117] Sevinj Huseynova, "Why Do The Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in The Aftermath of The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War." p. 34.
[118] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War." p. 128.

worlds without a bias potentially inherent for the "insiders." At the same time, of course, this very positionality is a limitation by which my choice of the interviewees, access to locations, as well as specific knowledge was limited.

The motivations of those who were willing to participate in the research were various. Some of the participants displayed an interest in conversing with me out of motivation to better understand their own state of mind and stance on the struggle. For example, Aliya khanym,[119] a 40-year-old Bakuvian, upon the first encounter for a moment, was hesitant to speak to me for the purposes of the research, but in a few moments said that "*this might be interesting for myself, because when one speaks out loud, it helps to determine one's own stance on the topic*." Such search for positioning oneself was recurrent in my encounters, thus prompting me more towards speaking about identity negotiation and contestations with the offered symbolic framing one encounters at first glance.

3.3. Handling the Data and Methodology

All of the interviews, which constitute the core of this work, were recorded and later transcribed directly into English in their entirety, with the exception of some irrelevant to the research elements. This way, all the translations of conversations presented in the examples belong to me, as well as the translations of signs, slogans, and the like, encountered around the city and presented as contextual evidence.

The transcriptions stored as a standalone document are accompanied by biographical notes about the participants and additional context-related information, such as where and how the interviews took place. To fulfill the promise of anonymity to the respondents, all

[119] All names have been changed. Their choice corresponds with the gender of the participants and their ethnic/linguistic tradition (e.i. Azerbaijani-Turki names are replaced with Azerbaijani-Turki names, Russian names are replaced with Russian names). See "Handling the data" subsection and the Appendices for more.

names are replaced by pseudonyms, and any context-related information is limited not to hint at the personalities of the participants. The interviews, along with fieldwork reflections and photos, serve as the fundamental source of empirical evidence for the present study.

The design of this research was predominantly dictated by the assumptions and frameworks of "banal nationalism" and "everyday nationhood," as already mentioned in the previous chapter, it also accounts for the methods used to study "affective nationalism." "Banal nationalism" directs the analysis at observing the everyday items and practices, "everyday nationhood" then brings more attention to the manifestations of the national enacted by the individuals; "affective nationalism" in turn builds on the latter framework and then focuses attention at the expressions of affection or alienation from the national, in bodily response and in speech. With all these considerations in mind, I apply thematic analysis to the data collected in ethnographic observation and in the interviews. Thematic content analysis allows to highlight specific topics about identity transformation and negotiation discussed in reference to the symbols, or in the course of follow-up questions. It also separates thematically some of the forms of engagement with the symbols, the ideas they represent, and emotions they evoke.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The first part of this chapter presents a detailed description of the symbols that emerged in Azerbaijan during or after the 2020 war and were mentioned in the *Altered Spaces* subsection of the first chapter. It does this through literature review, table research, and material from the ethnographic observation and the interviews. It records what these symbols look like, where they are most commonly found, and what they are most commonly known to mean. The second part exemplifies and analyzes the specific ways in which people speak about and engage with the symbols and what this tells about identity and identity negotiation in post-war Azerbaijan.

4.1. Symbols of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

4.1.A. Xarı Bülbül

Xarı bülbül[120] essentially is an orchid native to Southeast Europe and Iran.[121] In Azerbaijan[122] it is popularly believed to grow only in the vicinities of the city of Shusha, considered the cradle of Azerbaijani culture. With the completion of the revanchist mission to recapture the territories, the flower became the primarily symbol of the victory. At the same time, it has another strand of emotional potency. Similar to red carnations used to commemorate the victims of "Black January" and those fallen in the Second World War, khary bulbul is a symbol of remembrance of the fallen soldiers in the 44-day war. This way, the symbol contains both sadness and joy. To Alla, one of the respondents, khary bulbul is "*both festive and official*."

[120] Spelled as *khari bulbul* or *khary bulbul* to roughly represent phonetic properties in English. See on Pic. 2 in the Appendices.
[121] "Ophrys Sphegodes Subsp. Taurica (Aggeenko)."
[122] My research did not identify that the Armenians living in the region or beyond have claims to this symbol or in fact attach any significance to the flower.

In its image form, khary bulbul looks like a three-colored bird or flower. Since the war it started appearing in both private and public settings. It is used ubiquitously by both state officials and individuals not affiliated with the state in any manner. Despite this, practically no one knows about the origin and the story of the symbol; debates over its appropriate usage also spring up occasionally.

Reshad for instance is sure that '*it is the [regular] people who revived it in 2020*,' and then '*the state also embraced it, and now people affiliated with the state wear it*.' When he says that '*it appeared after the war,*' his words point to the sudden and mass appearance and reproduction of khary bulbul in various forms, and also the fact that before the war it was barely known. Now it is printed on notebooks, scarves, phone cases, and clothing, it is cast as jewelry, and shops are branded with this name.[123] The flower is cultivated in botany classes in schools[124] and presented as a revered object to the international audience. The Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan published a school-play scenario named "Victory Smelling of Khary Bulbul,"[125] performed at least once on the occasion of the Victory Day celebration in the city of Ghazakh,[126] by the children of 6-9th grade. Khary bulbul greets every viewer of the state television, constantly sitting in the corner of the screen.

Looking into its history, it becomes apparent that khary bulbul holds a symbolic significance in the life of contemporary Azerbaijan at least since 1989, when the Khary Bulbul International Folk Festival in Shusha was first organized.[127] As the region was heavily

[123] "Xarı Bülbül Şokolad Evi."
[124] Report.az, "V Baku rastsvet Khari Bulbul." (Khary Bulbul will bloom in Baku)
[125] Ilkin Jafarli, "Zafer Gununе Hesr Edilmish 'Khary Bulbul Qoxulu Zafer Gunu' Adli Tedbirin Ssenarisi Teshkil Eden." (A scenario of the play "Victory smelling of Khary Bulbul" dedicated to the Victory Day) One must note, in nature the orchid has no smell.
[126] Qazax-ih.gov.az, "Qazakhda 8 Noyabr - Zafer Gunu ile elaqedar 'Khari Bulbul qokhulu Zafar Gunu' adli tedbir kechirilib." (An event "Victory day smelling of Khary Bulbul" took place)
[127] Xaribulbulfestival.az, "'Kharibulbul' Beynelxalq Folklor Festivali." (Khary Bulbil International Folk Festival)

affected by military action and Armenian forces took control over the territory, the organization of the festival was discontinued in 1991 and its symbol was barely mentioned since then. At the same time, the literary and symbolic properties of the bird-flower khary bulbul have roots in the west Turki-language[128] folk and literary tradition of the region dating back to the time of the Karabakh Khanate, when Shusha was its capital. Two motifs in particular are significant in framing the imaginaries of the flower among Azerbaijanis. One is connected to the name of the flower and the aspect of its meaning related to selfless sacrifice for that most loved and cherished; the other – to longing for a homeland out of reach.[129]

All this feeds into martyrdom (*şəhidlik*) culture that sanctifies death on the battlefield or for the "right cause," thus adding another extremely potent cultural layer to the emotions associated with the war, loss, and attainment of the desired in battle. This connection also further contributes to the justification of militarization and deepens the us–enemy dichotomy. The sanctified "martyr" is placed in opposition to the soldiers and families "on the other side," potentially rendering the latter dishonorable and dehumanizing them.

Taking into account that losing the city of Shusha during the First Karabakh War became the center of collective grievances for many Azerbaijanis, the flower so tightly associated with the city became a symbol of grief and longing. Only more so due to the connotations it carried in culture already. Later on, reinstalling control over the city and launching the festival anew in 2021 for local and foreign nationals to participate in can be viewed as an apotheosis of the symbolic campaigns undertaken by the government early on after the November 10 ceasefire was signed.

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[128] Of or relating to the peoples of Turkic speech. See: "Definition of Turki." I choose to name it so to highlight that these motifs are attached rather to a linguistic tradition as opposed to a moder state, and potentially also can be claimed by those who identify with this wider linguistic culture.

[129] Nubar Bayramova, "The XXVIII International Scientific Symposium "Karabakh is My Native Land", dedicated to the 190 anniversary of Khurshidbanu Natavan." p. 142.

4.1.B. The Flag

Cloth flags in their hands, flags painted on their cheeks, people went to the streets around the country to celebrate the end of the 44-day war bringing them the desired victory. Flags of Azerbaijan, and of the "supporting states" – Turkey and Pakistan – rose up into the air, filled windows and shop showcases, and gained new popularity in homes. Since then, the number of flags one encounters in Azerbaijan is at an unprecedentedly high level as compared to what it was like before the war.

Sabina's account can give a sense of what kind of a change happened: "*Before, when we would go to Turkey, we'd see how many flags there were on the balconies. We would be extremely surprised. Now here as well [there are many flags]. I have one on my balcony. But before, it would be extremely weird, strange. It was rare to see flags here*."

Not only did the number of flags increase, the ways of interacting with them changed. Especially during the war, the flag's usage in symbolic power contestation increased significantly. From flying the Azerbaijani flag over the captured villages and town to tying the Armenian flag to the car trunk, or demonstratively standing on the flag of Armenia and Artsakh as the war waged on. Zamanov contends this is done in a quest to "belittle and humiliate alternative masculinities."[130] The possibility and effectiveness of such symbolic act is possible due to the sacred nature of flag treatment, which historically was "attained through the ritualization of nationhood."[131] This is only one demonstration of the direct association between the flag and the nation.

[130] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War." p. 120.
[131] Elgenius, *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism*. p. 57.

Considering that flags are the most straightforward and potent "symbolic containers,"[132] looking into the modes of interaction with flags promises to exemplify also the modes of identity and power negotiation in regard to the nation in the post-war order. Flag's contradictory nature of being both sacred and mundane objects is also a particularly promising item for studying nationalism in the everyday. It can easily transform from a "hot" state to "banal" and vice versa. A meaningful yet empty vessel, the flag is potentially relatable to very different groups and individuals, which can showcase a wide variety of meaning-negotiation modes.

4.1.C. "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!"

The slogan exclaiming that "Karabakh is Azerbaijan" is the first thing a visitor encounters at the Haydar Aliyev International Airport. These words are read at entrances to cities, on billboards, and on many Azerbaijani websites. The slogan is used in social media avatars on personal profiles and serves as a topic for songs[133] and school essays.[134] A claim, a slogan, a discursive assertion, it was uttered by President Ilham Aliyev during the war and banalized into myriad forms establishing and reminding of itself everyplace.

While certainly an intrinsic part of the state politics since the 90s, and a part of the national imaginary for the people, the "Karabakh is Azerbaijan" claim appeared so boldly and occupied physical spaces only with the war in 2020. Appearing in response to the exclamation of the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan "Artsakh is Armenia, full stop!",[135] the slogan soon became the motto of the war for Azerbaijan, its strategic aim, and utmost reward. Further, becoming a reality, the claim and delivering on it also became one of

[132] Eriksen and Jenkins, *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*. p. 2.
[133] "Şəbnəm Tovuzlu - Qarabağ Azərbaycandır (Official Video) - YouTube."
[134] "Azərbaycanlı uşaqlar Qarabağdan yazdılar." (Azerbaijani children wrote about Karabakh)
[135] BBC, "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why Did Nagorno-Karabakh Spark a Conflict?"

the main sources of the incumbent government's legitimacy, and President Aliyev's in particular. Aliya said that "*Surprisingly*," she did not feel doubt in the "*people who represented us. […] If they've waited for so many years and then took this road, it must be they have made the calculations. […] Thirty years were dedicated to this, and now it is our time.*"

4.1.D. The "Iron Fist"

In February 2023 a picture of Ilham Aliyev, faded in color, raising his fist with the words "Karabakh is Azerbaijan" typed above his head could still be seen in the window of the building hosting the "Organization of the Veterans of the Homeland War of Azerbaijan." It is just behind the cemetery in Highland Park, where many *shahids* are buried. Many of such small Aliyevs fervently shaking their fists in the air appear erratically around the city. The "iron fist" became one of the landmarks of the Second Karabakh War in Azerbaijan. Sometimes quite literally. A clenched fist dismembered from the body appears on buildings, hilltops, and posters designed by state ministries, and local enthusiasts at times. Alternatively, it is *written out* in words: "*Dəmir yumruq*" or "*Gücümüz dəmir yumruqdur*."[136] Souvenirs are made[137] and at least one more-than-human-sized monument was erected in its likeness in one of the cities in Karabakh as a part of the memorial complex dedicated to the soldiers killed during the war.[138] "Iron fist" is also the name of the 2020 military operation - "Dəmir yumruq" əməliyyatı"[139] – and a national decoration for achievements before the state.[140]

Yet another product of the war-time presidential speeches, the "iron fist" became Ilham Aliyev's signature gesture, signifying his resolution and power. My interlocutor Tofiq,

[136] See Pic. 4 and 5 in Appendices.
[137] İctimai TV, "Zəfərimizin Simvolu | 'Dəmir Yumruq' Abidəsi."
[138] "Hadrutda 'Dəmir yumruq' abidəsi ucaldıldı."
[139] "Tariximizin şanlı səhifəsi - 'Dəmir yumruq' əməliyyatı."
[140] Əfəndi Zadə, "'Dəmir Yumruq' mükafatının təqdimetmə mərasimi baş tutub."

speaking with me very cautiously, reproduced what the symbol is officially supposed to mean: "*It was about unity. The President meant that Azerbaijan is united like a fist and hits one target. [The President] knows that he's doing the right thing and everyone is in agreement with [his actions] and helps. It means that in a united effort, we can 'move mountains*.'" Pervin and Aliya also said that it was a symbol of "unity." Researchers Samadzade and Zamanov point out that the "iron fist" interplays with the "strengthened the role of hegemonic and strong male figures in Azerbaijan" that ascended in demand with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. [141] The "iron fist" consolidates "masculine hegemony and power."[142] Sabina's and Aliya's further remark, when speaking about the symbol, that before the recapture of the territories their society was "loose,"[143] but "unified" and "strengthened" with the war further point to the credibility of such assessments.

Discursively, the "iron fist" has a lot of similarities with "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!" slogan. They are also often combined, just as on the picture near the cemetery. Yet by their properties, they are not unified and can receive different readings. They both possess militaristic properties, they are assertive and point to a specific aim. But while the slogan among these two contains longing, can be placed into an earlier historical context, and is somehow closer to the people, the fist is an entirely fresh invention and has a stronger bond with the incumbent government. It refers specifically to the 2020 war and Azerbaijan's success in it. It also signifies the effect the state's strategy was intended to have on the people under the mobilization effort.

[141] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War"; Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*.
[142] Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*.
[143] The word *рыхлый (rykhlyi)* was used in Russian. It is usually used to describe porous substances or materials, or such that lack solidity, firmness, unity, or stringency. When used to speak about people or events, similar qualities are ascribed to them.

4.1.E. Enemy-degrading Symbols

"*Azerbaijan solved the issue on his own*," "*Azerbaijani flag rises above the liberated lands*," "*We banish them like dogs*," reproduce excerpts from the presidential speeches popular songs to a vogue beat.[144] On countless videos on YouTube with hundreds of thousands of views, President Aliyev repeats "*What now Pashinyan? The status of Nagorno-Karabakh went to hell! Pashinyan will cowardly sign this document in a basement far from the cameras!*" [145] While my interlocutors in Baku say the appeal and importance of this speech and words decreased over time, this performance has left a trace in the memories of the people, the language, and in the physical world. Apart from making it into songs, memes, stickers, and hand-painted banners, a shortened version of the expression "İti qovan kimi qovuruq" - "İti qovan" – came to materiality as a name of an Azerbaijan-produced drone, and became an inspiration for further forms artistic expression.[146] While devising physical objects with the phrase "Nə oldu Paşinyan?" is more difficult, this phrase entered the popular culture and everyday language.

Humiliating and degrading Armenians is a recurrent strategy in President Aliyev's performances. He ridicules the military power of Armenia by calling Armenians derogatory phrases such as 'barbarians', 'vandals', and 'wild tribes.'[147] Using Zamanov's words, this act increases Aliyev's 'manly' reputation and allows him to gain "massive support from the hegemonic and non-hegemonic Azerbaijani male population."[148] Through language President Aliyev "positions himself as a leader who is 'bringing Armenians to justice', not only for the

[144] E.g. Bandit Beatz - Topic, "Iti Qovan"; "Zawanbeats - Itiqovankimi - YouTube."
[145] TV100, "Aliyev: Yol Chekiyordun Cebrail'e, Ne Oldu Pashinyan?"
[146] İctimai TV, "Zəfərimizin Simvolu | 'Dəmir Yumruq' Abidəsi."
[147] Sevinj Huseynova, "Why Do The Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in The Aftermath of The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War." p. 25.
[148] Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War." p. 132.

crimes committed during the Second Karabakh War, but also for the historical injustices which have shaped the collective memory of Azerbaijanis."[149] Truculent discourse is one of the tools the President uses to maintain his political legitimacy, and the former continues reproducing through the banalized forms of the expressions under scrutiny here.

Considering the discursive load of these expressions and their popularity at a certain stage, these symbols are particularly alarming. The impacts of these deliberately bellicose discourses in the official speech have already been recorded to have dire consequences.[150] Recurrent dehumanization and "humiliation cannot be a strong basis for sustained peace."[151]

4.2. Interaction, Attitudes, and Negotiation

In the end, what can we learn about Azerbaijani society and the transformations happening in it by looking at the symbols and practices discussed above? Selecting the relevant and recurrent topics from the interviews, I heuristically subcategorize the data into three parts: (1) transformations, (2) trauma and attachment, and (3) detestation, detachments, and negotiation. Such thematic distinction aims to highlight several different ways of engagement with symbols and the distinct features of identity negotiation in the new environment this varied behavior appears to highlight.

[149] Shaybazyan, "An Analysis of Ilham Aliyevs Addresses to the Nation: The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Enemy Image of Armenians." pp. 60-1.
[150] "Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?"; Zamanov, "Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War"; Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*.
[151] "Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh."

4.2.A. Transformations

a. Feeling belonging

Alla recalled that on the day of the capture of Shusha, she bought a flag. Even two of them. She then brought them home – an action that at any other time or under any other circumstances would be strange: "*My relatives would think this is weird. But after these events, the feeling was that I must have [the flag]*." For her, the flag not only transformed from being an alien object incompatible with her livelihood and living space, but also became desirable in her intimate spaces, where she lives and others can see it: "*When I clean the apartment it gets in the way sometimes, but after I always put it in its place. It was in the corridor first, then I moved it to the living room*." From her elaboration on the topic it appears that earlier the flag was somehow incompatible with her identity "*Considering that I have a mixed background, that I rather speak Russian.*" She then continues "*But here there was this belonging to the land. Because it is significant. I felt how all these [symbols] unite.*"

I asked Alla why the flag, and "belonging to the land" are important. She said that this is about identity: when "*[identity] is blurred, or one observes how it is being distorted – then it is personal – it is a distortion of your personal story*." She says that "*knowing the origin is more relevant*" in the contemporary time of mobility and migration, for one "*to know that this is the officially accepted territory that belongs to [the people who move].*" The feeling of unity she experienced is important to her, but it is also a new experience she had not encountered ever before.

She said that Baku, rather than Azerbaijan is the place she feels connection to. But "*These events*", she continued, "*gave me a sense of identity, of belonging. That I belong to some place*." She then also shared her wonder and surprise about the changes she observed in herself, "*And at the moment I probably even was surprised by how important this can be for me. I can't say this is an active kind of sympathy, but respect for the way people can love their*

land. And the connection to the land, and the value base [that comes with it]." Nonetheless, whether this attitude remains, and to what extent this transformation would determine her potential participation in collective action remains without answer.

Her "mixed identity" was influenced by the victory in other ways as well: "*I am now involved in different international groups – there I tell about Azerbaijan, including about these aspects [we talk about in the interview], as if I have some responsibility for it. […] It was important for me on this international platform to highlight where Azerbaijan is, that it is not just generic Caucasus. […] Before I would never feel that this is relevant for me, to tell, to represent my country. I identify [myself with Azerbaijan]*." This discussion exemplifies how the extraordinary events and their individual interpretation influenced a sense of belonging and identification with the nation. The flag, in turn, became a form of "unified response"[152] to express, interpret, and incorporate the change in the outside world and personal perceptions into daily life.

Speaking at first about the flag and how its presence and role changed in Alla's life we are able to productively discuss other topics relating her identity in relation to the nation. This conversation if just one of the examples of how all the interviews took place. While not always providing answers to the main question in themselves, symbols can be a useful entry point to discuss individual experiences and opinions. In this aspect, the approach used here shares similarities with arts-based methods, which "have been used to assist people in expressing feelings and thoughts that […] are difficult to articulate in words."[153]

[152] Butz, "National Symbols as Agents of Psychological and Social Change." p. 785.
[153] Kara, *Creative Research Methods*. p. 30.

b. Dignification and healing

As in other interviews, I ask about the confidence the victory apparently instilled in people. Alla's reply is compelling in making sense of much that relates to the topic of this study.

"*People became confident about who we are. We can tell about ourselves, we are people with a history. The confidence… Before, this confidence was less. Then people would socialize among themselves, but they would not speak up, and would not show themselves. Now they do. There is a sense of pride. One does not have to stay quiet or silent. In a very positive sense*."

It is as if Azerbaijan, and its political project came to be seen as such that are worth liking, and associating oneself with. In another interview, on the topic of flags, Aynur replied, "*I think that people now have hope, that the territories are returned. [People] became closer, and started loving their homeland, language, and the flag more. I am very happy about it. I have seen patriotism in Turks, and have always been frustrated our people didn't show it. They do now. It is good. Everyone should love their country, and [their] flag.*"

This conversation continued on the reasons why this should be, and echoing another one with Parvin, as well as Aliya and Sabina, pointed out that it is about identity and belonging. According to Parvin, identity and belonging are "*the first thing that allows one to stand on one's feet. It gives stability*". Speaking on the difference in people after the military action ended she reflects, that "*victory dignifies*" – "*It touches a string,*" she said.

Ayça Ergun also notices these changes, saying "The rise of patriotism with the feeling of glorified statehood is a significant pattern of creating a sense of solidarity and commitment to the national goal in the postwar period with a stronger sense of Azerbaijani citizenship identity."[154] It has also been observed that groups that have access to power, and "possess a

[154] Ergun et al., *Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives*. p. 5.

sense of group inclusion" are more likely to report pride in their nations.[155] It shows clearly in the data that the "dignifying victory," increased involvement in ritualized acts like flag waving and bearing, or even observing these at an increased rate signify and result in transformations in relation to the national, while also improving self-image.

The phenomenon highlighted above also comes to the fore in another interview with a young man Tofiq when I ask what the victory brings, also bringing to the light arguably the most important transformation. So Tofiq speaks:

"*I think that [the conflict] had become so mundane among our people that no one thought a resolution was possible. When one had a problem the saying among the people was 'The only real problem is Karabakh – anything else can be solved.' I think this victory really brought spirits up. The depressive feeling subsided. Because many of the social troubles were connected to it. [The victory] released the tension. This had a positive impact. I also think that the level of trust in relation to the government also increased. [The victory] means that we can resolve issues. Regardless of what we're faced with, we can resolve it*."

Useful insights on how to evaluate the described by Tofiq above can be found in studies on victimization. In particular, the needs-based model of reconciliation "proposes that the very experience of being victimized […] reduces an individual's or group's perception of agency." When victimized, people may "feel helpless and powerless to stop the victimization that is being inflicted" on them. Parvin's words on what the feelings were like before the victory just point to this phenomenon again, "It was a disbelief." Experiencing trauma, scholars contend "undermines previous perceptions, schemas, and understandings that victims have about themselves, others, and the world."[156] Recognition, or perhaps restitution or retribution, on the other hand, allows to reestablish positive basic assumptions about the

[155] Mylonas and Tudor, "Nationalism: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know." p. 118.
[156] Vollhardt, *The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood*. p. 362.

self and the world, it also reestablishes "confidence in their evaluation of reality." The sense of detachment from the ability to evaluate how things ought to be, and who will or can take action to rectify the situation is present in many of the conversations. Parvin too doubts whether her past evaluation of the situation she was living inside as hopeless was right, and the passiveness and inaction in her life was justified by the disbelief she speaks of. As before the war and after, "victory became an assurance of shelter."[157]

More to that, protractedness and ineffectiveness of the peace process led "to trivialization of the significance of the issues over which it was possible to reconcile."[158] This in turn led to fatigue and a sense of hopelessness, which potentially can be converted into a conviction that there is no other way to be liberated from the former other than to become strong and united to fight off the supposed source of all problems. The "disbelief" was not only about the inner capacities of self but also about the capacity of the state to deliver on what it claims to be allocating resources to. Tofiq speaks: "*Military action in Karabakh was as much implausible for our society [as the pandemic and death of a disease]… [But in 2020] the state also showed that their claims and slogans were serious*." So, the image of the state also improved, then leading to strengthening of the regime's legitimacy. Following, Ahmadzada's argument of Azerbaijan's identity stepping into the Fourth Republic period, it is exactly these transformations – grievances being addressed and self-image improved – that may make it possible.

[157] Ihar, "Properties of War." p. 8.
[158] Ataman and Pirinççi, *Karabakh: From Conflict to Resolution*. p. 26.

4.2.B. Trauma and Attachment

"This war was about to end the emotional attachment of Azerbaijanis to the NK conflict," echo Ahmadzada's argument Huseynova's records.[159] At the same time, this statement also implies that perhaps the transformation has not happened after all, at least in full. As shown above, some of the enduring attachments to the narratives of injustice and trauma indeed have been addressed by the victorious outcome of the war. But there are already grounds to say that perhaps not all of the deeply-rooted attachments and preconceptions about the world and the self among the people of Azerbaijan have been dispelled. More to that, it appears that the war created new forms of attachments defined by trauma and which now are very likely to become a part of identity in the new setting. These attachments are mostly characterized by the feeling of being stuck on the mental level, which then manifests in various forms in daily life.

a. Powerlessness and trauma

Unlike the interlocutors for whom the war and the victory brought a sense of relief and gave a sense of direction, Sevinj, a psychologist and educator, remained stuck, feeling powerless and alienated. This is revealed in her response to the question of attitude toward the government, the decisions taken during the war, and the presidential speeches. "*Right, I remember now that many people, even those who didn't like [Aliyev], started liking him. My neutral feeling has not changed. I still have a feeling that I can't do anything*." She also indicated that during the war she was unable to continue to work as usual. The contrary was the case for those who displayed having found a sense of direction or empowerment. This was the case for Sabina; to a lesser extent, but for Aliya, Parvin, and Javid as well.

[159] Sevinj Huseynova, "Why Do The Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in The Aftermath of The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War."

Tamara was one of the few respondents who had a close relative at the frontline during the war. Her son remained in service for all 44 days the confrontation continued. Overtaken by the fear for his life she was, in her own words, "*traumatized*." "*I suppose I got detached very soon. […] living from one call [with my son] to another*," she told me when I asked what she did while the military actions continued. For her, the symbol of this war is "connection." Speaking on whether she was able to associate herself with the reactions and performances of those around, she shared that "*No, everyone just… as for the idea of the common victory. [long pause] And I was for my son*." When we spoke she still had trouble speaking or even thinking about any of the events of the war, and especially the symbols and manifestations that appeared at the time. Having witnessed the consequences of the decades of war for the country and its people since the 80s, she is deeply aware of the trauma, grief, and dispossession her compatriots suffered. At the same time, impacted most deeply by a personal traumatic experience, she remained completely detached from the nationalistic fervor and effects of the performances of the elite some other individuals experienced and performed in 2020 and on. The mention of the "iron fist," the flags, or other items disturbed her. When I mentioned khary bulbul she was unable to continue the conversation for a while.

b. Two wars coalesced - persisting sentiments and solidarity

Despite her inability to speak about the last war and the symbols, she shared that she has a khary bulbul brooch at home and the emblem sits on her Facebook profile picture. In her words, khary bulbul is the "*symbol of victory. That we have made it. That we have returned what is ours*." I then asked what is "ours," to which she responded: "*For many [Karabakh] is the homeland. I was born here. But some, there. [...] Birds are different there, the soil is different... And... Even now you can go to Kyiv if you wanted to. It is dangerous, but you can. They couldn't.*" Her seemingly contradictory reactions – full detachment at first, and then full association with the feelings of her co-nationals – demonstrate that analyzing

identity in Azerbaijan just through the prism of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War will be a flawed approach. "*But see, for many, it stretches into the other war*," and then shares a story of her colleague, whose entire family either fought in one of the wars or rehabilitated the injured. "*War goes through the entirety of her life. For her it was very difficult*," she concludes.

Perhaps if not manifesting her own sentiment about the 2020 war, or even little personal connection to the occupied territories, Tamara usages khary bulbul as a memory of the past and as a sign of solidarity with those who went through difficulties. Such seemingly mutually exclusive descriptions of one's attitude and sense of self in relation to the First NK War and the Second NK War also appear in the interaction with other interview participants. While few are in full agreement with the performance of the state in 2020 and rarely are all or in fact, any of the identified symbols resonate with individuals, the memory and the identity established earlier are ubiquitously shared. It appears it is these identity markers President Aliyev continues to appeal to in his performances.[160]

4.2.C. Detestation, Detachment, and Negotiation

Alongside speech with affection or neutral expressions, some respondents didn't express any enthusiasm about the symbolic manifestations they observed in their country since the war. Importantly, all respondents provided me with an *explanation* of what these things they felt *meant* to other people, but this does not indicate they associate themselves with or accept these symbols. When providing these descriptions and interpretations they engage in obvious othering, negotiation, detesting, and contestation of the symbols and what they stand for. Importantly, in these modes, individuals actively position themselves in opposition to the offered symbolic order, even if not always successfully.

[160] Sevinj Huseynova.

a. Contestation of a top-down identity

When asked about the "iron fist" Reshad shrugs, as if he doesn't want to hear the words I speak. He thinks that '*A symbol like this should not exist.*'

Reshad uses words expressing negative emotions, such as "*disgrace*" and "*disgusting.*" He explains his feelings saying that is because "*it's like he [Aliyev] is showing himself off. One has to be humble."* He then concludes that all of these uncomfortable emotions precluded him from identifying it as a symbol of the war. This then transfers into a discussion of the motivations among some to fight and participate in the struggle. He assured me with confidence that "*Whoever'd be in power, people would go to fight.*" He assures that "*this fist and all – it is all insignificant.*" He is even offended that the government and the leading figure may be appropriating the achievement and the sacrifice people made: "*What is expressed [by the fist] is 'I did this', 'this is my victory,'*" referring to the President. Reshad is sure that "*People don't accept this. All this was people's fight and effort*," clearly identifying himself with "the people." He supports his claim by saying "*It is for this reason there were no deserters, people really wanted to fight.*"

Zaur Shiriyev's remark on that "It is not Aliyev's war. It's a people's war,"[161] is exemplified in Reshad's words. Reshad is ardently willing not to allow the figure in power to appropriate the sacrifice and struggle of the people. This way he spurns a discourse offered to the domestic audience and the symbolic order that accompanies it. This dissonance is borne out of a refusal to identify with the figure representing the political elite. Reshad has a strong identity of his own – that of "the people," clearly placed in opposition to the discourses embodied in the figure of President Aliyev.

[161] The Economist, "The Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh Reflects Decades of Conflict."

Reshad also thinks "iti qovan" is *'not a nice thing.'* He then continues: '*If we want peace such things should not be used. If you're a president, you shouldn't speak such words. This is not a kids fight that you use such words. The feeling it gives me is embarrassment when I hear these words. This is horrible, I am very embarrassed*.'

While people rarely speak of this directly, there is a constant awareness of the price their community paid for the state's strategy; especially the inadequate social support offered to the injured combatants and civilians. While many identify with the victory and the cause in the war, the show of symbols and public declarations by the state representatives are spurned, they cause anger and frustration. Anxieties that a final resolution to the conflict will not be achieved is also looming. It is obvious to Reshad that the official ceremonies and talk often sideline the loss, grief, and deep social injustices people experience, exacerbated only further by the war. [162] It angers, as no real stability and deliverance is reached. What we see here is not merely a negotiation of identity, but a contestation of power and of its legitimacy over the symbolic and factual order in the society. Thus "iti qovan" separates, rather than brings together.

b. Refusal to participate

Nargiz khanym welcomed me at her home in a cozy living room with chic dark-wood furnishings. She treated me with tea and white cherries jam, displaying the best of hospitality people in Azerbaijan take pride in. While taking out her cigarettes, she warned me that she is "*of an oppositional mindset,*" probably implying that she would not speak like she imagines other people speak about the war and the government; and that I might not get what I expect to get from a conversation with her.

[162] More on this: Samadov, "Politics in Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War: Actors and Shifting Internal Discourses"; Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*; Ihar, "Properties of War."

My expectations indeed were not met. But in a different way. When I asked what are the symbols of this war she said it was the "*flags, some patriotic mood prevalent at the time, and memory of the deceased*." But she expressed no least bit of interest in these, and had little knowledge of symbols generally identified by the participants, even about khary bulbul. Her attitude was performatively aloof from participation in any mass events or movement, even in the procurement of help for the injured. Nonetheless, when asked directly about why the struggle is important, what Azerbaijanis are like, and the key events like the Khojaly massacre, she shared with me a narrative much akin to that expressed by all interviewees, regardless of their background or attitude towards specific symbols. She appeared not only to *know* about the emotions like remembrance, grudge, anger, and a demand for justice and restitution widely experienced in Azerbaijan concerning the conflict, but also *experience* them. At the same time, she was deliberately distant from participating in any of the performances within the existing symbolic order.

She explained her skepticism by the absence of *"genuineness"* in what she observes. She too wishes that it was indeed *the people* who fought for what is right, she wishes that the protests that preceded the war were a *genuine* mobilization. How does it happen, she asks, that "*life is becoming harder every day, prices are increasing, but somehow no one is going to the streets?*" How could it be, she questions, that there were so few arrests, and it is still not exactly clear why the people went to the streets. She is sure that the protests were "*planned, paid for*," and it was done to create a feeling that it is indeed the people who demand satisfaction. "*I do not believe a single politician, or non-politician, no one. They want to control us with their scummy wars*," she concluded.

By complete non-engagement with anything she associates with the "scummy war of the politicians," she throws herself outside the emotional range where her sentiments even potentially could be manipulated or capitalized on. While her attitude at first sight could be

assessed as indifference, hers is in fact a protest against the symbolic and power order that surrounds her. In this way, she is much like Reshad. She draws distinctly the boundary of the acceptable and strives to orient herself in the social world without reference to the offered symbolic order.

c. Navigating the new order, negotiating identity

'*The idea of war for me is horrendous, I don't understand it,*' said Sevinj to me. Speaking of the "iti qovan kimi" phrase and the "iron fist" she described them as symbols that demonstrate President Aliyev specifically, as well as his own strive to manifest power through referrals to the revanchist sentiments born out of the memory of tragedy among the people.

Sevinj has a strong attachment to and an apparent love for her ethnic identity and origin, at the same time, she struggles to situate herself in the new post-war order as a national, as a person, and as a professional. She shared that when trying to reason with others on the topic of war, her ideas were dismissed as "childish," and she couldn't find support in her thinking and argumentation that waging a war is unacceptable. Her criteria for an acceptable identity is rendered as infantility, and she is virtually excluded from the community by her own family and society, overtaken by what she reads as the joy of living the revanche. She says that unity and a feeling of connection are important to her, but she refuses to participate in the collective action or to side with the ways of talk and performance that she observed in people around her. She also continuously makes a distinction between "them" – those who wave the flag, go to marches, and seem to support the government's strategy – and herself. Using Militz and Shurr's terminology, she is experiencing an emotion opposite – not joy but anxiety.[163] This precludes her from participating in national

[163] Militz and Schurr, "Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan." pp. 55, 60.

celebrations, she disengages and even spurns the symbols offered by the new order around her.

Another result of this detachment and the impossibility of finding a place for herself in the new reality resulted in a feeling that everything she does as a psychologist and educator is senseless – "*Does it make sense saying to one child 'fighting is wrong' when on the level of two countries this is happening?*" She admits nonetheless that she attempted to understand what she couldn't by speaking to her father who had fought in the 90s, and to her male soldier friends. Pertinently to what Sevinj is describing in the interview, author Sevinj Samadzade highlights that in the post-war order, "women try to make new concessions and take on new roles to find their places […] to deal with the violence brought on by war and the hierarchy of losses resulting from it."[164]

[164] Gabunia et al., *Masculinities in the South Caucasus*. p. 244.

Conclusion

This work rests on the premise that in a series of extraordinary events in the year 2020, Azerbaijan lived through a transformation that touches some of the principal identity markers that had been defining the nation since the end of the First Karabakh War in 1994. It then hypothesizes that there is a link between these transformations and a symbolic order that overtook the country and proposes to study how this transformation is both expressed and perpetuated by the new symbols. Crucially, it aims to look at these processes from the perspective of the individual members of the country's society, who are both recipients and (re)producers of the symbols and the meanings they carry.

Theoretical frameworks that study identity and nationalism in "quotidian realms" – in physical and digital spaces, in language, and daily practices – from a non-elite perspective guided this work. Specifically, it was led by the assumptions that items and practices reproduced and repeated, or just constantly appearing in individuals' everyday lives have the power to shape people's identities, or that identities can manifest through such symbols and practices. Drawing on the concepts of "banal nationalism," "everyday nationhood," and "affective nationalism," this work looked at the symbols and engagement with them to identify meanings of the post-war symbolic order in Azerbaijan, and how individuals express and negotiate their identities in the post-war context in the country.

With the help of ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews, this study identified and worked with the most frequently and widely disseminated six symbols produced during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in Azerbaijan. They are the bird-flower xarı bülbül, the Azerbaijani flag, the slogan "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!", the "iron fist," and two excerpts from President Aliyev's speeches "iti qovan kimi" and "Ne oldu Paşinyan?", which became symbols in themselves, reproduced in various forms in physical and digital spaces.

This study reveals that some of the symbols are indeed taken for granted or are not noticed in everyday life as the studies of quotidian realms suggest it often happens. At the same time, others are either actively ignored or rejected or remain unseen and completely irrelevant to the lives of the people, as well as to their conceptualization of self or the nation. If never able to express all the complexity of individual experiences, the symbols proved to be useful as an analytical tool for studying identity. Symbols, being carriers of specific memories, ideas, or hopes also helped to lead structured and productive conversations on the topics symbols represent, even if no further reference to the latter was made later on.

The analysis shows that the symbols indeed serve as a reference point for identity negotiation in Azerbaijan. Among other things, it is manifested through physical contact with the symbols in intimate and public spaces, and in language. At the same time, the influence that the symbols have is not universal. While perceived and interpreted in a similar way by most, the specific effects they have are negotiated by each individual in accordance with personal demands and values. When there was a lack thereof, or if hesitant to express personal opinions, the participants utilized the narratives provided to them, as presented by the symbols. If individuals were independent in their opinions, the symbols and the messages attached are negotiated accordingly. The strategy of behavior adopted in relation to the symbols may be reception, negotiation, or detestation, taking place in accordance with the internalized needs and demands of the individuals, either formulated independently or as a result of collective meaning-making processes.

The secondary finding this study offers is the apparent difference in the acceptance of symbols that elicit either neutral meanings, or such that represent “the people,” and such that are associated with the figure of President Aliyev. The more neutral or “people’s” symbols like the flag, khary bulbul, or, partially, the “iron fist” (in the meaning of “unity”) and “Karabakh is Azerbaijan!” slogan appears to represent the memories, grievances, and hopes

of the population. The enemy-degrading symbols or those associated with the President's figure and the message that asserts himself as the victor, while still popular and continue appearing in quotidian realms, are losing their relevance and are contested and rejected more frequently.

Crucially, as mentioned above, partial acceptance of meanings is also possible – meanings of a particular symbol that are not acceptable are cut off or renegotiated to fit one's personal understanding of morals, a vision of history, or the future. Thus, learning about one's attitudes or identity could prove erroneous by just looking at the surface of individuals' interaction with the symbols or at their symbolic performances. By engaging with people directly, this study goes beyond surface observation of symbolic manifestations taking place in Azerbaijan since the beginning of the war in 2020 and highlights various forms of meaning-making and identity-negotiation that have been overlooked in previous research.

Building on this work and other newest studies emerging in the field, there is a promising path of research on symbolic power contestation between the elites and the people, which was hinted at in the present analysis already. The potential of popular mobilization through the use of symbols is also worth exploring further. It would also be fruitful to expand the scale of the approach applied in this study to a wider context around the country, encompassing population in smaller towns and in rural areas. In the context of the ongoing resettlement of former IDPs and their families into the region and the large-scale construction projects undertaken by the government in Nagorno-Karabakh and the formerly occupied territories, following the establishment of the new quotidian practices will be important.

Appendices

A. Anonymized participants list and interview details

Name	Age	Self-identification[165]	Interview duration	Interview language	Proficiency in Azerbaijani[166]
Sabina	60-65	Azerbaijani Turk	1h	RU	Yes/Unknown
Nergiz	60-65	born and raised in Baku, Azerbaijani Turk	39min	RU	Some/Unknown
Aliya	40-45	born and raised in Baku, Azerbaijani Turk	43min	RU	Yes/Unknown
Daria and Javid	25-30; 25-30	Russian but rather Bakuvian; Avar, but Azerbaijani	56min	RU + ENG	Yes; Yes
Aynur	25-30	Azerbaijani Turk	35min	RU	Yes/Unknown
Parvin	40-45	Georgian Azerbaijani Turk	43min	RU	Yes
Sevinj	25-30	born and raised in Baku, father -Georgian Azerbaijani, mother from Tovuz	43min	RU	Yes
Tamara	50-55	a Slav, born and raised in Baku	32min	RU	Yes/Unknown
Alla	25-30	half Slav-half Azerbaijani [Turk]	39min	RU	Some
Tofiq	30-35	n/a; parents from Qubadlı	47min	RU	Yes
Reshad	25-30	[Azerbaijani] Turk	1h 15min	TR	Yes

[165] I use the wording the participants used answering the question, "Who are you – how do you identify ethnicity-wise?"

[166] I include this because of a contentious divide into "Azerbaijani speakers" and "Russian speakers" in the country, at times accompanied by stigma. This was not a question during the interviews, but if information is available I include it. I use "_/Unknown" if the information is an assumption from my observations and "Yes" or "Some" to identify full proficiency or limited proficiency respectively. For more on this topic see e.g.: Zamanov, "Understanding Intersectionality through LGBTQIA+/Queer Narratives in Azerbaijan"; Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*.

B. Information sheet in English

Nationalism Studies Program
Central European University (CEU)

Researcher: Yelyzaveta Zolotarova, M.A. student, zolotarova_yelyzavet@student.ceu.edu
Supervisor: Dr. Ana Mijić, M.A. mijica@ceu.edumailto:ana.mijic@univie.ac.at

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT
"Azerbaijan as an Affective Community: An Exploration into the Emotions Related to the Second Karabakh War Through Symbolic Representation and Practices"[167]

This research is conducted as a part of the MA thesis requirement at the Nationalism Studies Program of Central European University (CEU).
Thesis supervisor: Dr. Ana Mijić, MA

1. **What is this research about?**
   This study aims to explore the place and implications of affect for the socio-political community of Azerbaijan, as represented and perpetuated through symbols and symbolic practices born or activated during the Second Karabakh War. Thus, one of the goals of this research is to study emotions that emerge during severe crises such as war, loss and displacement, how these emotions emerge and how they are managed individually and collectively, how these emotions are mapped and whether they can be mobilized, and through what means. The research will also focus on documenting and analyzing symbolic practices that are believed to refer to the events of the war and to have a power to consolidate or fracture Azerbaijani community.
2. **Why am I invited to take part in the research?**
   You are invited to participate because probably you are a citizen of Azerbaijan or a person who has long-term and close ties with Azerbaijan on any other basis.
3. **Do I have to participate?**
   You do not. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether you want to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw any moment, and thereby withdraw all the information you have provided, without explanation and without consequences, by informing the researcher of this decision. All the information you will have provided will be excluded from the research.
4. **How will the conversation proceed?**
   The interactions will happen individually or in small groups. The researcher will ask the participants several general questions about the events relating to the war, about their experience with it. The participants will also be asked to speak of how they interpret some symbols and symbolic actions, both those that became widely spread and adopted during the war, and those that exited previously. The conversations will be recorded for the subsequent analysis.

[167] This is the initial name of the research project.

5. **What is going to happen with the information and data I provide?**
   The data the researcher obtains from the participants will be anonymized and stored in secure electronic databases. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the collected data.
   The final version of the project will be accessible to the public through CEU theses database. It is also possible that the research will be published in a student or scientific journal.
6. **Do I have any benefits from this research?**
   There is no direct benefit that participation in this project can offer, yet sharing your stories, thoughts, and knowledge will help to shed light on some of the facts of the events of reference, teach the readers about your context, and contribute to empirical and theoretical studies in several areas.
7. **Who is organizing this research?**
   This is my personal project overlooked and supported by the Central European University (CEU) as a part of a Master's degree program.

In case you have any questions or concerns, please refer to the contact details in the header and don't hesitate to reach out to the researcher and her supervisor. We will try our best to answer your queries.
If you are still unsatisfied or want to submit a formal complaint, please contact the Ethical Research Committee which is the relevant authority at CEU, and will look for a solution responsibly and promptly:
Dr. Eszter Bordas, Secretary of the Ethical Research Committee at CEU
Quellenstraße 51, 1100 Vienna
E-mail: erc@ceu.edu; bordase@ceu.edu
Phone: +36 1 235-6137

C. Informed consent form in English

INFORMED CONSENT

For the participation in the research project

"Azerbaijan as an Affective Community: An Exploration into the Emotions Related to the Second Karabakh War Through Symbolic Representation and Practices"

Please write YES/NO

1	I confirm that I have read and that I understand the information sheet for this research. I had the opportunity to ask questions to which I was given satisfactory answers.	☐
2	I understand that my participation in this research in voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any moment and without any explanation or consequences.	☐
3	I understand that some individuals from Central European University (CEU) will, when needed, have insight in the data and information gathered during this research. I allow these individuals to access the data and information I have provided.	☐
4	I understand that this research has been reviewed and has gotten an ethical approval from the research supervisor.	☐
5	I understand who has access to the personal data I have provided, how data will be stored and what will happen with the data at the end of the research.	☐
6	I understand in which way this research will be written and published.	☐
7	I understand how to show I have worries about parts of this research and how to file a complaint.	☐
8	I agree the conversation to be recorded with a voice recorder.	☐
9	I understand in which way the voice recordings will be used in this research.	☐
10	I understand that I will be completely anonymous in this research so that I could not be identified.	☐
11	I give permission to be quoted in this research using pseudonyms, or anonymously.	☐
12	I agree that my personal data be kept in a safe database in order I might be contacted in future to be a part of possible further research.	☐
13	I will not disclose any personal and sensitive information of other participants.	☐
13	I agree to participate in this research.	☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Name of researcher	Date	Signature

D. Illustrative materials

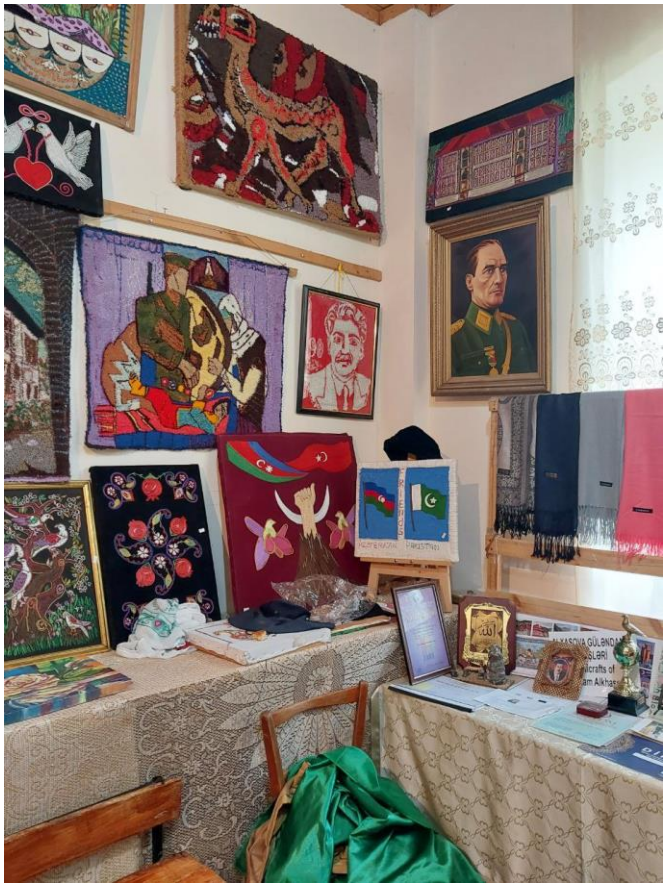
Pic. 1 – "The First Snow of Free Shusha" exhibition poster at the National History Museum (22 February, 2023).

Pic. 2 – An exhibition stand at the National History Museum (22 February, 2023). Xari bulbul is featured as an adornment. The museum guide indicated there was no specific idea behind placing it in this manner or place.

Pic. 3 – Foyer of Shusha State Musical Drama Theater in Baku suburb (25 February, 2023).

Pic. 4 – A poster designed by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan that can be seen in schools across the country (27 February, 2023; continuing presence confirmed in April 2024).

Pic. 5 – A snapshot from the video "The symbol of our victory | "Iron fist" monument" from 15 December 2023.[168] The writing says "*Our power is the iron fist*."



Pic. 6 – Traditional crafts bazaar in Sheki (14 April 2024).

[168] İctimai TV, "Zəfərimizin Simvolu | 'Dəmir Yumruq' Abidəsi."

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