STATUES AND VANDALISM IN ARMENIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA: EXPRESSIONS OF OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL NATIONALIST IDENTITY

Hanna Samir KASSAB [1, *] (iD)

1 East Carolina University, Greenville, NC

* Correspondence
Hanna Samir KASSAB, Brewster A-136, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858-4353
E-mail: hskassab@gmail.com

Abstract: In Skopje, there are many statues of heroes and patriots controversially claimed by Greece and Bulgaria. One statue now labeled 'warrior on the horse' due to Greek pressure was designed to be Alexander the Great. People still refer to the statue as Alexander, a testament to the persistence of nationalist beliefs. In Yerevan, the Mother Armenia statue looks upon Mount Ararat in modern day Turkey. She wields a sword, as if to say "it's not over". The same might be said about the graffiti in both states as both are heavily nationalistic in nature. These acts of graffiti/vandalism communicate a message of disorder and dissatisfaction against the state. These official and unofficial nationalist sentiments are expressed because of the need to recover, in North Macedonia's case, a long suppressed sense of national identity, and in the Armenian sense, a nationalism under attack. Nationalism in this sense is an expression of cultural revitalization, an essentially Postcolonial need to recover notions of self. This theoretical underpinning will serve as a baseline from which to apply the ethnographic findings of my trips to these locations.

Keywords: postcolonialism, colonialism, culture, nationalism, social constructions.

Introduction

In some countries, nationalism is expressed as opposition to colonization. Walking around Skopje and Yerevan, one notes various patriotic symbols, statues, structures, and vandalism, sometimes taking the form of graffiti. In Skopje, there are many statues of heroes and patriots controversially claimed by Greece and Bulgaria. One statue is labeled "an equestrian warrior" (Marusic, 2012) due to Greek pressure and was designed to be Alexander the Great. People still refer to the statue as Alexander, a testament to the persistence of nationalist beliefs. In Yerevan, the Mother Armenia statue looks upon Mount Ararat in modern day Turkey. She wields a sword, as if to say "it's not over". The government of Armenia wants people to forget Ararat and other mountains considered sacred, yet the people reject those calls (Pashinyan, 2024). The same might be said about the graffiti in both states as both are heavily nationalistic in nature.

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This article discusses the centrality of statues in nationalism, and considers the persistence of national traumatic memories experienced by the collective. Similarly, nationalist graffiti is prolific. In Skopje, graffiti is splotched onto identification plaques that render any explanation useless. In Armenia, graffiti features Greater Armenia, including the idea that Artsakh is sovereign Armenian territory. These acts of graffiti/vandalism communicate a message of disorder and dissatisfaction against the state. This message is nationalistic in nature as it communicates a political message. These official and unofficial nationalist sentiments are expressed because of the need to recover, in North Macedonia's case, a long suppressed sense of national identity, and in the Armenian sense, a nationalism under attack. Nationalism in this sense is an expression of cultural revitalization, an essentially Postcolonial need to recover notions of self. This article thus uses a Postcolonial approach to better understand the political situation in North Macedonia and Armenia. Both these states underwent socialism, a political system that suppresses nationalism for class conflict. Like any colonial and/or imperial experience that undermines the indigenous population, the culture of the imperial power, in these cases Marxist-Leninism, seeks to 'civilize' the local population by eradicating the local culture by replacing it with a foreign one. The colonized people, after removing that foreign power, will then seek to remember itself through a process of gradual cultural recovery that will serve to increase collective self-worth and self-confidence. While many would scoff at these efforts, statues and graffiti/vandalism serves to strengthen the collective identity after foreign influence, for, as the Foucauldian argument goes, wherever there is power, there is resistance. This article's theoretical Postcolonial underpinning will serve as a baseline from which to apply the ethnographic findings of my trips to these locations.

Postcolonialism and Ethnography: Examining Nationalism after Colonialism

Postcolonialism is the study of European colonialism on the formerly colonized peoples globally, and specifically their fight against that power (Drebes, 2016; Young, 2016). Edward Said's *Orientalism* was among the first books to discuss the effects of colonialism in this manner. Said himself states that "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 11). As a perspective, it seeks to unravel race discourse that constructs power structures shaping life and living for people in the global south (Geeta & Nair, 2013, p. 8). Significantly, epistemic violence facilitates these constructions, by establishing a superior-inferior cultural dichotomy (Spivak, 1988, p. 280). Culture is the center of analysis as Postcolonialism "...bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 71). Under colonialism, indigenous cultures are suppressed and dehumanized while the colonial power is glorified as superior. The main focus for this paper is not to describe epistemic violence of North Macedonians and Armenians, but rather to look at the process and praxis of cultural revitalization through the study of statues and graffiti/vandalism, and its nationalist expression. In these countries, nationalism adopts a rejection of colonialism, and might best be explained using a Postcolonial framework.

Defined, cultural revitalization as a "conscious and deliberately orchestrated process of restoring a cultural experience that has been lost, disrupted or diminished" (Shea et al., 2019, 553). Cultural revitalization describes the transmission of memories, cultural beliefs, practices, and other important symbols of cultural identification from one generation to the other (Shea et al., 2019, Merton, 1949; Wallace, 1956). An often studied vehicle for the transfer of this knowledge is Native American tribes as discussed by Shea et al. (2019). However, I submit that this process may be present anywhere a culture has been suppressed by another, foreign culture.

To Postcolonial scholars, nationalism is seen as a European idea, 'foreign' to the political experience of people living in the global south (Lazarus, 1999). However, there are some elements, including nationalism, that have made their way, or migrated, into the makeup of global south countries. People there enjoy European sports

like cricket and football, but also various cultural practices of the so-called 'western' world (Lazarus, 1999). This is because of the European experience. Many European elements can now be found in the global south because of the forces of colonialism. Most important of these is the acceptance of the state as a political unit of governance. The Arab nationalist movement dominated politics of the middle east for much of the twentieth century (Martin, 2014). Indeed, there are many non-western ethnic groups that seek statehood: the Palestinians, the Kurds, the Western Saharans, among others, all see their survival as tied to statehood. There are also growing nationalist movements in parts of Africa and Asia, such as the Omora, Tigray, E Timor nationalism. States like India, Bangladesh, and more recently South Sudan were all created out of national belief systems. Thus, nationalism can no longer be considered a western ideal; it is clear that nationalism, like other western practices such as sport, music, movies, and other vehicles of art, culture, and identity, has been transplanted into the global south (Martin, 2014).

Essentially then, the nation-state is a vehicle for self-rule as people seek to keep their cultures and traditions alive (Khandy & Şengül, 2022). While this may seem as foreign to the experience of the global south, many peoples act in accordance with this idea of preserving national identity through the nation-state. This works within the Postcolonial perspective as it is centered around maintaining and recovering lost identity (Shea et al., 2019). Identity, what was now cultural identity, might now be incorporated into national identity. Nationalism is a construction of knowledge used to create myths, forming an identity to convince others to follow. It requires cultural revitalization, a process of recovering and remembering the past.

It is debatable whether or not North Macedonia and Armenia truly qualify as 'western' as these states are not part of the geographical western Europe nor are they culturally part of western Europe. Once part of the Ottoman Empire experience, these nations have a different cultural development than western Europe. These nations also have no real experience of independence. There were independence movements in both states in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but these efforts were part of a growing, global political trend (Pinson, 1975). These nations had

to create and shape their nationalist identity through a socially constructed process described by Anderson (2016), Prohuber (2009) and Wimmer (2018). Indeed, nationalism started in France with the idea of brotherhood and fraternity and enveloped the world, whether through an active development or as a legacy of colonialism (Hastings, 2018). Nationalism today is present throughout the international system as a major organizing principle. Understanding these expressions within the public sphere, whether unofficially through graffiti and vandalism, or officially through statues, will help us better understand the forces that drive political outcomes.

Methodology: Combining Ethnography and Comparative Historical Case Study Analysis

Since, as Said argues, "no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or form the mere activity of being a member of society" (Said, 1978, p. 10), it becomes important for scholars to engage in ethnographic studies to understand the political situation. Even though there is no method as Said stated, we still seek to understand the world. Like Carol Cohn (1987) and other scholars with that curious mindset (Enloe, 1990), we all have preconceived notions that inhibit that understanding. The immersive experience of ethnography may help in that effort (Harrison, 2018).

In 2024, I spent 10 days in Armenia and 13 days in North Macedonia. There, I carried out an ethnographic study (withheld for anonymity). I engaged in observation, noting public spaces, their composition, and the graffiti/vandalism that defined the space. I noticed that like many spaces, there are expressions ofofficial nationalism like statues. However, what intrigued me most, was the prevalence of graffiti. In my other travels such as to Athens, Greece, I noted left-wing anarchist graffiti. In Armenia and North Macedonia, nationalist graffiti/vandalism stood out. What was interesting is that in these countries, nationalism is couched in terms of past experiences with colonialism. In Armenia, Turkey was and is the colonial power that continues to undermine the Armenian state and national identity, especially after the loss of Artsakh. Nationalism was the response against Turkish colonialism.

Hence, Armenians fight colonialism through national identity. Similarly, North Macedonia is fighting both Greece and Bulgaria to keep what people see as their identity. The country had to change its name because an outside force, Greece, demanded it (Neofotistos, 2021). From the North Macedonian position, Bulgarians are demanding North Macedonians recognize that they are Bulgarian (Brunnbauer, 2022, p. 725). This again is perceived as a form of colonialism, as an outside influence is trying to shape and destroy cultural beliefs and identities of another group. Thus, in both cases, Postcolonialism presents an excellent framework to analyze nationalism.

In Armenia and North Macedonia, I had the pleasure to observe and speak to my contacts and other citizens about nationalism relating to experiences of colonialism. One left-wing activist from Armenia responded that a pure left-wing is altogether non-existent in Armenia. Any left-wing intellectualism is grounded in Armenian nationalism. For instance, when it comes to conflict with Azerbaijan, the idea is that since Armenians are the indigenous peoples, they deserve the land. Hence, in Armenia, nationalist fervor is grounded in Postcolonialism. In North Macedonia, I found a country fighting to retain its identity. People were adamant that the name "Macedonia" was the correct and only name, that the prefix "North" was imposed upon it by Greece. Anger also turned toward Bulgaria, as Bulgarians deny the very existence of a separate Macedonian identity. Rather interesting is the fact that, in order to have any success electorialoly, the Socialist Party has to ally itself with the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity Party (VMRO-DPMNE) (see sobranie.mk, accessed October 1, 2024). This paper will discuss both these issues together as it defines the continued relevance of nationalism in these countries.

Alongside ethnography, comparative historical case study analysis will also be conducted. Using primary and secondary sources, this paper hopes to provide insight into manifestations of nationalism in the public space. The Skopje 2014 project and the history of the Mother Armenia monument provides for us unique insight to nationalism in colonized states. However, another intriguing aspect is that both states underwent a similar experience with socialism: Armenia was a member of the Soviet Union, and North Macedonia, a part of Socialist Yugoslavia. Thus, both these countries had to go through two rounds of colonialism, with the Ottoman Empire being a mutually shared experience and then socialism although in different forms (Rajak, 2011).

Like many other cultures in countries such as Cambodia and Maoist China, Armenians and North Macedonians suffered under colonial masters in socialist form under the Soviet and Tito influences, respectively. When free, many tend to go to great lengths to achieve cultural revitalization. Culture is at the center of nationalism, as Smith (1991) defines a nation to be "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1991, p. 14). Since nationalism as defined by culture informs behavior, nationalism, especially in former colonies, becomes central (Heller, 2011). Essentially, nationalism is "the ultimate source of political legitimacy as a readily available cognitive and discursive frame, as the taken for granted context of everyday life" (Özkirimli, 2010, p. 2). To study nationalism is to study culture; and to study culture, we must engage in ethnography.

As said, Armenians and North Macedonians experienced a surge of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not unlike many other non-western states like Egypt that were influenced by the French Revolution (Gerges, 2018, p. 35). However, these nationalist movements were interrupted by an external force. For the Armenians, Soviet forces destroyed the First Republic of Armenia, a state that lasted two years from 1918-1920 (Zolyan, 2024). Armenian nationalism was undercut until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Zolyan, 2024). North Macedonia never quite existed as an independent state. After World War I, the nation found itself absorbed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and then Socialist Yugoslavia. However, during this time, Macedonians enjoyed some autonomy under the formed Socialist Republic of Macedonia. For this reason, Josip Broz Tito has a complicated history (Crvenkovska, 2020). Some remember him for first giving "Macedonians their state" as a member of the VMRO-DPMNE said to me during my time there.

While different nationally, historically, culturally, geographically, and linguistically, these two nations have an Orthodox Christian majority, but also experienced socialism for a number of decades; Armenia for a few more decades than North Macedonia. Typically, churches and other religious institutions serve as a threat to the monopoly of power and control of socialist regimes. As a result, they are forced into the state as part and parcel of the socialist ideology. In many instances, the church serves in opposition to socialism such as the experience of the Polish People's Republic, the Solidarity Movement and Pope John Paul II (Kraszewski, 2012). These identities managed to survive the experience. As will be discussed, national identities in socialist spaces went through a complicated historical era.

The Socialist Experience

Nationalism is supposedly suppressed by socialist ideologies but it can also be tolerated by it. Goff (2021) cites the *Atlas of the Peoples of the World,* published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1964 as an example that nationalism has been: "...solved on the basis of Leninist national policies that proclaimed the princi-ple of full equality for all nations and their right to self--determination. In the big - family of Soviet republics, representatives of all nations, large and small, live, work, and successfully develop their own culture together. They are united by common interests in life and one goal - communism" (Goff, 2021, p. 2). Communism was to suppress nationalist identity as an evil, uniting diverse people under a new identification, socializing all peoples into a completely new political identity with common socialist goals. Following this was the statement "in contrast with the socialist countries, the majority of capitalist countries have no national equality" (Ibid). On paper, there were no nationalist conflicts in the Soviet Union. The reality of the situation was completely different. Shcherbak (2015) discusses the explosions of nationalist movements across diverse ethnic regions by the end of the 1980s. However, these movements did not just spontaneously explode out of a vacuum but were just resting dormant, waiting for an opportune time.

Socialists tend to believe that nationalism is an ideology created by the bourgeoisie class to divide the working class across nation states (Martin, 2001). Any cultural identity would soon be superseded by class identity, as one ideology would be replaced by another. However, the Soviet Union would soon understand that any Soviet Union would be perceived as an extension of Russian chauvinism (Martin, 2001). Thus, initially the Soviet Union became a melting pot of sorts, subsuming various nationalisms and also tolerating native languages and cultural practices (Shcherbak, 2015, p. 873). This changed around 1930, with Bolsheviks understanding Russian and the "ethnic glue of the USSR" (Shcherbak, 2015). During this time, Stalin began the implementation of Russification, and many ethnicities were accused of helping Nazi Germany such as the Chechens, Tartars, and among others (Hajda, 1993, p. 220). These experiences did not eradicate nationalism, only sent it into incubation to seemingly return stronger, creating grievances that exacerbated nationalist conflict given specific economic and political circumstances.

Armenia's experience with socialism was similar to North Macedonia's. Socialist Yugoslavia. Around 2008, I asked my then Serbian neighbor what life was like in Tito's Yugoslavia. I recall the following response that life was good. He then added "if anyone stepped out of line…" moving his thumb from left to right across his neck. The Yugoslavian experience was similar to the Soviet one, as there was a Pan-Yugoslav identity shaped by Tito's cult of personality. The concept of 'brotherhood and unity' encouraged unity (Perica, 2004, pp. 94-94). Said differently, there was a recognition of difference between the republics. This explains why each republic enjoyed some degree of autonomy within Yugoslavia . Such unity is based not completely on force, but by consent also. During my visit to North Macedonia, I asked someone if North Macedonians still admired Tito. This response followed: "everyone loves him, 2-3% may not, but "he was a big visionary and in his time we got our country...without him we would still be fighting, and he was a cosmopolitan, a unifying figure…in his essence, he was an aristocrat, communism one of his faces". The idea that 'we got our country' is important, as without Tito and Yugoslavia, many believe that an independent North Macedonia or Bosnia would not exist without that experience of autonomy during the Tito years (Perica, 2004, p. 76).

What is also unique to both Armenia and

North Macedonia is both nations also suffered periods of great tragedy. The Armenians experienced one of the worst disasters to befall any society or collective group: the Armenian Genocide (Akcam, 2012). 1.6 million Armenians were killed with many more people being traumatized by the experience. This trauma has been passed down generationally (Muti & Gurpinar 2023) and is simply a fundamental part of the Armenian national identity and consciousness. Armenia's current losses are joined to the memory of the genocide (Avedian, 2019). The North Macedonians also experienced ethnic cleansing in its history by the Greeks and Bulgarians during and after World War II (Rossos & Evans, 1991). Like Armenians, North Macedonians recall these experiences and connect it to today's political climate. Within this context of interrupted national sovereignty, genocide, and Orthodox Christendom that we find these two nations comparable. The next section will discuss the statues and graffiti/vandalism as official and unofficial expressions of nationalism, a force still very relevant in today's international political system.

Official and Unofficial Nationalism: Statues and Graffiti/Vandalism in North Macedonia and Armenia

In North Macedonia, the city center is defined by its statues, European style buildings, and history (Grcheva, 2019). As an open-air museum, the city-center hopes to teach citizens and visitors of North Macedonian national experience, the importance of their historical figures, and their historical experience. The buildings also hide the much older and brutalist architecture of the socialist period. This paper argues that these statues act as an attempt at cultural revitalization, recovering a lost identity long suppressed by the Yugoslavian experience. In Armenia, statues and public spaces are defined by war. Statues of people who communicate strength and valor in the face of overwhelming odds, are at the forefront. There is also a major religious element, and an ancientness. Public spaces are an expression of the nation and the state and (Cherkes & Hernik, 2022; Volchevska, 2021). Cherkes and Hernik (2022) argue that:

> The properties of city center public spaces, particularly in capital cities, reflect the changes in political, social, and economic conditions and factors that have been occurring in them and are also a materialized expression of a country's long historical development. History shows that the long period of shaping public space of city centers is closely related to the ideological and political changes in society (Cherkes & Hernik, 2022, 1).

Expressions of nationalism often manifest in the public space after colonialism. Even before the end of colonialism, nationalist expressions exploded in public spaces similar to other manifestations of independence desires (Pugach, 2016). The following section will discuss my experiences discovering and observing official expressions of nationalism, specifically the role of statues in constructing, furnishing, and protecting national identity.

North Macedonia

On my first day in Skopje, I explored my hotel neighborhood. It was in a suburb about 30 minutes away from the city center. I was expecting to see some graffiti/vandalism. I saw a poster of a map of Greater Bulgaria, including North Macedonia, but it was a giant red "X" through it. I also saw a spray-painted stencil of a man who I learned to be a national hero: Gotse Delchev. Delchev is fought over by Bulgaria (Heil, 2023). Bulgaria has been vetoing North Macedonia's European Union accession talks since 2019 (Todorov, 2022). I did not expect to see nationalist graffiti/vandalism, especially anti-Buglarian sentiments. Yet it was a reflection of the time as part of the ongoing Bulgarian interference with North Macedonia's entry into the European Union (Brunnbauer, 2022).

On the same day, I also saw some vandalism with the words 'animal rights now' which is interesting because it was in English. I saw plenty of English anti-tourist graffiti in Greece which led me to conclude that either the graffiti was written by a tourist or for a tourist audience. If it were for a local audience, most likely it would be in the indigenous language. In Greece, the graffiti conveyed left-wing phrases in support of migrants such as "Tourists Go Home! Greek State Kills" and "Tourists Enjoy Your Stay in the Cemetery of Europe" (for other examples, visit

Charlie, 2024). There is a deep distaste for nationalism in Greece and many western European states. North Macedonian and Armenian graffiti and vandalism in general, from what I saw, was not left-wing but rather nationalist in nature. At any rate, the anti-Bulgarian vandalism I saw was indicative of the particular time that North Macedonia was undergoing; and this theme continued throughout my visit.

The second day, I planned to visit the old Ottoman bazaar. In early 2024, before my trip to Skopje, my colleague informed me of the great many statues as part of the wider Skopje 2014 project. On the way, I saw several massive statues. The words 'overkill' and 'overcompensation' came to my mind as they were sort of out of place, sometimes placed haphazardly around the city. My map took me straight to the Ottoman market where I saw tourists milling about. I wondered my way through, finally coming to an opening where I saw something unexpected: Macedonia Square. I was not familiar with the size and scope of two major statues: "Warrior with accompanying elements" and parallel to it across the beautiful Stone Bridge: "an equestrian warrior" (Marusic, 2012). These are the official names. The unofficial names that local people use are Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great, respectively (Marusic, 2012). The reason for this difference is due to Greek's objection. Yet, when the statue was placed upon its pedestal, the local government (Skopje's Centar Municipality) used the unofficial name, stating in fact: "Philip's 13-meter statue was placed on top of a 16-meter pedestal" (Marusic, 2012). I watched as tourists took pictures with the statues, thoroughly impressed with the enormous size of both statues. I met my first contact who was a member of the Conservative party, a foodie, and a citizen, under the "Warrior with accompanying elements" statue, but I referred to it as "Philip". The individual was happy I did that. The person was also happy to hear that I liked the statues, and how other tourists seem to enjoy them. Also, the person had the original plan to start from the statues and go to the Old Bazaar "to see the different traditions". Although a nationalist, the person was proud of North Macedonia's diversity, comparing the country to a "Macedonia salad" a "salad with everything in it" (NoNoJulia, 2014).

After spending a few days in Skopje, I began to notice that the new buildings, and the statues,

were hiding much uglier, older, and brutalist type architectures (Babić, 2024). The new, classical European style hid the ugly and old. For example, The Mother Teresa House hides the ugly Ministry of Defense building. In the city center, just across from the "an equestrian warrior" statue, was a new building but just behind it revealed a decrepit building that seemed to be falling apart. I asked my first contact about this at our final meeting, whether the new buildings were intentionally hiding the old, ugly, brutalist architecture of the Yugoslavian past. The response was straightforward: "that was the goal"; why would I come here to be depressed?" The central idea was to transform Skopje from 'depressing' to a place that celebrates Macedonian history, culture, and politics: it is a nationalist space. Of course, in the beginning, the project was opposed. I met someone involved in the Social Democratic Party who opposed the project initially, but then saw the joy it brought to people and to tourists. These and many more statues and classical style buildings were quickly built up in the past decade to beautify the downtown area. Museums, concert halls, hotels, among other buildings, now hide much uglier, brutalist style buildings of the former communist period.

North Macedonia's use of its city center to celebrate nationalism shows the great priority for the North Macedonian state. Cherkes and Hernik quotes a declarative statement from the XXI World Congress of Architecture held in Berlin, Germany (2002) which says: "the goal of modern architecture is to achieve the maximum adaptive capacity without losing national identity" (quoted by Cherkes & Hernik, 2022, p. 2). It is clear that the Skopje 2014 project intended to reassert a long suppressed Macedonian identity long hidden by the Ottoman Empire and Socialist Yugoslavia. Not only that, Macedonians want locals and visitors alike to know their culture, history, and national experience through the open-air museum that is the city center. Even the museums are located there to enhance the utility or function of the site. However, I noticed there was some awful vandalism aimed at obscuring the placards that described the statues and monuments.

The plaques explaining the statues were defaced so that no one could read them. I was told that this began after the signing of the Prepsa agreement. The Macedonian government had to

acknowledge that some statues, especially the central ones depicting the warriors, had Hellenic roots on the placards. As a form of protest, some people vandalized the placards. Hence, there was a clear rejection of the Prespa agreement and the altering of what many saw as the truth of the nation's history. In North Macedonia, it is quite common to find the word "North" scratched out. I managed to visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After some convincing, I was led to carry out an informal style interview. As I walked the halls, I noted that all posters or plaques that had the 'North' in North Macedonia scratched out. I asked about it with extreme curiosity, and the response was that someone scratched it out as a 'joke'. The truth is, however, that many people reject outsiders trying to shape or mold the national beliefs and identities of the nation. Some see this as a form of colonialism. I mentioned this to one of the persons interviewed, and the person acknowledged it describing the official/unofficial status of Macedonian national symbols. The unofficial is manifested through individual beliefs and freedoms, that there are ways to keep the old symbols and that nationalism always finds a way.

The use of the public space in Skopje illustrates the importance of national identity to the people (Cherkes & Hernik, 2022). Postcolonial mechanisms of cultural revitalization through artistic expressions of statues, vandalism/graffiti, architecture and so on, represents the recovery of a long-thought lost sense of self. It says "here are our heroes, here are our artists, we exist, recognize us". It is an act of resistance against the state and the government by citizens and members of government to preserve their cultural and hence national identity. This was a common theme during my interviews, with two people stating "we exist" when I try to bring up the changes to national symbols like the country name and flag. North Macedonians see their country as under attack, part of a wider historical narrative passed down generation to generation. This process was also clear in Armenia.

Armenia

Nationalism in the Soviet space manifested itself on several occasions such as the Hungarian Revolution (1956), the so-called "reform communism" of Imre Nagy. Nagy argued for Hun-

garian solutions to Hungarian problems (Nagy, 1996, p. 87). Another event was called the Prague Spring, where there were calls for the Czechoslovakians to come together and fuse communist ideals with the state, creating a "pluralist society for which there is at present no real analogy among the socialist states" (Mlynář, 1996, p. 124). Developing a pluralist system was thought to be the best choice for Czechoslovakia, signifying a split from the Marxist-Leninist framework of the Warsaw Pact. This was also the case in Armenia but in a concealed sense as shall be discussed.

I arrived in Yerevan at 2am. The city was dark and my hotel was surrounded by large, imposing buildings. My second day was dedicated to the Mother Armenia monument. I trekked up a vast hill focused on safely arriving at my destination. After I cleared the buildings, I looked to my right to behold Mount Ararat. Like the warrior statues in Skopje, I let out an audible gasp as I was not expecting such beauty to suddenly appear. During my visit, I realized that the Mountain did follow you around the city; wherever you went, you could see at least some part of the mountain. It felt like an eternal spirit, which ultimately describes the nature of Armenian nationalism, specifically their identity as represented by national symbols and narrative. I asked about the significance of Mount Ararat, and one interviewee described its centrality to the Armenian identity: "we considered ourselves to be chosen people, and the first nation in the world to accept Christianity…represents religion, pride, history, and exceptionalism. It is a symbol of Armenia". The person was referring to the belief that Noah landed there after the flood. This represents the beginning of humanity after its destruction. The mountain represents renewal and recovery, giving the people a sense of meaning after tragedy. This is why one person commented "I will never leave my mountains" given its deep cultural, even existential meaning shaping national identity.

My second visit to the Mother Armenia monument was even more interesting. As I walked from the Cascade to the Mother Armenia Monument, I saw a lot of vandalism and graffiti, even more than in Skopje. There happened to be a tunnel under the street that you could use to cross to get to the monument. In the tunnel, there was a sign that said "Armenia fights for you" stenciled

on the wall. There was a flag that was spray painted along the wall. The colors of the Armenian flag represent the struggle for survival. Struggle is central to the Armenian identity; it seems to be always present. Specifically, the red represents struggle and the Armenian highlands. There are also several maps of a united Armenia, such of which includes Western Armenia (in modern day Turkey). On the walls surrounding the monument's "Victory Park" to celebrate World War II, there was even more graffiti, this time of the Artsakh flag. The Artsakh flag was a common theme, decorating the city of Yerevan, sometimes featuring young men killed in the most recent wars. To see this graffiti and vandalism in a public space such as this initially seemed disrespectful. Eventually, I understood that the official position of the current Pashinyan government was defying the will of the people as expressed in vandalism. The focus for me was on preserving the sanctity of an important monument. However, vandalism within the contemporary political context is nationalist expression done in support, not against, the very meaning of the monument.

The history of the Mother Armenia monument is best explained by Postcolonialism, and the rejection of foreign influence of Soviet style socialism. The monument was built to celebrate the Soviet victory over Nazism in World War II. However, the statue that stood on the pedestal was not the one we see today, but of Josef Stalin. An explanation from a famed Armenian blog the "Armenian Explorer" highlights the history:

> The current statue of Mother Armenia replaced a monumental statue of General Secretary Joseph Stalin that was created as a victory memorial for World War II. The statue was considered a masterpiece by the sculptor Sergey Merkurov. The pedestal was designed by architect Rafayel Israyelian. Realizing that occupying a pedestal can be a short-term honor, Israyelian designed the pedestal to resemble a three-nave basilica Armenian church. As he confessed many years later, 'Knowing that the glory of dictators is temporary, I have built a simple three-nave Armenian basilica' (Armenian Explorer, accessed October 4, 2024).

There are two important notions to consider here. In 1962, the statue of Stalin was removed, replaced by the Mother Armenia statue in 1967. The person designing the pedestal understood that Stalin and the Soviets were not going to be there for long, and so it was built in the spirit of national resistance to foreign occupation. The Mother Armenia statue now stands, sword in hand facing Mount Ararat, and Turkey. She is surrounded by Armenian motifs: grapes and spirals. The grapes represent the vineyard planted by Noah after the flood. It signifies the ancientness of the Armenian people. The spiral is the country's national symbol representing the longevity and survival of the Armenian nation and the national identity of the people. The Spiral icons on the monuments, crosses and church doors. Taken together, these are national symbols of Armenia communicating the eternal and everlasting nature of the cultural identity. Taken together, I understand that many Armenians feel "we are not done yet", and the fight will continue.

Joining the graffiti and vandalism with the monuments, that is the official with the unofficial, it is clear that public spaces are dedicated to the memory of the national spirit. Like the examples in Skopje, it serves to remind the governing forces of the national identity. This force was felt throughout the city of Yerevan as well. As mentioned, I arrived in Yerevan during a very difficult time. Like many times throughout its history, the city opened itself to Armenian refugees, this time from Artsakh. Further, the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, was advocating for normalization of relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. I saw posters, graffiti, and vandalism rejecting the effort, instead focusing on one man: Gargin Nzhdeh.

Gargin Nzhdeh was a military strategist and ideologist. He was a proponent of restoring the First Armenian Republic and remains a giant in the mind of nationalists (Davtyan 2021; Sharon 2016). Posters and graffiti of him were found all around Yerevan, along with phrases such as "Read Nzhdeh-Save the Motherland"; "To forgive the Turks for one crime means to give them the right for two new ones"; and "our problem is not that there are Turks, but that there are Turk-like Armenians." This final one is an attempt to link Pashinyan as a traitor, a turk-like Armenian, because many refer to him as "Nikol Pasha" with Pasha being a Turkish title of status. The problem for Pashinyan is simple: he is trying to con-

vince Armenians to forget the past struggles with Turkey to embrace the status quo, something that is exceedingly difficult for any Armenian to do. He states:

> We must stop the searches of a homeland, because we have found that homeland, our Promised Land, where milk and honey flow. For us, the commemoration of the martyrs of the Meds Yeghern should not symbolize the lost homeland, but the found and real homeland, in the person of the Republic of Armenia, whose competitive, legitimate, thoughtful and creative policies can exclude a repetition. Never again. We should not say this to others, but to ourselves. And this is not an accusation against us at all, but a point of view where we, only we, are responsible and the director of our destiny and we are obliged to have enough mind, will, depth and knowledge to carry that responsibility in the domain of our sovereign decisions and perceptions (Pashinyan, 2024).

Armenians facing difficult times reject this message. Many now refer to Pashinyan, as Judas Iscariot, the fallen apostle who betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver; : sold Artsakh for 30 pieces of silver (Pashinyan, 2024). The context of all this boils down to Turkey-Armenian relations (Ter. Matevosyan, 2021). Armenia's identity is tied into its history with Turkey, the genocide, and the wars with Azerbaijan. Hence, for many Armenians, it is important to remember the heroes of old and for them it is Nzhdeh especially when juxtaposed to Pashinyan.

I was not planning on studying statues or open spaces, but I think it is completely necessary to "measure" and understand the atmosphere in North Macedonia and Armenia.The use of limited public space in these countries expresses deep held desires for the future of the nation. Statues and graffiti/vandalism illustrate the discourse expressed by the government and the people through official and unofficial expressions. By the expressed discourse (statues and vandalism/graffiti), it is clear that national pride is still relevant, and that outside interference is to blame for any interruption in self-actualization and ultimately jouissance; the self is compromised by outside interference. Armenia is surrounded by two enemy states: Turkey and Azerbaijan. There is a debate now in Armenia to put

aside nationalism and the historical memory of land in Turkey and Azerbaijan in order to have better relations with these countries for prosperity's sake. Similarly, to join NATO, North Macedonia had to compromise its name and national symbols, basically submitting to the requirements placed upon it by Greece, the very nation that ethnically cleansed Aegean Macedonians. It seems that further demands are being placed upon it by Bulgaria to join the European Union. Defending the cultural existence of states is a central organizing principle of the international system. By examining this phenomena, it is a clear measure of the impact nationalism will have on the international order.

Conclusions

Connecting ethnography to the historical cases, and applying Postcolonialism, it is clear that nationalism is not only relevant, but an ideological belief system that has incredible power to shape the behavior of citizens. Armenia and North Macedonia are both democracies. Therefore, if enough citizens are convinced of the power of their national identity over other issues such as global integration, especially because in both cases, global integration requires the subversion of its national identity. It is therefore clear why right-wing populism seems to be growing throughout the international system (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2017). An essential part of this movement is a nationalist backlash against globalization. Nationalism's resilience is due to the political identification of people culturally. Since globalization is seen as the manifestation of outside influence and the homogenization of indigenous culture, nationalism becomes an organizing principle from which people might organize to 'save' or 'take-back' their country for their nation. Such a movement cannot be written-off as a bunch of racist or crazy people, but rather a force that seems to be gaining strength (Khandy & Şengül, 2022). As a result, there may be serious changes to the international order. But how might we know that nationalism is still important? Election results in Germany and France in recent years point to growing nationalist fervor. Studying public spaces and their use may help us better understand two major things. First, nationalism and patriotism remain fundamental to identity.

People cannot separate their existence from their identity; both forces are intertwined. Any attack on identity is understood as an attack against the people. After all, nations and nationalism is not simply a set of ideas, but a belief system that organizes individuals together (Özkırımlı, 2010) to survive in an anarchical international system (Waltz, 2010). Second, studying graffiti/vandalism may help us better understand change or desired change that may take place in the future. Defacing a monument, statue or its placard, signifies the beginnings of discussion as it sets the agenda, particularly the possibilities of setting the future political agenda (Lopez, 2023, p. 144).

Acknowledgment

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