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Women of Transition: Collective Memory in Azerbaijan Republic

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Women of Transition: Collective Memory in Azerbaijan Republic

Master's Thesis

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I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis solely by myself and I agree with its eventual publication in print or electronic form. All sources and literature have been properly cited. This work has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague, June 22, 2023

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Husniyya Hashimova

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Introduction

Collective memory is a vital element of Historical Sociology that is significantly interconnected with a group's historical consciousness and collective identity. Historical study of the events tells us what happened, whereas collective memory embarks on epistemic relativism. The epistemological description of the past is not always objective as it is conditioned on sociological, political and psychological factors. In other words, what happened does not necessarily align with how it is remembered. Although the concept of collective memory is often associated with Maurice Halbwachs, it became popular in academia in the late 1990s, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Collective memory of transition, the theoretical framework this thesis is built on, is a bridge between past, present and future. It does not only analyze how the shared past is remembered by a certain group but also sheds light on how the collective identity of this group is constructed and what its future implications are. Understanding how socio-political transformation is remembered can uncover and predict political behavior of collectivities. Thus, collective memory is an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses historical sociology, and political anthropology.

This paper studies the collective memory of Azerbaijani women of transition. My interest for this topic grew out of my curiosity when I noticed that Azerbaijani women who have lived under the Soviet regime were feeling nostalgic for the past yet complaining about it simultaneously. This dichotomy made me pursue this degree in order to gain enough theoretical knowledge to be able to conduct my own research. This is when I found out that this specific demographic group – Azerbaijani women aged fifty and above – has been neglected in existing scholarship (except some research data related to gender issues, and Karabakh conflict) as well as the topic itself– collective memory of Soviet to post-Soviet transition in Azerbaijani – is under-researched. The only relevant profound research data that I could find is Farideh Heyat's book, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, written in 2002.

A lot has happened that has fostered the collective memory and identity of Azerbaijani women since then. The objective of this paper is to draw attention to the gap in the existing scholarship, as well as add new empirical data to the study of Azerbaijan, which is a unique country with a complex identity and is geo-politically important. The paper seeks to find answers to two research questions:

1. How do Azerbaijani women of transition remember the Soviet past?

2. How did collective memory (de/re) construct collective identity of Azerbaijani women of transition or vice versa?

In order to answer these questions, I had two field trips to four cities of Azerbaijan in June 2019 and September 2022. The goal of the first trip was to conduct a preliminary research to test the methodology, whereas the latter aimed at collecting primary data. The thesis is based on ten qualitative interviews that I conducted during my second field trip.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: the first chapter studies three key domains of the thesis – history, memory, and identity, and theorizes their intersection. First, I list important historical events that might have influenced collective memory and the construction of identity of Azerbaijani women. Then, I discuss two main theories related to collective memory – nostalgia and cultural trauma. Finally, I explore how collective remembering of the Soviet past and identity are interconnected. The chapter is based on two studies – *Azeri Women in transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* by Farideh Heyat, and *'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things* by Daphne Berdahl. The second chapter discusses the methodological framework of the thesis. It depicts how I designed and conducted research in Azerbaijan.

The third chapter illustrates the key research findings. I uncover how Azerbaijani women of transition recall the Soviet past and the Soviet to post-Soviet transition and how their identity has been shaped by or has shaped their collective memory. I give comparisons of my findings with existing scholarship where necessary. The fourth chapter analyzes the research findings. The main focus here is the analysis of the de(re) construction of identity. I conclude the chapter with theoretical implications of the research. Finally, practical implications of the thesis and recommendations for further research are described in the Conclusion.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

What differentiates the present from past and future is a change or in other words, a transformation. We remember the past by recalling a specific event that has happened. It is also determined by a certain course of events that existed within a specific time frame. *What happened* is usually different from *how it is remembered.* Our memory is interlinked with *who we are* – our individual and collective identity. During the course of historical events our identity is subject to changes as well. This chapter examines these three key domains – *history*, *memory*, and *identity* against a backdrop of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as well as theorizes their intersection.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by depicting general characteristics of history. Although the paper examines collective memory, it would be irrational to dismiss the historical background of a period that is remembered. That being said, I list several important dates in Soviet Azerbaijan history to prepare the ground for future referential points. Here, I only consider several key events that took place in seven decades that might be influential in women's lives.

In the second section, I define collective memory by employing Halbwach's theory. Then, I illustrate two possible ways to recall the past – *nostalgia* and *cultural trauma*. I review existing studies of the post-Soviet collective memory of women. Given the fact that there is a scarcity of research in this area, I mainly draw on two papers – *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* by Farideh Heyat, a British-Iranian anthropologist and *'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things* by Daphne Berdahl, a German anthropologist.

The last section of this chapter examines collective identity. I highlight construction of a new individual and collective identity through Sovietization and collectivization respectively. Then, I explore how the Soviet to post-Soviet transition deconstructed Soviet identity and how "remembered past" reconstructed new identities. The evidence is taken from the above-mentioned papers.

1.1 History

Imagine wandering around a museum, looking at artifacts behind red barriers or under glass stands that once were ordinary and common to use. They are protected and kept intact now

because they are of great value, not necessarily valuable by nature but we attribute a meaning to those artifacts that make them precious. They are usually a representation of a triumph, invention, noteworthy occurrence or suppression by an enemy. Simply put, they are a representation of the past. History plays the same role. It archives the records of the past, through chronicles and *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) and passes the knowledge to next generations. “Lieux de mémoire”, Nora (1989) argues, “originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (p. 12).

History is often considered a reliable and valid reference to point out what happened in the past. History is critical, analytical, universal, single and prosaic (Halbwach, 1950/1980; Nora, 1989). However, I agree with this argument only to some extent. History can be manipulated, not only by masses but also top-down. It is visible when we compare a historical description of an occurrence or period in several sources. Here, I do not discuss how we remember the past. My argument is that “history in the making” is recorded subjectively and usually purposefully. The illustration of an ongoing occurrence is constructed even before it gains a status of a historical event. Since this paper analyzes a history-memory-identity relation in the context of the Soviet Union, we should not turn a blind eye to *Soviet propaganda.* In Soviet doctrine, history as a science has no objective content but expresses the tastes and preferences of the ruling classes (Zemtsov, 1991, p. 153). To sum up, history is neither universal nor single. Once constructed and archived, history is now subject to further interpretations by individuals and groups who either have or have not witnessed it directly.

In this section, I reflect upon a certain time period and space – 1920-1991, Azerbaijan. In order to avoid bias, I attempt to list some historical events without interpretations of mine or of the source. Before I continue, I acknowledge that a critical thorough analysis of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) history lies beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I aim to highlight several key historical events that might have a major impact on the lives of Azerbaijani women in chronological order.

To start with, it is noteworthy to mention that prior to the establishment of Azerbaijan SSR, there was an enlightenment movement and cultural revival in Azerbaijan in the late XIX century that paved the way to foundation of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) on May 28, 1918. Depicted in the National Charter, ADR guaranteed to all its citizens full civil and political rights, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, class, profession, or sex (Świętochowski, 1985, p. 129). Some of the developments of this twenty-three months of independence are

women's suffrage, achieved as early as 1918, and promotion of higher education. On April 28, 1920, with the support of the Azerbaijan Communist Party and fear of possible bloodshed by the Russian XI Red Army, Azerbaijani independent statehood officially ended, giving way to the Azerbaijan SSR.

Held in Baku in 1920, Congress of the Peoples of the East was a multinational conference that aimed at supporting revolutionary anti-colonial nationalist movements of the East. On September 7 – seventh session on rights of women, demands of communist women – "complete equality of rights; ensuring for women unconditional opportunity to make use of the educational and vocational-training institutions established for men; equality of rights of both parties to marriage; unconditional abolition of polygamy; unconditional admission of women to employment in legislative and administrative institutions; everywhere, in cities, towns and villages, committees for the rights and protection of women to be established" – were pronounced (Pearce, 1977, pp. 149-150).

The 1930s saw the Great Purge in which many people were arrested and sent to either forced labor or prison camps. Data (Zemskov, 1997) shows that women constituted around 9% of the penitentiary population in the years 1934-1940. Azerbaijani intelligentsia was also subject to prosecutions, arrests and repression. The most prominent female victims were Khadija Gayibova – Azerbaijani pianist, and Ayna Sultanova – statesperson and editor-in-chief of *Sharg Gadyny* (Eastern Woman), a Communist magazine aimed at women's emancipation.

In 1936, a draft decree on abortion and divorce was published. The results were a ban on abortion in all cases except potentially life-threatening ones, as well as more difficult and expensive divorce. Unfortunately, there is no reliable quantitative data to showcase the number of illegal abortion or public opinion on this draft decree in Azerbaijan SSR. In 1944, *Mother Heroine*, an honorary title, was established to award women for raising a large family.

During the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), Azerbaijani women alongside men fought against Nazi Germany. More than 300 000 Azerbaijani soldiers did not come back home that left thousands of Azerbaijani women widowed. Those women who did not participate in war replaced men in agriculture, especially collectivized cotton production. Rather than women being forced to do laborious work, they were encouraged to do so. Many women were awarded the *Master of Cotton of the Azerbaijan SSR* honorary title. Besides the death toll and hard physical labor, there was a shortage of goods, especially bread and personal hygiene products.

During the de-Stalinization period, several reforms were achieved. In 1955, abortion was legalized again. Starting from the mid-1950s, the rural population was provided with passports which gave an impetus to urban migration (Hasanli, 2015). During the Brezhnev

regime, consumer habits of Soviet people started to change. Youngsters were exposed to Western pop culture with the arrival of the audio and videocassettes. With the changing demands of customers, the number of black markets increased that ultimately altered shopping dynamics.

Although the 1980s marked *perestroika* and *glasnost* by Gorbachev, social and economic issues were not on agenda due to Azerbaijani-Armenian clashes that resulted in the first Karabakh War (1988-1994) and invasion of Mountainous part of Karabakh and seven surrounding territories of Azerbaijan. The seeds of the Karabakh conflict were sown in 1921. There were discussions, with Stalin in attendance, to include Mountainous part of Karabakh in the composition of the Armenian SSR. Although it did not happen in practice, "in effect, a delayed-action bomb was placed under Azerbaijan statehood, in order to cause an explosion when Russia left the Caucasus" (Hasanli, 2017, p. 157). In the meantime, Azerbaijani people faced two tragedies – *Black January* (1990) and *Khojaly Massacre* (1992) that left indelible marks on national consciousness and had a tremendous influence on the formation of national identity.

The reason why I am hesitant about this historical period in my research is because, as stated above, the national consciousness of Azerbaijani people is built on the Karabakh issue, especially after the second Karabakh War (2020) and many Azerbaijanis associate this conflict and its byproducts with Russia. Hasanli predicted this as early as 2017 in his book, stating that "after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Karabakh question became an efficient mechanism of controlling the region in Russia's hands" (Hasanli, 2017, p. 157). In order to separate life under the USSR from ongoing political relations with Russia, as well as Soviet identity from national identity, I decided to be on alert about this time frame (1980-1991) when conducting my research because it is whole another dimension in the collective memory of Azerbaijani women who lost their fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands starting from 1980s till today in both Karabakh wars.

1.2 Memory

The socio-linguistic paradigm of memory is quite wide. Apart from an ability to remember, memory is an individual and collective recollection of the past. In the latter definition, memory is subject to interpretations. Several terms are used to describe the act of looking back in time. Although certain terms such as history, commemoration, revivification, and nostalgia, all refer

to the past, they cannot be used interchangeably. As stated earlier, history is a record of events. History does not study transition between two single events. Rather, it believes that nothing happens between what precedes and follows. Changes are regarded as normal and continuation of each other. Nora (1989) argues that history is an intellectual and secular production, whereas memory is an emotional and sacred production.

The sociological study of memory has long been neglected in social sciences, whereas history has been regarded as a more reliable domain to comprehend and analyze the past. It was not until 1925 when Maurice Halbwachs, a founding father of social memory studies, wrote his work on memory. His work on collective memory is especially indispensable. Halbwachs (1950/1980) differentiates collective memory from history. First, as opposed to history, collective memory is marked by irregular and uncertain boundaries. Second, history is unitary, whereas there is more than one collective memory.

Apart from individual memory of a certain event, we may also remember something that we have not witnessed directly. When analyzing the social shape of the past, Zerubavel (2004) argues that we transform unstructured series of historical events into *historical narratives*. Narratives carry memories within a group that becomes a memory of the group. He identifies several types of historical narratives: progress, decline and zigzag. All of these plotlines are unilinear. However, Zerubavel (2004) also mentions multilinear plotlines which are not discussed here. He argues that “the progress narrative indicates an idealized future, whereas the decline narrative presupposes a highly romanticized past” (p. 16). According to the progress narrative, there will be improvement and development by time. On the other hand, in the decline narrative, things are getting deteriorated and regressed as time passes. Third narrative features both progress and decline. It implies that history is full of upward and downward changes that replace each other all the time. In this section, I indicate two possible ways to remember the past – nostalgia and cultural trauma, based on above-mentioned historical narratives. The starting point of the change is set to 1991 – collapse of the USSR and independence of Azerbaijan Republic.

1.2.1 The Good Old Days: Post-Soviet Nostalgia

Before I start elaborating on this social phenomenon, let us first look at the etymology of the term. Nostalgia, derived from Greek *(nostos* – return home and *algia* – agony) means homesickness as well as a wistful or excessively sentimental sometimes abnormal yearning for

return to or return of some real or romanticized period or irrecoverable condition or setting in the past (Webster's third new international dictionary, 1993, p. 1542). The term, first coined by Hofer in 1688 to describe homesickness among Swiss mercenaries, lost its initial etymological meaning a long time ago.

As a matter of fact, the term has been demilitarized and demedicalized and it can be traced in our daily communication frequently. The clinical nature of the term has been deconstructed. That being the case, nostalgia has a different connotation now. But how did this semantic shift explain the cause of nostalgia if it is not clinical? Fred Davis (1979) argues that nostalgia is not caused by the past. In fact, it is confined to the present. He states that "nostalgia, the adoration of the past that triumphs over lamentations for the present is a reaction to a change" (1979, p. 16). When past experiences do not match with present experiences, or in other words, when continuity of experience is broken, a painful yearning for the past is born. It occurs both on individual and collective levels. Self-discontinuity evokes nostalgic reactions from individuals. Changing a job, place of residence, even a common milestone in our life cycle such as becoming an adult disrupts the continuity of self. For some individuals, it may lead to anxiety and unacceptance of the present. If the transition is not mitigated well, identity discontinuity paves the way to individual nostalgia in the long run.

On the other hand, an abrupt change in collective experience gives rise to collective nostalgia. What differentiates individual nostalgia from collective nostalgia is the fact that the latter occurs as a result of major historic events and sudden social changes. An individual may feel threatened by a social change too but when the past is shared with other members, memory in the group becomes memory of the group. We may assume that the world is full of discontinuities. The transition always happens, so does the discontinuity. That being the case, do we feel nostalgic all the time? The answer is no. When masses feel anxious of a change or event and find it difficult to adapt to the new order, it is precisely these states that Davis (1979) argues "nostalgia in its sometimes charming, sometimes pathetic way aims to arm us against" (p. 50).

As mentioned in this paper before, memory is not only a mental faculty but also a social construction. How we remember the past is shaped by the present. Halbwachs (1950/1980) explains that if a conflicting event introduces a new element inharmonious with the past, vague remembrance of what had gone ahead of this crisis would remain. It, in return, creates a fertile ground for group sentiments. Indeed, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, some people started feeling nostalgic of the Soviet days. The dissolution itself was one of the most profound social, political and economic transformations of the XX century. The byproduct of this social

change was the threatened identity of a Soviet man. Confused, anxious *Homo Sovieticus* (popularized by Aleksandr Zinovyev) started feeling nostalgic for yesterday and it gave birth to a new social phenomenon – *ostalgie*. The term is defined as nostalgia for the East in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Daphne Berdahl, a pioneering anthropologist who was known for her work in politics of memory, especially the concept of ostalgie, conducted research in 1990 in the former East German border village of Kella and carried out an ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Leipzig in 1998. By witnessing the immediate aftermath of the *Wende* (the transition) and Germany's reunification, she collected ethnographic data in Kella and published an article *'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things* in *Ethnos* in 1999. The paper illustrates the birth and boom of the nostalgia industry in the former GDR. Berdahl observed revival, reproduction, and commercialization of GDR products, as well as museumification of GDR everyday life as symbolic resistance to western German dominance and remembrance of the past. She argues that ostalgie discloses more about the present than the past. She concludes her thoughts about nostalgia as "it is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past" (Berdahl, 1999, p. 202).

Though ostalgie is mainly associated with GDR, the phenomenon is endemic to several post-Soviet countries, including Azerbaijan. Farideh Heyat, born in Tehran to Azerbaijani parents, is an anthropologist and writer who specializes in gender relations and the position of women in Azerbaijan. In 1992, she made her first trip to Baku where she conducted anthropological research during 1994-1995. As Berdahl, Heyat could also eyewitness the transition and collect firsthand data based on participant observation and life-history interviews with women. In her book, Heyat (2002) discusses the impact of Soviet policy and its dissolution on Azerbaijani women. Although she does not analyze the transition from the perspective of collective memory, the life-stories she collected while interviewing twenty women living in Baku give us a glimpse how respondents remembered the past within the time frame of the present. While analyzing the discourse of women about the transition, we may find out that some of the respondents feel nostalgic about the Soviet times. The narratives are mainly built around the pressures of transitional economy and changing dynamics of domesticity, femininity and womanhood. It is noteworthy to mention that when interviewees talk about the past, they often make comparisons of *back then* and *now*. The sentiments are valid only within the context of nowness.

The collapse of socialism brought along deep economic and social changes. Not all changes were in the positive direction. The *post-Soviet social earthquake* (Heyat, 2002) was so

tangible that she did not dismiss its catalyzers. Unemployment, sudden poverty and the changing nature of workplaces were to look at. Most of her respondents complain about economic instability. Heyat describes that many Azerbaijani people who suffered from the economic transition had a nostalgic perception of the past. Although in official outlets the Soviet regime was being criticized, in informal and sincere conversations with local people, she observed that many people, in fact, were missing the life under the Soviet system (Heyat, 2002, p. 20).

Another important remark is the influence of transition on the lives of women. During her fieldwork in Baku, Heyat observed the hardships of everyday life (e.g. lack of water supply, deteriorated condition of apartments). It made the domestic chores more difficult and time-consuming. The household burden on women confined them to houses unlike in the Soviet regime. Besides, Heyat mentions several examples of gender segregation such as genderization of public spaces in her book. Once working shoulder to shoulder in the *kolkhoz* (collective farm in the Soviet Union), women were not allowed to socialize in public spaces without the presence of an older or male family member. The discourses of women in her research are heavily overloaded with phrases such as *akhlaghiyat* (sexual morality, in Azerbaijani), *haya* (female shame, in Azerbaijani), *mahram* (close kin with whom marriage is prohibited, in Azerbaijani) to name a few. Taking the religious identity of Azerbaijanis into account, the line between Soviet and post-Soviet sociality in the context of gender is blurred. I attempt to shed light on it in the section dedicated to identity.

By looking at both academic works by Berdahl (1999) and Heyat (2002), we may summarize that in spite of shortcomings of the Soviet past, ostalgie can be prevalent in some post-Soviet societies. Herb Caen (1975, as cited in Davis, 1979) states that "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed". Whether it is in the form of resistance to or complaints about the present, nostalgia is a crucial part of collective consciousness. In my view, nostalgic sentiments of a certain past are evoked when a person is dissatisfied in the present. Thus, nostalgia is not remembering a past but the *lost* past.

1.2.2 On Cultural Trauma

Nostalgia is not the only way through which we remember the past. In some cases, a certain past is not glorified or missed, rather it evokes painful feelings. The difference is not determined by the nature of an occurrence but an individual and collective interpretation of it.

Those interpretations are stored in our memories and sometimes, transmitted through generations. When we recall that past, we tend to describe it as a traumatizing event and ourselves as being traumatized. The term – trauma is mainly conceptualized in the psychological and physical frameworks. Thus, when using it in our discourse, one should be careful in order to avoid semantic confusion.

Although the term has not been fully demedicalized, it is frequently used in social sciences. Similar to nostalgia, trauma also has social and cultural connotations. Here, I analyze a specific type of remembrance by applying the concept of *cultural trauma*. In contrast to the medical definition of trauma that involves a severe mental and physical pain, cultural trauma is an emotional reaction to an occurrence "that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander et al., 2004, p.1). The key word that needs to be underlined here is collective identity formation.

Cultural trauma occurs when a group is traumatized by an event or a sudden social change. An event itself, Alexander (2004) argues, is not the immediate culprit of trauma. Trauma is a social construct. Groups attribute traumatic status to an event selectively. Through symbolic interactions, narrative and discourse, the past becomes present and a new collective identity is constructed (Alexander et al., 2004). While I agree with this definition of cultural trauma and its causes that are linked to a social change and an event that is open to various interpretations, let me criticize this argument: "…collective actors decide to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go…" (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 10). When an experience is violent and results in an actual physical and psychological pain, in other words, cultural trauma is experienced together with physical or psychological trauma, groups are not privileged to decide whether it has a traumatic status or not. The notorious examples would be genocide, war crimes, physical and psychological torture, and forceful altercation of identity that actually cause pain, shock, and fear.

In analyzing historical legacies of political violence, Walden and Zhukov (2020) identify four types legacies: legacy of armed conflict (e.g. Karabakh War, Black January); mass repression and genocide (e.g. Great Purge, Khojaly genocide); institutions (communism); interpersonal violence (e.g. Sumgait and Baku pogroms). In the context of political violence, a legacy is a negative long-lasting effect of an event or process that leaves a durable influence on political behavior and attitudes; social behavior and attitudes; economic conditions; public

health outcomes (Walden and Zhukov, 2020). When individuals and groups are directly exposed to violence, legacy of it persists in the form of trauma.

Trauma can be experienced individually and collectively. If an individual is subject to the examples listed above, the person becomes psychologically and physically traumatized. Cultural trauma happens when a collectivity faces it. Even if trauma has not been experienced by all members of the group, one member can be traumatized by the pain and loss of another member. In this case, the group does not need to define the experience as a trauma, because it already is traumatic. Through family socialization, community and peer influences, as well as institutionalization – borders, written histories, memorials and propaganda, trauma can be transmitted through generations (Walden and Zhukov, 2020). These transmission mechanisms can shape collective memory even though the trauma is second hand.

Now back to cultural trauma of which carriers attribute a traumatic meaning to an event and a social change. The collapse of communism was a *traumatogenic* change, because it was sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected (Alexander et al., 2004). When reviewing the existing data on how individuals and groups remember life under the Soviet regime, it is critical to note when the research was conducted. The question that needs to be asked is “What was traumatic?” The transition or the Soviet system?

Both Berdahl and Heyat conducted their fieldwork and research during the Soviet to post-Soviet transition period. Majority of people felt uneasy about this political, economic and social change. They might have needed some time to comprehend what happened and adjust to the new order. Decades later, it is possible that a person who found the transition as a traumatic experience back then may think of the Soviet system itself as a traumatic experience now. This is something that I tended to keep in my mind while interviewing the research participants.

When analyzing the discourse mentioned in Berdahl’s paper, it is obvious that her interviewees were lost in transition. One of her interviewees tells: “I can't tell you how painful it was for me to see the products of my labor simply dismissed after the Wende… Unemployment is for our understanding the worst thing there is. We were all raised to be socialists, and we were taught that work is what separates humans from animals. That is what we learned. Suddenly to be without work is unthinkable for us” (Berdahl, 1999, pp. 198-199). This narrative illustrates how eastern Germans were baffled as a result of a change. As Ron Eyerman put it, “the collective experience of massive disruption and social crisis becomes a crisis of meaning and identity” (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 304).

Although some Azerbaijani women might have also been traumatized by this abrupt social transformation, it is hard to track it down in Heyat's book (2002) as the research was conducted when the transition was still ongoing. The title of the book says so – women *in* transition, whereas the title of my paper is read as women *of* transition, because the process is over now. Another pitfall is that Heyat conducted her research in a turbulent period that was full of crucial historical events. She also mentions in her book that when she was on a field trip to Baku, the memories of Russian tanks invading Baku in January 1990 were still fresh in people's minds. "Therefore", she explains, "there was a strong anti-Russian sentiment in the country and a collective endeavor to reject all that was considered Soviet" (2002, p. 2). This might have changed the whole narrative of remembrance.

There is no doubt that memory in a group does not reflect memory of the group. If individuals and groups attribute different meanings to an event or a social change, individual and collective memory may vary in nature. In this regard, Heyat's research is not representative because the sampling is limited to women of middle and upper class (class, here, is used in reference to educational and professional status) living in Baku. If we consider memory a social construct, then the degree of access to power and privilege is an important determining factor in how certain groups recall the same event. A Sovietized urban woman who belongs to intelligentsia may interpret the Soviet to post-Soviet transition differently compared to a rural illiterate woman.

In this section, I aimed to reflect on memory, more precisely formation of collective memory. We have previously described that what happened differs from the narrative of what happened. Two possible ways to refer to the past are "good old days" and a "traumatizing event or change". Although there is a dichotomy between nostalgia and cultural trauma, both social phenomena have a similar cause – discontinuity. Now is compared to once was and it results either in missing the past or attributing a traumatic meaning to it. Both research papers by Berdahl and Heyat provide us with valuable data about the collective memory of eastern Germans and Azerbaijani women of the Soviet regime respectively. The interviewees describe life before and after the collapse but in the condition of ongoing changes. Many years have passed since then and masses have been subject to several other social changes in both localities. Women now may look back at the USSR with either nostalgic sentiments and traumatic recalls. First theoretical question that this paper seeks to find an answer is "How do masses remember the past?" Second question that is raised in the next section is "How does collective memory (de/re) construct collective identities or vice versa?"

1.3 Identity

Identity resembles a mosaic that has many and equally important pieces. It is not only complex but also fluid and dynamic. In traditional and contemporary scenes, there are several arguments and theories on construction of memory and identity. It is a chicken and egg situation where which domain constructed the other one is argued. In the Halbwachsian model, memory is shaped by an identity that is already well established. Halbwachs (1950/1980) notes that a group becomes conscious of its identity through an awareness of its past. On the other hand, in Benedict Anderson's concept, identity itself is *imagined.*

But why do we get the urge to remember? Individual recall of the past can be triggered by an immediate problem. A man remembers in order to solve the problem. Similarly, when faced with a threat of sudden crisis, a group searches for a response in the pile of memories. Conflict leads to cohesion and solidarity within the threatened group (Coser, 1956). Out of multiple identities – let it be national, religious, ethnic, or cultural, the group sticks to one that is threatened and highlights it. This group identity becomes a shield to overcome the crisis. In my opinion, none of these domains – memory and identity, is purely a cause or consequence. A certain collective identity of the group is in the spotlight in times of an unexpected social transformation.

Collective identity of Azerbaijanis is a tangled yarn ball. Facing Persianization, Turkification, Russification and Sovietization over centuries, modern Azerbaijani identity has become a fusion of religious, cultural and linguistic values and norms that are immersed in a long historical development. In his diary an American journalist Thomas Goltz writes (1998, p. 254):

> [...] the very newness of the Azeri identity left it open to manipulation by three outside powers: Turkey, by dint of the strong pull of language; Iran, due to geographic, cultural and religious proximity; and Russia, which could project itself as the 'traditional' economic partner as well as protector of the diverse non-Turkic/Shi'ite elements in society.

As stated in the first section, with the efforts of intelligentsia Azerbaijan gained independence in 1918 and remained independent until Soviet occupation in 1920. Goltz (1998) describes that while intelligentsia promoted secularism, open-mindedness and most importantly, Azerbaijanism, masses remained on the level of *ummah* consciousness being indifferent to secular power. Majority of people did not show any enthusiasm to the idea of nationalism and Communist party abused this term in their propaganda against the ADR. Even

though masses who had fought against the Tsarist regime before, did not rebel against the Soviet rule this time (Świętochowski, 1985).

Seventy-one years of Sovietization, suppressing Turkic and Muslim identity, followed by Westernization – analyzing this multi-layered complex identity plays a crucial role in understanding how Azerbaijani women remember the Soviet times, as well as how these memories shaped their collective identity. This section first examines how Soviet identity was constructed during the course of historical events and how collective memory of the Soviet regime shapes (or is shaped by) collective identity after the transition.

1.3.1 Soviet Identity

To understand the identity of an Azerbaijani woman, we need to look at different phases of transformation that directly and indirectly influenced her life. In the early days of socialism, she was promised equality. To what extent she enjoyed her rights is open to discussion. After collectivization of labor, loyal, obedient, hard-working by nature, she became part of a collectivity that shared the same characteristics under the slogan of "Bütün ölkələrin proletarları, birləşin!" (Proletarians of all countries, unite! in Azerbaijani) *The paradoxical feminine Soviet woman* carried a psychological double burden as she was expected to exhibit both feminine and masculine characteristics in order to be seen as a real socialist woman (Attwood, as cited in Heyat, 2002). Kolkhozes and sovkhozes were inseparable features of this new collective identity. In 1930s, the image of a *traktoristka* were published everywhere to promote the first campaigns of recruitment of women as tractor drivers (Ilic, 2001).

During the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet woman was depicted as a heroine for exhibiting bravery and productivity on the front and in agriculture accordingly. She had to overtake the role of her man at home and on the farm. She was encouraged to produce and reproduce more. Starting from the 1970s, Azerbaijani women were exposed to alternative portrayal of women – modern, fashionable, consumerist on the covers of women's magazines and later on TV. Glossy magazines and colored TVs tempted women to visit *univermags* and sometimes shop under the counter. Towards the end of the collapse, national identity became more distinguishable due to a turbulent political period.

Heyat's research is salient in this regard. She explores Soviet and ethnic conceptions of femininity prevalent in Azerbaijan. While reading her interviews with Azerbaijani women, we may sum up that the Soviet, as well as cultural and religious expectations of womanhood

required a lot of sacrifices and efforts from them. Heyat explains that Azerbaijani women were seen as guardians of customs and traditions, and bearers of their community's ethnic identity. When discussing Soviet identity of Azerbaijani women, it is significant to note that gender norms differed in rural and urban areas. Women living in big cities, especially in Baku, passed the transition more smoothly and quickly compared to their compatriots in the countryside where identity was deeply rooted in culture, religion and socialist values. Therefore, I argue that an urban Azerbaijani woman was Westernized and her identity was reconstructed more easily than a rural Azerbaijani woman.

1.3.2 Post-Soviet Identity

Deconstruction of Soviet identity could not be accomplished in a short period of time in some societies. Soviet propaganda and collectivization had created *opium of the masses* that was impossible to get rid of. Instead, the discontinuity of experience left people agitated and caused post-Soviet nostalgia. The importance of Berdahl's article in analyzing history-memory-identity relation is that she touches upon preservation of identity in the context of social transition and remembering. "During socialism", she argues, "the workplace, for instance, was a symbolic space of community and national belonging" (1999, p. 194). With the collapse of socialism, GDR saw an increasing rate of unemployment like other post-Soviet countries. Consequently, it affected people's sense of self and identity. After the reunification, Berdahl observed that many eastern Germans started the process of assertion of identity as *Ossis* (eastern Germans) through consumption of nostalgic products, playing ostalgie board games, Ossi discos and informal museums about the former GDR everyday life.

In another scenario, collectivities that were dissatisfied with the Soviet rule and its byproducts and had long before the collapse sneaked into Western world, referred to the past as trauma and were quick to adapt to the new order. Heyat (2002) argues that after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the state-imposed ideal of womanhood was history. The new economic forces, together with Western cultural influences, were major players in shaping the post-Soviet ideals of femininity. During her field trip to Baku, she noticed how social norms and behaviors had changed. There were visible changes in women's post-Soviet pattern of employment and entrepreneurial activities too. Women took jobs in the service sector (e.g. shops, hotels, beauty salons) that were previously done by Russians and Armenians. Another striking change Heyat mentions in her book is the rise of a new social phenomenon – prostitution in Baku. This was

not only contrary to Islamic values but also to the Soviet concept of prostitution – *a relic of the capitalist society of exploiters* (Zemtsov, 1991). At the same time, since there was no longer a ban on practicing religion, it allowed women to embrace their religious identity and wear Islamic attires, cover their head again.

Whether these changes were in the direction of Westernization, nationhood or religious freedom, it led to the formation of post-Soviet identity of Azerbaijani women. Heyat (2002) notes that "the multitude of women's identities that are now evolving go beyond the Soviet/Azeri and official/ unofficial dualities that pervaded Azerbaijani society" (p. 168). Thirty years later after the transition, how this history-memory-identity trichotomy works will be studied in this paper.

Summary

Memory, being a social construct, differs from history. Therefore, what happened and narration of what happened can sometimes be contradictory. This chapter illustrated two sentiments of the remembered past. Missing or glorifying the good old days, is put against remembering the pain. While some individuals and collectivities may feel nostalgic of the past, others may recall the past as traumatizing. The cause of collective nostalgia is discontinuity of experience which occurs when the present is compared to the past. On the other hand, it was argued that an event or a change itself is not painful. The *meaning making* (Alexander, 2004) is a powerful tool to construct a framework in which an experience gains the status of trauma. Both terms are applied here out of medical context.

New individual and collective identities are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed all the time. Hence, Soviet and post-Soviet identities and their relation to historical events and collective memory were analyzed. Two main sources to explore the Soviet to post-Soviet transition were reviewed. In Berdahl's article (1999) the highlights were ostalgie and revivification of east German products. We also looked at how Azerbaijani women in transition reacted to the transformation, how their lives changed and what they remembered of the lives under the Soviet regime in Heyat's book (2002).

Unfortunately, the existing scholarship is limited in post-Soviet collective memory, especially in the Caucasus. The collective memory of Azerbaijani women deserves further research. The outcome will be valuable to analyze history-memory-identity relation in the context of post-Soviet transformation in Azerbaijan through the lenses of women. Taking into

consideration that it is usually women who are muted, the new research agendas can be done *by* and *about* women. By women, because women feel more comfortable and reveal more in same-sex socio-communication. About women, because women, especially in conservative societies such as Azerbaijan, are more involved in domestic life than men who may have a more structured and detailed memory of the past.

Oral history, in this regard, fits best as this method is intended to collect data on life stories. The recorded in-depth interview differs from other conventional methods, especially how the questions are formulated. At the same time, an interviewee may be asked to reflect upon the content and interpret her answer. Best way to do this is to ask the question: What did that (event) mean to you? Hence, unmanipulated mémoire.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In 2019, I conducted a preliminary research on post-Soviet nostalgia that was funded by Transitions (TOL) in partnership with Internews. During the research study, I interviewed five Azerbaijani women and the results of the research were published in an online magazine using cutting-edge multimedia tools. Even though my expectation was that the interviewees would express only yearning for the past, that was not the case in reality. Some of the participants shared their traumatic memories that they experienced during the Soviet regime and transition. This exploratory interviewing made me look at the collective memory of Azerbaijani women of transition from a broader perspective, hence preparing the ground for the research that this paper encompasses.

This chapter illustrates the methodological approach to address the research questions posed in this thesis: *How do Azerbaijani women of transition remember the Soviet past? How did collective memory (de/re) construct collective identity of Azerbaijani women of transition or vice versa?* In the previous chapter, I introduced the distinction between collective memory and history. I would like to highlight that the objective of this paper is not to examine to what extent these individual memories reflect reality. Rather, I aim to focus on the relation of history-memory-identity. More precisely, I will analyze the recollection of historical events and its influence on (re/de) construction of identity.

As explained in the previous chapter, I found qualitative methodology more suitable to answer my research question. I use Denzin and Lincoln's (2008) classification. They identify five types of qualitative methods, of which I have applied a biographical method – *oral history*. Oral history is an approach that sheds light on both past and present through recording personal recollections of events, their roots, and their outcomes from one or several individuals. It may be regarded as a time-consuming and inefficient way of collecting data in the presence of archives, museums, and history books. Yet, there are several reasons why I have chosen this approach. First of all, as Paul Thompson (2000) puts it, oral narratives are interpretations of events rather than merely representing the events. Therefore, an interpretative biographical form of study will help me better understand the key domains of my research – memory and identity.

Although oral history has gained popularity in the XX century, storytelling has always been a significant dimension of human communication. Individual and collective memories have always been passed through generations by word of mouth. As telling of the story is part of the story being told (Portelli, 2016), oral history is not a simple collection of historical data.

Each story being told represents the memory and identity of a teller. First-hand information shared by an insider adds a subjectivist dimension to the story.

On the other hand, witnesses of oral history can be the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated contrary to those of history (Thompson, 2000). In this regard, oral history has an egalitarian purpose and it offers a grassroots approach to historical research. The participants of my research are Azerbaijani women who are usually muted or not taken seriously. My purpose here is not to disregard the noteworthiness of male perspectives on life under the Soviet regime and during the transition. However, I have purposefully chosen my target group as women for the reasons stated in the previous chapter, as well as to take the opportunity to give voice to the voiceless.

Given the fact that memory and storytelling have a selective nature, validity and reliability of oral history can sometimes be subject to criticism. However, having interviewed ten women coming from different backgrounds for several hours generated new insights into the existing data. During the interviews my main concentration was the emotions produced and interpretations of events. The meanings that the participants attributed to certain events, as well as how they told these stories were highlighted in my field notes.

Since life history provides the readers with the biographical data of the storytellers, I made sure that I followed certain ethical guidelines to respect and protect the privacy of the interviewees. Each participant was informed about the objectives of the research by telephone in advance. On the interview day, they got familiar with the research study again in a written form (see Appendix A). They then signed the participant consent form to confirm their participation, as well as accepting the terms indicated in the form (see Appendix B). In order to achieve confidentiality, full names of the participants have been changed. The remaining biographical data is unaltered, because demographics plays a crucial role in this research study to illustrate diversity and make a logical connection between interviewee’s biography and her life story. Taking the minimal age of the interviewees into consideration, I expected that remembering something that happened at least thirty years ago might be challenging for some. In order to avoid the possibility of distorted memory and forgetting, I encouraged all participants to use memory aids such as fact-checking with a family member, and personal archives if needed.

2.1 Data Collection

The primary data has been collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with ten women, recorded, transcribed and translated from Azerbaijani into English by me; field notes; as well as examining photographs and personal objects such as newspaper, clothes, photo archives etc. provided by the participants. All of the interviews were conducted in September 2022 in four cities of Azerbaijan – Baku, Sumgait, Goychay and Zerdab. It is important to note that during my field trip to Azerbaijan, the Karabakh conflict had escalated, resulting in the death of dozens of soldiers. It influenced the discourse of the women that I will describe in detail in the next chapter.

When selecting the participants, I applied double sampling – *criterion* and *purposeful* (Creswell, 2007). First of all, I made sure that all of the participants met the criteria of sex (female), age (1972<) and place of birth/residence (born and raised, currently living in Azerbaijan). Second, with the purpose of gaining valuable data and representativeness, I attempted to reach out to women who were willing to share their life stories and came from various social backgrounds. Most importantly, I tried to record the memories of people who have never been previously recorded, nor will probably be recorded again.

In Azerbaijan, freedom of speech is limited and discouraged both on political and social level. In order to avoid suspicion and invite respondents who would feel comfortable to describe something that somehow has to do with politics, I availed myself of my well-established personal connections and described them criterion and purposefulness of my sampling. I would like to take the opportunity here to give credits to my mom and dad who were very supportive of me during this overwhelming process. They introduced me to several people in Goychay and Zerdab who connected me with the prospective participants. My father is a well-respected man in Goychay (my hometown). That is why the participants that I contacted agreed to participate in the research. My mother comes from a well-known family in Zerdab who was a mediator between me and the participants in that city.

The most difficult part was reaching out to women in Baku – the capital city of Azerbaijan. People I know from academia and the social sphere suggested several women to me based on the scope and objective of the research and I made the final decision. I assumed that having been introduced to the prospective interviewees by someone who they knew very well would build trust and credibility between us. It did but to some extent. I will talk about it in the next section of this chapter. After having prepared the preliminary list of participants, I made an initial phone call directly with them. I briefly explained the aim of the research. Some

refused to participate even though they seemed very keen. Some refused because of unavailability. With those who confirmed their participation, I arranged a date and time to meet for the interview. The detailed demographic information about the participants can be found in Appendix D.

All interviews took place in either the respondents' houses or workplaces. Each interview lasted for about an hour or two depending on the length of the answers. All interviews were held in Azerbaijani and accompanying documents had been translated into Azerbaijani. Extracts from interviews have been translated into English by me with proofread by a native speaker. Some of the interview questions were prepared in advance (see Appendix C). Instead of formulating questions in a chronological order – life under the Soviet Union; the transition; and life after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I chose *progressive-regressive method* (Denzin, 1989). Thus, I began asking questions about the major epiphany – collapse of the USSR. The reason why I did that lies in the theoretical part of this paper where I raised the question: What was traumatic? The transition or the Soviet system? Having started with recalling the exact historical stage helped narrators remember the past, reflect on the present, as well as make necessary comparisons. Apart from pre-determined questions, impromptu questions were also asked during the interviews in order to clarify something, to encourage the narrator to interpret the meaning of her words and let her elaborate on a theme that was not considered beforehand. Semi-structured interviews facilitated the research study to be on track. It also opened up new themes that broadened the research perspective.

I used my cellphone as an audio recorder after notifying the interviewee and getting her permission. Using a recorder has definitely changed the dynamics of the interview. I will explain it thoroughly in the next chapter. During the interview, I took some field notes. However, I tried to keep eye contact as much as possible and avoided being a passive listener. This helped the narrators feel heard and motivated them to share their stories in depth. Immediately after the interview ended, I took some time to finalize my thoughts and initial analysis in a written form before leaving the interview setting. When memory aids were used, I took the digital copy of them with the permission of the interviewees.

2.2 Analysis Method

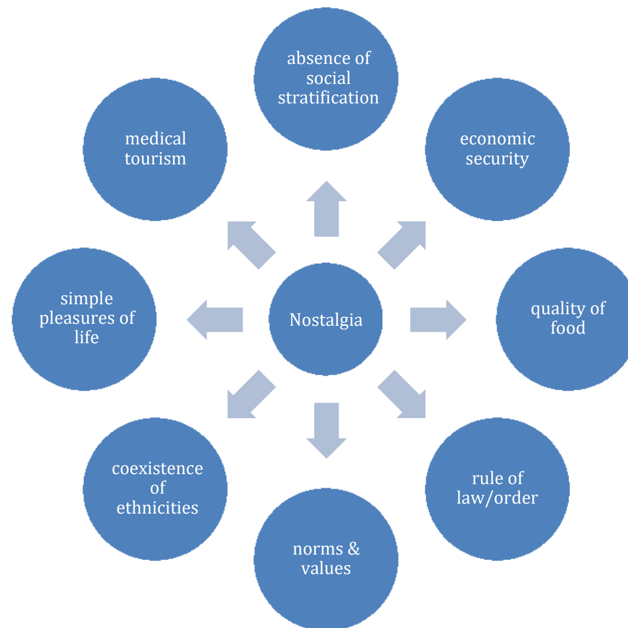
I started data analysis with data managing and reading, memoing (Creswell, 2007). All data collected during the interviews were transcribed and archived by me. This followed by reading

transcripts and field notes multiple times. As opposed to the recommendations of many, I did not send the transcripts to participants for their review because of the time limit and inefficiency of digital medium. Instead, I applied content analysis while I was interviewing the participants by discussing the meaning of certain words, phrases and sentences. It also helped me avoid misinterpretation in the later stages of analysis.

Next step in data analysis was identifying commonalities, patterns and structures across the transcripts. As suggested by Merrill (2009), my goal was to find the answer to the question: "What are the shared experiences and patterns which connect across all recorded narratives so that the individual stories become collective ones?" Since my research study is based on collective memory, I was in search of repeated themes in individual memories of the narrators. Based on existing knowledge and theories on collective memory, I used a deductive approach while analyzing the themes. As stated thoroughly in the theoretical framework of the paper, a shared past is generally remembered either with pain or longing by groups who have directly or indirectly experienced it. Therefore, I expected to find two main patterns in the narratives of the interviewees: nostalgia and collective trauma.

My expectations were true except one new theme emerged out of the blue – *unspoken words*. They appeared in the forms of silence, praise and forgetting. The reasons were subtle and difficult to detect. At first, I thought it was arbitrary until I noticed this commonality over and over again in all narratives. I will come back to this theme in the next chapter. However, I would like to outline that this theme is very essential in understanding Soviet and post-Soviet identity of Azerbaijanis and is worth its own research project.

Back to thematic analysis. First of all, after transcribing all the interviews I coded the data. After creating several codes, I identified the sub-themes, then narrowed them down to main themes. Overall, the data was classified around three general themes: nostalgia, collective trauma and unspoken words. It is noteworthy to mention that all sub-themes were apparent in all narratives. I eliminated the subjective views based on personal experiences due to their irrelevance to the research. It is the drawback of the oral history method as the final product is a bulk of extensive data that it takes a lot of time and patience to get purified. Below is the example of coding that applied to the first emerged theme – nostalgia. As you can see, I have identified eight sub-themes that were common in all life stories. For instance, all respondents mentioned that one of the things that they liked and missed about the Soviet Union was the absence of social stratification. Nevertheless, they referred to it as “everyone was equal”, “we did not know who was poor, who was rich” or “everyone looked the same”.



Regarding the interpretation stage, I followed Denzin's (1989) interpretive approach. The interpretation of social and cultural changes was provided by the interviewees, whereas I examined the influence of transition on identity. While listening to the narrators, I kept the issue of propaganda in mind, frequently asking myself "is my respondent conceptually aware of what she is telling?" "Narratives", Merrill (2009) also argues, "can be structured by powerful discourses of which individual narrators may be unaware" (p. 129). I would like to stress again that during the research study, I was not concerned about historical accuracy of life stories. However, I paid close attention to find out whether told stories, especially the ones filled with nostalgic elements, silence or repeated avoidance of discussion of a particular question, were a product of Soviet propaganda, current censorship, or mythology. I will reflect upon it in the next chapter.

2.3 Challenges, Obstacles and Solutions

Even though I started preparation four months before the field trip to Azerbaijan, I faced several issues. I categorize them as technical challenges and obstacles. The main technical challenges were limited time and budget as I predicted it to be. Reaching out to women and getting their confirmation were very time-consuming. There were many last-minute changes or refusals to participate in the research. Besides, traveling to four cities took me longer than I expected.

Interviewing ten women within a month was ambitious. In order to solve this problem, all I needed to do was to work intensively with no break.

Another challenge was financing the trip. As I did not have any funding, I covered all of my costs to and from Azerbaijan and during the trip myself. Initially, I was planning to travel to four more cities for the purpose of diversity but I had to reduce the scope of the research due to time and budget limits. On the other hand, it created a basis for further research and motivated me to pursue a PhD degree to analyze collective memory of post-Soviet transformation in Azerbaijan from a broader perspective.

The challenges were predictable and solvable. However, I encountered a major obstacle during my trip which was not under my control and was much more complicated. It was the fear of the current political regime that made prospective participants refuse to take part in the research. Even those who agreed to tell their life stories carried the fear with them throughout the interview. The fear was in their silence, avoidance to answer certain questions, suspicion and hesitation. Most of them disliked the idea of their interview being audio-recorded. Before, during and after the interview, I had to make sure that their identity would be kept confidential and they would never be prone to any risk in the future. After consulting with them individually, we agreed that the full transcript and audio-recording of their interviews will not be published anywhere. However, the findings from the research (including some direct extracts from the interview) will be stored in the archives of Charles University with a pseudonym.

Although over three decades have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani people still carry the fear of the regime in their veins. By being constantly silenced, opposed or prosecuted for expressing one's opinion, they are unwilling to engage in conversation that is even slightly political. Freedom of expression, assembly and association is restricted in practice. It is a common practice that those who express their political views openly face dismissal from work or sometimes detention. According to Reporters without Borders' Global Score (2022), Azerbaijan is in 154th place out of 180 countries regarding press freedom which gives a clear view why I faced this obstacle during my research.

Another obstacle was the memory. What I noticed during the interviews was that the majority of the respondents had problems recalling certain events and dates. There are three possibilities why this happened: the interviewee knows the answer but is hesitant to talk perhaps due to the above-mentioned issue; the interviewee has a medical condition such as dementia; or the interviewee has not lost her ability to remember but has forgotten events related to the research topic. The average age of the respondents was 67 (the youngest – 57 and

the oldest – 84). Because of ethical issues, I did not obtain any information on their ability to remember in medical terms.

Understanding why and how people forget is as important as remembering the past. It is often neglected in memory studies of post-Soviet transformations. Assman (2016) identifies two types of collective forgetting: active and passive. The labels are self-explanatory. When it happens naturally, it is an active form of forgetting, whereas the latter involves external factors such as censorship or taboos. It is hard to conclude whether the women I interviewed had forgotten certain aspects of their life stories or not. If so, what was the reason for their forgetting. It is a new broad research topic that is worth its own research. In fact, it has inspired me to move in this direction when I start my PhD degree. Within the scope of this paper, I only kept this nuance – individual and collective forgetting, in mind while analyzing the research data.

Oral history was the most efficient method to collect data as it broadened the horizon of the research. Instead of bombarding the participants who were already feeling uneasy with predetermined questions, I allowed them to share their life story with me. Not only it built trust between us but also, they gradually got drawn into the discussion and opened up more. The collected data is valuable in many regards. Most importantly, listening to these women made them believe that their opinions mattered which was both sad and empowering to see. Some of them before, during and after the interview asked me if their speech was good and helpful enough. Being subject to constant discouragement due to their gender, Azerbaijani women of the Soviet generation are politically-unaware:

> A woman´s discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men´s dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman´s personal experience. (Gluck et al., 1991, p. 11)

My intention here is not to turn this paper into a gender analysis. However, it is an important nuance to mention that also opens a door to further research of the collective memory of the post-Soviet transition from a gender perspective.

Chapter 3: Research Results

This chapter summarizes the main research findings based on in-depth interviews, field notes and visual analysis of quotidian artifacts demonstrated by the interviewees. All biographical data about the research participants are factual, excluding their names. The names have been changed for ethical reasons upon agreement with them. As explained in the methodological framework of this paper in detail, I have divided the research results into two themes – traces of nostalgia and traces of cultural trauma, in accordance with the theoretical framework. The third domain of this paper – identity will be addressed in the next chapter, because I have not directly discussed this subject with the participants. Additionally, I will look at unspoken words in this chapter.

To start with, I will illustrate the common nostalgic patterns that were apparent in all narratives. I have categorized them as absence of social stratification; economic security; quality of food; rule of law or order; social norms and values; coexistence of ethnicities and nationalities; simple pleasure of life; and medical tourism. Moving on, I will demonstrate the portrayal of cultural trauma in these life stories. In order to better understand what cultural trauma means to participants, I have separated cultural trauma experienced during the Soviet Union from cultural trauma during and right after the transition. First, I will talk about individual identification of cultural trauma before the transition. Contrary to nostalgia, it is difficult to find commonalities across the life stories here. Instead, I will simply list them as they are: suppression of language; suppression of religion; collectivization; and backwardness and isolation.

Next, cultural trauma experienced during and after the transition (from late 1980s until late 1990s) will be analyzed. I will showcase political, economic and social dimensions of cultural trauma to give a clear view. Finally, unspoken words will be studied in this chapter. These unspoken words are an unpredictable outcome of the research. They carry as valuable information as the spoken words. That is why I decided to include it separately. By unspoken words, I mean the gaps that occurred in the interviews in the forms of silences and flattery due to fear of the political regime, political unawareness and forgetting. The latter will be briefly examined by active and passive forms of forgetting by applying Aleida Assman’s theory (2016).

3.1 Traces of Nostalgia

Based on the existing scholarship on collective memory, it was predictable that research participants would look back in yearning. Traces of nostalgia were found in all of the life stories that I have collected during my field trip to Azerbaijan. When talking about the past, the respondents were often comparing their lives before and after the transition without me asking them to do so. Their nostalgic sentiments were linked to the present as much as to the past (Berdahl, 1999; Davis, 1979; Heyat, 2002). Although it is not the aim of this paper to reflect on these women's views on the present, I have decided to include them here to illustrate the discontinuity of experience and identity. It is also important to showcase how these women define socialism vs capitalism, backwardness vs progress, traditionalism vs modernity, and East vs West.

This section draws on eight sub-themes under the theme of nostalgia that were prevalent in all interviews. To start with, all women praised the Soviet regime for the absence of social stratification. "I liked the USSR as a socio-political institution because classes were not visible there. It is a good time now too. But I am a socialist kid" (Sevinj, Baku). Sevinj is a fifty-seven years old housewife who used to work as a philologist and later resigned from her academic position to raise her kids. She is fluent in three languages and supported her children to get a higher degree of education. She describes class system after the transition as:

> Whoever could, got out [of the situation], whoever could not, remained on the bottom. Whoever could do this ["pay me" gesture], leveled up. I stayed in the middle. Middle-class. I could not go up because it was impossible. You needed to lose many things in order to go up. I did not remain on the bottom. Why would I? I have a higher education, wisdom, and mindset... But there are two types of middle-class: upper middle class which I belonged to for a while. Now I belong to the lower middle class.

Being at the core of Marxism-Leninism, creating a classless society was the aim of the Soviet Union. In 1920, in Baku, a congress of representatives of the peoples of the East was held by the Communist International where it set itself the aim of destroying the power of the rich and bringing about the complete equality of all (Pearce, 1977, p. 163). In practice, it was achieved to some extent. I say "to some extent" because there was no absolute eradication of class. People still belonged to certain classes even though it was not visible at first sight. Another participant – Madina, who is a sixty years old musician living in Baku recalls:

> In our class there was this girl who was the daughter of a high-status man, working for the KGB [Committee for State Security]. She told us that her father did not let her take an apple to school. Because when she eats it, there might be someone in the class who has no apples at home. In winter, for instance... He did not let her wear her nice boots or her mother's gold earrings. Even to the wedding party. So that she would not look different… There [Soviet Union] ... Everyone was the same.

The sudden transition from socialist to capitalist system had a huge influence on these women's economic status, mostly in a negative way. When comparing past to present, they complained about class struggle that is common nowadays. What is distinctive here is their usage of words to describe these two economic systems even though they rarely used the terms. Instead they were referring to socialism as "then" and capitalism as "now". They often associated capitalism with gluttony, greed and overconsumption or in other words, whereas socialism was described as modesty.

When participants took a trip down memory lane, one of their first stops was the taste of the past. Ramila, a seventy years old pensioner living in the suburbs of Sumgait describes: "Those days are missed immensely. That cheese, that cream… I cannot get the same taste from anything now. When we cooked chicken, the smell was felt everywhere. When we baked bread, the smell surrounded the entire village". Although there was a shortage of consumer goods, the available intermediate goods such as dairy and meat products were of high quality and organic. According to some of the participants, there was strict state control over the quality of food in the Soviet Union. Ramila even mentioned the role of OTK (Otdel Tekhnicheskogo Kontrolya – Technical Control Department, in Russian) emphasizing that quantity has overshadowed quality nowadays. Madina describes it as:

> My husband says, "you praise the Soviet [Union] but the shops were empty". I have a sweet tooth. Those cakes in the Soviet period… I cannot find the same taste of 'Skazka' [fairy tale in Russian] cake anywhere anymore. It was so delicious. High quality. Pure butter. Now, there are a thousand varieties of butter. We would wash our hands but they would still smell of that butter… Those tastes do not exist anymore. Maybe they still exist in Europe. I do not know…

Economic security is another aspect that participants praised the Soviet regime for. By economic security they mainly referred to two things: housing and employment. Citizens,

especially the ones who were productive in kolkhozes and factories as well as those working for the state would get a house or a land from the government on a rolling basis. Many of those residential buildings – *khrushchevka* (a three- to five-floored apartment building, built during the early 1960s), and *brezhnevka* (an updated version of khrushchevka, built in 1960-1980) are still intact in Baku, Sumgait and other big cities of Azerbaijan. Madina, for instance, has recently moved to a khrushchevka building after getting divorced. She told me that she could afford buying a flat in *novostroika* (a taller apartment building, built in the XXI century) but she preferred khrushchevka because of its relatively high endurance. It is crucial to note that due to the sky-rocketing prices of real estate in Azerbaijan nowadays, it is common that new generations do not leave their family house, sometimes never. It is also widespread that four generations – grandfather, father, son and grandchild live together as an extended family. To put it in numbers, the average monthly income in Azerbaijan as of today is 742,8 AZN which is not attainable for everyone. Majority of people live on a minimum monthly salary – 345 AZN. On the other hand, a one-room apartment in Baku costs a minimum 50,000 AZN (These figures are often mentioned in daily discourse and in the media. Therefore, I do not give a reference to any source).

With the introduction of Khrushchev's new housing campaign, *kommunalka* (communal apartment) was replaced by a single-family apartment which separated private life from public life. The state had a goal when introducing this new housing system. Harris (2006) describes it as "popular enthusiasm for improved housing could be channeled into greater mass participation in the regime's overall project of building communism" (p. 172). Madina, choosing an old khrushchevka over novostroika even though the first is known for its poor quality and nicknamed as *khrushchoba* (khru – slum, in Russian) is an indicator of unconscious loyalty. The loyalty for the state generated by the Soviet propaganda was ubiquitous yet hidden in all life stories told. Throughout this paper, I will come back to it when necessary.

Beside housing provided by the state, employment is another pillar of economic security defined by the participants. "The salary was low but we knew that we had a job" (Ramila). When I asked the participants to identify themselves in terms of occupation, those who do not work identified themselves as a housewife or a pensioner. A housewife is a modern identification that is the byproduct of capitalism. None of these women were solely housewives under the Soviet regime. Those who are uneducated were also involved in collective labor, mainly in the agriculture sector. It gave them a sense of belonging to a group and created a

collective identity – proletariat. Those who were educated were assigned a job right after their graduation, especially those with a degree in pedagogy and medicine. One of the participants – Goychek, who is a seventy years old retired primary school teacher, started telling her life story with pride, sharing her academic and career accomplishments with me. She showed me a bunch of certificates, medals, and newspaper articles dedicated to her that she received during her thirty-seven years of teaching career at a primary school. One of them is remarkable to mention here:

> Back then, advanced workers would be chosen as members of the Communist Party. I stepped out of the maternity hospital. My brother-in-law told me that I needed to go to the Executive Office of the city. I asked him the reason and he told me that I was selected as a member of the Party. I gave my baby who was just born to my sister-in-law and headed to the Office. There, they accepted me to the Communist Party in a solemn manner. Because I was an advanced worker.

Idleness was discouraged by the state. It is open to criticism in a European context where freedom of will is considered a basic human right, and "you can be anything you want" is promoted. Some take a gap year to figure out what they want to do in life. In developing countries, such as Azerbaijan, most of the graduates are not privileged enough to take time for self-development and self-actualization before stepping into the labor market. These women were worried about the career of their children and grandchildren. Even though capitalism brought about competition in the labor market, in Azerbaijan, nepotism and bribery are still highly practiced. It has resulted in rural-to-urban migration and in some cases, brain drain. It is not surprising to see nostalgic elements in regards to economic security created by the Soviet regime in the life stories of these women whose offspring struggle to meet their daily needs in the absence of state support today.

"I do not miss the Soviet [Union]. I miss the rule of law" (Ramila). Rule of law or as some women called it – order, is another nostalgic commonality. From a semantic point of view, the phrase rule of law is in everyday language in Azerbaijani and is often used in reference to order and discipline. The interviewees used this phrase to point out the efficiency of law and citizens' compliance to social norms and laws. Their examples varied from queue culture to citizen complaints being taken seriously. The participants often mentioned that both the social and political system are now arbitrary. Madina tells:

> Executive Power does not care about you now. You cannot even approach their door. Or you visit and they are not in the office. Back then, their working hours were hung on their doors. Who had the courage to be absent?! Eto byl zakon [This was the law, in Russian].

Based on these life stories, living within a certain structure in the Soviet Union must have created social cohesion and predictability for the future. This sub-theme is multi-layered and interconnected to other sub-themes such as norms and values. It was challenging whether to illustrate norms and values as a separate sub-theme or not. As it was mentioned frequently, I decided to include it to the list. Here the comparison of traditionalism and modernity enters the dialogue. The transition to a new social, political and economic system has put old norms and values in jeopardy. While the older generation still sticks to those norms and values, the majority of younger generations refuse to. It is difficult to draw a line between religion and socialism here. The reason is that the norms and values of everyday life in socialism was also a fusion of Islam.

The influence of modernity and globalization on traditions has caused agony among the *last Soviet generation* (the term was coined by Alexei Yurchak in 2006). “One of the good things about the Soviet [Union] was that it kept its secrets inside. The window is open to the world now. Therefore, they [young generation] go to other places and bring revolting habits with them” (Ramila). That is a common criticism of the youth especially the ones who have been exposed to Western culture either by studying abroad or having a network outside Azerbaijan by the older generation who have experienced life under the Soviet regime. Mentality is the most used word when an old person condemns the present. The individual attitudes, opinions and behaviors are categorized as pro-mentality or anti-mentality. The translation is ambiguous because this word in Azerbaijani is used to describe only collective way of thinking. The example would be a woman drinking alcohol in public is considered as an anti-mentality behavior. So, when an older man who lived under the Soviet regime disapproves of a certain behavior or opinion of a young person who was born after the transition often starts the sentence with “back then”. The problem is what does “back then” represent? Chronologically speaking, it is the Soviet period. However, there was not an issue of gender in consuming alcohol. Everyone was discouraged from consuming it. Alcohol is also prohibited in Islam. The question that arises here is why a young man drinking alcohol in public is not considered an anti-mentality action. Paradoxically, Islamic and socialist norms and values

reinforced each other during the Soviet Union. Both got threatened by the consequences of the transition. Islam has lost its power among the younger generation. The older generation blame it on globalization, more specifically Westernization that resulted in contamination of culture. When these participants complain about the new dynamics in social norms and values and look back with nostalgic feelings, it is hard to define whether they miss socialism or the lost power of Islam.

Another sub-theme that became dominant was coexistence of ethnicities and nationalities. “I should also note that neighbourship was good during the Soviet period. There lived Armenian, Russian, Azerbaijani. Our neighbors were not bad. They were good” (Ramila). Eighty years old Anja, who had her formal education in Zhirinovsky District, Russia and worked as a Russian language teacher in Goychay until she retired, told me that there was unity in the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the USSR, the relationship between nationalities deteriorated. “There was no brawl. Armenians used to live in Azerbaijan. Russians used to live in Azerbaijan. We used to live in Russia. All nationalities lived together. There were many ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan” (Meleyke). Afat, a fifty-nine-year-old infectious disease doctor, told me that when she was attending the residency program, she needed to go to the hospital with her colleagues every day. Their driver was an Armenian boy named Rachki. She remembers: “My dad said," So what, he is Armenian? He is a good boy. I mean he is good at driving and knows everywhere. He was born in the city [Baku]”. Until that period [transition], we did not have any trouble with them”. Madina describes:

> In the USSR, there was not a nationality. There was *druzhba* [friendship, in Russian]. He is Armenian, she is Russian. Who is he? There was not such a thing during the USSR period. We used to celebrate May 1. Everybody would go out collectively. Amazing celebrations. Very interesting. There was happiness in our hearts.

What unites these women is their yearning for social cohesion that was achieved under the Soviet regime. The reason why coexistence is valuable to them is the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way to ethnic conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some may argue that this ethnic conflict is not the result but the catalysator of the separation of Azerbaijan from the USSR. On the whole, these women were traumatized by this ethnic conflict that peaked in 1992-1993. Unfortunately, this conflict has been resolved yet. It is no wonder why coexistence is equivalent to peace for them.

On the other hand, it is utterly fascinating to see how these women define nationality. For them, it was not of great importance back then. Their articulate sense of group identity was a socialist. However, their identification of themselves has changed profoundly after the transition. The national identity of Azerbaijanis is strongly influenced by the idea of a common enemy that is the main tool of the populist regime now. Once living together in harmony, these two nations share nothing but mutual hatred now. This enmity is a vital part of the collective memory and national identity of Azerbaijanis.

Soviet nationality policy is more complicated than its mere portrayal of Russo-centrism. The original Bolshevik idea was to bring about international proletarianism by achieving the absence of the state, nation, class and religion. Slezkine (1994) describes how and why the Soviet Union promoted ethnic particularism in his article *The USSR as a Communal Apartment* accurately. As paradoxical as it sounds, Lenin and Stalin’s nationality policy involved giving the Soviet states national self-determination and ethno-territorial autonomy by recognizing their rights and promoting their native languages and cultures. The reason was that by doing these the oppressed nations such as Azerbaijan would restore their trust for the oppressor nation – Russian Imperialism. In order to achieve the ultimate goal – “unity in content, diversity in form” (Slezkine, 1994, p. 420) needed to be realized. It meant that by promoting ethnic particularism, Lenin and Stalin aimed at ultimate unity through diversity.

Before being occupied by the XI Army on 28 April 1920, Azerbaijan Democratic Republic that was established on 28 May 1918 had implemented several measures on the nation and state-building. It was the time of national awakening that was led by Azerbaijani intelligentsia. Soviet nationality policy influenced the construction of collective identity. When we look at early literary examples of this period, we can see that identification had three distinct directions: Sovietization, ummah and pan-Turkism. None of these directions illustrate national identity rather cultural and religious identity. It can be argued that Lenin and Stalin achieved their goal to great extent because the Soviet Union soon became the melting pot of national identities. The process reached its peak during World War II. Fighting against the common enemy – fascism created solidarity across all nationalities in the Soviet Union. It led to simple-minded patriotism of heroic deeds and defense of the fatherland. It is not surprising why the war was called the *Great Patriotic War* (1941-1945). Victory over fascism injected Soviet citizens with a high level of loyalty as projected above.

During the times when there was not so much to enjoy, Soviet citizens found simple pleasures of life. When remembering the past, these women often mentioned experiences of joy and pleasure during the Soviet regime. These experiences might not be the source of happiness and pleasure nowadays. However, during the interviews these women both verbally and non-verbally delivered the message that they found satisfaction in everyday life even though there was scarcity of consumer products, less freedom and more daily burden of productive and non-productive work. Madina remembers:

> Makulatura [waste paper, in Russian]. We would go to houses to collect old newspaper, paper. We would give them to recycling centers and receive a talon [coupon] according to the weight. With those talons we would buy nice books by Dreiser, Chekhov or Dostoevsky. One day, we went to Moskovskiy Univermag [Moscow Department Store]. There was a department of imported products – nightgowns made in Germany, cosmetics, soaps made in France, shoes made in Czechoslovakia. You could buy these rare products with your talons too.

Apart from her speech, it is noteworthy to mention her tone of voice and body language here too. She spoke of makulatura with great enthusiasm and pride. She continues:

> With those talons you could buy things that you could not get anywhere else. You toiled away and earned it. I remember I had collected a box full of nice, fragrant soap [she laughs]. We did not buy any soap in the next three years. People would stare at us. They had no right but you could buy these things.

Ramila tells me her story: "My old grandma would receive twelve manats [currency of Azerbaijan] as a pension. She would say, “God bless, Soviet government!” Twelve manats were sacred for them, especially for women… She would say, “Long live, Brezhnev!”” When I asked her about the purchasing power of twelve manat back then, she explained that a kilo of sugar cost one manat, a kilo of meat cost three manats and a kilo of black tea cost four manats. Although this amount of money was only enough to cover the basic needs of a family, it was sufficient enough to avail yourself of the simple pleasure of everyday life.

Why was a Soviet citizen satisfied with the simple pleasures of life? Most importantly, why do they still remember socialist pleasures and feel nostalgic about it? Crowley and Reid (2010) argue that “compulsory happiness, official optimism, and highly regulated leisure were part of the authorized self-representation of the Soviet regime” (p. 4). If we look at the Soviet

propaganda posters, the immediate impression is that the Soviet citizens are the happiest and most joyful people in the world. This injected happiness seems to still live in the body of the last Soviet generation who find it difficult to enjoy the simple pleasures of life now where they have more freedom and opportunities.

Last but foremost travel opportunities within the Soviet Union, especially medical tourism is one of the nostalgic patterns across all life stories told. Although travel outside the Soviet Bloc was nearly impossible, an ordinary Soviet citizen could travel within the borders of the Soviet Union and to its ally states. One type of tourism was quite popular, especially among adults – medical tourism. The most favored destinations were health resorts in Russia such as Sochi, Kislovodsk, Anapa, Yessentuki, Mineralnye Vody to name a few. Access to these vacation destinations was possible with a special voucher called *putevka*. This leisure-time activity was not common in rural areas of Azerbaijan. Soviet workers living in small towns of Azerbaijan used to go on vacation to local resort towns such as Istisu (mineral-springs bath), Nakhichevan (salt cave sanatorium) and Naftalan (petroleum sanatorium). Putevka was one of the tools of Soviet propaganda to spread a high level of loyalty and increase productivity among its citizens. For a Soviet worker, putevka was an incentive to produce more and remain loyal to the system.

> We used to visit those places to get our treatment. Those places were so beautiful! We were provided with lunch. Starter, then main course. We were provided with a place to sleep. We would go out sightseeing. We would go to the cinema. What more does one need?! (Ramila)

Some of the women complained about the hardship of traveling now due to high prices and bureaucracy. As medical tourism has become a luxury now, the well-being and motivation of the last Soviet generation has declined. They reenact those nostalgic scenes only by looking at their photo archive. Carefree, joyful young women dressed up in colorful yet modest outfits posing in front of a Zenit with their family members or friends. The quotidian artifacts that women proudly showed me were more than a memory aid. Madina's photo album and hand-made embroidery of Mir Jafar Baghirov's (First Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party) image, Anja's poem published in a local newspaper, Goychek's medals, certificates are last relics of everyday socialism that can be found in almost every household in Azerbaijan. Once being a symbol of loyalty and appreciation, these objects now symbolize nostalgia for lost past for these women.

3.2 Traces of Cultural Trauma

In collective memory studies, another crucial component of remembering is looking back in anger, horror or disappointment. As a political regime, the Soviet Union was harsh on its citizens. Over seven decades, the Soviet citizens witnessed famine, Stalin's terror and oppression, Great Patriotic War, Cold War to name a few. The collapse of the USSR, as well as national movements and ethnic conflicts that took place during the transition left people traumatized. The sudden change from socialism to capitalism shook the social structure that had taken many years to be constructed. As stated in the theoretical framework of this paper, cultural trauma is a discontinuity of experiences and identity as nostalgia. Cultural trauma is a predecessor of discontinuity, whereas nostalgia occurs as a result of discontinuity.

Apart from nostalgia, another commonality across the narratives was cultural trauma. Before diving into details, it is crucial to note that none of the women used the word – trauma, during the interviews. They expressed it as shock, pain, fear, and hardship. In order to distinguish trauma under the Soviet regime from that of during and right after the transition, I asked the participants how they experienced the transition first. Then we moved to life under the Soviet regime where they expressed both nostalgic and traumatic sentiments. In this section, I will first illustrate the research findings in regards to cultural trauma during the Soviet Union, then I will move on to cultural trauma during the transition which led to deconstruction of the Soviet identity and reconstruction of modern Azerbaijani identity.

Similar to the previous section, I have divided the main theme – cultural trauma during the Soviet Union, into four sub-themes: suppression of Azerbaijani language through Russification, suppression of Islam, collectivization, and backwardness and isolation from the global world. Unlike nostalgia, cultural trauma during the Soviet Union was experienced by the participants in a different manner. These sub-themes are not concurring in all narratives contrary to nostalgia. Therefore, it is more accurate to label them as individual trauma rather than collective trauma within the framework of this paper. Traces of cultural trauma experienced during the Soviet Union were not as visible as traces of nostalgia in these life stories. These women simply listed the things they did not like about the Soviet regime here. In other words, their nostalgic sentiments overshadowed their dislikes about the Soviet Union.

To start with, suppression of Azerbaijani language was mentioned only by one woman – Madina, that can be regarded as an example of cultural trauma:

> The People's Front came into power. Azerbaijani language gained importance. We were happy to see Elchibey [Abulfaz Elchibey – Former President of Azerbaijan] ... He was visiting Moscow for a meeting. We were very proud. He took an interpreter with him to translate Azerbaijani into Russian. That had never happened before! How come you go to Russia and speak Azerbaijani? That is why Russia overthrew him. The most important thing is the language.

This fact that only one participant touched upon this topic is utterly surprising as language is a popular topic of public debate even today. Even though Azerbaijani has been the official language of Azerbaijan Republic since 1995, there is still discrimination against people who speak Azerbaijani, especially the ones who come from rural areas to Baku to study or work. Mercilessly, they are often called *chushka* (pig, in Russian), meaning a stupid, slow-witted peasant, by *korennoy* (native-born, in Russian) Bakuvians. This ethnic slur is a relic of the transition period when manual workers from smaller towns migrated to the capital city – Baku, which was heavily populated by Russified elite and ethnic Russians, in search of a better life.

Azerbaijani language, being a crucial component of national identity, was subject to suppression both on political and social levels under the Soviet regime. Some of the participants were extensively using Russian words during the interviews. It is an important factor when analyzing the collective identity of Azerbaijanis. Russification or Sovietization is a salient dimension of national identity formation and language policy of the USSR was a pivotal tool to erase national peculiarities. Nevertheless, the research participants except Madina did not touch upon this issue at all. National consciousness of these women is underdeveloped. I am hesitant to use this adjective because my aim is not to put a blame on these women. Next chapter will cover the last domain – identity in detail. However, it is significant to note it here as well. The reasons why Soviet policy on national identity was not questioned by the participants may vary from simply them forgetting it to mention to them being politically unaware to analyze what was happening under the Soviet regime. Although this is very interesting as well as vital to examine the selective memory of these women thoroughly to understand collective memory, it is beyond the scope of this study. It opens a door to infinity where further extensive research needs to be done.

Suppression of religion, more specifically Islam is another example of cultural trauma experienced during the Soviet period. Although practicing Islam was not officially prohibited,

it was portrayed as uncivilized activity and through Soviet propaganda citizens were systematically discouraged to follow any religion. Meleyke, a seventy-three years old mullah (Muslim clergy) living in Goychay, describes it: “Friday prayer was not forbidden. However, they did not let educated people in there [mosque]. Teachers, doctors. The rest could go. Who cared?!” Sariyya, a fifty-seven years old music teacher living in Zerdab recalls:

> Nobody could worship our religion. There were no mosques. When we were kids, in the Soviet period, our grandparents used to go to a small mosque located in Gelme village. During Ashura [commemoration of Battle of Karbala], they would close the doors and windows and listen to religious laments, Quran in Iranian radio channels.

When it comes to religious identity, majority of Azerbaijanis are cultural Muslims, meaning that even though they do not necessarily follow all five fundamental rules of Islam – Shahada (declaration of faith), Salah (obligatory daily prayer), Zakat (compulsory giving), Sawm (fasting) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), they adhere to Wajib (religious duty) and believe that they accumulate Thawab (spiritual reward) for each good deed. They believe in the existence of God and the afterlife. Apart from visiting mosques and celebrating or commemorating important days, there were no other restrictions on Islam under the Soviet regime, at least not mentioned by the participants. One more restriction was to go on a pilgrimage to Mashhad, Karbala, Mecca and so on. However, this ban was due to the general travel ban outside the Soviet Bloc. Meleyke describes:

> Later, I went on several religious journeys. After 1990. All roads were open. You could go wherever you wanted. But… in 1990 we were still scared to go on a pilgrimage. Alikram’s [Alikram Hummatov, Azerbaijani Talysh military commander, known for his separatist political activism] gang, People's Front's gang controlled the roads [to Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia].

Following Marx’s ideology, the Soviet Union aimed at creating a society where no religion existed. With the help of various means of communication, Soviet citizens were encouraged to have a more secular lifestyle. Anti-religious posters such as “Boga net” (There is no God, in Russian), “Religiya yad. Beregi rebyat” (Religion is poison. Save children, in Russian) were visible everywhere. However, promotion of secularism and anti-Islam propaganda were not successful in Azerbaijani where religious identity is inseparable from

cultural identity. People still continued to practice religion, and celebrate important holy days in disguise.

One of the surprising examples of cultural trauma is collectivization. I define it as surprising because collectivization is usually mentioned as a nostalgic element of remembering among Azerbaijani women. It gave them a sense of belonging to a community and most importantly, that was one the few opportunities to get socialized. Local and regional competitions would take place where the results of individual and collective production would compete against each other. The *Hero of Socialist Labor* honorific title was established in 1938 and Soviet workers were awarded for their unprecedented achievements in Soviet industry and culture, including agriculture until 1991. These incentives would motivate a Soviet worker to produce more and become an exemplary, well-respected worker.

Collectivization was also promoted through arts and culture. When we study Soviet Azerbaijani cinema, collectivization of labor can be seen in every film produced by the Azerbaijanfilm. The prominent example is *Görüş* (Meeting, in Azerbaijani) that portrays the friendship between competing cotton harvesters of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. The illustration of collective farming was also common in paintings and sculptures. The songs dedicated to labor would inject a Socialist spirit into workers and create solidarity among them.

In Azerbaijan SSR, collective cotton harvesting was a very popular activity imposed by the state. "During the Soviet period, we used to go to cotton [harvesting]. State ordered, we went. That was the law" (Meleyke). It was the reality of Socialist everyday life. Regardless of age, gender and social status, everyone was involved in collective labor. "During the communist period everyone was working together. Doctors, nurses – everyone was involved in farm work. When the cotton was ready, all the doctors, nurses, accountants – everyone was helping harvest the cotton" (Rafiga). Nevertheless, collectivization was not approved by all because in the core of it there is forced labor. For Sariyya, for instance, collectivization was absenteeism:

> During the Soviet regime, starting from the fourth, fifth grades, they would take us all to cotton fields. The harvesting season used to start in September and last until mid-December. Sometimes, we could not go to school at all. We were excluded from education. Four months for harvesting, two months for weed cleaning. They did not

> care that we were still kids. They would take us to the fields without any guidance, under the direct sunlight. It was very difficult. It was very difficult back then.

Sariyya's husband used to work as a deputy director at a shoes' department located in Raypo (Rayonnoye Potrebitelsko Obshchestvo – Consumers' Cooperative, in Russian). When I asked her about the origin of the goods, she told me that her husband used to sell both local and imported shoes. Imported products were not available to everyone:

> Most of the time, imported products were sold based on a list. To advanced cotton harvesters, to advanced tractor drivers, to advanced teachers. In a nutshell, to advanced workers... Why does a kolkhoz worker need imported boots! Where could he wear them? They did not want those boots. Whoever had money would bet more money on those boots and buy them.

Rafiga, a sixty-six years old retired accountant who lives in Zerdab also complained about the forced labor. She told me a story that everyone in her town used to get the cocoon for silk-making. Because she had a full-time job and was responsible for household chores, she used to pay someone else to take care of the cocoon that was assigned to her. In her interview, she even went beyond forced labor. However, Rafiga struggled to put her opinion into words as she was lacking specific terms to express her views. Clearly, in the excerpt below, she talks about colonization, more specifically Russian imperialism. Azerbaijan was a great supplier of natural gas, oil, wheat, cotton to name a few to the Soviet economy. More significantly, Baku was the main provider of crude oil and gasoline during World War II. Many politicians and economists acknowledge the fact that without the fuel provided by Azerbaijan, the victory would be impossible to achieve. Rafiga mentioned how natural resources of Azerbaijan were appropriated by the Soviet regime and Azerbaijani citizens had to work in order to use those resources. Yet there was a scarcity of consumer products, gas and electricity. It put extra burden on women while taking care of the house and family. A woman of a country that harvested tons of cotton and contributed to production herself could barely find a nice cotton dress to wear:

> When we were under the Soviet regime, whatever we owned belonged to Russians. For example, our oil, gas, water, and cotton. All of these belonged to Russia. Russia seized everything. We could not make use of these resources… We would get things from Russia. Even "thank you" would come from them. We would receive our livelihoods

from them. But after we got out of the USSR and gained our independence, everything belonged to us again…

However, there is a village in Azerbaijan where a Soviet kolkhoz named after Nikolay Nikitin, the *Hero of Socialist Labor*, is still preserved. Located in Ismayilli district, Ivanovka is a home to Molokans – a Russian ethnic religious group. Local people claim that this is the last kolkhoz in the world that has remained intact. The production of this kolkhoz is high. In fact, last year the village reached a record in harvesting – 50 quintal per hectare (Baku TV, 2023). I had a short trip to Ivanovka to see the collective farm before my field trip. I got to see the honey-making process and was invited to taste bread baked in kolkhoz. However, neither I nor the local women had time for the interview that day. Unfortunately, due to no funding, I could not pay a visit to this extraordinary place during my field trip in September.

Decades of backwardness, isolation from the global world, and the Cold War era ban on Western culture, had created a public desire to acquire Western products (industrial, consumer, artistic and cultural). That was the beginning of the end. Everything that was foreign was considered unique. Madina told me a story about how she started playing the violin. She said that her mother wanted her to learn the piano which was popular among Azerbaijani schoolchildren. They eventually chose violin after the music teacher insisted that piano was a local instrument. "Violin was an imported instrument. Back then the word *imported* was very valuable. It means foreign", Madina explained, "You are a smart girl. Do you prefer local or imported? – the teacher asked. Imported, – I answered". She also shared a story about how she got into a fight with a woman at the univermag (department store) over a pink lipstick even though it had a defect. When I asked why, it turned out that it was a rare color of lipstick back in the days and was imported from a foreign country.

When Sariyya talked about shopping, she also described how imported products used to be sold secretly at houses. Private traders (black marketers of foreign products) used to smuggle imported goods, especially from Georgia and sell it in their houses. They also let customers buy these products with credit. It means that they had a notebook where they wrote the name of the customers with the amount of money they owed. Customers paid the amount in several instalments. It strengthened customer loyalty between these private traders and buyers.

Although there was a lack of information about the other parallel universe – the West, some Azerbaijanis who managed to get out of the borders of the Soviet Bloc transmitted information about the outside. "We heard that laborers in America wore a pair of jeans when extracting the oil. Our people paid 250 manats to buy them and they were proud that they got jeans. We could never keep up with them [Americans]" (Sariyya). Madina shared her story about isolation from the rest of the world under the Soviet regime:

> I had a colleague. His grandma was Jewish who lived in America. One day he told us: "Do you know in America bread is sold in plastic packages, also sliced". We did not believe him. How could bread be sold in a plastic package? How could bread be sold as sliced? He also told us that sunflower seeds were sold unshelled. We said, come on, do not lie. He swore... Later, we saw it. We saw that production. But back then, it was shocking to us.

Living in a bubble without freedom of information for many years, a Soviet citizen got gradually exposed to the outer world during and after World War II. Kolář (2013) describes it as "the official policy of increasing the weight of consumer goods over producer goods opened a Pandora's box of individualized desire" (p. 212). As we can see in the interview excerpts above, imported products and trips outside the Soviet Bloc opened the eyes of many consumers. The Iron Curtain created the concept of *Zagranitsa.* "This concept was disconnected from any real abroad and located in some unspecified place – over there (*tam*), with them (*u nikh*), as opposed to with us (*u nas*)" (Yurchak, 2006, p. 159). The Imaginary West was an exotic, unattainable and abstract place where oilmen wore jeans to work, and bread was sold in plastic packages. Zagranitsa was not only a place outside the geopolitical border. It also represented otherness. Sariyya defines Americans as them: "We could never keep up with them".

In her book – *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, Černyšova (2013) argues that Soviet citizens began enjoying modern consumer goods and Soviet consumption started losing its dominance even before perestroika. Starting from the 1960s the circulation of Western cultural symbols began. It was seen in fashion, music and cinema. These symbols were being distributed, especially among youngsters by *fartsovshchiki* (black marketers). Getting glimpses of life outside the borders through lifestyle and fashion magazines, music videos and movies, women were exposed to another reality. They began to desire modern home appliances such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners and refrigerators to reduce domestic labor. Majority of women I interviewed complained about the lack of gas, electricity and warm

water that was needed to do daily household chores. Doing laundry and taking a shower were the most problematic ones. Now, seeing images of glamorous Western women, they yearned not only for necessities but also foreign home decorations, leisure-time activities, cosmetics and fashion.

Later, with the introduction of Gorbachev's *perestroika* (reconstruction) and *glasnost* (openness) policies Soviet consumerism was altered forever. Many historians and sociologists argue that consumer dissatisfaction played a crucial role in protests against the Soviet regime that resulted in the collapse of the USSR in 1991. I agree with this statement to some extent, because consumer dissatisfaction was not as strong as it was in Eastern Europe in Azerbaijan, except the capital city – Baku. The reasons may be religion, as well as the fact that people had little to no time to even think about the Imaginary West due to daily domestic burden and mandatory collective labor.

What is peculiar is how Meleyke remembers the collapse of the USSR. According to her, five active workers from ten cities were invited to meet Ayaz Mutallibov, the first president of Azerbaijan from 8 May 1990 to 6 March 1992, in Baku. She was representing Goychay. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the possibility of secession. Meleyke explains:

> That day, two people from each city gave a speech. From our city, I had a talk. Ayaz Mutallibov was sitting on the chair together with the people. There were people outside the building too. They were screaming: "Go away! Freedom! Freedom!" There were loudspeakers. Our speeches were heard from outside too. I said: "Yes, we want freedom. But we will regret it. We will regret it because of the army, police system, education system. If we are given freedom – arbitrariness today, there will be no unity". Some applauded, some did not. Ayaz Mutallibov kissed my hand. I said: "You are leaving anyway. Thousands of people are waiting outside. We will regret it". Listen, they were screaming 'freedom'. They gained freedom. Secession was possible… But by the state. Not by the citizens. The fate of the state separated by the citizens is this! Whoever comprehended it, cried, whoever did not, were happy that the USSR collapsed.

On August 30, 1991, the supreme Council of Azerbaijan declared the independence of Azerbaijan. In my opinion, the secession of Azerbaijan SSR was a result of territorial dispute that escalated in late 1980s between Azerbaijan SSR and Armenia SSR that led to mass

demonstration on January 20, 1990 in Baku and resulted in invasion of Baku and death toll of 150 civilians by the Soviet Army. Until 1990, the Soviet Union was the homeland. Even though many Azerbaijanis were victims of the Soviet regime, especially under Stalin's leadership, citizens were unaware of it. On the contrary, they saw the USSR as the winner of the Great Patriotic War and savior of the nation from fascism. It was unimaginable for Azerbaijanis to witness the Soviet military vehicles, tanked up with the oil of Azerbaijan, that once fought against the common enemy roll around in Baku and target civilians. That is the trauma that was mentioned by all women that I interviewed during the field trip to Azerbaijan. Traces of cultural trauma experienced during and right after the transition is so vivid that it has become the most crucial part of historical consciousness and national identity.

"Let there be no war!" All participants repeated this sentence several times. During my field trip to Azerbaijan, the Karabakh conflict had escalated again with a death toll of eighty soldiers. It had a huge influence on the discourses of women. The reason is that the majority of people associate Russia, who plays a crucial role in the conflict, with the Soviet Union. Both Karabakh Wars (1992-1994 and 2020) were mentioned in all stories. The topic of war was inevitable. These women began telling their traumatic journey by mentioning pogroms that happened in the late 1980.

> It was very hard, my daughter. We were going through a painful period. There were demonstrations every day. Nobody was working. Everybody was at the demonstrations. Then, the Sumgait pogrom happened. I am a witness of it. The situation was horrible (Ramila).

I could see the horror in the respondents' eyes when they were telling me these stories. They paused, sighed a lot in this part of the interview. Madina recalls: "I cannot forget how people were throwing away their communist membership cards. Some were holding a bed-sheet in the street and passersby were throwing their cards into that bed-sheet". Next traumatic event was Black January that happened on January 20, 1990. The territorial claims of Armenia over Karabakh led Azerbaijanis living in Baku to the streets to protest against the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The peaceful demonstration was violently suppressed by the Soviet Army. On January 21, the streets of Baku were covered by thousands of carnations that once were a popular bridal flower, now symbolizing mourning:

> Those were horrible days. I remember, we heard noises coming from outside. We all ran to the balcony, and the orchestra stopped playing. Crowds of people were shouting 'Karabakh'. It all started because of Karabakh... My husband says they [Soviet Army] were not only shooting at protestors but at houses as well. His family hid under the table. There are still bullet holes in their house (Madina).

Similar to Heyat's (2002) research findings, during my field trip to Azerbaijan I also observed that there is still a strong anti-Russian sentiment in Azerbaijan after three decades. When I asked Madina how she felt when she heard the news about the collapse of the USSR, she said: "After the events of 1990, there was a feeling of hatred towards Moscow and Russians. In my opinion, many people were happy because of the collapse [USSR] and independence". The waves of shock had left people speechless. I found it strange because the terror was also there. How could Soviet propaganda be so powerful that Azerbaijanis did not expect Black January to happen?

The trauma reached its peak when the Khojaly massacre happened on February 26, 1992. Azerbaijanis living in Karabakh were exposed to direct violence – mass killing, torture and assault. The war continued until 1994, with the invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts by Armenia, leaving thousands of people dead, tortured, captured and "best-case" scenario, homeless. On one hand, the socio-political transition which was complicated on its own, on the other hand the Karabakh War traumatized the entire nation. Ramila who was living in Sumgait back then remembers:

> The voices of Azerbaijanis were not heard. Because of this injustice, my husband died of a heart attack. In 1988. It was very hard when the war [First Karabakh War] started, kid. I remember those days in horror. I would leave the house in the morning with the hope that I would come back home in the evening. Crime was everywhere.

Before the field trip, I was expecting the participants to mention this turbulent period which overlaps with the transition. Being personally affected by the second Karabakh War, it was very difficult for me to relive the horror in the life stories of these women. As a researcher, it is also challenging to remain objective and avoid bias. Therefore, without further comments on the chaotic political situation that Azerbaijan faced in early 1990s, I would like to move on to the social and economic dimensions of cultural trauma of the transition period.

Because Azerbaijanis were living together with other nationalities such as Jews, Armenians, Russians in Baku, what was happening in Karabakh affected life outside the conflict zone. Afat was studying at the Medical University in Baku when all this happened. She describes:

> In 1989, the state of emergency was declared. Nobody could leave the house. There was a curfew. I had to go under appendicitis surgery. It took my parents two days to visit me [they were in Zerdab, about 250 km away] ... That was the situation. We were studying, doing our duties. Our polyclinic [where she was doing her residency] was in the neighborhood where Armenians inhabited. We were scared. We lived with fear. We were scared that they would do something to us. Because the mindset of people had changed a lot. It had changed completely. We were scared of walking in the streets. They could bomb a bus. They could bomb a metro. Or something could happen at the polyclinic. We were having a psychological shock.

Safety became the foremost social concern. Your neighbors became your potential threats. Social cohesion was disturbed. Madina remembers: "It [the Soviet Union] collapsed. Then the Karabakh conflict. They [Jews] were afraid of chauvinism. They are very clever. They realized that it was better to move to America". Another social problem was the worsened healthcare system. Afat recalls: “In 1993, we could not accept new patients in our hospital, my daughter. Everything was in a terrible condition. There was a shortage of medicines. There were not enough medical beds. We did not have food for the patients”. These social problems stemmed from the sudden socio-political transition and ongoing war. Sevinj summarizes it perfectly:

> Imagine you go from 50 degrees Celsius down to -50 degrees Celsius. How would you feel? Same things. We could not keep the balance. That is why it [transition] lasted till the 2000s. Everything changed. System changed. School changed. University changed. Shop changed. Market changed. Everything!

The hardest part of the transition was its economic consequences. All participants mentioned several economic issues such as scarcity of food, especially bread, closure of *sberkassas* (savings banks) and loss of bank savings, unemployment, brain drain. Material and non-material levels of life decreased. The livelihood was at a very low level. People suffered from financial and moral damage. Sariyya remembers:

> The USSR dissolved. The People's Front was in power. We became independent. But we suffered a lot. People lived in poverty. It was so hard to raise our kids... My husband used to work in Raypo [Rayonnoye Potrebitelsko Obshchestvo – Consumers' Cooperative, in Russian]. It was closed down. Everybody started his own business. Some could, some could not. Those who could not start business went bankrupt. Those who had more savings, sharper minds could.

Transition from collectivization to privatization was not gradual. Therefore, many people could not keep pace with capitalism quickly. Those who could not adjust to the new economic system migrated abroad. Madina tells: "My former musician colleagues were selling ice-cream in Germany, America, and Israel. They were working at an ice-cream factory. You get it? They were not accepted as musicians there". This brain-drain later had negative outcome for Azerbaijani economy.

The most gruesome activity of the day was the long bread lines. Some participants compared it to bread lines that occurred during the Great Patriotic War. The average Azerbaijani's diet is heavily based on carbohydrates, especially wheat. Bread shortage must have stood the test of time. Sariyya explains:

> The monthly payek [food, issued at a certain rate for a certain period, in Russian] was five hundred grams of butter per capita. The People's Front was in power. The bread was scarce. The ones we found were black with worms inside. We could not feed our kids with it.

Another output of economic decline was the closure of Gosbank – central bank of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. People who had savings in sberkassas – official outlets of Gosbank, lost it. Azerbaijani citizens could only receive their savings partially starting from 2012. Having savings in the bank was crucial for an ordinary Soviet citizen. They lost it when they most needed it. Most people had savings to help their children get married. Ramila told me that she was traumatized when she heard the news. Her savings meant a future. She had lost her future in one day. Transition period was not only mourning for lost past but also for lost future. People who were used to stability over decades suddenly found themselves at the crossroads of past, present and future. Past was no more, the present was turbulent, and the future was unknown.

Ramila told me that when the second Karabakh War started, she got scared that history would repeat itself. Apparently, when the war was announced on TV, people rushed to supermarkets to stock their food. After the war ended forty-four days later, there was a lot of rotten food in the garbage bins. She describes it as "People had witnessed hardship. They had witnessed torture”. Trauma experienced during the transition lives in the consciousness of Azerbaijanis till today and any resemblance reactivates their collective survival mode. The cultural trauma they have experienced under the Soviet regime as well as during the transition is interwoven. One cannot be studied without the other one although the first was subtle in their life stories compared to the latter. In my opinion, the reason is that first of all, transition is the recent past and thus memories are still vivid. Second, the respondents fail to analyze life under the Soviet Union due to several reasons that will be discussed in the next section.

3.3 Unspoken Words

When I asked Ramila about her birth date and place, after a long pause she replied: “Should we go there? Is it necessary?” The questions that these women did not answer are as important as the stories they told me in order to analyze collective memory. Sometimes they hesitated to answer certain questions followed by a long pause or silence. Sometimes they began and ended their speech with praises of the current political regime. Sometimes they could not comprehend what had happened. Sometimes they could not simply remember. I have come up with several reasons behind unspoken words and have categorized them into three groups:

- fear of regime
- political unawareness
- forgetting

To start with, several women that I reached out during the sampling process refused to participate in the research. Some made excuses, some were courageous enough to convey their concern to me which was their fear of the regime. They explicitly said that they did not want to lose their jobs or get into trouble with the government for participating in this research. I did not try to convince them to agree to an interview because it would have been unproductive anyway. Fear has already eaten them up. Those who agreed to contribute to this research due to respect to either my parents or other mediators, were not fully comfortable to talk during the interview. I first had informal talk with them over tea before setting the audio recorder on to gain their trust and make them feel less anxious. However, they still had doubts that this

research might be a headache for them later. To guarantee themselves, at the end of the interview they made sure that they had not done anything illegal. For instance, when I told Afat that I was not going to publish her audio recording or full transcript anywhere, she told me that “you can if you want. I have not told you anything wrong”. Ramila also said something similar: “If you are going to publish it, go ahead. I am not doing anything surreptitious. I am telling the truth”. I should not note that the presence of an audio recorder has changed the dynamics of the narratives. It might stem from Soviet espionage:

> My late grandpa used to say “stop talking, they have released metal [satellite] to the sky. They are recording our voices. If Khrushchev hears you, he will come for you”. We were that scared. But now no one is scared…

This extract taken from Meleyke's speech is a compelling example. She addresses the fear, then contradicts herself by saying that no one is scared now. Her method to overcome fear is to show a high level of loyalty to both the Soviet regime and Aliyev: “Our president is a good person. No one can deny it. I love him as my own son and will always do”. She accepts that the current regime has got major problems. However, she chooses indirect criticism and complains about ministers instead of the president himself:

> I wish we had the rule of law of that period and the leader of today at the same time. Rule of law and constitution of the Soviet state and communism, and the leader of the present time. He [Ilham Aliyev] is not to blame. Officials! Officials around him plunder the country… There is no respect for the leader. Not me, in general. The mobsters living in this democratic country have no respect for the leader. What sane person could write in the media where he is, where her daughter is?! Could anyone publish that?! Now, they do. They do many things against the leader. You should know who your leader is as you do God!

This cult of personality has gone so extreme that I was in awe when I heard the last sentence. Meleyke has been working as a mullah for around forty years. She is covered up and follows all five pillars of Islam. Yet her comparison of Aliyev to God is outrageous. She has chosen flattery as her “life jacket” to not get into trouble and deal with bureaucratic problems. She was not the only one who chose flattery to stay on the safe side during the interviews. Ramila also selected officials as a scapegoat and expressed her loyalty to Aliyev throughout her narrative:

> Perhaps, if Heydar Aliyev had not come to power, there would have been very hard and difficult days. Let him rest in peace. That man saved the nation from falling off a cliff, kid. From falling off a cliff… It is not the president’s duty to give medicine to someone

> who has a headache. It is the responsibility of the ministers. They fail to do it. They do not think of the nation.

To make it clear, I did not ask participants for their opinion on the president or current politics at all. Nevertheless, almost all of them started and ended their interview with the praises of Aliyev. Sevinj followed the same path as well:

> They say a fish starts stinking from head [an expression used to criticize top-down approach]. No, no. There are some tiny issues that people make a problem out of. But everyone blames it on the top. I totally disagree with it. Everyone can make a mistake. The bottom, they create all problems.

These public displays of devotion, as well as glorification of obedience and state control are rooted in Soviet propaganda. Some of these women are not ashamed of fear. On the contrary, they see it as a necessity. They equate fear with respect. The more fear you have, the more respectful you are. That is one of the reasons why the majority of the population is refrained from any form of political activity**,** especially demonstrations. Some of them, on the other hand, are vigilant. As Ramila puts it: "Let there be peace. Life… This country has just had a war. When I look up, there is a mustache, when I look down, there is a beard [an expression used to show that one is on the horns of a dilemma]. We have to think thoroughly. We have to take both the state and the nation into consideration".

The week I visited Azerbaijan to conduct the research, Gorbachev passed away. I asked all respondents about his death deliberately to observe their reactions. Below is the dialogue between Ramila and me:

- Did you hear about the death of Gorbachev?
- By God! No!
- A few days ago.
- My TV does not show Baku [channels].
- So, you hear it for the first time?
- Yes, now.

It is noteworthy to mention that earlier during the interview, Ramila had mentioned that she actively watched news, especially when the second Karabakh War happened. She felt uncomfortable when I asked this question. After a long pause, she continued: "By God! I did

not understand anything from his [Gorbachev's] rule. May his power fall upon himself. He did hypocrisy. He did discrimination. Especially against Azerbaijan. He did not listen to Azerbaijan's truth".

Another interesting dialogue was with Meleyke. When I asked her the same question, she confirmed the news. I carried on by asking her a provocative question – How did you feel when you heard the news? She replied:

> Putin was standing at his head crying [she laughs]. He said, "you did not teach me politics well". You know, we cannot call a head of state bad. None of them. We [Azerbaijanis] call everyone bad. Therefore, we live in a bad condition. If you go to the museum in Moscow, the photos of all the leaders are hung on the walls…

Both women – Ramila and Meleyke, continued holding onto their life jackets – avoidance and flattery respectively. It was impossible to break the wall and get their candid opinions on certain questions. Their fear of the regime was stronger than the trust we established between us. However, fear was not the only reason why these women could not or did not answer specific questions that were raised during the interviews.

During my field trip to Zerdab, I experienced something unexpected. The plan was to meet Rafiga who used to work at the hospital as an accountant from 1974 until 2021. When I visited her at her house, she was taking care of her mother – Gul (aged 84) who was a bedridden patient. Her husband was also at home who would interfere with the interview to correct her wife or add more information. At first, I thought it would be a good idea to reschedule the meeting so that I could interview Rafiga one on one. However, she started telling her story right away and I could not interrupt her. I am glad I did not! The age and gender gap changed the whole dynamics of the interview.

Like other participants, Rafiga was also talking about the past in contrast to the present. At one point, she stated that the present – post-Soviet period, is better than the past – Soviet period. Her husband who was watching TV in the living room – apparently, eavesdropping on our conversation – walked in and started arguing with Rafiga questioning her why she preferred the present time. He tried to silence her by saying "How would you know?" What took me by surprise was that this man, as opposed to all female respondents I interviewed, had more clear and precise memories of historical events. Despite the fact that women who participated in my research were not illiterate (in fact, some of them are university graduates and have a successful

career), they were politically unaware of the past. It raises a question: Why is Rafiga not as politically aware as her husband?

To answer the question, my hypotheses are women having little or no access to public spaces and being involved in both productive and non-productive work hindered their political participation. Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that epistemic injustice occurs in two distinct ways in society – either because of your identity (e.g. sexual, gender, racial and etc.), your words have no credibility and consequently you are silenced or ignored; or your social experiences are interpreted falsely. The less masculine one is, the more likely they are discouraged to participate in exchange of political opinions in Azerbaijan (then and now), even on a social level. The very famous public space to discuss politics in Azerbaijan is a tea-house where women are not "allowed" to enter. Heyat Faridah (2005) also mentions several examples of gender segregation in her book during and after the transition period. She argues that gendered spatial separation is a new social phenomenon that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I disagree with this statement. Although women used to work with men side by side, doing collective labor, they usually spent their leisure time separately. The reason why her findings suggest that gender segregation in public space became wide-spread after the transition is that she conducted her research only in Baku – the most "civilized" city of Azerbaijan. The gender roles were always apparent in the rest of Azerbaijan.

This opens the door to the next hypothesis. A Soviet woman was not attributed only one identity – a socialist worker. She was also a nurturer. She was always occupied, both working in a kolkhoz or factory and taking care of the household and family. Because of her active (and inevitable!) involvement in productive and non-productive work, she had no time to socialize and most importantly, engage in political discussions with her peers. She got alienated from political discourse. That is why Rafiga is unable to reflect on the past as analytically as her husband. That is why Ramila says that she is not good at politics and does not want to stick her nose into it. That is why Madina says she does not remember the day when the USSR dissolved and Azerbaijan restored its independence because she had recently got married and was not interested in politics at all. These hypotheses can lay a foundation for further research and I encourage my colleagues to conduct a research, specifically on the influence of public space, especially tea houses on political awareness and political participation in Muslim societies.

Why does Rafiga prefer the present as opposed to her husband even though the past is shared? It is another question that was raised during my interview with them. In order to answer it, we need to analyze what the dichotomy of past and present mean to Rafiga and her husband. They labeled these periods as communism and capitalism themselves. Although they both look back at those days with longing, Rafiga complained about communism for the shortage of water, electricity and gas that doubled the daily burden on women. Working as a full-time accountant and taking care of the household chores with lack of water and heat supply, challenged Rafiga to perform her gender role that was assigned to her by the society successfully. The byproducts of capitalism eased her hardship and had a positive impact on her well-being.

On the other hand, her husband was praising the Soviet regime due to economic stability. He several times mentioned that the money he earns now is not sufficient to cover all costs of the family:

> Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine – all these countries were in the USSR. Then the Soviet Union was dissolved. These are independent states now, and they are dying of hunger. But we lived in communism during Brezhnev's time. We did not feel who is hungry, who is full. Everyone lived well.

In Azerbaijan, like any other Muslim society, men are assigned the role of a breadwinner. The competitive nature of capitalism, as well as over-consumerism disable him to carry out his "male" duties which makes him feel "less of a man". The tension between wife and husband over a better and worse period was in fact the conflict of gender identities. This unexpected and surprising encounter opens a door to another realm – *gendered memory* which is worthy of its own study.

Another remarkable aspect of that day was Rafiga's mother – Gul's input. An eighty-four-year-old Gul did not forget the weight of cotton she collected on a specific day precisely but she did not remember who was in power back then: "I had eight kids, my kid. In the evening, I would bake bread. In the morning, I would go to cotton [harvesting]. We were very hardworking. We would work until twilight". When I asked her what she recalled of the transition period, she replied: "Where did I go? I did not leave the house nor did I hear anything. The kids were here and there studying. I do not remember…"

"I do not remember", "I am not able to understand", "You should help me remember", "I have never heard of it". This is another paradigm that is common across all narratives. Forgetting is an essential part of collective memory as remembering. By applying Assmann's (2016) theory on forms of forgetting, I found out that these women forgot certain aspects of the past actively and passively. By active form of forgetting in this paper, I mean negligence and dementia. Active form of forgetting is natural and occurs outside of external factors. Simply put, you choose not to remember or forgetting happens naturally as you age. If we look at an extract from Madina's interview, we can notice that she has a selective memory of a certain event – the collapse of the Soviet Union because. The question was how she heard the news about the collapse:

> Only on TV. Gorbachev, Yeltsin, po moyemu [in my opinion, in Russian]. How people… in Moscow… demanding… Do you know how it was back then? There was no economy. Talon system. We bought sugar and other products with a talon. The USSR collapsed because the economy was so… it went down… no progress… I understood it like this. They explained it to us like this. It had to collapse no matter if we wanted it to happen or not… Do you know why I was not interested in such things? I got married recently. On December 30 [1991]. Me and my husband were happy and we were enjoying the best years of marriage. We were not interested in politics.

This part of her speech was incoherent and full of pauses. As I stated in the theoretical part of this paper, my aim is not to find out what happened. It is rather to analyze how it is remembered. When I asked Madina what happened, it felt as if she had never thought of it or had never been asked about it before. Not only Madina but also other participants were walking down memory lane for the first time with me. Assman (2016) describes it as "a memory dispersed in forgotten depots". It is not only a matter of the forgotten past. It is also an identifier of historical unconsciousness. Here, the past is linked to the future. If the past is forgotten, what kind of future awaits us?

On the other hand, the collectivities can be subject to systematic forgetting, for instance through propaganda and destruction of a lieu de memoir. It serves a purpose and is done by the regime. During the interviews, I avoided having an active dialogue with a participant. I usually let her tell her life story without interference. I only asked them follow-up questions for content analysis purposes as stated in the methodological framework of the paper. However, when I

had an interview with Rafiga, I could not conceal my curiosity and the dialogue below between me and her occurred:

- We went to see a movie at the local club with our classmates and teachers. I remember, when Stalin appeared in one of the scenes, every one of us stood up. He was already dead. All of the pupils and teachers stood up to pay respect to him.
- What do you think of Stalin now?
- He was the one who ordered Baghirov [Mir Jafar Baghirov] to commit repression.
- Did you not know that back then?
- No, we learned it later. After the collapse of communism, we found out some truths. We learned that Stalin had ordered Baghirov to send our awakened people, poets into exile.

I was flabbergasted by this dialogue even though I had read a lot about Soviet propaganda. However, getting first-hand information from a woman who lived in a bubble with a lack of information under the Soviet regime made me question the reality that I believe is true today. Azerbaijani nation, at Rafiga's instance, was not aware of Stalin's terror. If not secession, they would have always praised Stalin for his victory over fascism even though the number of the victims of his orders is not less than of Hitler's. Yet, a typical Soviet citizen believed that the Soviet Union was the greatest state in the world. Media played a salient role in fostering Stalinism. The cult of personality is still relevant as we saw in this section of the paper. As a result of either fear or propaganda, the majority of the population sympathize with the Aliyev regime now. Similar to fighting against the common enemy – capitalism, then fascism – back then, the Karabakh conflict has become a populist tool to unify the nation around patriotism and heroic deeds. It has shifted people's attention from the undemocratic and corrupt political system to glorification of "victory" in the second Karabakh War.

Another catalysator of forgetting is destruction of sites of memory. It is systematically done by the state to reinvent a nation's history. The destruction can be tangible such as demolition of monuments, memorials, and intangible such as alteration of history books. It seems to me that the approach to the Soviet past is neutral on a state level. The Soviet toponyms have been changed, some of the buildings have been demolished. However, there is neither negative nor positive portrayal of life under the Soviet regime. On one hand, the government does not spread Soviet nostalgic sentiments. On the other hand, it does not foster the historical consciousness of the nation enough. It could be argued that the government neglects Soviet

history on purpose as many Azerbaijanis associate the Soviet Union with Russia who is the "mediator" of the Karabakh conflict, as well as an important economic and political partner of Azerbaijan, especially the Aliyev regime.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the research results. Two main findings of this research are Azerbaijani women look back both in sentiments and trauma. They feel nostalgic for certain aspects of life under the Soviet regime such as classless society, economic stability, organic food, social order, norms and values, coexistence, simplicity, and last but not least medical tourism. The past was often compared to the present and the latter was characterized by social inequality, unemployment, quantity over quality, absence of respect and order, overconsumption, and a higher cost of living. This pattern was found in all narratives.

At the same time, traces of cultural trauma were also observed in all life stories. In order to study what was traumatic, I categorized trauma as the one experienced under the Soviet regime and during the Soviet to post-Soviet transition. As opposed to nostalgia, women did not settle on cultural trauma during the Soviet period. Few of them mentioned traumatic experiences such as suppression of Azerbaijani language, suppression of Islam, collectivization of labor, and backwardness and isolation from the global world.

As for the cultural trauma during the transition, it was multi-layered. The discontinuity of experiences was abrupt and incalculable. People did not only grieve for the lost past but also the uncertain future. In my opinion, the transition lasted until the early 2000s although Azerbaijan restored its independence on October 18, 1991. Transition for these women symbolizes political chaos, social disorganization, and economic hardship. It is not solely because of the collapse of the USSR but other historical events such as ethno-territorial clash between Azerbaijan and Armenia, first Karabakh War, 20 January that overlapped this period. Unpreparedness and unpredictability gave people anxiety. Finally, the stories that women did not share with me were studied. They either did not answer certain questions because of the fear or they could not simply because of loss of memory. Most of them did answer all the questions but in a fabricated manner and the reasons were analyzed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Collective memory of Azerbaijani women of transition is insufficiently researched. However, their input is highly valuable to understand the both collective memory and collective identity of Azerbaijanis. This chapter assesses the relations between historical events that are listed in the theoretical framework of this paper, and their implications as well as remembrance. I will give the comparisons of my findings with those of Berdahl (1999) and Heyat (2002). After analyzing the dichotomy of history and memory, I will shift the discussion to the last domain of this paper – identity. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of the research and share my recommendations for further study.

In the theoretical framework of this paper, I draw on several historical events that could have influenced the lives of Azerbaijani women profoundly. I started the list with the short-lived national emancipation that resulted in the establishment of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in 1918. ADR was a progressive political institution that promised women a lot in regards to equality. For instance, ADR is one of the first states globally to grant women the right to vote (1919). The same year, Baku State University was founded where girls could get higher educational degrees in Azerbaijan for the first time. Unfortunately, ADR and its brilliant ideas ended in 1920 with the establishment of Azerbaijan SSR. The 1920 Congress of the Peoples of the East also promised women complete equality of rights. However, women's position in society has hardly ever gone beyond domestic life. On the contrary, it put a double burden on women by exploiting them in collective labor. Azerbaijani women became a wife, a mother, and a socialist worker. A ban on abortion and promotion of a large family by giving women incentives such as a medal and child allowance, pinned women to their houses. Women were assigned even more roles during the Great Patriotic War. They took over male roles to sustain and protect the family. Despite the fact that the original communist ideology focused on women's legal equality and political participation, women, neither individually nor collectively were given any direct political power in any communist state (Harsch, 2013).

Interestingly enough, the theme of gender equality and historical events mentioned above were not brought up by any of the research respondents. Some of them briefly noted the forced collective labor, however they did not refer to it in the framework of gender equality. For instance, Soviet pro-natalist policies were excluded in their life stories. My interpretation is that as paradoxical as it sounds, most of the Islamic values overlapped with Soviet social norms. Although there is a discontinuity of Soviet experiences, these women still embrace their

religious and cultural identity. Therefore, they do not criticize inequality in political participation or being bound to taking care of the family and household then and now. They still carry the femininity and motherhood traits imposed to them by the Soviet regime.

When I prepared the research design, my goal was to exclude the turbulent years of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict as it is a broad and complex topic that deserves its own thorough study. However, during my field trip to Azerbaijan, the conflict had escalated again and eventually it was impossible to avoid this topic altogether. As stated before, some Azerbaijanis associate Russia, who plays a key role in this conflict, with the Soviet Union. What I noticed is that the women I interviewed can compromise with everything only if there is no war. They have been traumatized during the transition and they saw senior Aliyev as a savior of the nation. In 2020, the second Karabakh War erupted and the current president administration spread populist ideas through promotion of patriotism and defense of the motherland, similar to Stalinist propaganda. Majority of Azerbaijanis believe that the victory has been achieved and consider junior Aliyev as the savior of the nation. The women I interviewed represent typical Azerbaijani women who want stability and are scared of any kind of transition. Corrupt, and undemocratic regime is a “necessary evil” for them to maintain economic stability and prevent any conflict that may arise due to political chaos as they witnessed in the 1990s.

Another pivotal instance of the research results is the definition of the past and the present. The words communism and capitalism were sometimes used by the respondents. What is intriguing is that they often associated the past (i.e. communism) with harmony, stability, simplicity and scarcity, and the present (i.e. capitalism) with enviousness, greed, ambition, immorality and abundance. Their life stories consist of paradoxes as well. They complain and a minute later, they praise. I interpret it as they expressed their opinions and feelings about the Soviet Union and the transition in length for the first time, the interview was an individual brainstorming for them.

Similar to Berdahl (1999) and Heyat’s (2002) studies, I also summarize that the participants shared their life stories in the backdrop of the present. Collective memory is the production of the present in lieu of the reproduction of the past. Both nostalgia and cultural trauma are rooted in the discontinuity of experiences. Even though Berdahl and Heyat conducted their research after the collapse, it can be argued that the memories of the past have not changed two decades later. Overall, none of the respondents either feels completely

nostalgic or recalls only the trauma of the past. In all life stories told, the dichotomy of nostalgia and cultural trauma went hand in hand. This excerpt from Goychek's interview sums it up:

> I was very happy when I heard the news [collapse of the USSR]. Imagine you rent a house. No matter how wonderful days you spend there, you are not fully satisfied. But if you own a cracked house, you have absolute freedom. You are free. Homeland is similar. You obey someone or you have free will... I emphasize it again, you should not forget the old vehicle just because you are in a new one. There are many good aspects of the past…

Perhaps the most important finding of this research is the analysis of the de(re) construction of identity. Based on various historical sources, we know what happened. In this paper, I attempted to study how a certain historical period is remembered by a certain group. Remembrance has an effect just like a cause and collective memory should always serve a purpose. We, as individuals and collectivity, do not stop at recalling something. That something is an identifier of who we have become and how we will change the narrative. As George Santayana (1950) famously said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". (p. 284) Whether we apply Halbwachsian model or Anderson's model, memory and identity are inextricably intertwined.

Cultural identity is a term used to define the collective identity of a group that shares a common culture and history. This paper suggests that cultural identity of Azerbaijani women of transition is based on three pillars of consciousness: social, economic and political. Social identity is equal to religious identity because the foundation of it is religious norms and values. An Azerbaijani woman of transition is a (cultural) Muslim and lives her life according to Islam. She misses social aspects of life in the past such as strong family bonds, respect and modesty and is worried about the future that predicts globalization, advanced technology and high level of secularism. Economic identity of an Azerbaijani woman of transition is founded on socialism. As Sevinj puts it: "I am a socialist kid". What is peculiar about Sevinj's identity is that she defines herself as a socialist and religious. An Azerbaijani woman of transition has a socialist soul. She is hardworking, frugal with money and resources, disapproves of overconsumption and greed and has difficulty keeping pace with capitalism. She prefers economic stability to a competitive market, a nine-to-five job to entrepreneurship. Finally, the political identity of an Azerbaijani woman of transition is Azerbaijani. Her national identity is constructed by political conflicts and war. She has lost a father, a son, a brother or a husband

in two Karabakh wars. She has been traumatized by the turbulent transition and is reluctant for any socio-political change.

I am glad that I have chosen oral history as a method to collect and analyze data for my research. Each and every life story told is a representation of memory and identity of the narrator. As I have stated before, my focus was not historical events that shaped the memory of Azerbaijani women. On the contrary, my ultimate goal was to find out how remembrance of a certain historical period shaped the identity of Azerbaijani women. One of the advantages of this method is the emphasis on the quality of the interview over quantity. For clear reasons, it was rather difficult to reach out the target group and most importantly, gain their trust so that they would agree to contribute to the study. Therefore, this method was efficient to collect enough data from a few respondents. Another benefit was the participants were given the power to tell whatever they wanted to share within the framework of the study. They touched upon some issues that broadened the perspective of the research.

Nevertheless, there is a pitfall of this methodology – distorted memory. In the previous chapter, I have illustrated the gaps such as silence, flattery and selective memory that occurred in the interviews. As an insider, I had an epistemological privilege to notice it. A researcher whose biography does not give them a lived familiarity with the studied group may find these narratives as subjective. As there is a scarcity of existing scholarship on Azerbaijani women in general, it might be challenging to understand the mentality of an Azerbaijani woman of transition whose identity is a fusion of socialism, Islam and nationalism. It is also vital to take bureaucratic challenges and women's unwillingness to participate in a study that is related to politics even to a minimal extent into consideration.

This chapter outlined the key findings of the research. I argued that the historical consciousness of the participants is low, especially in regards to gender issues in the Soviet Union. The reasons have been listed in the previous chapter in detail. I found out similar patterns in my research with those of Berdahl (1999) and Heyat (2002). The central argument here is that both nostalgia and cultural trauma are apparent in all life stories told. Cultural trauma has been experienced during the transition due to economic, social and political hardship. However, the trauma of the communist past was downplayed or completely eliminated by the participants. Last but the most important, the paper concludes that cultural identity of Azerbaijani women of transition is inseparable from their collective memory of the Soviet past.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the collective memory of Azerbaijani women of transition. The research questions that I aimed to find an answer were: How do Azerbaijani women of transition remember the Soviet past? How did collective memory (de/re) construct collective identity of Azerbaijani women of transition or vice versa? The theoretical framework of the thesis is built on the concepts of collective memory (Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora), nostalgia (Fred Davis), cultural trauma (Jeffrey C. Alexander) and identity (Maurice Halbwachs, Jeffrey C. Alexander). I reviewed the books of Farideh Heyat – *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan* and Daphne Berdahl – *'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things.*

When I searched for the existing scholarship on the topic, I noticed the scarcity of literature which encouraged me to design and conduct research in Azerbaijan to collect primary data. To do that, I chose the oral history method and applied Valerie Raleigh Yow's (1994) and Barbara Merrill's (2009) practical guide to record oral history. This method was effective for three reasons. First, it gave women a voice who are often silenced due to their gender. Second, as participants told me their life stories, it broadened the horizon of the research by raising further questions that I did not expect. Third, it allowed me to combine three dots of the thesis – history, memory and identity, which is to say, women by reflecting on the past revealed their cultural identity.

The premise of this paper is that collective memory and collective identity construct each other. In this sense, I agree with Megill's (2011) argument the most: "When identity becomes uncertain, memory rises in value." (p. 194) I would replace "uncertain" with "threatened". When a collective identity of a group is in jeopardy, the collectivity selects a memory and constructs its identity around it. It is related to the present and future as much as it is to the past. A state usually guides the collectivity to generate a collective identity. First, it creates an image of a common enemy (e.g. fascism, the USSR and Armenia). It, then, fortifies collective memory with lieu de memoir, such as public holidays that foster national unity and group identification (e.g. Stalin – Victory Day: May 9, 1945; senior Aliyev – National Salvation Day of Azerbaijanis: June 15, 1993; and junior Aliyev – Victory Day: November 8, 2020).

Based on the research findings, the central argument here is that collective memory of life under Soviet rule is composed of both nostalgic and traumatic elements whereas collective

memory of post-socialist transition is dominated by cultural trauma that had an enormous impact on de(re) construction of the collective identity of Azerbaijani women.

This study had a limitation of sampling due to lack of time, resources and unwillingness of the target group to participate in the research due to aforementioned factors. Further research is essential to reach out to women coming from more diverse backgrounds to expand the scope of it. I would like to encourage outsider researchers to conduct more research in Azerbaijan in general, as this country is often neglected in academia yet is of great importance to study the region. I would suggest having multiple field trips to Azerbaijan before the actual research to build trust and connections that are vital for research of any kind. I would also recommend taking gender into account as Azerbaijani women are difficult to approach but once the wall is destroyed they are able to contribute to research in many ways.

Despite the limitations, the research has fulfilled its objectives by highlighting the gap in the knowledge and adding empirical data that has interdisciplinary nature. The theoretical implications of this research such as gendered history and gendered memory can be further analyzed in sociology and anthropology, whereas practical implications such as political awareness and participation in a (post)-conflict society can be examined in political science.

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