

History Lessons in Armenia and Azerbaijan

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In each country, school textbooks teach one version of history that sustains animosity towards the other.

Schoolchildren in Armenia and Azerbaijan are too young to remember the Nagorny Karabakh conflict which created so much hostility between their countries. But their school textbooks feed them an unbalanced view of history that some experts believe will only harden attitudes for the future.

For decades, when both the republics were part of a single Soviet state, many Armenians lived in Azerbaijan – predominantly in Nagorny Karabakh – while large numbers of Azerbaijanis lived in Armenia.

In the late 1980s, Armenians in Karabakh began campaigning for separation from Azerbaijan. Open warfare began in 1988 and only ended in 1994 with a ceasefire that left Armenians in control of Nagorny Karabakh and adjoining areas. No formal peace treaty was signed, and international attempts to resolve Karabakh's status have so far failed.

By the end of the conflict, the ethnic Azeris of Karabakh and Armenia itself had become refugees in Azerbaijan, and the Armenians had fled in the other direction. So two populations that were once mixed became homogenous, each with a decreasing awareness of the other.

As the two nations developed separately over the past two decades, each established its own narrative of events not just around the Karabakh conflict but going back decades, even centuries. This is reflected in the very different content of school history books in Azerbaijan and Armenia, which colours the way children view both the other side and their own past.

ENEMIES AND HEROES

Ashkhen, an Armenian in the 12th grade – the final year of school – says she has studied the causes of the Karabakh conflict and the way it unfolded, as well as the names of Armenian war heroes. She has concluded that peace with the Azerbaijanis will not come any time soon.

“They have to give up their claims to our lands,” she said. “Only when several generations have passed will it be possible for Azeris and Armenians to stop being enemies.”

Guljennet Huseynli, a 16-year-old Azeri schoolgirl in Baku, can list the sites of atrocities committed by Armenian forces in the conflict, although she is too young to remember it herself.

“How can we forget it? They killed our babies in Khojaly and Shusha,” she said, referring to events of the early 1990s. “My parents lost their friends and classmates in the war. They witnessed a huge influx of refugees to Baku. I’m learning about the bloody acts which the Armenians committed against my nation at school from teachers and textbooks.”

Khojaly is a case in point – an event in February 1992, during the Karabakh war, which is remembered in Azerbaijan as a massacre of hundreds of civilians fleeing the town – a tragedy of iconic importance. The Armenians’ memory is that it was one of the unfortunate incidents of war, with a lower bodycount than their opponents claim.

In their most recent attempt to forge an agreement, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan met his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev in the Russian town of Sochi last month. One of the points they agreed on in a joint statement issued together with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev was that intellectuals needed to start engaging in dialogue in an attempt to bridge the gap between their two countries.

Many young Armenians, however, say they want nothing to do with their contemporaries in Azerbaijan.

Anna, 21, has plenty of internet contacts in various countries, but avoids interacting with Azeris.

“You can’t talk to them without a conflict arising. We start arguing about history, blame each other for things, attempt to convince each other, but we always end up with the same opinions that we started out with,” she said. “An Azeri schoolboy once wrote to me and started accusing me of various things, denying the existence of a genocide [against Armenians in Turkey in 1915-16], and calling Armenians ‘occupiers’. I was naïve enough to say that he had studied poorly at school, and suggested he read what it says in the textbook.”

The boy replied by quoting chunks of Azeri school books that supported his argument, such as one passage

from a year-ten history text describing Armenians as “our eternal enemies” and detailing their offences in the early 1900s.

Tofiq Veliyev, head of the Slavic history department at Baku State University, is the author of this textbook, and insists he had to use negative language in order to tell the truth.

“Those phrases give an accurate picture of the Armenians,” Veliyev said. “I would be falsifying history unless I described them like that.”

Similar language is found in the year 11 history book, which covers the Karabakh war period, and describes the Armenian forces as “fascists” who perpetrated various crimes.

Hasan Naghizade, a year 11 student in Baku, said it was right for history to be presented in this way.

“The author is Azerbaijani. Of course he’s going to incite animosity. That’s the way it should be,” he said. “They definitely don’t want to prepare us for peace. We don’t need peace. The Armenians have committed a lot of bloody acts against us. Peace would be disrespectful to those who died in the war.”

Azerbaijan’s education ministry approved the current set of history books in 2000. Faig Shahbazli, head of the ministry’s publications department, says the books were commissioned from historians and then checked for content.

One stipulation was that the texts should not contain discriminatory language. “Textbooks should promote democracy and tolerance, not hatred,” Shahbazli said.

But he added that words like “terrorist”, “bandit”, “fascist” and “enemy” did not breach that principle.

“Those words reflect facts. They do not provoke intolerance of Armenians. They don’t suggest the Armenian nation committed crimes; they merely indicate the nationality of those who did,” he said, adding that children were capable of distinguishing between individual wrongdoing and a nation as a whole.

Armenia’s education ministry conducts competitions for new textbooks every four to five years, with historians and publishers entering joint bids to be approved by ministry experts.

In Armenia, adolescents learn about the “War of Liberation” for Karabakh – which they call Artsakh – in year nine. The conflict is framed within the context of a long history from ancient Armenian statehood through to the “perestroika” period of the late 1980s, when nationalist aspirations began being voiced by various Soviet groups.

“The spread of liberation movements in the Soviet Union was a direct result of the politics of perestroika,” the book says. “The Artsakh Armenians were the first to rise up in defence of their national dignity. They would not accept that their historical lands had been forcibly united with Azerbaijan.”

This textbook is careful to avoid criticism of the Azeri nation as a whole, reserving it for the government in Baku.

Some say the book lays out the facts too drily, and would like to see it strike a more patriotic tone.

“There’s no national spirit in this material,” complained Anahit, 19. “Student should feel a sense of national pride in the valorous compatriots and in this magnificent victory won by the Armenians. This is lost in a dry recounting of events,” she said.

Mikael Zolyan, a political analyst in Yerevan, has studied textbooks from all three countries in the South Caucasus, including Georgia.

He said Armenian books were phrased relatively neutrally, and lacked the emotional language found elsewhere, he said. But they were still far from ideal as they presented history from an entirely Armenian perspective.

“You can’t expect anything else from history textbooks, but it would be right to present the other side’s point of view, even if it’s mistaken,” he said.

Arif Yunusov, an Azeri historian who has written on the Karabakh war, appealed to the authors of all textbooks to refrain from inflammatory language and to try about their influence on the younger generation.

Bellicose rhetoric makes a resumption of conflict more likely, he said.

“It is racism to portray Armenians the way they do in the [Azerbaijani] textbooks,” he said. “Those kids will grow up with hatred, not tolerance. How are we going to achieve peace then?”

OLD GRIEVANCES, MODERN NARRATIVES

It is not just recent history that leaves Armenians and Azerbaijanis with entrenched opposing views.

Another major difference concerns the mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during the First World War.

Schoolchildren study these events in year eight, and read accounts of the Ottoman authorities driving Armenians into the desert and killing 1.5 million of them in a deliberate act of genocide.

Ruben Sahakyan, the historian who wrote the section on the killings, said he tried to avoid provoking emotional reactions.

“You must present only the facts, so that children can analyse them for themselves,” he said. “If you introduce emotional factors, you lose objectivity.”

Sahakyan argued that the Azerbaijanis were perpetuating historical myths created in Soviet times, whereas Armenian academics had spent the early years after independence in 1991 attempting to correct the record.

“We are writing real history, without exaggerations,” he said.

Turkey denies genocide and disputes the number of dead, and its stance is shared by its close ally Azerbaijan.

Veliyev, for example, said the reason Azeri children did not learn about the Armenian genocide is because it did not take place.

“It never happened. Why should we teach our children an invented history?” he asked.

Another set of historical issues about which Azerbaijani and Armenian teachers offer differing accounts is the period following the Russian Revolution and attempts to create nation-states in the South Caucasus.

In outlining the events of 1918, when Armenians and Azerbaijani forces battled for control of Baku, textbooks from Yerevan confine themselves to describing the short-lived independent Armenian state that was later subsumed within the Soviet Union. Azerbaijanis, meanwhile, read accounts of massacres committed by Armenians in Baku.

Baku school pupil Guljennet links the Karabakh war to 1918, suggesting a pattern of events that means Azerbaijanis must always be on their guard.

“Armenians killed Azerbaijanis at the beginning of the [20th] century. We forgot it and became friends. And what happened? They killed us again. Is there any guarantee they won’t do it in future?” she said.

Sahakyan dismissed such accounts as inventions.

“The Azerbaijanis have set themselves the task of making Baku an Azeri city, so in order to explain why Armenians were numerically superior there, they have invented mass killings that did not actually happen,” he said.

Armenian Academy of Sciences member Vladimir Barkhudaryan led the group of writers who produced the first post-independence history book, and continues to edit textbooks today. He argues that the reason why Armenian textbooks pay little attention to certain events is that they are not judged important.

“Insignificant events such as those that took place in Khojaly and in Baku in 1918 cannot be included. Schools have a clear timetable for the number of lessons into which the study of history has to fit. If you include this small changes in the book, it would be a huge tome,” he said.

CALLS FOR ALL-EMBRACING, RIGOROUS HISTORY

In Azerbaijan, historian Yunusov said the selective approaches taken to events in Baku in 1918 illustrated the problem of drawing up a commonly-accepted narrative of the past. He said Azerbaijani historians talked only about March 1918, when many Azeris died, while their Armenian counterparts focused on September the same year when the Turkish army entered Baku and killed many Armenians.

He said this was wrong, and recommended instead that each side include the grievances of the other when compiling historical textbooks.

“Both sides use history as a political game. Armenian and Azerbaijani historians each claim to represent the public interest. But the historian should not be a provocateur; he should not represent the public interest. He should just present the historical facts,” Yunusov said.

In Armenia, Hrant Melik-Shahnazaryan, an analyst with the Mitq think tank, was similarly despairing of the spectacle of historians engaged in mutual recriminations.

“The [textbook] material must not agitate to create a victim mentality, but instead point to the mistakes that were made and the methods for avoiding them in future,” he said.

Melik-Shahnazaryan called for more intellectual rigour and analysis in historical accounts.

“You end up with a load of facts that you can’t connect together,” he said.

Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Centre in Yerevan, agreed that the general intellectual standard of Armenian school books could be better.

“Even the more recently produced textbooks have generally not been up to the minimum professional standard,” he said. “That’s particularly true of history books, which despite the higher expectations placed on them with the end of Soviet state control and ideology, tend to deliver only a meager and random selection of historical topics,” he said.

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