

Armenia 3.0 Understanding 20th Century

Part 3

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[Video material](#)

Gevorg- Hi! So, this is going to be our third broadcast in this series of ‘Armenia 3.0’, thank you for those who watched [the first two](#). Now, things are happening and of course, you’ll be watching this stuff much later than it was produced, but still I want to make a mention of the context within which we are continuing our ‘Armenia 3.0’ broadcast.

What is the context? It is major events, major occurrences that took place over the recent times. Of course, you understand that we started them at late fall, almost at the beginning of the winter and things continue on happening (globally) and sometimes not very nice things like: terrorist attacks and things like that, but also when we are talking about Armenia some of the biggest elements of the context that are bringing everybody’s attention to right now, in my opinion, are the fact that one new party is being made. I don’t know if it will become registered or not, if it will become serious or not.

It is a party made by a famous artist, clown, and its name translates as ‘excrement’, even stronger word which exists in Armenian. Why? What is happening? What is going on? They try to demonstrate that no party program, no existing party is satisfying for them and in the first week or so of them declaring that on Facebook they had, maybe, as they claim, about 2000 people signed up for that party.

The second occurrence that I want to mention is the speech of the first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan at Armenian National Congress party congress. Congress’s congress where he again reiterated in a very forceful way the need in making peace around Karabakh, the need in compromise and he declared that his party will be going to the elections with the slogan of peace which will be novelty in Armenian politics more or less.

And again, of course, it generated a lot of discussions; a lot of pros and cons; but when Ter-Petrosyan speaks it is somehow significant. He has a capacity of a certain rhetorical style which is intellectually usually much stronger than any other political, politician’s speech. So, I suggest for those who are interested in political thinking of Armenia to study the language and style of [Ter-Petrosyan’s speeches](#) independently if they agree or disagree; or if they understand and interpret why did he say such a thing at this point in time; because it is not, usually, that you

should take his arguments for their surface value, there is a politics, political necessity, the way he sees it attached to such arguments.

In fact our office, [Eurasia Partnership Foundation](#) several years ago participated in a [research done by International Alert](#), where Mikayel Hovhannisyan, who is sitting right here, did a research on Levon Ter-Petrosyan's style, if I am not mistaken, so we can make a reference to that research in the transcript of this broadcast. Am I right Mikayel, that was a ...?

Mikayel- It was about the image of external enemies and friends in the public speeches of Ter-Petrosyan during his pre-electoral campaign.

Gevorg- So, the point is that it makes sense to study Ter-Petrosyan's language if we want to understand the twenty-five or so years of independence and the political thinking of Armenia.

And the third occurrence is that it is awfully cold outside and because of the poverty and the crisis that now have swamped, I would say, in Armenia a lot of people, who are poor, are suffering from this cold, which is quite unusual. I mean it's not really unusual, but we usually hope that winters will be lighter, and this winter has started with quite freezing weather. We'll see how it goes.

So, last time I finished on the point of 1965. And I am writing it here, because I am not going to continue on. I think this broadcast we'll go again through that timeline, just for people to, first, refresh what happened last time, or those who missed last broadcasts can come into the context with us. But also we didn't finish what we could say about the first half of the 20th century Soviet Armenia history. You remember the main point, which is 20th century, study the 20th century, if one wants to understand today's Armenia.

So, we'll start from a very typical timeline, and a very approximate one, because obviously there were a lot of events in between of these dates that we are not going to mention. And now we can leave here a lot of years and then we can come to the war and then I am not going further, I need more space here (*writing dates on the whiteboard*). Approximately like this.

So, (1915) The Genocide, (1917) The Bolshevik Revolution, (1918) The First Armenian Independent State, (1920) The End of the First Armenian Independent State, the Declaration of the Sovietization of Armenia; a lot of things happened there.

1937: this is an interesting and special date, registered in the minds of people like me, or people like my parents. We'll talk about that.

Then it's not the Second World War, but it is the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), the way the war was referred to and it is still referred to in the Soviet Union and in the former Soviet Union. It's the part of the Second World War which happened, which concerned only the Soviet Union.

Then 1948, this is a date, the year where again the people, the repatriates, who came here starting from 1944 were ousted to Siberia.

You remember we talked about that at the [last broadcast](#) , and I mentioned that there are very few studies or researches or references to these events. There are very few, but some of them are [Tigran Paskevichyan's films](#) which I highly recommend to watch. I don't know if they exist in English or not. It is interesting that his daughter is here: Nane is helping us with camera work; and we'll talk about the fact that there's always a big gap in research of these events.

1953, the year of death of Stalin.

1956: the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when Khrushchev opened up the discourse about Stalin's crimes and the crimes during the Stalin's times. And I put here 1963, but I am not sure I think this year was, when in Armenia the Communist party leader changed. If I am not mistaken it was 1964, I think Khrushchev was ousted in 1964, anyway; and then we will come to 1965.

Now, some of these are very noteworthy. What are some of these time frames that we want to pay special attention to. Last time I was explaining that there were good news and bad news. There were positive events and negative events, so the negative event was the uprooting and the positive event was the building of the Socialist Republic. The negative event was the Stalinist times and the repressions against people. And among these, as a part of a culture of repressions we discussed the word 'donos', which is a funny word, because it's not being really translatable into English. We translated it as 'false', 'false', what? 'False allegation'. You can say this is 'denunciation', but it isn't. Because denunciation is a public allegation, and 'donos' is a false and very often anonymous allegation. And in Armenian you very often refer to this saying 'թուղթ գրել': 'to write a paper', 'to write a message', i.e. to write a notice to the KGB, to the security services, about the fact that somebody behaves not according to the Soviet rules. And that was how this culture emerged.

So, in fact, the Soviet system was repressive throughout its existence, but there were some other points I didn't mention here, maybe I should.

1933, which is notorious for many things, first of all Kirov was killed in St. Petersburg, one of the Soviet leaders. Secondly, the Union of Writers was constituted, which means the freedom of speech came to an end. Thirdly, this was a high point of [Holodomor](#), of collectivization, of the time when a lot of, millions of peasants all over the Soviet Union, particularly in Ukraine, were either killed or exiled to Siberia, or died from hunger. Of course, it was not only this year, but it was over these years, around these years.

So, repressions took place throughout these times. But people very often mention 1937. Why is that? Because it was a time when political leaders were prosecuted, number one; so the friends of the power, those who belong to the socialist ideology; but also the cultural figures, ideological

figures, the writers, the artists, the thinkers. Particularly, significantly there were prosecuted at this time; as well as military leaders and many others.

So, why is that 1937 registers more than many other years, and when you say 1937 many people, especially the old generation still understand the height of Stalin's repressions? Though in terms of amount it may not be the year where the highest amount of repressions took place.

Because it was people who could speak and who could think and who could express themselves that were prosecuted over this year. You remember last time during the broadcast we used three interrelated terms, which stem from Johan Galtung. At least I have heard them from Johan Galtung: **anomie**, **anemie** and **atomie**. So, in this broadcast we will be talking a lot about these terms: how do they express themselves in the Soviet Armenia history.

So, one of the reasons why 1937 is so registerable, is because 'anomie', the incapacity to say about things, to think, to express oneself, to refer to the past, to explain the past, happened after 1937 when such great cultural figures, writers, artists, etc. were prosecuted; and we mentioned some names last time. So, from this time onwards, there is much less opportunity and capacity to mention, to express oneself, to understand what's happening with them.

Of course, the years of war are very well expressed, more or less. Again they are not reevaluated, they are not evaluated from the perspective of today, and they are more expressed within the socialist ideology concepts. So, there's still a lot of things to do while reevaluating these years. For instance, the big, very large volumes of [Hovhannes Baghramyan](#)'s memoirs, one of the major Marshals of the Soviet War, are not, as far as I know, evaluated. It's not analyzed, what is true there, what is wrong, what happened really. Are they really worthwhile to study, to give a historical material, to study what happened or not?

So, what are we doing now? We are looking for terms to explain the situation. Diagnosis is usually easier done than suggestions for change, or, moreover, prognosis. We have to find a ground for us to be able to explain what is going on, what was going on. Where from to start to look at the events of today, to look at the future? And that's why we need certain terms, which are ringing a bell, which are about the past of the Soviet Armenia, which have explanatory power, using which we can explain some things, which are now consequential for these days. These terms, like the ones that I wrote here, are called usually 'thick variables'.

The other one that I want to add here, that we will be talking about is 'negative selection'. This is again referring to the cultural genocide, so to speak, that took place during Stalin's times. There are two major elements that we have to focus our attention on, if we want to understand this period particularly. One is 'donos', and we'll talk about that a little bit more, and the other one is 'negative selection', or it is the fight between cultural build-up and the negative selection. It's been a time of a fight and the fight has continued on and it still goes on.

What is this fight about and who is this fight between? It's between two major forces: the constructive forces, which built the very first Academy of Sciences, University, and established the entire centralized culture of Soviet Armenia, which was a centralized culture for the entire Armenian nation, with a lot of deficiencies, of course. But that was that: the establishing of the cultural fabric anew, after the Genocide, after the attempt to have an independent state, after losing that opportunity and having this quasi-independent state. So, a lot of building was taking place here, and against that background, a lot of destruction was taking place here via the negative selection, via removing people who could think, who could express themselves, who are creative, either killing, or sending them to the exile.

So, these were the two major influences: '**cultural construction**' (and destruction); and we should understand the significance of both, because cultural construction was extremely important. Armenia had never had Academy of Sciences, had never had serious science in Turkey. As we know in Ottoman Armenia there was no higher educational institution at all; and suddenly we have university and we have branch outs of universities, from which other higher education institutions are being opened up. And we have, as I mentioned already, the Union of Writers; and we have the Opera built. But the Union of Writers was not just the union of writers: there was a union of artists, union of composers and the union of... other cultural groups' unions. And while this were ways for the Stalinist power not to allow creative expression in a way, (such that) which wouldn't be corresponding to the Soviet standards, at the same time these were opportunities for people to become artists, painters, writers, etc., and to have state support while they were doing their writing. So, it was very controversial process. But again, the moment one was more or less significant, metaphorically or not metaphorically speaking, one's head was being cut, and that was the essence of Stalin's time.

I have a [broadcast in Armenian about negative selection](#) particularly referring to the Russian culture, which I recommend, will have a link to that, hyperlink to the transcript, so if you want, if you understand Armenian and you want to get deeper into this subject you are welcome to watch.

Now, the 'donos' thing. As you remember we were saying last time these (the 'good' things) were ways of rebuilding the fabric of the society, weaving the fabric of the society. But the way to atomize the society, the way to destroy that fabric, to atomize was the 'donos' culture.

Where is it coming from, this culture of false allegations? There are several researches on that concerning the entire Soviet Union and the Russian history. It is coming from certain combination of Russian cultural inclination, for instance from, because, as you know, Russian peasants were not free, were having a slave status up until 1861. So, that's one reason, that's one source according to the scholars; the other source is the Bolshevik ideology itself; and there may be other sources. But we cannot now go deep into these sources to understand where it was coming from. What we can see is that Armenians after the Genocide, in a pretty sorry condition, easily adapted to that culture, quite easily. Again, depends on how you measure and compare.

And now this is very interesting phenomenon not enough studied even when it comes to Russia, Soviet Union.

What I can recommend is for those who want to understand this culture is to read the transcripts¹, the publications of the interrogations of people who were arrested at that time. There are transcripts of the court sessions which were totally staged, but the people who were accused there, were making speeches accepting their guilt. There are transcripts of interrogations in the KGB structures, which was at that time called ‘[Cheka](#)’, ‘[VChKa](#)’, ‘[NKVD](#)’, etc.

So, this is again linguistically very interesting material, which, in a very simplified way I can say, that it was a somebody writing on somebody, very often anonymously, that this person doesn’t belong to, doesn’t adhere to the Soviet ideology, then this person was being arrested, then he or she was saying that he or she agrees with the accusations, that indeed ‘I have been a spy of Japan and Turkey, who was planning to kill Aghasi Khanjyan’. That is another year that should be put here, because Aghasi Khanjyan was killed, as if committed suicide, but in fact he was killed in 1935. So, this acceptance of the (absent) guilt, because of the torture, was a very interesting element. And of course, also implicating others, so those who were arrested were, because of the torture, easily implicating many others.

Another element, important element to understand here is, that very often this ‘donos’ was first taking place for mercantile reasons. Somebody needed an apartment, a writer needed an apartment of another writer, so he would write a ‘donos’ on that writer, that writer would be removed with his entire family, and this writer would get into that apartment. I know such apartments, with the entire library, piano, fortepiano, all of, you know, surroundings, the same, as it was during the previous owner. So, this mercantile element, this way of easily becoming better adapted to the country, becoming better off essentially, better adapted to the circumstances, was another reason for flourishing of this culture. And we can talk about that a lot.

What is important to understand, is that if we don’t understand that, just as I said, if we don’t understand the mainstream, mainstream, the ‘trunk’ of the history of the 20th century, as it comes to the Soviet Union, we don’t understand a lot. So we have here this 20th century situation, which leads to today’s situation, and the funny thing is that the entire national construction of history after independence started as if avoiding this entire part.

So, if you look into our textbooks and the way, the amount of references to the past, before 20th century, starting from the Genocide (backwards); or to immemorial times, (like) Tigran the Great etc., there’s much more of that, than the studies of stuff, which is still known, which is easy to

¹ Please see one example: a former boss of NKVD, an author of purges, is himself subjected to the wide-spread practice of self-denunciation after arrest: <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrgr/research/ezhovinterrogs.html>
There are many more such examples in Russian, though perhaps not often translated into English.

study because it is more related to one's life, and even there are people who have lived at that time, so they can give the clearest information about how was this all happening.

So, similarly, of course, the history of the diaspora, the history of Spyurq around this 'trunk' is not being studied. I remember one important and interesting thing, that when we were studying history of Armenian nation during the Soviet times in the university, Yerevan State University, we had a great lecturer Petros Hovhannisyian (who died relatively recently, unfortunately); but I am talking now about 1981-82. There was only one textbook usually for every subject, only one textbook approved by the Soviet power. And, of course, the history of Armenian nation was studied very much according to the Soviet ideology. And Petros Hovhannisyian was unique, because he gave us two books. He gave us this 'History of Armenian nation', but also a book about the Armenian 'Spyurqi gakhtojaxner' (Սփյուռքի գաղթօջախներ), about the 'colony hearths', if we translate it literally, of the diaspora, published in 1963, in the times of thaw. Meaning at that point in time you could publish something. And in 1981-82-83, twenty years on, there was no other publication on the Armenian Diaspora 'colonies' available. So, we were studying, because Mr. Hovhannisyian, Professor Hovhannisyian, he understood that the textbook gives only the history of the 'trunk' (and in a distorted 'soviet' way), and the Diaspora history was totally absent from the discourse of this textbook.

So, he brought in the one and only existing textbook. Or it wasn't even a textbook, it was just an auxiliary publication. To be able to tell us that there is this entire Diaspora all over the world. And I remember how surprising it was for me to learn about that. And, of course, that was a pretty schematic book; I mean it was just telling about one 'colony hearth', another 'colony hearth', the third 'colony hearth', the fourth one, etc. It didn't have any methodology of studying the history of the Diaspora of the 20th century. And I don't think such methodology exists until today, because what do you study? Do you study the church and school focal points, or the party focal points, or the culture houses? And is that enough? Is that just enumeration? And how do you distinguish the important event from a less important event?

So, that is one thing that we should still go back to. Not we in this broadcast, but we as Armenian nation. But this trunk still remains (which is much easier to study); still remains unstudied. People live as if they didn't come from the 20th century, as if nothing existed until 1993 or the Karabakh war, or something like that. As if it was very natural that Armenia became independent, as if there is nothing to discuss from the previous times. So, the amount of publications, the amount of discussions about Armenian history of 20th century, the amount of cultural products about that is very little, that's why it is very important for us to somehow, a little bit fill in that void.

As I already said, now coming back to the 'ills'... Yes, please Rob, you want to say something.

Robert – Going back to the 'donos' thing, 'donos' issue, I think it's important to talk about the ways Soviet Union was encouraging people to write these false allegations for reports, false

reports; and one of those means was, so called '[kommunalkas](#)' where, it's like, it was a big house, building, where people were gathered and living in rooms, not in apartments. It was a way for the regime to oversee, to control what people were thinking, because as you can imagine there were people on one floor, like ten-twenty people living together, and they would talk to one another and, yes, with this perverted thinking of controlling the society, the government came up with this kind of solution.

Gevorg – Yeah, any kind of concentration of people. And, of course, there was a housing crisis, so many apartments were being filled in room by room with different families, and one family wants to expand the amount of cubic meters that they inhabit. So they 'write a paper' ('donos') on their neighbours. And we have thousands of stories like that, some of them also in Armenia as well. And it was all over the Soviet Union kind of way of action. But we should understand that any place of concentration of people, camps themselves, the Gulag camps, the military garrisons, the factories, any place of concentration was limiting people's privacy, limiting opportunity for people to be free. You couldn't make a joke, even not a political joke, just an innocent joke, because it could be interpreted somehow by somebody that it wasn't that innocent, then the 'donos' would go up and you would be removed.

So, it was a pretty nasty time. But I want to come to... You know, as I have said, this is something that we can have several broadcasts on. But so, as I said during the previous broadcast, after Stalin's death killings stopped.

So what flourished was stealing, because "*thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal*". So if killing stops, then stealing flourishes in the absence of following these rules. Why is that? Because, as I said, people would think: "I will now get something, either my small business illegally, or steal something from the state. If I suffer it will not be killing, I'll just go to the camp and will come back most likely, but my family will be better off".

And the '[tsekhavism](#)' movement that I was talking about last time, is referring to exactly these kind of processes, illegal businesses. Illegal production started all over the Soviet Union, but also particularly in Armenia. So, I am bringing back this word '**tsekhavism**'. And now, what is the **value target** of 'tsekhavik'? He, usually it is he, or he can have a nice wife; he was usually a good businessman, who would get an educated wife with higher education, often working in the Academy of Sciences or somewhere (like that). He is less educated, but that's not the point: he is very much adapted, so he has adapted this thief language that we were talking about last time, the 'blatnoy' language. But his value target is that '**I am working for my family and making my business, and I don't give a damn about my state, society, and power**', which is interrelated, because in the socialist ideology, state and power were one and the same thing, they were alienated from the population and they were speaking in the name of the society.

So, in a way (I don't know what to remove here, but I can remove this), in a way, it was a kind of clash; it was not even a clash, it was alienation of this tripartite concept: state, power and society,

from people. And not only the ‘tsekhavik’ was building **the second reality, the second market, the black market**, not only the people were exchanging, already after Stalin’s time, with slightly more security, jokes about Soviet power, critical comments about the Soviet power; but also a ‘simpleton’, an ordinary person wouldn’t mind stealing from state/society/power; because they wouldn’t see it as in any way relating to their own life. To the contrary, their own life was about them personally or their immediate family.

So, this **alienation** is another of the terms that we should be relying on. By the way, as far as I understand, philosophically it is dating back to the Karl Marx teaching about the proletariat who gets alienated from the means of production. And we can have very different types of alienation taking place. But what was taking place in the Soviet Union and in Soviet Armenia was alienation of people, and not necessarily only ordinary people, because you may be here (inside the state) as a representative of state, but at the same time you are here (outside). So, it was alienation which was taking place in the minds of people. So, we can speak about something the worst type of which is eventually schizophrenia. We can speak about some degrees of alienation: alienation, cognitive dissonance and eventually it brings to, if it becomes an illness, if it becomes totally irrational, it is actually schizophrenia. **Living with one official ideology, but according to another set of values and behavioral patterns and adaptation rules.** Please, Mikayel.

Mikayel- I want to add to this that, actually, one of the basic factors also that had influenced these processes was the liquidation of private property. So, people and this **dualistic situation or existence of two realities, two parallel realities** is also connected with the fact that officially people were not allowed to have any property, which meant that all the property they could have was illegal or was not their own. So, the more it went throughout development of the Soviet Union, the more the gap between these two realities was. And this brought again to a gap between the state, power, society and people as you have described here. So, this division and liquidation of the private property was essentially in the whole process of both ‘killing and stealing’ obviously, because the people who had something and the people who had nothing, eventually all became people who had nothing, because during this transition those who had nothing started to kill those who had something. So this was this mixed situation. And I wanted to also add to this timeline quite interesting and important period, which is [NEP](#) (approx. 1921-1927-ish), because it is, yeah, because it was also something that, on one hand, seemed to be some kind of approach to find a solution from the extremely difficult economic and social situation, but resulted in further identification of potential people to be killed, deported etc., etc. And ‘NEP’ is, just to open, ‘[New Economic Policy](#)’ (Новая экономическая политика).

Gevorg- Thank you, Mikayel. Indeed, we think we know something about the Soviet Union. So everybody understands that it’s quite horrible power system. But we don’t often know or we forget to mention some ‘thick variables’ which constituted that system. There was this prohibition of property. And if we are taking the stereotype about Armenian national psychology, we can say that Armenians are very much against that. I mean they don’t like that. As different from Russians in some concepts, particularly because they were slaves, their

peasants didn't have anything until 1861. So huge amount of population in Russia had become used to not having any property and any rights, historically.

Armenians have a special attitude towards their ownership of something, towards property. So removing the right to have any property was, of course, one of the building blocks of this socialist Soviet system, which resulted in that entire situation. And the 'NEP' you said, exactly, indeed, again, correctly. We can go on to every year, and every, every day and what happened then, and it is always fascinating to study this history. You used the word '**dualism**' which I wanted to mention, because schizophrenia is too strong a word, but on the way to schizophrenia one of the experiences is dualism. And this dualism, which is referred to in many studies as: **second society, black market, second reality**, this entire complex of the situations that we sometimes, in Armenia, refer to this as **a system of unwritten rules, relations, institutions** (չգրված օրենքներ, կանոններ և այլն). So, this was the essence of the situation and people. And of course it is also extremely hypocritical. And the west is also hypocritical, but there is differences between, say, the famous 'British' hypocrisy and this hypocrisy here. On the surface you say something which you don't want people to understand what is meant, that it is meant something at the subtext level.

In Britain, for instance, all these jokes that are floating around are that, if somebody says 'it was my mistake' you should understand it that they mean it is your mistake. So they mean something else other than what they say. In the Soviet type of hypocrisy, that's why I am saying schizophrenia, because this was a gap between one context and the other context. When this gap started to be bridged it was already during **thaw** times. I remind that word. Already after death of Stalin in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

We came back to the 1960s and we'll probably stop there, because in the next broadcast we can continue on talking about what happened next. Thank you for your attention.

Transcribed by Ani Babayan

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