At 'Home' Away from 'Home': The ex-Ottoman Armenian Refugees and the Limits of Belonging in Soviet Armenia

Ayşenur Korkmaz
University of Amsterdam
a.korkmaz@uva.nl

Abstract

This article explores spatial attachments among the ex-Ottoman Armenians who survived the Armenian Genocide and settled in their 'new homeland', Soviet Armenia. It addresses the question of how the refugees dealt with loss and displacement and reflected on their former hometowns, referred to as '*Ergir*', a spatial construct denoting a symbolic 'Armenian homeland' or a 'local homeland' in Anatolia. I argue that the refugees conceptualised *Ergir* not only in relation to their expulsion but also the socio-political factors that influenced them in Soviet Armenia in three periods. The first era of reflection on *Ergir* was the 1920s and 1930s, replete with nostalgic sentiments. The second was the suppression of the theme of *Ergir*, between 1936–1960, particularly during political crackdowns in Stalin's era. The third period saw the revival of *Ergir* and marked a new phase in the conceptualisations of 'homeland' in which the displacement from Anatolia in 1915–1916 and the Stalinist purges were enmeshed into one tragedy of the ex-Ottoman Armenians.

Keywords

Ottoman Empire – Soviet Armenia – Ottoman Armenians – refugees – homeland – nostalgia – Stalin – the Great Terror of 1936–1938

1 Introduction

The ex-Ottoman Armenians in Soviet Armenia were around 300,000 forcibly displaced trans-border refugees mostly living along the Soviet-Turkish border.

They had fled their homes in the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1916 and arrived in Tsarist Russia in search of safety from the massacres and mass deportations. They had crowded into refugee camps and settlements in the South Caucasus while waiting to be repatriated to Anatolia. However, as the years following the First World War saw the collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, the Sovietisation of the short-lived Democratic Armenian Republic (1918–1920), and the emergence of the Turkish Republic (1923), the refugees ended up settling in what became their ‘new homeland’, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (hereafter Soviet Armenia or the ASSR).

Some Armenian refugee communities were estranged from the new realities of everyday life in Soviet Armenia, as many aspects of their lives and political expressions had to change, particularly in the period of Stalinism (1928–1953). They had to come to terms with the collectivisation programme and the ideological restrictions imposed by the Stalinist regime and reappraise their beliefs and rhetoric accordingly. During the purges of 1936–1938, many refugees were killed, incarcerated or deported to Siberia. The Stalinist terror, together with the expulsion from Anatolia during the Genocide, hampered the efforts of the refugees to swiftly take root in the land of refuge. Though they achieved a sense of ‘home’ in Soviet Armenia over time, they maintained feelings of attachment for their vanished ‘home’, which they referred to as ‘*Ergir*’.

Ergir is a spatial construct that connotes an attachment to a symbolic ‘Armenian homeland’ or a ‘local homeland’ in Eastern Anatolia.¹ *Ergir*’s terminological flexibility allows a two-fold categorisation of the Armenian homeland: one at the national level, another at the local. When used in the national sense, *Ergir* is analogous to the often-used term ‘Western Armenia’, referring to the lands ruled by ancient Armenian kingdoms, an area where Ottoman Armenians also lived for generations.² Emphasising historical ties to Anatolia, *Ergir* gives people a sense of place and rootedness and enables them to imagine

1 The word corresponds to ‘the country’ in Armenian and is transliterated as ‘*Yergir*’ in the Western dialect and ‘*Yerikir*’ in the Eastern. The ex-Ottoman Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia preferred to pronounce the term in their local dialects, as ‘*Ergir*’. I, therefore, transliterate the word based on their pronunciation.

2 *Ergir* resembles the German concept of *Heimat*, the Italian *Patria*, the Serbo-Croatian *Zavičaj* and the Turkish *Memleket*, which signify contested affiliations to the local, regional and national homelands. See Celia Applegate, *A nation of provincials: The German idea of Heimat* (Berkeley 1990); Hariz Halilovich, *Places of pain: Forced displacement, popular memory and trans-local identities in Bosnian war-torn communities* (New York 2013) 1–20; Ipek Demir, ‘Battling with Memleket in London: The Kurdish diaspora’s engagement with Turkey’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38:5 (2012) 815–831.

their attachment to the Armenian 'homeland' and 'nation'.³ Besides symbolising the national 'homeland', *Ergir* also embodies the idea of an affective (or relational) and local 'homeland' towards which people develop personal or familial attachments. In that sense, *Ergir* is not purely an imagined place but is instead formed through experiential connections to specific localities. The term may be used to identify the villages, towns, and provinces inhabited by Armenians in Ottoman Anatolia (e.g. 'Vasporakani *Ergir*' for Van, 'Msho *Ergir*' for Mush and 'Sasno *Ergir*' for Sasun).

Nevertheless, when historically contextualised, *Ergir* has meant different things to different communities at different times. Within the nineteenth-century, traced in the writings of Armenian intellectuals in the Ottoman and Russian empires, *Ergir* emerged as a political aspiration of national and territorial unity. Under the motto of '*Tebi Ergir*' which translates as 'Towards the country', Mkrtich Khrimyan Hayrik (1820–1907) and the Patriarch Nerses Varzhapetyan (1837–1884) stimulated the interests of young Armenians in the political future of 'Western Armenia'.⁴ The concept of *Ergir* also formed the basis for claims by nationalists to a right to establish an integral Armenia over Eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus.⁵ These political aspirations were thwarted by the genocide of 1915–1916 and subsequent events. When Eastern Anatolia officially became a part of the newly established Turkish Republic in 1923, the understanding of the term *Ergir* shifted from a political goal to a lost dream. In the interim, in Soviet Armenia, *Ergir* emerged as a symbolic depiction of the 'local homeland', obscuring the political connotations denoting nation-building. In the 1920s and 1930s, the ex-Ottoman Armenian refugees adopted a sense of exile from *Ergir*, which they constructed as a local and relational 'homeland' where their home or family roots were situated, and sometimes treated as a lost paradise that was far better than any existing land.

This article addresses the question of how the refugees whose lives straddled the two worlds of Ottoman Anatolia and Soviet Armenia conceptualised *Ergir*, dealing with their loss and displacement in the post-genocide period. What did 'homeland' mean to them when it no longer existed in the way that they imagined? How did their relationship to *Ergir* change over time while

3 On how territorial nationalism is constructed, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London 1983).

4 Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian revolutionary movement: The development of Armenian political parties through the nineteenth century* (Los Angeles 1963) 136–137; Owen Robert Miller, "Back to the homeland" (*Tebi Yergir*): Or, how peasants became revolutionaries in Muş, *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 4:2 (2017) 287–308.

5 Avetis Aharonian and Boghos Nubar Pasha, *The Armenian question before the peace conference* (New York 1919) <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89095750956>.

living in the official 'homeland'? I argue that the refugees imagined and conceptualised *Ergir* not only concerning their expulsion during the genocide but also the socio-political factors and traumatic events that greatly influenced them in Soviet Armenia in three different periods. The first period of reflection on *Ergir* was during the 1920s and until the mid-1930s, replete with nostalgic reminiscences of the local homes in the Ottoman Empire before the displacement. In these years, the endorsement of non-Russian national communisms and the policy of 'nativisation' (*korenizatsiia*) paved the way for the Ottoman Armenian cultural and linguistic activities to be designed in Soviet Armenia. This relative freedom for cultural and literary expression on *Ergir* only lasted until the purges of 1936–1938. As several scholars of Soviet studies have shown, Stalin reversed his tolerance for local nationalisms of the non-Russian Soviet nations in the late 1930s.⁶ He set a new political tone all over the Soviet Union that endorsed linguistic Russification, Russian chauvinism, or what David Brandenberger calls 'Russo-centric etatism'.⁷ Consequently, the previously approved cultural and literary expressions of the ex-Ottoman Armenians about *Ergir* came to be considered as acts of 'bourgeois nationalism'. The climate of fear and political abuses during Stalin's rule heralded a period of forced amnesia in Soviet Armenia regarding the refugees' memories of 1915–1916. Only years after Stalin died, the 1960s saw the revival of *Ergir* and a big boom in the nostalgic accounts of life in Ottoman Anatolia and the forced expulsion of Armenians. The post-Stalin era also marked a new phase in the ex-Ottoman Armenians' 'homeland' orientations in Soviet Armenia, with which they drew parallels between the two trajectories of Armenian suffering in the twentieth century: the Armenian genocide and the Stalinist purges.

In exploring the site of imaginations of *Ergir* wielded by the ex-Ottoman Armenians in Soviet Armenia, I take a two-fold methodological approach. First, I make use of the oral history interviews that I conducted with the descendants of the refugees during my ethnographic fieldwork in Yerevan, and

6 Terry Martin, *The affirmative action empire: Nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca 2001); David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist mass culture and the formation of modern Russian national identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge MA 2002); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca 2005); David Brandenberger and Mikhail Zelenov, 'Stalin's answer to the national question: A case study on the editing of the 1938 Short Course', *Slavic Review* 73: 4 (2014) 859–880.

7 David Brandenberger, 'The creative intelligentsia and the rise of official Russocentrism under Stalin', in: Mark Lipovetsky, Sven Spieker and Anna Brodsky (eds), *The imprints of terror: The rhetoric of violence and the violence of rhetoric in modern Russian culture* (Munich 2006) 83–98.

the Kotayk and Aragatsotn regions of Armenia between 2017–2019.⁸ These interviews help uncover some of the previously neglected historical complexities that shaped the refugee lives in the early Soviet period of Armenia, such as the new socio-economic conditions, political persuasions and adaptation to the 'new homeland'. Second, I analyse a diverse range of literary and cultural works, such as childhood memoirs, autobiographical novels, short stories, poems and exilic folk songs, all of which were produced by the Armenian refugees or their children in Soviet Armenia. Most of these sources were published and circulated in Yerevan by private publishing houses between the 1920s and 1980s, under the auspices and support of the Writers' Union of Soviet Armenia. The aim of my analysis is to show how certain events in Ottoman Anatolia and Soviet Armenia shaped the Armenian refugees' perceptions of *Ergir* and spatial attachment. These sources can shed light on post-genocide everyday-life in Soviet Armenia and some of the critical concepts such as homeland, displacement, nostalgia, and spatial belonging.

2 From Ottoman Subjects to Soviet Citizens: Armenian Refugees in the South Caucasus

During the Armenian Genocide, an estimated 300,000 to 370,000 Ottoman Armenians fled the massacres of Ottoman and Kurdish forces in Eastern Anatolia and reached relative safety in Tsarist Russia after an arduous journey through the battle zones of the Caucasus Front of the First World War.⁹ The majority of the refugees were from Kars, Ardahan, Erzurum, Malazgirt, Van, Mush, Bitlis and Sasun. In search of safety, they pursued three major routes through Transcaucasia. The first one passed through Van and Igdir (İğdir in Turkish), and after skirting Mount Ararat, it reached Sardarapat, Armavir, and Yerevan respectively. The second crossed Bitlis, Erzurum, Kars, Ardahan, extending into Alexandropol (renamed as Leninakan in 1924, and as Gyumri in 1992) and Tiflis (renamed as Tbilisi in 1936) where many refugee relief agencies were operating. The third route ran through the north-western parts of Iran, connecting Van, Khoy, Maku and Zangezur. When the Russian-Ottoman battles destroyed one of these escape routes, the Armenian refugees turned to others that were deemed relatively viable alternatives. Nevertheless, they often found

8 The recordings of all the interviews used in this article are held in the private archive of the author.

9 Samvel Tigrani Alixanyan, *Sovetakan Rōwsastani derē hay žoğovrdi azatagrman gorçowm (1917–1921 t't')* (Erewn 1964) 89; Antranig Chalabian, *General Andranik and the Armenian revolutionary movement* (Southfield 1988) 270.

themselves stranded on the continuously shifting frontlines due to the unceasing series of offensives and counter-offensives by the Russian and Ottoman armies.¹⁰

The refugees also suffered greatly on the road from famine and infectious diseases. Deprived of essential food and water supplies for weeks, many faced malnutrition and dehydration and perished from hunger and various types of diseases such as typhus, dysentery, malaria and cholera.¹¹ In the summer of 1915, more than a third of the 100,000 Armenians fleeing persecution in the province of Van died of starvation and disease.¹² Armenians from Sasun and Mush shared the same fate, enduring thirst, hunger, heat and sickness. As many as 8,000 of them perished in July 1915 on the way to the Caucasus.¹³ Exposure to violence and abuse during their flight further exacerbated the situation of the Armenian refugees. Kurdish tribesmen mounted attacks on the convoys heading to the Russian border. As an Armenian intellectual, Hovhannes Ter-Martirosyan (A-Do), wrote in his memoir, Kurdish militia units from the Zilan tribe ambushed and slaughtered 10,000 Armenian refugees in the town of Janik in July 1915. Around the same time, 6,000 more refugees in flight were also killed in the attacks carried out by other Kurdish tribes near the towns of Bekri and Saray.¹⁴ Women were particularly vulnerable during the raids. They were abducted and taken to Kurdish and other Muslim households to serve as sex slaves or second wives.¹⁵ Some 50,000 refugees departing Bitlis and Van in 1916, however, were guarded and protected *en route* by the Armenian irregular units (*fedayis*) under the command of Andranik Ozanyan, a member of the Armenian nationalist political party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (also known as the *Dashnaktsutyun* or the Dashnaks, hereafter the ARF).¹⁶

10 William Edward David Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian battlefields: A history of the wars on the Turco-Caucasian border 1828–1921*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 2011 [1953]); Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering empires: The clash and collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* (Cambridge 2011) 140–166.

11 Peter Gatrell, *A whole empire walking: Refugees in Russia during World War 1* (Indiana 1999) 53.

12 Anahide Ter Minassian, 'Van 1915', in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed), *Armenian Van/Vas-purakan* (Costa Mesa and California 2000) 209–244, 242–243.

13 Avetis Harowt'yownyan, "'Hayoc' Meç Egeinē ew Hay gağt'akanowt'yownē Kovkasowm (1914–1916 t't')', *Hayoc' C'eğaspanowt'yan Patmowt'yan ew Patmagrowth'yan Harc'er* 6 (2002) 19–31, 23.

14 A-Do, *Meç dēpk'erē Vaspowrakanowm 1914–1915 t'wakannerin* (Erewan 1917) 280.

15 Gatrell, *A whole empire walking*, 119–120.

16 Alek'sey Kolmakov, *Patmakan haykakan vaštē: Andraniki verjin zoramasi sibiryan vaštē*, trans. Vardanyan Karo (Erewan 2014) 60–62.

Upon arrival, the refugees crowded into the camps in Kars, Yerevan, Tiflis, Alexandropol, Etchmiadzin (renamed as Vagharshapat in 1995) and Nakhchivan, funded by the Tsarist government, international relief organisations, the Armenian church of Etchmiadzin, Christian missionary organisations, and several Armenian relief committees.¹⁷ Soon the refugee population far exceeded the capacity of the under-resourced camps. Therefore, the new arrivals crammed into the rural areas to self-settle.¹⁸ Those from Sasun, Mush and Bitlis, for example, on the one hand settled on the slopes of Mount Alaghez (today known as Mount Aragats), mainly in Talin and its surrounding villages. The refugees from Kars, Igdir, Erzurum, Elashkert and Van, on the other hand, settled in Yerevan, Gharakilisa (later named Kirovakan and Vanadzor), Alexandropol and the villages around it such as Ghukasavan (Amasia), Artik, Molla Khoja (Maral) and Ghzilgoch.¹⁹

Initially, the refugees thought of their predicament as transitory, awaiting their return to the former villages in Eastern Anatolia. Yet, their dreams soon came to nought as the next years saw significant events that rendered the repatriation impossible. In 1917, the Tsarist Empire collapsed following a whirlwind of protests, after which came the Civil War of 1918–1921 and the Bolshevik takeover of the imperial lands.²⁰ In 1918, the Ottoman Empire capitulated, signing the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October. In the same year the Democratic Republic of Armenia was established and mostly governed by the ARF until the end of 1920, when the Bolsheviks took over and incorporated the republic into the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1921, the Bolsheviks also established an alliance with the new Turkish nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), signing the Treaty of Moscow (1921) which settled

17 Gatrell, *A whole empire walking*, 40–42; Beniamin Poġosyan, 'Britanakan hayanpast kazmakerpowt'yownneri ògnowt'yownë Hay p'axstakannerin Araġin Hamaşxarhayin Paterazmi tarinerin', *Hayoc' C'eġaspanowt'yan Patmowt'yan ew Patmagrowt'yan Harc'er* 8 (2003) 31–46; Louisine Abrahamyan, 'The condition of Armenian refugees and orphans as reported in Armyanskiy Vestnik', in: Joceline Chabot et al. (eds), *Mass media and the genocide of the Armenians: One hundred years of uncertain representation* (London 2016) 110–125.

18 Arnold Toynbee, *The treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire: Documents presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, secretary of state for foreign affairs; with a preface by Viscount Bryce* (London 1916) 193–220.

19 The sources of this information are my interviews. All interviewees pointed out that their ancestors, the Ottoman Armenian refugees, violently forced out the Russian Azeris, Tatars and Kurds from these regions upon their settlement. See also, Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, vol. I: The first year, 1918–1919* (Berkeley 1971) 229; Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in modern history* (Bloomington 1993) 124.

20 Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian people and their revolution, 1917–21* (New York 2013) 94–105.

the Russian-Turkish border question, acknowledged the Turkish authority in Eastern Anatolia, and therefore hindered the refugee repatriation.²¹ Finally, the year 1923 saw the establishment of the Turkish Republic and its international recognition by the Treaty of Lausanne which determined the fate of the Armenian refugees in Transcaucasia, precluding their return and finalising their expulsion from Eastern Anatolia.

The ex-Ottoman Armenians' 'new homeland' was now Soviet Armenia, a country that was being politically and economically transformed at full speed. In 1921–1922, the Armenian Communist Party consolidated its power and crushed the anti-Bolshevik uprisings organised by the ARF, exiling, arresting, and killing several intellectuals and *fedayis* connected to the party.²² Shortly after, the newly established Soviet government started campaigns against the Western and Christian-run refugee relief operations, portraying them as a threat to its ideological motivations.²³ On the other hand, the government established its own relief organisations to offset the devastating starvation and poverty in the country. Among them was Armenia's Relief Committee (*Hayastani Oknutyan Komite*), established in 1921 to provide shelter, housing, agricultural tools for cultivation, education, and healthcare to the refugees.²⁴ Endorsing Armenia as the 'homeland', the Soviet government also repatriated an estimated 20,000 Armenian refugees from Iran, Turkey, Greece and Syria between 1921–1925.²⁵ To meet the needs of the refugees, the government started levying a special refugee tax from the Armenian locals.²⁶

21 For a detailed discussion on these developments, see Suny, *Looking toward Ararat*, 119–148; Simon Payaslian, *The history of Armenia: From the origins to the present* (New York 2008) 145–175.

22 Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Soviet Armenia', in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed), *The Armenian people from ancient to modern times, volume II: Foreign dominion to statehood: The fifteenth century to the twentieth century* (New York 1997) 348–351.

23 Inger Marie Okkenhaug, 'Refugees, relief and the restoration of a nation: Norwegian mission in the Armenian Republic, 1922–1925', in: Hilde Nielssen Inger Marie Hilde and Karina Hestad Skeie (eds), *Protestant missions and local encounters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (New York 2011) 207–232; Jo Laycock, 'Saving the remnant or building socialism? Transnational humanitarian relief in early Soviet Armenia', *Moving the Social* 57 (2017) 77–96, 90–92.

24 Aghavni Yeghia Yeghenian, *The red flag at Ararat*, 2nd ed. (London 2013 [1932]) 71–73; Aršak Vardi Vardapetyan and H. Knyazyan, *Hayastani օցնօւոյան կոմիտե (1921–1937)* (Erewan 1966) 10–31.

25 Hranowš Xařatyan, "Նաւ'իօնալիզմի" ծիկօւոյսքնքն և շիգասքանօւոյան հիօցօւոյան տիրաւօրօւմն կ'ադակ'ան քնօւոյաննօրօւմն', in: Hranowš Xařatyan et al. (eds), *Տալինյան քնաճնօւոյաննքն Հայաստանօւմ: Քաթօւոյան, հիօցօւոյան, արօրյա* (Erewan 2015) 5–135, 108.

26 Peter Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee* (Oxford 2013) 59.

Regardless of the implementation of relief projects and policies, the Soviet leadership maintained its suspicion of the ex-Ottoman Armenians' political allegiance to the state, fearing that they were the supporters of the exiled ARF and therefore could launch rebellions against the government.²⁷ Indeed, the Sovietisation of Armenia had caused resentment and alienation among some refugees who were sympathetic to the ARF, but certainly, those did not represent the whole ex-Ottoman Armenian population. Some refugee communities believed that the ARF failed them amid misery, disease and starvation, and the Bolshevik leadership could bring more stability to their lives. Also, some refugees were non-Dashnak socialists, though they constituted a minority. They joined the Armenian Communist Party's ranks as politicians, writers and educators.²⁸

Nevertheless, irrespective of their political persuasion, a complicated process of adaptation to Soviet Armenia was common to all Armenian refugees. Living under a new political order necessitated a total transformation of these ex-Ottoman subjects into allegiant Soviet citizens. They had to learn Russian and adapt to Eastern Armenian dialect and grammar. They also needed to accommodate their understandings to the new cultural norms and socio-economic practices dictated by the state. The majority of the refugees had to take up the dominant political language of communism and class consciousness, which Stephen Kotkin has referred to as 'speaking Bolshevik' in his study of Stalin's pre-war USSR.²⁹ Their allegiance was constituted to the Soviet state through speaking, thinking and acting like a Bolshevik.³⁰ Adaptation to the new way of life in a rapidly changing Soviet republic was difficult for the refugees. When Joseph Stalin, who took over the reins of government after Vladimir Lenin and became the sole leader of the state, launched his mass collectivisation programme in 1928, forcing the peasants to give up their private lands and animals and join the collective farms (*kolkhozy*), some ex-Ottoman Armenian communities resisted. They refused to join the collectives, staging

27 Peter Gatrell and Jo Laycock, 'Armenia: The nationalisation, internationalisation and representation of the refugee crisis', in: Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (eds), *Homelands: War, population and statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918–1924* (London 2004) 179–200, 187.

28 To take some examples, among the famous Armenian communist refugee politicians were Aghasi Khanjyan, Petik Torosyan and Artak Stamboltsyan; the writers were Guren Mahari (Achemyan), Vahan Totovents, Vahram Alazan (Gabuzyan) and Vagharshak Norents (Yeritsyan); and the university professors were Vahram Aristakesyan, Norayr Dabaghyan, and Hrachya Hakob Acharyan.

29 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley 1995) 221–225.

30 Anna Krylova, 'Imagining socialism in the Soviet century', *Social History* 42: 3 (2017) 315–341, 316.

protests in the villages surrounding Talin, Yeghegnadzor, and Azizbekov, and slaughtering their animals to not to give them up to the state.³¹

The refugees maintained a separate identity and communal belonging based on their dispersion experience. The locals recognised them as a distinct group and referred to them as 'refugees' (*pakhstakanner*), 'Turkish Armenians' (*Tachkahayer*), 'Western Armenians' (*Arevmtahayer*) or 'the people of *Ergir*' (*Ergri zhoghovurd*).³² The refugees also emphasised their distinctness from the locals by naming themselves after their former hometowns in Eastern Anatolia (e.g., *Mshetsi* for those from Mush, *Vanetsi* from Van and *Sasuntsi* from Sasun). They continued to speak in their dialects, resisted inter-marriage with the locals and practised village endogamy with those who originated from the same regions in the Ottoman Empire, which can be seen as signs of distrust of outsiders to their close-knit '*Ergir*' solidarity groups.³³ The refugees also lived in enclaves in the camps and settlements, relying on each other. Some communities established new villages and named them after their cities and towns of origin (e.g., Nor Arabkir, Nor Sebastia, Nor Yevdokia, Nor Kharberd, Nor Matlatia, and Nor Tomarza).³⁴ Others chose to live near the Soviet-Turkish border, as they considered their stay in Armenia to be temporary and expected to return to *Ergir* eventually. As a descendant of a refugee family from Sasun recounts how his ancestors considered their dwelling in the village of Nerkin Bazmaberd in Talin as sojourning: 'Our family did not build any houses in the village until the late 1930s. They did not do anything to settle in this Armenia. They had a burning desire to go back to their own soil.'³⁵

31 Matakaranman žogovrdakan komisariat, *Hrahang 1931 t' hac'amt'erowmneri masin* (Erewan 1931) 4; Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *The impact of Soviet policies in Armenia* (Leiden 1962) 65, 105, 108; On collectivisation, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's peasants: Resistance and survival in the Russian village after collectivization* (New York 1996) 48–79; Robert Service, *A history of twentieth century Russia* (Cambridge 1998) 120–125.

32 Interview with Liza Manukyan, conducted on 20 April 2018 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in the village of Ashnak, Talin, the Republic of Armenia. Interview with Zarik Benoyi Shahinyan conducted on 19 September 2018 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in Yerevan, Armenia.

33 These distinctions came up in many of my interviews with the descendants of refugees. For example, Interview with Setrag Manukyan, conducted on 12 April 2018 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in the village of Sasnashen, Talin, Armenia. Interview with Vanik Sahakyan, conducted on 14 April 2018 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in the village Proshyan, Kotayk, Armenia.

34 Nor was Arabkir established by the refugees in November 1925. Other villages were formed between 1927 and 1931 with the aid of the Soviet Armenian government. See 'Nor Arapgiri hamar gadarowadz kordzer', *Nor Arapgir: Arapgiri Hayrenagts'agan Miut'ean Getronagan Varch'ut'ean*, 29 November 1925; Yeghenian, *The red flag at Ararat*, 127.

35 Interview with Samvel Melkonyan, conducted on 19 April 2018, by Ayşenur Korkmaz in Yerevan, Armenia.

3 Refugee Narratives of Ergir in Early Soviet Armenia

Deprived of the possibility of a return, the Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia found themselves in the grip of intense exilic nostalgia for *Ergir*. They reflected on life in their former hometowns before 1915 and the subsequent experience of violence, displacement, trauma and loss. They expressed their yearning for 'homecoming' or tried to assuage that desire with a handful of soil brought from the foothills of Mount Ararat, a behaviour that the Bolshevik leadership considered 'pitiful bourgeois patriotic sentimentality'.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Soviet rule was aware that ignoring the nationalities of the USSR would be perceived as a continuation of Russian imperialism, and it would risk the possibility of anti-communist revolts against the Union. Therefore, both Lenin and Stalin (until the purges of 1936) were in favour of acknowledging, endorsing and celebrating the non-Russian nations. Accordingly, the Armenian Communist Party supported the cultural and linguistic nationalism in Soviet Armenia, promoting several public events such as art exhibitions, celebrations of the Armenian national epic *Sasna Tsrer*, and festivals of Armenian folk dances originating from the Ottoman Empire.³⁷ The First Secretary of the party (1930–1936), Aghasi Khanjyan, an ex-Ottoman Armenian who had fled Van in 1916, tolerated, if not openly supported, the Armenian refugee intellectuals' initiatives to write about their destroyed past in the Ottoman Empire.

Therefore, throughout the 1920s and early 1930s in Soviet Armenia, the theme of *Ergir* flourished in cultural and literary representations, as a local 'homeland'. Several songs and poems, composed and written by the ex-Ottoman Armenian refugees, expressed their grief over the displacement, dispossession and non-return.³⁸ A folk song, 'Let's Go My Son' (*Kele Lao*), originating from the refugee-city of Talin was one of the cultural products that captured the essence of the exile experience in the early 1930s.³⁹ The song describes the

36 Yeghenian, *The red flag at Ararat*, 85.

37 For example, the folk dances originating from Sasun, named '*Yarkhushta*' and '*Sasnapar*', were popularised in 1935 in Soviet Armenia. On the celebrations of *Sasna Tsrer*, see Michael Leezenberg, "A people forgotten by history": Soviet studies of the Kurds', *Iranian Studies* 48: 5 (2015) 750–760.

38 For a variety of songs on *Ergir*, see Verzhine Svazlyan, *The Armenian genocide: Testimonies of the eye-witness survivors* (Yerevan 2011) 38, 69, 555, 568, 595, 601, 612, 614, 616.

39 '*Kele Lao*' was said to have been composed by an Armenian refugee from Sasun in the Ottoman East. It is a popular song even today, performed by contemporary Armenian singers. It is frequently performed in everyday occurrences in Armenia such as drinking get-togethers, wedding ceremonies, and other celebrations. See Melissa Bilal, *Thou need'st not weep, for I have wept full sore: An affective genealogy of the Armenian lullaby in Turkey* (Doctoral Thesis The University of Chicago. Chicago, 2013) 42.

refugees' emotional and familial connection with *Ergir* (namely their city, town or village in Eastern Anatolia). It elicits a reaction to the flight and expulsion from their local soil, and expresses a fervent desire to return:

Let's go, my son. Let's go to our *Ergir*
 Let's go to that valley and pick newly-sprouted *khartsvil*⁴⁰
 We pick it, we pick [it], and that will be our remedy
 Let's go, my son. Let's go to our *Ergir*.

Our father is there; our mother is there
 Beautiful *kilam*, they are crying with pain⁴¹
 How can we not go to our *Ergir*?
 Let's go, my son. Let's go to our *Ergir*.⁴²

The song also mythologises *Ergir*, portraying it as an enchanted landscape teemed with abundance and richness. One of the stanzas refers to the miraculous manna rain on the trees and vines in *Ergir*. Manna was believed to be a sticky, sugary, yellow food substance that would rain to the ground. The manna mentioned in the song alludes to the Biblical story of the heavenly food that God rained upon the Israelites for forty years during their exodus. The stanza below portrays manna as a remedy for the refugees' suffering from exile:

Sweet manna falls on each leaf
 We eat little pieces to have peace in our hearts
 Let *Sasna Ergir* become a sea in front of our eyes
 Let's go, my son, let's go to our *Ergir*.

To sum up, the song *Kele Lao* points to the refugees' deep connection with *Ergir*, articulating their pain about their loss of family members, home and everything else they left behind.

The sense of uprootedness and yearning for *Ergir* also permeated the early Soviet Armenian literature. The 1920s and 1930s were marked by poems, novels and childhood memoirs, depicting everyday life in Anatolian towns before the Genocide, as well as the subsequent violence and displacement to the South Caucasus.⁴³ Some Russian-Armenian writers, though they never lived in the

40 *Khartsvil* is a type of greens.

41 *Kilam* is the Kurdish term for songs sung by *dengbejs* (singers).

42 The translation from Armenian to English is my own. I would like to thank Anahit Ghazaryan for her linguistic input.

43 See Vahram Alazan, *Taġapank'i owġinerov: Howşer* (Erewn 1990) 2–5.

Ottoman Empire, wrote about the refugees' longing for *Ergir* in fictional form. Among them was Aksel Bakunts (1899–1936) who wrote a short story named 'Apricot Flute' (*Tsirani Poghy*, 1933), about a refugee from Sasun who settled in a small village in Armenia, Dzyanberd, spending his days playing his flute and pining for his heavenly home.⁴⁴ Armenian refugee writers also nourished sentiments of nostalgia for the past and fantasies of return to their hometowns.⁴⁵ Vagharshak Norents Yeritsyan (1903–1973), a refugee who fled the 1916 massacres in Sasun and found refuge in one of Tiflis' orphanages, wrote several poems about his former home and his lost family.⁴⁶ In one of his poems, named 'Towards Home' (*Depi Tun*, 1921), Norents described his pain and his bitter feelings about being in exile:

Life's joyful laughter that my numb heart heard,
Sounded like a death scream looming over me,
And do you know what my worn mind said to me?
Is it possible to run away and go back home?⁴⁷

Other refugee writers wistfully recalled their childhood years in the former Ottoman Empire through childhood memoirs. They provided vivid portraits of their loved ones and descriptions of expulsion and expressed nostalgia for their bygone childhood in *Ergir*. Guren Achemyan Mahari's 'Childhood' (*Mankutyun*, 1928) and Vahan Totovents' 'Life on the Old Roman Road' (*Kyanky Hin Hromeakan Chanaparhi Vra*, 1930), both of which quickly found favour with the public in Soviet Armenia, can be considered as proto-typical works of this genre.⁴⁸ Before examining their works and the portrayal of *Ergir*, it is worth briefly reviewing the life stories of these two authors.

Guren Mahari (1903–1969) was born in Van, where, at the age of eight, he lost his father in an allegedly accidental shooting by his maternal uncle who was a member of the Dashnak party. The 1916 massacres in Van stood as a major point in Mahari's life. He lost his mother, sister and grandmother *en route* to

44 Aksel Bakunts, *Çirani p'ogë* (Erewan 1954).

45 See, for example, Vaġarřak Norenc', *Oreri ĉambin: Erkeri havak'aĉow* (Dilijan 1925); Eġiře Abġari Ćarenc', *Erkir Nairi* (Erewan 1977 [1926]); Lyowsi T'argyowl, *Ćakatowm* (Erewan 1932).

46 Vaġarřak Norenc', *Ērger řogovaĉow: Erkow hatorr*, vol. 1, 2 vols (Erewan 1963) 51–55.

47 Norenc', *Ērger řogovaĉow*, 51.

48 Gowrgen Mahari, 'Mankowt'yown', in: Ařot Ćowkasi Lowsenc' (ed), *Erkeri řogovaĉow*, vol. 2, 5 vols (Erewan 1967) 7–51; Vahan T'ot'ovenc', *Kyank'ë hin h'rowmeakan řanaparhi vra* (Erewan: 1956 [1930]). Zabel Yesayan also wrote a memoir about her childhood in Istanbul. See Zapel Mkrťei Esayan, *Silihtari parteznerë* (Erewan 1935).

the South Caucasus, and found refuge at an orphanage in Etchmiadzin. During his teenage years, Mahari became an advocate of Soviet socialism and an ardent critic of the Dashnak nationalists, presumably because he was shaken by his father's death. He wrote propaganda leaflets about the Bolshevik ideology in the 1920s.⁴⁹ Vahan Totovents (1889–1938) was born in Mezre, a town in the Ottoman province of Mamuret-ul-Aziz (named Kharberd in Armenian). After finishing his secondary education in 1909, Totovents left for America where he worked as an unskilled labourer and took courses at the University of Wisconsin. During the Genocide of 1915–1916, Totovents returned to Anatolia to join the Armenian *fedayis*, fighting alongside the Tsarist army against the Ottomans. In 1917, he left the army and moved to Tiflis to edit the Armenian daily 'Armenia' (*Hayastan*, 1917–1918), founded by Andranik Ozanyan, the Dashnak leader of the Armenian *fedayis*. Soon after, Totovents became disillusioned with the Dashnaks and transformed himself into a defender of Bolshevism in Armenia.⁵⁰ Accordingly, he gravitated towards the literary themes, deemed essential for the Soviet government, such as the communist revolution and struggle of the proletariat.⁵¹

Despite their faith in the Soviet system and Bolshevik ideology, both Mahari and Totovents reflected on their childhood in the Ottoman Empire, often with humour and irony, sometimes with melancholic and nostalgic tones. Referring to *Ergir*, Mahari called Van 'that city' (*ayd kaghaky*), and Totovents called Kharberd 'the old country' (*hin yerkir*). For both authors, *Ergir* was a local 'homeland'; a small intimate world revolving around their childhood, rather than a national or political 'homeland'. They portrayed it not only as a physical space but also as a space of networks. They described their home, garden, room, street, neighbourhood, or a farm field, where daily life, local traditions and a rich tapestry of social relations and conflicts unfolded.⁵² *Ergir* facilitated their relationship with family members, friends, neighbours, and childhood sweethearts, whom they lost during the Genocide. They wrote about those who died or went missing, expressing grief over their loss. Mahari wrote about his disturbed and mute sister, during the flight from Van:

49 Agop Jack Hacikyan, *The heritage of Armenian literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Modern Times* (Detroit 2005) 1014.

50 Richard D. Wilkinson, 'Nationalist literature in Armenia and the Soviet regime: The case of Vahan Totovents', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59:2 (1981) 197–218, 200–211.

51 Marc Nichanian, *Writers of disaster: Armenian literature in the twentieth century* (Princeton 2002) 255–259.

52 Mahari, 'Mankowt'yown', 17–20, 34–38. T'ot'ovenc', *Kyank'ë hin hrovmeakan*, 14–15, 76–79, 85–89.

You had black eyes and were tall. You came to the world and had a right to live, to love, and to be loved. But on a sunny morning, your life turned into a terrifying night. Your brother is still living, dear Adrine, but he did not forget you. He wished you would also reach the sunny days.⁵³

Similarly, Totovents paid tribute to his maternal cousin Rebeka, who was abducted and Islamised by an Arab tribal leader during the forced marches to the Syrian desert. 'They took her to the Arab deserts,' he wrote. 'I heard... I heard, with great pain that they tattooed her sun-like forehead and cheeks. Sister, I bow my head before your terrible destiny. Please accept your brother's tears.'⁵⁴

The expulsion and loss of loved ones, home, routines and relationships meant the loss of *Ergir* for Mahari and Totovents. As their hometowns turned into spaces of imagination and desire that were unattainable, they found themselves in the grip of nostalgia and fantasy, cast as a reaction to their loss. Totovents started writing a new novel, 'Brief Outline of a Long Novel' (*Pokrik Eskiz Mi Medz Vepi*, 1933), about his return to Kharberd after the massacres where, according to the plot, he would find no one alive but his friend's dog, Bella.⁵⁵ Mahari was in the myriad of fantasies in much the same way. To quench his yearning, he imagined a conversation with Van in the epilogue of his memoir:

The city that I wrote about and where I spent my childhood comes to my mind often, too often, with its foggy lines and smiles. Apparently, it wants to talk. It asks me: 'Do you remember me?' I reply: 'I do'. 'I remember, not because there is no more beautiful city than you in this world. Oh, there are! I remember you because you are the only city that my unique childhood passed and that child with curly hair beautified you.'⁵⁶

The literary works of Mahari and Totovents, and the other refugee narratives I discussed above shed light on the ex-Ottoman Armenians' conceptualisation of homeland, and the way they dealt with the 'loss of *Ergir*' in the 1920s and 1930s. The refugees yearned for the irrevocably lost 'homeland' while living in the actualised 'homeland', Soviet Armenia. In the next decades, the theme of *Ergir* largely disappeared from refugee narratives due to a climate of fear and political persecutions in Stalin's era. Between 1936–1938, Mahari, Totovents, and dozens of refugee writers, intellectuals and politicians fell victim to the

53 Mahari, 'Mankowt'yown', 14.

54 Tot'ovenc', *Kyank'ë hin hrovmeakan*, 72.

55 Wilkinson, 'Nationalist literature in Armenia', 216.

56 Mahari, 'Mankowt'yown', 49.

Stalinist terror. What followed was almost a three-decade silence on the issues of *Ergir* and the expulsion of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire.

4 Refugees under Persecution: The Stalinist Terror (1936–1938)

The terror that Stalin unleashed on Soviet citizens profoundly affected the Armenian refugees in the 1930s. The repressed were accused of being the enemies of Soviet power, counter-revolutionaries, Trotskyist members of the Communist party, spies, bourgeois nationalists, underground or former Dashnak supporters, active members of Christian communities, and landowners.⁵⁷ The crackdown began in 1936 when Aghasi Khanjyan was allegedly shot by Lavrenti Beria, the director of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (henceforth the NKVD). A year later, other Communist Armenian politicians such as Sarkis Kasyan, Avis Nurijanyan and Sahak Ter Gabrielyan were also shot dead.⁵⁸ Among those targeted was also the Armenian Apostolic Church which was accused of spreading anti-Communist propaganda, Armenian nationalism and religious backwardness. Several priests were imprisoned or sent into exile to Siberia.⁵⁹

Research in the NKVD archives demonstrates that from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, 42,000 people from the Armenian SSR were purged, imprisoned, executed or sent to the Gulag labour camps in Siberia.⁶⁰ In 1936–1938 alone, 8,837 people were arrested and half of them were sentenced to death.⁶¹ How many of these victims of the terror were ex-Ottoman Armenian refugees is impossible to know, as no precise figures are available, yet scholars estimate that they constituted a majority over the local Russian-Armenian victims.⁶² The Stalinist regime was suspicious of the ex-Ottoman Armenians for a few reasons. First,

57 Armenak Manowkian, *K'ajak'akan b'raçnšowmnerë Hayastanowm 1920–1953 t't'* (Erewn 1999) 7, 38; Xařatyan, "Nac'ionalizmi" diskowrsë, 126.

58 Ronald Grigor Suny, *Armenia in the twentieth century* (Chicago 1983) 61–64.

59 Jacob Osiecki, 'The invigilation of the Armenian clergy (1920–30): According to the documents in the possession of the Armenian National Archive and the Georgian State Archive', *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 21 (2012) 271–276; Felix Corley, 'The Armenian church under the Soviet regime, Part 1: The leadership of Kevork', *Religion, State and Society* 24:1 (1996) 9–53.

60 Manowkian, *K'ajak'akan b'raçnšowmnerë*, 239. Hranush Kharatyan warns that there may have been numerous other political persecutions and murders that were unrecorded. See Xařatyan, "Nac'ionalizmi" diskowrsë, 41–42.

61 Manowkian, *K'ajak'akan b'raçnšowmnerë*, 20–22.

62 Xařatyan, "Nac'ionalizmi" diskowrsë, 120. Harowt'yown Marowt'yan, 'Hayoc' C'egaspanowt'yan zoheri hišataki òrva jevavorowmë, zargac'owmnerë, meròrya viçakë (Mas 1)', *C'egaspanagitakan Handes* 6: 1 (2018) 105–29, 116.

the refugees had come from an empire where land ownership was permitted and encouraged. Their resistance against the collectivisation programme in 1928 in Armenia only increased Stalin's suspicions. In the 1930s, they were imprisoned or deported to Siberia as Gulag workers and exiles.⁶³ Second, there were ex-Dashnak supporters and former *fedayis* among the refugees. During the purges of 1936–1938, they were sentenced to death or sent to Gulag camps. For example, a former ARF member, Ghazar Fahradyan, who found refuge in the village of Madga (Lernarot) after the expulsion from the Ottoman Empire, was shot dead in 1937 because 'he had played a role in the killings of Azeris and fought against the Bolsheviks as a Dashnak leader. His whole family was exiled to Siberia as enemy family members.'⁶⁴ In the same year, several ex-*fedayis* in Talin, Katnaghbyur, and the neighbouring villages were given death sentences or sent to Gulag camps in Tashkent.⁶⁵ Finally, the attempts at border-crossing to Turkey and Iran heightened the Stalinist regime's paranoia about the refugees, who were seen as 'dangerous alien elements'. A refugee from Sasun, Petros Hakobyan, suspected of having contacts outside the USSR and of attempting to cross the Soviet-Turkish border from the Shirak region, was arrested and shot by the NKVD without trial in 1938.⁶⁶

The Stalinist regime also attacked the Armenian refugee writers and artists, who had formed the backbone of intellectual life in Soviet Armenia, accusing them of provoking nationalist and counter-revolutionary sentiments.⁶⁷ Branded as the enemies of the state, many refugee writers were incarcerated, killed or deported to Siberia.⁶⁸ Totovents was among the first to be arrested in July 1936. He spent two years in jail, and after a short trial in 1938, he was shot dead. Mahari was also arrested in 1936 and sent to a labour camp in Siberia where he spent nine years. He was released from the camp in 1947, but a year later was sent into internal exile at a remote Siberian village. Ler Kamsar (Aram Tovmasyan, 1888–1965), who was born in Van and displaced to the South Caucasus during the Genocide, was also arrested and sent to the labour camps in Ukhta and Varkuta, the coal mining towns in northern Russia. He was released and rehabilitated in 1955 after Stalin died.⁶⁹

63 Manowkyan, *K'agak'akan b'inač'nšowmnerë*, 19; Interview with Lida Petrosyan, conducted on 27 April 2019 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in the village of Zovasar, Talin, Armenia.

64 Interview with Albert Fahradyan, conducted on 27 April 2019 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in the village of Proshyan, Kotayk, Armenia.

65 Xaratomyan, "Nac'ionalizmi" diskowrsë, 122.

66 Interview with Sofia Hakobyan, conducted on 23 April 2018 by Ayşenur Korkmaz in Yerevan, Armenia.

67 Marowt'yan, 'Hayoc' C'egaspawot'yan, 16–18.

68 Alazan, *Tarapank'i owjinerov*, 2–3.

69 Lei Kamsar, *Čapraç őrer*, Hayk Xemčyan (ed), (Erewn 2016) 17–26.

Significant here is that all of these writers were repressed mainly because they wrote about the violence, flight and expulsion during the massacres of 1915–1916, and expressed a nostalgic longing for their *Ergir*. These were truly taboo subjects, considered to be nationalistic and anti-Soviet propaganda by the Stalinist regime. Norents was arrested in 1936 after several accusations were levelled against him in the Writers' Union of Soviet Armenia. The regime accused him of being a nostalgic nationalist because he glorified the Armenian resistance against the Ottoman state and portrayed the *fedayis* as heroes in his works – he had also named his son after Sasun, his former hometown.⁷⁰ Norents was sentenced to forced labour and imprisonment for eighteen years. In such political turmoil, several writers found self-censorship the solution to evade the persecutions that Norents and others endured. While publishing new works, they refrained from 'controversial' topics and nostalgic sentiments for *Ergir*. Others were impelled to erase certain elements from their literary history that could make them blameworthy. But all these efforts were futile. A large wave of political repression engulfed other prominent intellectuals such as Yeghishe Charents, Vahram Alazan, Zabel Yesayan, Gurgen Vanandetsi, Norayr Dabaghyan, Vahram Aristakesyan and many others.

The Stalinist terror of 1936–1938 in Soviet Armenia marked a new phase in the lives of the ex-Ottoman Armenians, a community that experienced double displacement and victimisation over approximately twenty years. It shaped the refugees' integration process into the 'new homeland', much as it affected their self-conceptions, spatial attachments, and political expressions. The persecutions contributed to the strengthening of the refugees' nostalgia towards their former hometowns and hampered their efforts to swiftly take root in Armenia. Even though the Stalinist regime had managed to silence any mention of *Ergir* between the 1930s and mid-1950s, this unintentionally laid the groundwork for a new period in which the narratives of *Ergir* boomed in popularity.

5 Narratives of *Ergir* in the Post-Stalin Era

After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev denounced his predecessor and promised a new period of Soviet optimism. This era (1955–1964), referred to as 'the Thaw', was characterised by a relative relaxation of the previous pressures and attempts to dissociate the Soviet state from the 1936–1938 purges.⁷¹ In 1954–1956, the victims of Stalinism were rehabilitated and amnestied. The

70 Hračya K'očar, 'Nac'ionalist takanbneri hokevordin', *Grakan T'ert'*, 10 March 1937, 3.

71 Polly Jones, *The dilemmas of de-Stalinization: Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era* (London 2006).

ex-Ottoman Armenians who survived the prisons, camps, and internal exile were released and allowed to return to Soviet Armenia.⁷² The period of Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982), saw the emergence of nationalistic narratives in the Armenian SSR. On 24 April 1965, the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, an illegal demonstration took place in Yerevan, where approximately 20,000 people gathered and chanted nationalist slogans, calling for the return of the 'Armenian lands' from Turkey.⁷³

Brezhnev's era in Soviet Armenia in particular witnessed a renewed interest in the theme of *Ergir* and the history of Ottoman persecutions against Armenians. A plethora of novels, short stories and poems appeared in Soviet Armenian literature between the 1960s and 1980s, focusing on the refugees' experience of violence and expulsion from their hometowns. Among them were the works of the ex-Ottoman Armenians themselves or their children, such as Hrachya Kochar's 'the White Book' (*Spitak Girký* 1965) and 'Yearning' (*Karot*, 1965), Khachik Dashtents' novel 'The Call of Plowmen' (*Ranchparneri Kanchy*, 1979), and Mushegh Galshoyan's short stories 'Valley's Miro' (*Dzori Miron*, 1968) and 'Clouds on Mount Maruta' (*Maruta Sari Ampery*, 1981). Other literary works were of the Russian Armenians, such as Paruyr Sevak's 7,000 stanza poem-book 'the Unsilenceable Belfry' (*Anreli Zangakatun*, 1959) and Gevorg Emin's poem-book 'Seven Songs About Armenia' (1970). A common feature of all these literary works was that their portrayal of *Ergir*, which transcended the level of local and relational aspects of 'homeland', and instead denoted a politically charged national homeland of Armenians located in Eastern Turkey.

These literary representations in the post-Stalin era also brought a new dimension to the conceptualisation of *Ergir*: their portrayal of the Ottoman Armenians' expulsion in 1915–1916 and the Stalinist terror of 1936–1938 as entangled trajectories of victimisation. Hrachya Kochar's short novel *Karot* particularly exemplifies this characterisation with its gritty storyline that intertwined the memory of Ottoman atrocities with the havoc of the 1930s in Armenia. Set in a small Armenian village right across the Turkish border under Stalin's rule, the novel explores an Armenian refugee's nostalgia for his hometown in Eastern Anatolia. The main protagonist Arakel carries conflicting emotions for his *Ergir*: on the one hand, a deep yearning, on the other, a

72 Matossian, *The impact of Soviet policies*, 199–210.

73 Scholars argue that the demonstration was not necessarily anti-Soviet. The nationalist narratives of the demonstrators were coupled with an affirmation of socialist ideals. See, Maïke Lehmann, 'A different kind of brothers: Exclusion and partial integration after repatriation to a Soviet "homeland"', *Ab Imperio* 3 (2012) 171–211; Arsène Saparov, 'Re-Negotiating the boundaries of the permissible: The national(ist) revival in Soviet Armenia and Moscow's response', *Europe-Asia Studies* 70: 6 (2018) 862–883.

fear that the land had become barren in the Armenians' absence.⁷⁴ A part of Arakel's daily routine in the Soviet village is to gaze at the mountains and Araxes river on the other side of the border and try to identify the villages he used to pass with his flock before the expulsion: 'Now, *Ergir* was distant and unreachable, yet standing before his eyes. One could only watch and long for his own land. And Arakel did that for day and night.'⁷⁵

Arakel was not alone in his yearning. Other refugees too were nostalgic and had fantasies about their former hometown, but they refrained from vocalising these as fantasies of 'return' would be denounced and punished by the Stalinist regime.⁷⁶ Despite the danger, Arakel plucked up the courage to swim across the Araxes river and go to his *Ergir*. He visited the graves of his parents, the mountains, valleys, and monasteries, and drank fresh water from the Euphrates. However, as the Kemalist state pursued him, he felt obliged to end his journey and go back to Soviet Armenia.⁷⁷ Upon his return to the border, the NKVD officers arrested Arakel on the grounds that he was a Turkish spy:

- Who sent you to Turkey?
- I had missed my *Ergir*.
- Why would anyone go there only because of yearning?
- I did.⁷⁸

At the end of his interrogation, an officer who was also a former Ottoman-Armenian refugee decided to release Arakel, as he believed that he was not a Turkish spy, but just a dreamer who had crossed the border to visit his 'home'. For his act, the officer was removed from his position and given a much lower level job by the Stalinist regime.

The plot of Kochar's novel suggests parallels between the Ottoman and Stalinist persecutions against Armenians. It reflects on the Gulag camps, exile to Siberia, and the impossibility of return to *Ergir* in relation to the massacres and deportations in 1915–1916. Kochar's conceptualisation of Armenians' double victimisation found its echo in the writings of other ex-Ottoman Armenian writers. Kamsar, for instance, referred to his expulsion from Van and the twenty years he spent in camps between 1935 and 1955 as the two most harrowing experiences of his life:

74 Hračya K'očar, *Karot* (Erewn 1965) 52.

75 K'očar, *Karot*, 51.

76 K'očar, *Karot*, 62–63.

77 K'očar, *Karot*, 99–102.

78 K'očar, *Karot*, 79.

I have seen two hard days in my life. One of them was the day we were forced out of our homeland, leaving our homes, ancestral graves, and anything else we liked to the Turks [...] My life's second unfortunate day was when two Chekists came to search my house, separate me from my wife and three dear children, and put me behind bars. I was deprived of the two most essential things to live, homeland and liberty.⁷⁹

In his memoir 'Barbed Wires in Blossom' (*Tsaghkats Pshalarer*, 1968), Mahari also expressed grief over the way that the catastrophe of the past unfolded in the present. He converged his two separate traumatic experiences. Thus his expulsion from *Ergir* and the Stalinist persecutions directed against him for his nostalgia for *Ergir* were rolled into one personal catastrophe:

I quenched my longing for the rivers of my birthplace from Hrazdan, my longing for Van from Erevan. And they thought it was too much. Deprived me of that; they made me a criminal in one night and blocked me in a dark prison cell.⁸⁰

There is no better conclusion than ending this section with the observations of Vasily Grossmann, on the issue of ex-Ottoman Armenian's double-victimisation and displacement. The Jewish dissident writer who spent two months in Soviet Armenia in the early 1960s wrote in his 'An Armenian Sketchbook' (1965), about a wedding ceremony he attended at a village on the foothills of Mount Aragats. On such a happy day, wrote Grossmann, the refugees were sad and mournful, wrote Grossman, describing their sense of nostalgia for their 'homeland' and the persecutions they had to endure during the Stalinist rule:

They kissed and began to weep. They were weeping not because a young man was marrying and leaving his mother but because of the incalculable loss and suffering that Armenians have endured, because they could not weep for the relatives of theirs who had perished during the massacres of 1915, because no joy in the world could make them forget their nation's grief and their homeland on the other side of Mount Ararat.⁸¹

79 This quote is cited, without a reference, in Xaratian, "Nac'ionalizmi" diskowrsë, 109.

80 Gowrgen Mahari, *Çağkaç p'salarer* (Erewn 1988 [1968]) 21. Cited in Rubina Perroomian, 'Historical memory: Threading the contemporary literature of Armenia', in: Richard Hovannisian (ed), *The Armenian genocide: Wartime radicalization or premeditated continuum* (New York 2007) 97–120, 109.

81 Vasily Grossman, *An Armenian sketchbook*, ed. Robert Chandler and Yury Bit-Yunan (New York 2014 [1965]) 172.

6 Conclusion

This article has explored how the ex-Ottoman Armenians who fled their hometowns in 1915–1916 developed a differential spatial identity around *Ergir* in Soviet Armenia and how their imaginations of *Ergir* evolved over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, through cultural and literary representations, the refugees reflected on everyday life before the violence and their subsequent displacement and trauma during the genocide. I have argued that the concept of *Ergir* denoted a local and relational ‘homeland’, rather than an abstract national ‘homeland’. I showed that these representations were in part made possible by the policy of *korenizatsiia*, a major constituent of the Soviet ideology until the mid-1930s. On the one hand, before the Stalinist purges, local nationalisms of the non-Russian components of the USSR were endorsed to forge a sense of social and cultural unity between them. In 1936, on the other hand, Stalin’s government employed new nationality discourses, and gave a pivotal role to the Russians to the detriment of other Soviet nations. Shifting his policy towards condemnation of local nationalisms, he denounced several ethnic groups as disloyal nationalists and capitalists. It was in this period that thousands of ex-Ottoman Armenians lived in fear, with the threat of political crackdowns, killings, imprisonment and internal exile for their nostalgic accounts of *Ergir*, which were considered as manifestations of Armenian nationalism by the Stalinist regime. Until the 1960s, the theme of *Ergir* disappeared from literary representations and public view and turned into a political taboo. The following period, in which Khrushchev and Brezhnev were in power, witnessed a boom in the discussions of *Ergir* and the stories of the ex-Ottoman Armenians. Both leaders’ efforts to reverse the effects of the political terror from Stalin’s era and their renewed interests in the non-Russian nationalities’ culture, history, and literature paved the way to Armenian nationalistic movements to spread throughout Soviet Armenia. *Ergir* quickly turned into a politically charged national ‘homeland’ of Armenians. This period also marked a new phase in the imaginations and conceptualisations of *Ergir*, in which the traumatic experiences of the genocide of 1915–1916 and the Stalinist purges of 1936–1938 were enmeshed into one vast perpetuated tragedy of the Armenian nation, crystallising their experiences with displacement, violence, victimisation, and nostalgia.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Joep Leerssen, Harutyun Marutyan, Hranush Kharatyan, Erik van Ree, Milou van Hout, Anahit Ghazaryan, and Naira Sahakyan for sharing their ideas with me and commenting on the drafts of this article.