

Armenian Medieval Art and Architecture in Soviet Perception: *A longue durée* Sketch

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Abstract The study of medieval Armenian art in the Soviet Union demonstrates a close interaction between historiography and history. Through the 70 years of the USSR's existence, the method of studying the artistic monuments of the southern Caucasus seems to follow the large waves of the question of nation within the Soviet empire.

Keywords Medieval Armenian art and Soviet Union. Historiography. Aleksej Nekrasov. Nikolay Brunov. Varazdat Harutyunyan. Mikhail Babentchikov. Alexej Lidov.

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1 Introduction. First Academic Inquiries into Armenian Art¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth, Armenian medieval art experienced an early prolific wave of interest. The most important names among professional art historians were, in the Russian world, certainly Dimitri Bakradze, Nikodim Kondakov, at the turn of the twentieth century, and Nicolas Marr (Filipová 2018).

In recent years, Ivan Foletti has attempted to demonstrate how Bakradze and Kondakov – the former a historian and the latter an art historian – put forward a vision of medieval Armenian architecture as being peripheral (Foletti 2016). Implicitly, the two scholars deal with the art of Armenia and Georgia as if it were one single historiographical phenomenon (Bakradze 1875; Kondakov 1891). A study by Bakradze is emblematic here. In a concise publication on Armenian and Georgian architecture, he classifies the monuments alphabetically, as though to deny any differences between the two cultures (Bakradze 1875). Kondakov, in turn, promotes a viewpoint of the art of the Caucasus that is largely dependent on Byzantine art. The final result is simple: in the Middle Ages as at the end of the nineteenth century, when these studies were published, the Caucasus had been considered a somewhat indistinct province of a great empire. It is interesting to note that Kondakov was Russian and Bakradze was Georgian. Their official viewpoints of Caucasian heritage, however, were very similar, which certainly mirrors the intellectual unity sought within the empire. We believe their position can be explained in view of the political situation at the time when the Caucasus had become another viceroyalty of Russia – a reality which affected the scholars' perception of the legacy of the medieval Caucasus.

Marr's case is more complex: from a younger generation, this scholar was part of a wave corresponding to a rebirth of regional studies in Georgia and Armenia (Choisnel 2005). It is interesting to note that Marr was from an Anglo-Georgian family but spoke Armenian and five other languages since childhood. Educated at the University of St. Petersburg, he specialised in the study of the languages of the Caucasus, becoming a professor of Armenian. Well-known for his later linguistic theories, Marr is actually a fundamental figure for studies on medieval Armenia, having directed the earliest (and most extensive) excavations in the ancient capital of Ani. This essay is not the place to delve into these important very significant excavations, published only in 1930; however, we would like to highlight the fact that, although

¹ This article was carried out as part of the project “The Heritage of Nikodim P. Kondakov in the Experiences of André Grabar and the Seminarium Kondakovianum” (GA18-20666S).

aware of the uniqueness of Armenian culture, Marr believed in great interdependence between the cultures of the southern Caucasus:

The class tastes in different societal strata possessed such peculiar features that the architectural monuments which emerged from various social milieus in the self-same people of Armenia share fewer similarities than those created within one and the same social environment of two distinct peoples, i.e., the Armenians and the Georgians. For instance, common features in the monuments of Armenian and Georgian architecture can be explained not so much by the mutual influence of one nation on the other, but, rather, by the common sources in which both Armenian and Georgian masters would find satisfaction and forms for their art; they were imbued with affined ideals pertinent to their shared feudal condition. (Marr 1934, 124)²

What we can see is that, although he had a different methodological training, Marr does not challenge the doxa established in the previous decades: medieval Armenian and Georgian art (of the *élites*) are in his view very close to each other. His own story, born and raised in Tbilisi, then a city with a thriving Armenian community, made him particularly sensitive to interpreting the culture of the medieval Caucasus in this way. Thus, for example, his definition of the Church of St Gregory of Tigrane Honents as a ‘chalcedonian orthodox, of armenian-georgian type’ monument, has an evident foundation in visual culture.

Thus, at the outbreak of war and later the Russian revolution, the view of monumental Armenian art seems to be dominated – at least in general reflection – by an ‘imperial’ vision that presents the art of the Caucasus, with its various specificities, as a whole all together consistent throughout the Middle Ages.

The aim of this paper is to understand – after a short excursion into the cultural background of this Russian imperial viewpoint – how this vision would be transformed in the Soviet years. It is not materially possible here to give a detailed explanation of all the stages of thought in more than seven decades of Soviet domination. Moreover,

2 “Сословные вкусы имели настолько своеобразные особенности, что иногда архитектурные памятники, возникшие в различной сословной среде одного и того же армянского народа, меньше проявляют общих черт, чем памятники, возникшие в одной и той же социальной среде двух различных народов, армян и грузин. Общие черты в памятниках, например, армянского и грузинского зодчества, могут находить объяснение не столько, быть может, во взаимном влиянии одного народа на другой, сколько в общности источников, в которых находили удовлетворение и откуда черпали формы для художественного творчества армянские и грузинские мастера, проникнутые сродными художественными идеалами одинаково феодальной среды”. If not otherwise stated, all translations were made by the Authors.

for us, this is just the first study in a vast field. We would, however, like to comprehend the general historiographical tendencies in the Soviet years. First, we will look at the interwar period, and the second part will be dedicated to the history of studies during the sixties and seventies. Finally, the last chapter of this study will address the final years of the Soviet empire.

2 Pushkin and Abaza: Within the Old Mythology

As demonstrated in the works of Kondakov, Bakradze and Marr, the first scholars studying Armenian art presented the Caucasus as a homogeneous cultural whole and its peoples as dependent not only geopolitically but aesthetically on the surrounding states. This approach was based on contemporary Russian imperial discourse; however, the latter can be retraced much further back in the time.

Armenia and Georgia, the ancient Christian states, have been subjected to territorial strife and ensuing speculations around it for centuries. Certain common places emerged in this process that transcended even the Revolution of 1917 which apparently entailed some fundamental revisions of policies and mythologies. During the nineteenth century, once again, the countries lost their autonomy to be brought together in a single political whole called the Viceroyalty of Caucasus (Mahé, Mahé 2012; Rayfield 2012, 284-305). The Russian military generals were usually among the first intellectuals to explain the logic of another Russia's territorial acquisition in the Caucasus and were often the first to 'explore' and 'describe' the territories and the peoples. A good example in the case of Georgia was General Nikolay Muravev-Karskiy (1794-1866) who took Kars by storm to annex it from Turkey and wrote *Personal Notes*, and, in the case of Armenia, General Major Viktor Abaza (1831-1898), the author of *History of Armenia* (Abaza 1888), a book fully reflecting the imperial vision of a son of the fatherland and a faithful subject of the tsar.

Compiling his book on Armenian history, Abaza makes some observations which would become common places and probably had been for his predecessors. According to him the "borderlines of Armenia were frequently redrawn" (Границы Арменіи подвергались частымъ измѣненіямъ) (1888, 1), in different epochs the country had intermittently been under the rule of the Greeks, the Romans, Parthia, Byzantium, and the Sassanians; it enjoyed some periods of independence and was fighting to protect its Christian faith against the pagans. An amateur historian, Abaza outlines major events in the Russian-Armenian affairs starting from the Derbent campaign of Peter the Great (unrewarding for Armenians), Catherine the Great's 'Greek project' and down to the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1824) and the Treaty of Adrianople (1828) (Abaza 1888, 99, 104). Speaking of the latter, Abaza clear-

ly expresses the imperial point of view calling Georgians and Armenians “our Transcaucasian population”, Russia’s “eastern coreligionists” drawing the following geopolitical bottom-line for Armenia:

These victories of the Russians liberated the indigenous Armenia from the power of Persia. But the restoration of Armenia proved to be senseless since Georgia had already voluntarily entered Russia. As an independent country Armenia would have been too weak for an aidless fight against Persia and Turkey and would instantly fall victim to her Muslim neighbours. Now, Armenians were welcomed into a new fatherland of the same religion which guarantees their nationality [*narodnost'*], faith and customs from any entrenchments.³

Five years after the treaty, the poet Alexander Pushkin, in *Journey to Arzerum*, made in 1829 (published in 1836), recollects the atmosphere which he witnessed in Erzurum as the Russian troops victoriously entered the city.

The Armenians noisily crowded into the narrow streets. Their little boys ran before our horses, making the sign of the cross and repeating: ‘Christians! Christians!’⁴

On a mythological level, both for Abaza and Pushkin, Armenia had been a Christian country of Noah’s Ark, a territory belonging to sacred history. Following the Russian army, which was engaged in battles with the Turks, at some point of his journey the poet sees a mountain which immediately evokes the biblical context in his mind

Against the clear sky stood a white, snowy, two-headed mountain. ‘What mountain is that?’ I asked, stretching, and heard the answer: ‘It’s Ararat.’ How strong is the effect of sounds! I gazed greedily at the biblical mountain, saw the ark, moored to its top in hopes of renewal and life – and the raven and the dove flying off, symbols of punishment and reconciliation.⁵

3 “Эти побѣды Русскихъ освободили коренную Арменію изъ подъ власти Персїи. Но возстановленіе Арменіи уже потеряло смыслъ послѣ того, что Грузія добровольно вошла въ составъ Россіи. Какъ независимая страна, Арменія была бы слишкомъ слаба для самостоятельной борьбы съ Персїей и Турціей и неминуемо вновь сдѣлалась бы жертвою своихъ мусульманскихъ сосѣдей. Теперь же армянамъ открывалось новое единовѣрческое отечество, обезпечивающее ихъ народность, вѣру и обычаи отъ всякихъ покушеній” (Abaza 1888, 104).

4 “Армяне шумно толпились в тесных улицах. Их мальчишки бежали перед нашими лошадьми, крестясь и повторяя: Христиан! Христиан!” (Pushkin 1974, 557).

5 “На ясном небе белела снеговая, двуглавая гора. ‘Что за гора?’— спросил я, потягиваясь, и услышал в ответ: ‘Это Арарат’. Как сильно действие звуков! Жадно глядел я на библейскую гору, видел ковчег, причаливший к ее вершине с на-

In turn Abaza casts not a shade of a doubt on similar biblical allusions to say that

[Armenians] consider themselves the first-born people and trace their origin way back in a direct line from Noah. Confirming their opinion, the Armenians refer to the book of Genesis, recognising Ararat as the very place on which the ark stopped, and indicating that Noah and his family, the only ones saved from the flood, did not leave Ararat.⁶

Many people refute the significance of Armenia in a sense of it being the cradle of humanity. [...] But, according to the most recent writers, all these arguments fall short in the struggle against the Biblical legends.⁷

No matter how deeply religious the poet and the general were, they would view Armenian Christianity as a path to some autochthonous historical starting point in the distant past, tangible in their rhetoric of annexation. Religious connotations in the Russian perception of Armenia had had a long history related to the country's geopolitics, starting with Peter the Great's attempts to support Christian minorities in Persia, then the concerns of Alexander I "to take special care to win over the Armenian nation", to strengthen "the faith of Christians" in Armenia and throughout the last years of the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881), who appointed Count Loris-Melikov, Armenian in origin and the hero of the Russo-Turkish War, to head the Russian government in fighting Russian revolutionaries. The assassination of Alexander II led to Loris-Melikov's downfall and ushered in the time of reaction. The growing influence of middle-class Armenians in Armenia, their conflicts with the Georgian nobility and the promotion of education in the Armenian language and culture had made the people less subject to tsarist control towards the end of the nineteenth century (Sunny 1997, 127-8).

Armenians had been elaborating their own national political discourse at least since 1880s when *Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun*

деждой обновления и жизни — и врана и голубицу излетающих, символы казни и примирения" (Pushkin 2016, 381).

6 "[Армяне] считают себя первороднымъ народомъ и ведутъ свое происхождение по прямой линіи отъ Ноя. Въ подтвержденіе своего мнѣнія, армяне ссылаются на книгу Бытія, признающую Араратъ тѣмъ мѣстомъ, на которомъ остановился ковчегъ, и указывающую, что Ной и его семья, единые спасенные отъ всемірнаго потопа, не удалялись отъ Араратъ" (Abaza 1888, 14-15).

7 "Противъ значенія Арменіи, въ смыслѣ колыбели рода человѣческаго, возстають многіе. [...] Но, по мнѣнію новѣйшихъ писателей, всѣ эти споры не выдерживють борьбы съ библейскими сказаніями" (Abaza 1888, 15-16).

(Armenian Revolutionary Federation) gained acceptance as the first real Armenian political organisation with a programme adopted in 1892 and aimed at the administrative and economic freedom of Turkish Armenia (Hovannisian 1967, 17). Apart from the central concern for the Turkish Armenia, the *Dashnaktsutiun* nationalistic cause had been fuelled by various factors even in times when the people had been under protection of the tsar's Russia. Thus, in 1885, the tsarist government imposed the Russian as the language of instruction and shut down the hundreds of Armenian schools which had been operated by the Armenian clergy and community. This was not mentioned by General Abaza in his *History of Armenia*. Later, in 1903, the tsarist government ordered that the estates of the Armenian Church be turned over to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of State Properties (Sunny 1993, 26, 69, 92). As a result, there followed two years of organised mass protests in which the *Dashnaktsutiun* joined forces with the Armenian clergy whom they frequently criticised, as well as with the Catholics (Hovannisian 1967, 18).

However, the Russian government undertook measures to pacify the region in the first decade of the twentieth century by sending the viceroy of the Caucasus Adjutant-General Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov (1837-1916) who reported to Nicholas II in 1913, endeavouring to instil sobriety in the perception of the region whose "peculiarities are difficult to comprehend without intense attention from the remote centre" (Vorontsov-Daškov 1913, 6-7). The picture drawn by the viceroy portrayed Armenians as peaceful, self-sufficient, agricultural minority, not at all a burden to Russia which was not going to turn them into an industrialised force as part of its imperialistic ambitions. Moreover, the viceroy's Armenians were the minority which was remote from any attempts to form a sovereign national state.

'There is no separatism among the Caucasian Armenians' as I allowed myself to testify to you, Sire, in 1907, when the troubles did not subside, and again I boldly confirm this at the present time, when the past years have proved the correctness of the quoted testimony.⁸

The Adjutant-General then explained how the trial of the 30 members the *Dashnaktsutyun* party had exaggerated the actual insufficient influence of the Armenian nationalists and "ended with a puff" as it could not prove "the revolution in the whole people" (Vorontsov-Daškov 1913, 7). The paternalism in the view on the region in the Vo-

⁸ "Никакого сепаратизма среди кавказских армян не существует' позволили я себя свидетельствовать передь Вами, Государь, въ 1907 году, когда не утихла еще смута, и снова смѣло подтверждаю это въ настоящее время, когда протекшіе годы доказали правоту приведеннаго свидетельства" (Vorontsov-Daškov 1913, 7).

rontsov-Dashkov report is undeniable. This imperial vision of a small people of the Caucasus seemed to dominate the minds of many intellectuals and ‘statespersons’ as it was grounded in other powerful ideas such as the messianic role of Russia as the only Orthodox empire in the world, its specific mission to the world, its military strength etc. The report regards the people of Armenia not as those belonging to their land but as countryless subjects living in “our Caucasus” or in “Turkish Armenia”, a minority devoid of their own borderlines, sharing the land with other peoples of the Caucasus. No statesperson would dare to propose Armenia as a unique nation with its right to be a sovereign state and its people to be free *because* they are Armenians, i.e. they were not emphasising the rhetoric of nationalism even if they saw Armenians as a people with its history. Abaza concluded his chapter on the people of Armenia with a universal statement.

This people, as well as all of Adam’s kin, has their own strengths and weaknesses.⁹

At the turn of the century and towards World War I and the Russian revolution, the view of medieval Armenian art seems to be thus pervaded with imperial vision which did not distinguish national specificities even though some nationalistic movements were already underway both in Russia and among the Armenians. The generation of intellectuals born in the late nineteenth century was very much of an imperial mindset; it cut through their writings regardless of their social and ethnic origin. Not that Armenians and Georgians were not proud of their local heritage (Filipová 2018), but the general view of the empire was not questioned. The predominant contemporary policies affected their perception of the medieval past: it was so easy to see in the medieval Ani a sort of metaphorical mirror of Tbilisi which was an almost Armenian city in Georgia, where scholars and intellectual would experience daily a thorough cultural *métissage*. Yet a new historiographical turn would soon start to reflect the massive events which were shaking regimes and philosophies.

3 From Lenin to Stalin: From Byzantium to Armenia

We do not have significant ‘Soviet’ studies on Armenian architecture from the early years after the October Revolution. This situation can be easily explained in the context of the tragic events of those years of which we wrote earlier. After its annexation to the Soviet Union at

⁹ “Народъ сей, какъ и всѣ отъ Адама происходящiе, имѣетъ свои достоинства и недостатки” (Abaza 1888, 120).



Figure 1
Nekrasov, A. (1924). *Vizantijskoe i russkoe iskusstvo: Dlja stroit. fak. Vuzov*. Moscow: Izdanie Gosudarstvennogo Universal'nogo Magazina

the end of the twenties, the Armenian Socialist Republic found itself in dire economic conditions (Bobelian 2014). At the same time, more generally, in the years of Lenin, despite the violent persecutions, most scholars who remained in the Soviet Union continued their studies along the lines of what they had been doing before. As an example, below is a summary by Aleksey Nekrasov (1885-1950) in his volume entitled *Byzantine and Russian Art* published in 1924 [fig. 1]:

Armenia was linked to Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia; this determines its architecture. Some scholars want to see more Hittite echoes in Armenian architecture; but anyway, in the fifth century and later we see on the soil of Armenia both Syrian basilicas and central shaped buildings with exedras. The heyday of Armenian architecture belongs to the so-called third century and the era of Byzantine art. But it was too early for gable roofs and tent tops instead of the curvature of the roofs and domes of Byzantine architecture, where the roof was laid right along the arches. Recall that the exclusion of Ravenna is explained by the imposition

of Antiochian art. It is quite possible that these features, especially *zpatras* [...] are deep Eastern archaism. Archaism affects Armenia in curious forms. (Nekrasov 1924, 30)¹⁰

Apart from the first sentences – which emphasise the transcultural dimension of Armenian art – Nekrasov’s main thesis maintains that Armenian architecture was an integral part of Byzantine architecture. Furthermore, throughout the volume, Armenia is part of a general narration dedicated to Byzantine architecture. This is therefore a point of view that is completely consistent with what was described above, which is logical when we consider that the scholar graduated in 1920 from the University of St. Petersburg, where he had studied with Dimitri Ajnalov (1862-1939), who had been a student of Kondakov (Khrushkova 2012). Interestingly, in the introduction, completed in 1923, there are no allusions to any new vision of the world. A small nation, Armenia, wedged between colossal empires and exposed to their influence on all sides. The historical events of the late teens and early twenties, which we relate further, underpin this image entirely.

The Great War and the Russian revolution had brought a huge turn of the helm as the poet Osip Mandelstam wrote in his poem *The Twilight of Freedom* (1918). In the turmoil of the war, the Turkish government decided to ultimately resolve the question of its northeastern frontier, the territory of fierce contention with Armenians inhabiting it which led to their genocide in 1915 and this in its turn provoked even greater resistance on the part of Armenian revolutionaries and reinforced their nationalistic ideology (Sunny 1993, 28-9, 42).

The Bolsheviks faced the trouble of readjusting annexation policies and the in-depth recoding of the political vocabulary. Saving their revolution, they signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918) which turned Transcaucasia into an arena of territorial conflicts in which the leaders were able to employ the terms of national interests as long as the Bolshevik peace programme based on the principles of no indemnities, no annexations, and the right of every nationality to self-determination (Reynolds 2011, 174).

10 “Армения была связана с Персией, Месопотамией, Сирией и М. Азией; этим определяется ее архитектура. Некоторые ученые хотят видеть в армянской архитектуре еще отзвуки хеттской; но, как бы то ни было, в V в. и позднее мы видим на почве Армении как сирийские базилики, так и центрические; здания с экседрами [...]. Расцвет армянской архитектуры относится к, так называемой, зрелой эпохе византийского искусства. Но уже рано появились двускатные кровли и шатровые верхи вместо криватуры крыш и куполов византийского зодчества, где кровля клалась прямо по сводам; вспомним, что исключение Равенны объясняется влиянием антиохийского искусства. Весьма возможно, что эти черты, особенно шатры [...] являются глубоким восточным архаизмом. Архаизм сказывается в Армении в любопытных формах” [spacing in the original].

The tsar's Russian Caucasus Army, faithful to the former government, did not submit itself to the new rulers in Petrograd. Its dissolution began in 1917 with the subsequent forming and arming of Armenian and Georgian units, the only soldiers in these regions who had a stake in resisting the onslaught of the Ottomans. In doing so, they were virtually bringing to life the words of the Bolsheviks' decree no. 13, 'On Armenia' signed by Lenin and the Commissar for Nationalities Joseph Stalin (published in *Pravda*, 13 January 1918) (Reynolds 2011, 179). The document related the two mutually exclusive points: Armenia's weakness to withstand the Ottomans without Russia and the right of national self-determination which would be impossible to realize without Armenians taking to arms themselves.

Witnesses on all fronts, Turks, Russians, Armenians, Georgians, and Azeri wrote of political and humanitarian havoc into which Transcaucasia had been thrown in 1917-18. In a catastrophic situation of Turkish offensives and the absence of real support from the collapsing Russian empire they organised themselves into a single political body, the Transcaucasian Democratic Federation (9 April 1918), still hoping for unity in their land, but internal and external tensions and intrigues were so strong (including British and German military interventions) that the Federation eventually dissolved and the people indeed had to form independent states without being able to maintain them. To borrow the expression of one scholar, this part of the Russian empire "collapsed along national lines" (Martin 2001, 19). On 30 May 1918 the Armenian National Council, declaring independence - that is, the necessity "to pilot the political and administrative helm of the Armenian provinces" - used no nationalistic slogans, not even words like 'republic' or 'independence'. Although proclaimed an independent country, Armenia did not have a capital city and its national elites resided in Georgian Tiflis, while Erevan was predominantly a Muslim city (Reynolds 2011, 212). The period of Armenian independence lasted only two years, from the end of World War I to the arrival of the Red Army in the last month of 1920 (Sunny 1993, 129-30).

It was undeniable that, except for their revolution, the Bolsheviks were dealing with territories like the colonial rulers had done before them. Similarly to the tsarist government, at first they found it more convenient not to divide the Caucasian peoples into separate republics, but to unite them. By early 1924, Armenia was a republic within the Transcaucasian republic, which in turn was a member of the union of Soviet republics (Sunny 1993, 141). But trying hard not to resemble the tsarist colonial policies, in twenties, they created Armenian administrative and economic organs as well as a film studio, a national radio, an academy of science, museums, and a state university, all operating in Armenian. They introduced the policy of *korenizatsiia* (rooting) or 'nativization', opening schools, theatres and newspapers in the Armenian language (Sunny 1993, 146). The early twenties in Armenia were



Figure 2 Lavrentiy Beria with Svetlana Stalin and Joseph Stalin. 25 September 1934. © RIA Novosti

years of relative thawing and liberation. The majority of Russian party members, however, did frown upon the new nationalities policy and viewed it as no more than a temporary ‘concession’ (Martin 2001, 21).

Employing the slogan of national self-determination of people, the Bolsheviks, in fact, aimed for the modernisation and industrialisation of Armenia which was largely an agricultural society. In the late twenties and early thirties, the Soviet regime abolished the policy of supporting independent peasant agriculture urging the farmers to join collective farms. Towards 1930, collectivization befell 63% of all peasant households in Armenia; in 1936, almost four-fifths of all households had been collectivised (Sunny 1993, 151). These years were also the time of widespread purges; the forces of centralisation of the Soviet government began repressions of the former Dashnaks, independent Marxists, and Mensheviks who were accused of being Trotskyists. The period of intellectual freedom and debate in Armenia was brought to an end (Sunny 1993, 146).

The prominent role in subsequent repressions was played by Lavrentiy Beria, head of Georgian OGPU from 1926 [fig. 2]. In 1931 he became secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia, and, a year later, for the whole Transcaucasian region. His endeavours caused the death of 10,000 people. In 1935, he summarised the results of his work in his oration titled, *On the History of the Bolshevik Organisations in Transcaucasia*. The targets of his attacks were the ‘Dashnaks’, that is anybody expressing criticism of the Communist regime (Paya-

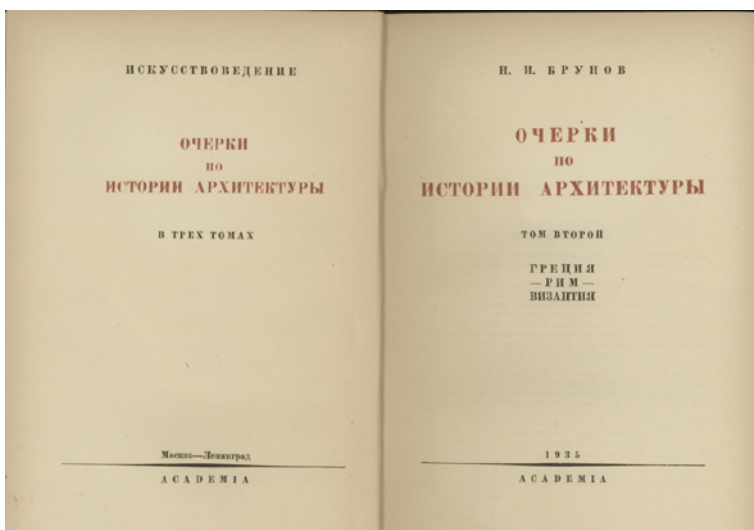


Figure 3 Brunov, N. (1935). *Očerki po istorii arhitektury: V 3 tomach. Tom 2, Grecija. Rim. Vizantija*. Moscow: Leningrad.

slian 2007, 176). He labelled them “creators of national trade unions”, “the party of nationalistic bourgeoisie”, “supporters of Armenian bourgeoisie”, and “the arsonists of the hostility between Armenian and Azerbaijani population” (Berija 1948, 236-7).

The text was written in 1935 as a reminiscence of ‘heroic’ activities of the Bolsheviks in the Caucasus. In 1936, the head of Armenian Communist party from 1930 to 1936, Aghasi Khanjian, who had a significant local base of support in Armenia, and aspired to be a national leader, was killed just before he was due to meet Beria. There followed unprecedented purges against Armenian communists with thousands of high- and low-ranking people disappearing in the waves of terror and ethnic Russian officials taking their places at commanding positions (Sunny 1993, 157). The centre which previously could not hold together the falling empire was now being remodelled. The dominant tone and thought of Beria’s *On the History of the Bolshevik Organizations in Transcaucasia* was Stalin, portrayed as all-knowing and powerful deity who had managed to bring peace and order to the region (Berija 1948, 5-6).

The new Soviet leaders of Armenia watched closely the developments in the Armenian Church whose members had been persecuted and properties confiscated since the early twenties. The active anti-religious campaigns began in 1928 (Avgustin 2001, 329-55). In 1930, the Armenian Catholics, Kevork V - who until 1927 refused to recognise the atheist Soviet regime (Sunny 1993, 144) - and the Soviet Armenian

government saw it as an the opportunity to achieve “the decisive conquest of the leadership of the Armenian Church” (Corley 1996, 91-2; Sunny 1993, 144). This was part of a radical wave of repressions. The studies of historian Armenak Manukyan, the author of the book *Political Repressions in Armenia in 1920-53*, showed that 14,904 Armenians had been subjected to purges and repressions, of which 4,639 were shot during the years from 1930 to 1938 alone (Manukjan 1999, 218-58).

As if echoing the purges, Soviet art historiography started to undergo radical changes. In 1935, Nikolay Brunov (1898-1971) published a volume dedicated to Greek, Roman and Byzantine architecture [fig. 3] (Brunov 1935). He was a scholar of a new generation, educated in Moscow in the years just after the revolution and became a professor at the Moscow Institute of Architecture in 1934. His book is crucial for its description of the transformation in the Soviet vision of art history. The introduction to the volume leaves no doubts about the political context of its preparation:

The main achievement of the Greek and Roman architecture is the liberation of architecture from religion and its approval as an independent area of human activity.

This process should be considered in connection with the development of all human culture on the basis of socio-economic development as a result of the transition from the Eastern despotic system to the Greek and Roman. The separation of architecture from other aspects of human activity is associated with the general differentiation of culture, which very strongly and rapidly advanced in trade-slave states. In oriental theocratic despotism, religion was a connecting principle that deeply penetrated various aspects of human activity, forcing them to serve themselves and uniting them into one undifferentiated culture. In it, science, law, art, etc., have not yet separated from religion and therefore have not yet separated from each other [...]. Only by referring to this whole grand process of the gradual development and complication of human culture, which continues from the pre-class society to the present day, one can correctly assess the stage at which the architecture of the trade-slave states is located as part of the entire culture of this era. (Brunov 1935, 11)¹¹

11 “Основным достижением греческой и римской архитектуры является освобождение зодчества от религии и утверждение его как самостоятельной области человеческой деятельности.

Этот процесс нужно рассматривать в связи с развитием всей человеческой культуры на основе социально-экономического развития в результате перехода от восточно-деспотического строя к греческому и римскому. Отделение архитектуры от других сторон человеческой деятельности связано с общей дифференциацией культуры, которая очень сильно и быстро продвинулась вперед в торгово-ра-

The new regime had finally penetrated the minds of intellectuals of the new generation. The quotation sounds like a distant but clear paraphrase of the events in those decades. The standpoint taken by a Moscow ivory-tower scholar is but shorthand for the aforementioned repressions, purges, prosecution of well-to-do peasants and expropriations of Church property. Imbued with Marxist dialectic, the text implies the primitive role of religion in social evolution following Communist doctrine verbatim. Speaking about Byzantium, the author even embellishes his rhetoric with a direct quotation from Marx:

Constantinople is the Eternal City, it is the Rome of the East. Western civilization, highly amalgamated by oriental barbarism under the Greek emperors. (Marks 1957, 239)

The Byzantine Empire is a feudal, theocratic, strictly centralised monarchy that in many ways resembles oriental despotism, especially Persian, revived again in the third century under the Sassanid dynasty with its magnificent court ceremonial of the third and fourth centuries which influenced the Roman court, and later, in the fifth and the sixth centuries, had a great impact on the Byzantine court. (Byzantium also resembles the Assyrian monarchy, the successor of which, to a certain extent, was the Persian monarchy.) However, the feudal Byzantine Empire is the direct successor of the slave-owning Roman Empire, in which the process of feudalization in the fourth century led to the reincarnation of its economic and social basis. [...] But the Byzantine Empire, in which the Greeks played a dominant role, became more and more Greek-centred, the Byzantines considered the past of the Greek culture their own, and themselves its successors. In Byzantium, all areas of cultural activity were strictly subordinated to religion, which is typical of the feudal worldview. But Byzantine architecture does not mean returning to the stage of the pre-Greek architecture, though it is based at the same time on ancient tectonics. Other Eastern monarchies, especially Persia and Muslim states, also inherited Greek. (Brunov 1935, 11-2)¹²

бывладельческих государствах. В восточных теократических деспотиях религия была связующим началом, которое глубоко пронизывало самые различные стороны человеческой деятельности, заставляя их служить себе и объединяя их в одну недифференцированную культуру. В ней наука, право, искусство и т. д. еще не отделились от религии и в связи с этим еще не отделились друг от друга. [...] Только имея в виду весь этот грандиозный процесс постепенного развития и усложнения человеческой культуры, который от эпохи доклассового общества продолжается до наших дней, можно правильно оценить этап, на котором находится архитектура торгово-рабовладельческих государств как часть всей культуры этой эпохи”.

12 “Византийская империя - феодальная, теократическая, строго централизованная монархия, которая во многом напоминает восточные деспотии, особенно



Figure 4 The Church of Aruch. 7th century. Photo Katarína Kravčíková. © Center for Early Medieval Studies

However, in the pages dedicated to the art of the Caucasus, Brunov writes:

A comparison of the monuments of Armenian and Georgian architecture of the sixth-seventh and subsequent centuries with the monuments of Christian architecture of the Mediterranean regions shows that the Caucasus was at that time closely connected

персидскую, вновь возродившуюся в III веке при династии Сассанидов (ср. т. I) и уже в III и IV веках своим пышным придворным церемониалом влиявшую на римский двор, а позднее, в V и VI веках, очень сильно влиявшую на двор византийский. (Византия напоминает также и ассирийскую монархию, преемницей которой до известной степени стала персидская монархия.) Однако феодальная Византийская империя является непосредственной продолжительницей рабовладельческой Римской империи, в которой процесс феодализации привел уже в IV веке к перерождению ее хозяйственной и социальной основы. Это обстоятельство составляет существенное различие между восточными деспотиями и византийской монархией, которая сложилась в результате разложения рабовладельческого Рима. Византийцы до XV века, когда их империя окончательно была завоевана турками (1453 г.), называли себя ромеями. Но Византийская империя, в которой греки играли господствующую роль, все больше и больше грецизировалась, прошлое греческой культуры византийцы считали своим, а себя ее продолжателями. В Византии все области культурной деятельности были строжайшим образом подчинены религии, что типично для феодального мировоззрения. Но византийская архитектура не означает возвращения на ступень догреческой архитектуры, а основывается вместе с тем на античной тектонике. Греческое и римское наследие досталось и другим восточным монархиям, особенно Персии и мусульманским государствам”.

with the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire in the field of architecture as well. [...] But at the same time, the architecture of Armenia and Georgia already at this early time has its rather pronounced face, which allows us to recognise the Caucasian monument among other Byzantine works. Eastern elements were also very tangible in it, and the comparison of Armenian and Georgian monuments with the Persian ones would be especially important. Thus, in the large Church of the Cross in Mtskheta near Tiflis, the end of the sixth-beginning of the seventh century, stands out through the basis of the type of baptistery in Tebessa, complicated by a composition dating back to the church of Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, the dome on the square with tromps (i.e. vaults bridging over corners) on the corners, which is so typical of Sassanian palaces, for example in Firozabad. (12)¹³

This is absolutely in line with the *doxa* as outlined during the end of the nineteenth century. The art of the Southern Caucasus is described as above all very united (if not identical) and, despite local specificities, clearly subject to the phenomenon of Byzantine art. While this choice had a political angle in the years of Kondakov, in this case, we believe we must think above all of the status quo that no one wanted to question, considering the national politics of the new empire. After a more liberal phase in the twenties, it had moved on to an intense phase of Russification and centralization in the thirties.

The general art history studies of the early Soviet times, therefore, give the impression that the overall perception of Armenian architecture remained consistent with that developed in late nineteenth-century writings and supported by widespread attitudes, despite the explicit change in the rhetoric and secularization of the entire discourse.

If we focus on more specific studies, however, written by Soviet authors of Armenian nationality – and by nationality, we mean here the famous ‘fifth point’ on the internal Soviet passport, where a So-

13 “Сопоставление памятников армянской и грузинской архитектуры VI-VII и последующих веков с памятниками христианской архитектуры присредиземноморских областей показывает, что Кавказ был в это время тесно связан с восточными провинциями Византийской империи и в области архитектуры. [...] Но вместе с тем архитектура Армении и Грузии уже в это раннее время имеет свое довольно ярко выраженное лицо, которое позволяет тотчас узнать кавказский памятник среди других византийских произведений. В ней очень сильны и восточные элементы, особенно важно сопоставление армянских и грузинских памятников с персидскими. Так, в большой церкви Креста в Мцхете около Тифлиса, конца VI – начала VII века, выступает сквозь основу типа баптистерия в Тебессе, усложненную композицией, восходящей к церкви Сергия и Вакха в Константинополе, купол на квадрате с тромпами (сводиками, перекинутыми через углы) по углам, который так типичен для сасанидских дворцов, например в Фирозабаде”.

viet citizen could even be of Italian or Jewish nationality – the rhetoric seems to be different. In his study on the Church of Arukhavank [fig. 4], for example, Varazdat Harutyunyan (1909-2008) writes:

The powerful rise in construction in Armenia in the first half of the seventh century had been prepared by a number of socio-historical premises, and led to the completion of the characteristic features of the Armenian architecture as with respect to the design of building and constructive techniques of the ancient masters, and in relation to the addition national style. (Arutjunjan 1946, 3)¹⁴

A few pages earlier, we can read:

This rapid construction activity started in the period when Armenia had been under the rule of the Sassanian *marzbān*, the time of a weakening Sassanian Iran in the first half of the seventh century. This construction continued somewhat to a lesser extent in the late seventh century – the initial period of the Arab invasions. (3)¹⁵

The whole concept then culminates, in the same passage, with the following words:

The struggle for the independence of the Armenian people, which was directed both against Arab and against Byzantine rule, was headed by Prince Theodoros Rshtuni, who was the actual ruler of Armenia in the initial period of the Arab raids. During the long struggle between the Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire, each of the opponents tried to attract Armenia to their side. (3)¹⁶

Published in 1946, the essay had been written in 1944. The interpretation of facts, with a hostile view on the Byzantine Empire, seems

14 “Мощный строительный подъем в Армении в первой половине VII в., подготовленный рядом социально-исторических предпосылок, привел к завершению процесса оформления характерных черт армянской архитектуры, как в отношении разработки строительных и конструктивных приемов древних мастеров, так и в отношении сложения национального стиля”.

15 “Эта бурная строительная деятельность начата в марзпанской Армении, периода ослабевшего сасанидского Ирана в первой половине VII в., в несколько меньшей мере продолжалась и во второй половине VII в.—начальном периоде арабских вторжений”.

16 “Борьбу за независимость армянского народа, которая была направлена как против арабского, так и против византийского владычества, возглавлял князь Теодорос Рштуни, который являлся фактическим правителем Армении в начальном периоде арабских набегов. В ходе длительной борьбы между Халифатом и Византийской империей, каждый из противников старался привлечь на свою сторону Армению”.



Figure 5 Annenkov, Y. *Portrait of Mikhail Babentchikov*. 1921. © The Charnel-House

totally relevant from a historical point of view. Indeed, during the seventh century, relations between Armenia and Byzantium were rather complex (Maranci 2013-14). What is surprising, however, is the generally very adversarial tone with respect to the Byzantine Empire and the repeated insistence on the concept of Armenia between two evils. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this rhetoric could have been interpreted as a veiled aspiration for independ-

ence, a disturbing geopolitical scenario in the likelihood of which Vortsov-Dashkov had been trying to dissuade Nicholas II. Now, in the course of the second global conflict, in which Armenian people were to show their absolute loyalty and subordination to Stalin's regime in distress, any concept suggesting national autonomy or an autochthonous origin would have been considered treason, even in academic papers with minimal readership.

Obviously, in specific studies, the autonomy of Armenian art from Byzantine art had always been present. Our impression is, however, that it is precisely with the Second World War that the reinterpretation of the past is significantly detached from the historiography of imperial tradition. Scholars began to surmise that Armenia had a potential for independence in its history. But to do this, they had to revise the concept of a country residing next to a neighbouring all-powerful empire which had been the conventional worldview of the scholars writing from the imperial Russian perspective (not to mention that by all accounts the Christian paradigm from its origin had been founded on stories in which this concept was providentially essential).

Deconstructing Russia's old imperial mentality, the Bolsheviks had to cancel the role of the Byzantine Empire as a true origin for the Russian culture and history which had been central for philosophers, religious leaders, and politicians for decades (Berdjaev 2012, 33; Leont'ev 2005). A vision of Armenia as an autochthonous entity had been in synch with the endeavours of the Bolsheviks to cast off the past with its continuity into the present and ascertain the nature of the people they annexed in their sheer existence as pure assets of modernisation and industrialization torn from their traditional agricultural ways and religious beliefs.

With the old concept of cultural, historical, and spiritual succession being demolished, new inquiries into the past obviously lacked symbolic interpretations. But the perils that the USSR was thrown into from the beginning of the war called for a change of roles for its national republics which had been for two decades subjected to new policies as the war created ultimate uncertainty. Statistics that are known today allow us to draw a picture of Armenia and its people as well as the Diaspora in a state of proactive engagement in many contexts. In the course of the *korenizatsija*, 'indigenization' of 1929-1933, the Soviet party leaders in Moscow considered the Armenians as a culturally advanced nation to be treated preferentially in human resource policies and decisions concerning leadership positions (along with the ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Jews, and Germans) (Martin 2001, 23, 56). Considering the general 10% literacy of the cultural minorities in the USSR, 36% of Armenians (46% for the Russians) were literate and along with Georgians "overrepresented in higher education" of the Union (Martin 2001, 166). In the context of ethnicity and nationality, Armenia had the lowest percentage

of Russians living in its territory, constituting only 4% of the population (21,000) by 1939, compared to other republics (Martin 2001, 77, 460). The linguistic *korenizatsija* in Armenia had been achieved rapidly with its experienced Bolsheviks, who immediately assumed leadership positions. Soviet Armenia had influential native speakers, such as Anastas Mikoyan, who occupied top party positions (Martin 2001, 77). By 1939, Armenian indices were remarkably more advanced as compared to other republics in such categories as the percent of Armenians in the total population in the republic (82.8%), the percent of Armenian white collar employees (85.6%, the highest among the republics), the *korenizatsija* rate (103.9%, the highest among the republics). In all these indices Armenia had dominated since 1926 (Martin 2001, 380). The figures suggest that Armenia had been ready to receive the status of a Soviet republic with its borders and modernised identity in 1936, when Moscow abolished the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic and therefore recognised the possibility of establishing a political entity whose overall potential had been very promising (Reynolds 2011, 265). In a way, Armenia could have been an exemplary object of the Soviet rhetoric of decolonization which in due time would arrive in such contexts as history of art.

The participation of Armenian people, both in Armenia and the Diaspora, in the Second World War is a story with very controversial turns, irreconcilable as they are in this inquiry, but which can be related to the question of the radical changes in art history discourse. The war did challenge the unfavourable geopolitical circumstances in which Armenia had always found itself in history. Scholars enumerate facts proving that the concept of one nation in distress between two powerful empires at war had called to action Armenian nationalists and separatists active on both sides of the battle lines.

Soviet Armenia supplied about 300,000 soldiers to join the 'Great Patriotic war', about 23% of the republic's population. More than 50 Soviet generals were Armenians, 32,000 soldiers were decorated in the war, and over 100 were awarded with the star of the 'Hero of the Soviet Union' (Walker 1990, 355-6). The 89th Infantry Rifle Division, recruited among Armenians, was awarded the Order of Kutuzov for its role in the capture of Berlin - the only Red Army national unit to enter the German capital. As one of its veterans recollected, many of the Armenian soldiers expressed a particular eagerness to take part in capturing Berlin on account of the role of the German Empire as an ally of the Ottoman Empire during the 1915 Armenian Genocide (Hakobyan 1991, 299).

At the end of the war, Armenian loyalty and aspirations coincided with the Soviet expansionistic politic, namely, Stalin's plans to return Kars and Ardahan; this had been preceded by many petitions which Armenian organisations had been sending to the Big Three in 1945, wishing for territorial annexations.



Figure 6 Portrait of Sedrak Barkhudaryan. Illustration from: *Sedrak Barkhudaryan - 120. Collection of scientific articles*, Yerevan 2019, 6

However remote these dramatic events in Armenia may seem from medieval art history, they affected the scholarly discourse, emphasizing the autochthonous nature of Armenian cultural heritage. In 1948, Mikhail Babentchikov [fig. 5], a Soviet art historian, wrote a book in which he attempted to reshape the discourse.



Figure 7
Chgalpachč'jan, O. (1971). *Graždanskoe zодчество Armenii. Žilye i obščestvennye zdanija*. Moskva: Izd. Literatury po Stroitel'stvu

Works of art of the Caucasus have been studied most often as auxiliary material, which had no independent academic value and necessary only to illuminate the historical development mainly of Byzantine art. (Babenčikov 1948, 13)¹⁷

He goes further, however, giving an explanation for this fact:

All this was a direct consequence of the tsars' colonial policies. "Tsarism, - according to the words of comrade I.V. Stalin, - constrained, and sometimes simply abolished the local school, theatre educational institutions in order to keep the masses in darkness. Tsarism suppressed any initiative of the best people of the local population. Finally, tsarism killed every activity of the people on the outskirts of the country". (14)¹⁸

17 "Произведения искусства Закавказья изучались чаще всего как подсобный материал, не имевший самостоятельного научного значения и необходимый лишь для освещения исторического развития главным образом византийского искусства".

18 "Все это являлось прямым следствием царской колониальной политики. Царизм, — по словам товарища И.В. Сталина, - стеснял, а иногда просто упразднял мастную школу, театр, просветительные учреждения для того, чтобы держать массы в темноте. Царизм пресекал всякую инициативу лучших людей местного населения. Наконец, царизм убивал всякую активность народных масс окраин".

It is clear that the art-historical discourse was reacting to changes in the national politics which had been forged during the war and due to its outcomes. Victorious, as the rest of the USSR, Armenia now could enjoy the fruits of renationalization which had been denied to the country under the Russian Empire. Stalin granted the people their new identity free from the ghosts of the ancient Christian empire, thus securing its status in the idea of the new renationalized and cultured nationhood seeking new continuity with the past.

Expecting a liberal thawing of the Soviet politics after the war, about 150,000 Armenian repatriates flocked to Armenia, which was also part of Stalin's expansionistic plans. In 1949, this active national measure would result in purges against 'nationalists' and the subsequent repressive relocation of 15,700 Armenians to the Altai region of the USSR (Walker 1990, 361, 363; Torosyan 2013, 78).

If we were to summarise in some way what we have asserted so far, the perception of the architecture of the Caucasus in general and of Armenia in particular, in the years after the revolution, continues along the lines of the nineteenth century. The Caucasus is considered to be a very artistically consistent region and an integral part of the Byzantine world. In Marxist rhetoric, however, this is perceived in an increasingly negative way. In the wartime years, then, there is - at least in specialised literature - a significant change in direction: the image of Byzantium 'completely loses its positive connotation' as an ancestor of the empire and is identified as an external aggressor. Just a few years later, Babentchikov explicitly states that regarding the Caucasus as a provincial entity was a result of the colonial attitude of the tsarist empire and that this situation had no historical legitimacy. What was stated above thus finds an explanation in the development of the question of nation within the Soviet empire. In this case, too, the movement is a consequence of the Second World War.

Such a tendency also appears to be perfectly logical in a more general cultural policy of the USSR in these years. Indeed, while describing the country's dominant artistic movement, social realism, Stalin used the very famous words: "Socialist in content, national in form" (Martin, Suny 2001, 67-82). Thus, the reflection on past cultures can be seen as mirroring the reflection of coeval cultural policy. Furthermore, it shows how the 'national' question has been mediated, into Stalin's years, through a reflection on arts and culture.

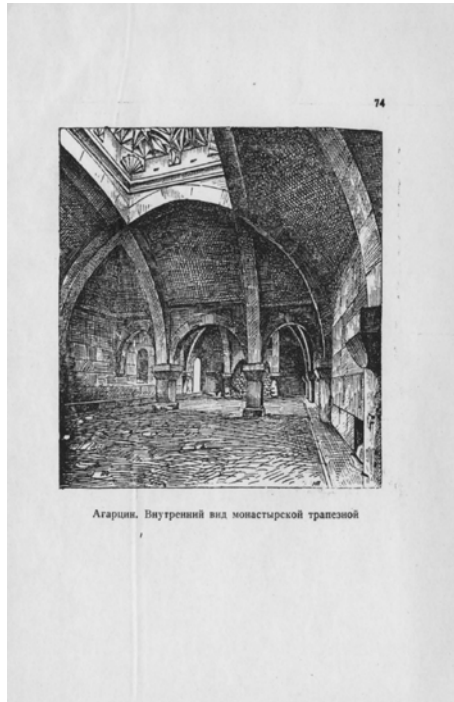


Figure 8

Armenian *Gavit*. Illustration from:
Tokarskij, N. (1961). *Arhitektura Armenii:
IV-XIV vv.* Yerevan: Armgosizdat, 74

4 From Khrushchev to Breznev: A Marxist View of Armenian Art

In the years before and just after the Second World War, the last years of Stalin, the perspective on monumental Armenian art is profoundly changed by the political situation in the Soviet Union. The medieval past is 'condemned' due to the weight that religion had or for reasons that seem to be directly linked to the global conflict. What is interesting, however, is that there do not seem to be direct relations with Marxist philosophy. This aspect seems to change over the sixties and seventies. While it is not possible to give an account here of the studies and general publications in those years, certain aspects consistently emerge. First of all, already outlined in previous years, is the question of religion. Wherever possible, the role of Christianity in Armenian art and architecture is blurred or even silenced. This is the case, for example, of a study by Sedrak Barkhudaryan (1898-1970), who dedicates a monograph to the study of *khachkars* (stelae decorated with crosses), which are absolutely essential to Armenian identity [fig. 6]. He describes these monuments in general:

Khachkars occupy a significant place among the monuments of medieval Armenia. The earliest prototypes of them are the menhirs, which received their perfect design in the Urartu era and continued to be erected until the nineteenth century. These Khachkar steles were erected with very different goals: as monuments of victories, as boundary stones, as architectural patterns, etc. On the basis of rich illustrative material, the speaker shows the development of khachkars from ancient times. A large number of dated khachkars bear the names of authors-artists and therefore are important for the study and dating of architectural ornamentation and architectural structures, as well as for identifying schools of carving artists. (Martirosjan 1957, 124)¹⁹

These few lines describe the phenomenon in a fairly faithful manner, aside for one fact: there is no mention of the fact that they feature crosses. This is not surprising, considering Barkhudaryan's biography: a promising scholar, he was arrested in 1938 and spent the next seventeen years in Stalinist camps. Cleared in 1954, he certainly understood how dangerous the regime was. This kind of self-censorship can certainly be comprehended in the context of a biography distorted by the Stalinist regime (Grigoryan 2005, 193).

In addition to the denial of elements of the past, though, Marxist criticism was probably also responsible for a new approach. Given its role in the promotion of the proletariat class, and also considering its complex philosophical approach, Marxist thought was at the base of an original methodology. An early example can be seen in the approach of Oganēs Halpahchan (1907-1995) who, in 1971, published a volume entitled *Civil Architecture in Armenia* [fig. 7]. His work was dedicated to describing the medieval Armenian city with careful attention to all the practical details of civil life. The volume includes pages dedicated to latrines, shops, and even religious structures (Chgalpachč'jan 1971). His attention to the social history (of art) is evident. This is clearly a completely logical point of view in the Marxist environment, where the preoccupation with daily life of the 'little' people was one of the founding pillars of artistic and cultural production.

19 “Среди памятников средневековой Армении значительное место занимают хачкары. Древнейшим прототипам их являются менгиры, которые получили свою совершенную конструкцию еще в урартскую эпоху и продолжали воздвигаться до XIX вв. Эти стелы-хачкары воздвигались с весьма разными целями: как памятники побед, как межевые камни, как архитектурный орнамент и пр. На основе богатого иллюстративного материала докладчик показывает процесс развития хачкаров начиная с древнейших времен. Большое количество датированных хачкаров с именами авторов-художников имеет важное значение для изучения и датировки архитектурной орнаментики и архитектурных сооружений, а также для выявления школ художников-резчиков”.



Figure 9 Alexey Lidov in Armenia. 1987. © Private archive Alexey Lidov

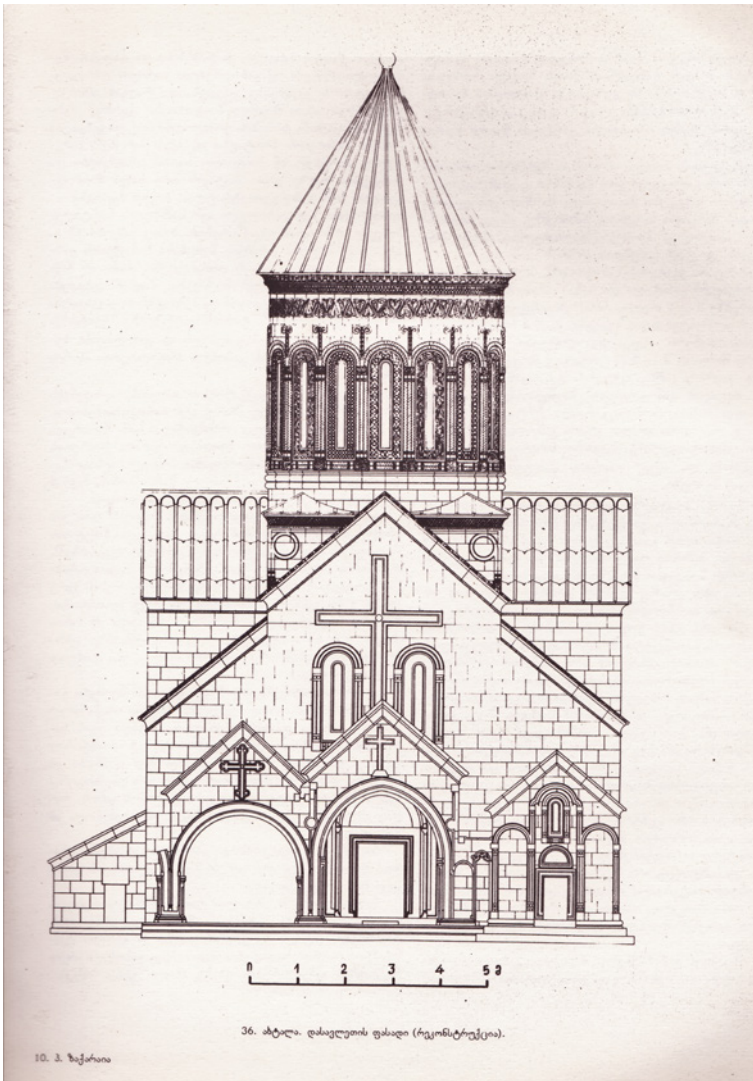


Figure 10 The Main Church of Akhtala. Illustration from: Zakariaia, P. (1990). *Georgian Architecture*. Tbilisi

Just two years after Barkhudaryan's book, a volume with a very different angle appears, written by Nikolay Tokarskiy (1961). In this work [fig. 8] – which is composed of four relatively independent essays on Armenian architecture – four basic questions are explored. The first essay is basically historiographical, as it addresses Marr's

excavations, mentioned earlier. The second focuses on civil architecture, and the third is dedicated to the civil architecture of Ani. The last essay discusses specific features of Armenian architecture from the fourth to the seventh centuries. The second and third essays can be considered, given the point of view adopted, to be the result of a method (and a mentality) that is similar to Barkhudaryan's work. Tokarskiy's volume is much more scholarly, but the viewpoint of these two works is fundamentally similar. Another important aspect: judging by their surnames, the two scholars are of Armenian and Russian 'nationality', respectively. Both, however, demonstrate a similar point of view. This is, we believe, proof of the fact that, in the seventies, the USSR reached a climax both in its unity and in its ideological consistency.

Tokarskiy's work, however, offers one further important element: the strictly formalistic method used to classify Armenian architecture in the last chapter. This is not an exceptional feature, given that a similar approach can be seen in countries beyond the Iron Curtain in those same years – such as Longhi's studies in Italy. The spread of a formalistic approach in the countries of the ex-Soviet bloc does not seem to be unintended: dedicating oneself completely to form was a clever way to avoid addressing iconographic and therefore religious content.

Therefore, what emerges in the USSR's peak years – in the years when the Helsinki Agreement (1973-1975) was signed (Suny 1993, 187) – is the establishment of a decidedly Marxist point of view on Armenian art. The absolute priority for this point of view is the social history of art, while religious culture remains, in line with previous years, in the margins. It is interesting to note that Byzantium – perceived for decades as an integral part of reflections on the art of the Caucasus – seems to simply disappear in studies dedicated to Armenian art. Instead, the notion of Armenian 'national art' appears on the horizon.

5 Gorbachev and the Fall of the Empire: The Studies of Alexej Lidov

The several decades' long merger with the USSR had turned the nation into a controversial whole. Politically, in 1953-1988, the republic was led by four ethnic Armenian leaders in a row (Suny 1993, 182). Officially, throughout the Soviet years, Armenia remained a nation, retaining its language as the official language of the republic (unlike other Soviet republics), although Russification was powerful: 71.3% of Armenians spoke Russian as their second language (Suny 1993, 184). Armenians were not disinclined to reside elsewhere in the USSR (34.5% of all Soviet Armenians) (Suny 1993, 185). Armenian parents

encouraged their children to apply to a university in Moscow or Leningrad (Payaslian 2007, 184-6). Despite the consistent anti-nationalist policies of the Soviet government, the nation solidified itself so that the 1989 census revealed that 93,3% of the population were Armenians (Suny 1993, 185). Even in matters of religion, Armenia could boast a leader who was unofficially regarded as the leader of the nation. During the demonstration of 1965 in Erevan, the Catholic Vazgen I was among those who were considered to be instrumental in pacifying the protesters, which would have been an unheard of scenario in Central Russia (Suny 1993, 186).

The eighties in the Soviet Union corresponded to epochal changes after Breznev's death and a rapid succession to the power of the 'old guard' when Mikhail Gorbachev was nominated as head of the party. As we know, one of the crucial reasons for what was called the 'implosion' of an empire was certainly the question of nation. In this context, Alexey Lidov's research deserves special attention [fig. 9]. At that point, he was a graduate student at the State University of Moscow.

Lidov dedicated his brilliant research to the Church of Akhtala [fig. 10] and, more specifically, to its decoration. This well-known building is representative of an interesting moment in Armenian history, when most of the territories of historical Armenia were included in the kingdom of the Georgian Queen Tamar (1184-1213). According to Lidov, however, the monastery is a place where the two cultures overlap:

At different times the region was part of the Kingdom of Georgia but it remained a stronghold of Armenian culture. (Lidov 1991, 332)

This general observation, however, according to Lidov, can be identified in its architectural structure. We read:

In accordance with Georgian tradition the facades of the church are decorated with large ornamental crosses with elongated windows at their base. There are also typically Armenian elements in the decor of the portals and individual motifs of the ornament. The combination of these two traditions is the most important characteristic of the architectural treatment of the Akhtala church. (333)

But the question is also confessional, given that the two populations professed different Christian beliefs. About this, Lidov writes:

The strong Chalcedonian sympathies of the area clashed with the most conservative aspects of the Armenian Church which, in times of increased danger, adopted an uncompromising attitude to people of other confessions. This situation became acute in the late 12th and 13th centuries when the region was ruled by two broth-



Figure 11 Carrère d'Encausse, H. (1978). *L'empire éclaté: la révolte des nations en U.R.S.S.* Paris: Flammarion

ers, the Monophysite Zakare and the Chalcedonian Ivane Mkhargrdzeli of the princely house of the Zakharids. (7)

The family of the Zakharids is a crucial element, not only because of the Akhtala Monastery. The two brothers came from the Armenian culture. The second, Ivane, embraced the Chalcedonian faith. Their reign must therefore be seen ecumenically.

This is what Lidov proves, observing several inscriptions present in the church and where the hierarchies of the two currents of Christianity are mentioned together. The scholar concludes that:

There must be some special reason for so close a connection between a Chalcedonian and Monophysite hīgumenos. Perhaps it reflects a deliberate policy [...] to bring the main monasteries of the two confessions closer together and thereby reduce the acrimony of the religious disputes in his territories. (13)

This harmony, according to the scholar, was sought in the political situation. Tamar entrusted positions of extreme prestige to the two brothers, despite the fact that they were initially Monophysites. Lidov cites an ancient Georgian chronicle that emphasises this situation. He then continues with the following words:

It is hard to say why Tamar entrusted such high posts to Monophysites. But she was certainly not mistaken in her choice. Taking the Queen's place at the head of the Georgian-Armenian forces, Zakare and Ivane began to win one brilliant victory after another, annexing new lands for Georgia, subduing the Muslim emirates and winning great riches. [...] By the beginning of the thirteenth century a large part of Greater Armenia had been liberated. The brothers announce this proudly in the Armenian inscription at the Hovanavank Monastery. (15)

Lidov also dwells on Ivane's conversion to the Chalcedonian faith, which he does not interpret as a betrayal, but as a key political gesture (17). Ivane then helps make the alliance between the two (Christian) peoples facing a stronger outside threat. In Lidov's research, Ivane becomes an even more interesting and ecumenical figure, given that he is in direct contact with Rome:

In a letter of 1224 to Pope Honorius III about the concerted action with the Crusaders to conquer Jerusalem, Ivane calls the Pope 'the head of all Christians' and himself 'your humble and obedient son'. It is possible that this tolerance in religious matters was largely determined by his belonging to the Armenian-Chalcedonian circles. (18)

Lidov summarises Ivane's activities with the following words:

One can conclude that in the activities of Ivane Mkhargrdzeli political and confessional tasks were organically combined, insofar as both Zakharid Armenia and the Armenian-Chalcedonian Church could develop successfully only given peaceful coexistence and the gradual convergence of the different confessions. (18)

This is a very interesting reflection, and is clearly proven by the sources. Lidov also opens up an almost completely unexplored field of research. Published in Russian and in English 1991, the year of the Soviet Union's collapse, his transcultural and ecumenical viewpoint would become, as the study presented in this volume by the article by Patrick Donabédian demonstrates, one of the most productive lines for the study of artistic production of the sub-Caucasian area two decades later.

In this case, too, we wonder if the orientation of Lidov's point of view was, at least subconsciously, determined by the historical context he was working in. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse had already suggested in 1978, in her epochal volume *La chute de l'Empire* (fig. 11), that the USSR would disintegrate following nationalist tendencies, something that proved true (Carrère d'Encausse 1978). The Caucasus was one of the particularly 'hot' places in the events that led to the collapse of the country.

Within the period of the sixties and eighties, Armenia was a country that had been learning to be an integral part of the USSR, on the one hand, with burgeoning nationalistic forces stirring it from within, on the other. In the year 1965, Erevan saw a mass demonstration commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide in which demands for reunification of the historic Armenian territories were heard. Dealing with the issue, the Kremlin eventually permitted the construction of the Genocide Monument at Tsitsernakaberd (Dzidzernagapert). In 1966, Armenians in Karabagh petitioned the government in Erevan expressing grievances against Azerbaijani rule. By 1975, the leaders of the Communist Party in Azerbaijan and that of Armenia had heated discussions over the Armenian claim to the mountainous Karabagh territories; the issue remained unresolved by the Brezhnev government. But officially the nationalistic movement in Armenia had been non-existent. The acts of terror which were attributed to it received very little exposure, if any at all, in the Soviet press; for example, the explosion in the 1977 Moscow Pervomaiskaia metro station, which killed seven people and wounded thirty-seven, was allegedly organised by members of Armenia's secret National Unity Party (NUP) (Payaslian 2007, 184-6).

Educated in Moscow, Lidov obviously had a different outlook on nationalistic tensions. Also, considering the years in which he was

educated, he was trained by a generation that, from the perspective of the Soviet capital, considered the USSR to be a single intellectual and methodological unit, despite differences in language and culture. It is therefore tempting to suppose that, in light of the USSR being in the grip of nationalistic tensions, Lidov would decide to study (consciously or unconsciously, only he would be able to say) a historical moment when the peoples of the Caucasus made union their strength.

6 Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this is the first step towards a broader reflection that we hope to carry out in the coming years. The studies we have chosen for this paper are representative, but only more exhaustive research can give further depth to the thoughts explained above. What emerges clearly is that, even before the birth of the USSR and for the duration of its existence, Armenian art and architecture was not a neutral subject. Viewpoints concerning these monuments served as a mirror of several issues that were central to Soviet identity.

In the early years, this identity is still weak and only marginally interferes with the studies. However, after Stalin's rise to power, official ideology would have an increasingly greater place in art-historical studies. First, it was necessary to remodel the past with a new social and 'objective' method resulting in Marx and Stalin becoming the authorities condemning Byzantium and Imperial Russia respectively. The last stage of this journey, made possible only by the changes promoted by Gorbachev, would be very different: the medieval Christian Caucasus would become a place of transcultural exchange, drastically different from the USSR in profound crisis.

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