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"Who Controls the Past Controls the Future": History Education in Armenia After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Maria
Avakyan

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“History is power, we cannot manipulate it, we need to rely on it”

Ruben Karapetyan, April 16 2025

Abstract

This Master's thesis examines how the current Armenian government has revised history education following the 2020-2023 Nagorno-Karabakh war, with the aim of reshaping national identity and projecting a new geopolitical narrative. The study draws on three theoretical concepts: symbolic power, curriculum politics, and critical pedagogy. Using a constructivist lens, it combines qualitative content analysis with interviews conducted with academics and teachers in Armenia and the diaspora, alongside a survey of seventh and eighth grade students using the new textbooks. The thesis analyses five key case areas (national ideology, textbook revisions, representations of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Genocide, narratives on Nagorno-Karabakh, and classroom experiences) and finds that education reforms are closely tied to broader political and ideological shifts. The state's efforts to redefine Armenian identity through curricular change highlight the role of education as a strategic tool of nation-building in the post-war context. In Armenia, revised history textbooks reflect this effort. Yet identity is not shaped from above alone: teachers and students also shape how it is understood through everyday practice and memory.

Keywords

Armenia - history education - post-war textbook revisions - national identity - symbolic power - curriculum politics - critical pedagogy - grassroot resistance

Declaration

This thesis has been written by me and me alone, no part of it has been written by AI or someone else, unless in the form of a quote or citation.

All interviews and survey responses used in this thesis were conducted with informed consent and in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

All photographs included in this thesis were taken by me, as noted in the image descriptions.

AI tools were used to assist in translating some Armenian and Russian texts that I was unable to translate myself.

AI tools were used to review the text for grammatical errors, typos, and to ensure consistency in British English.

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1. Introduction

”She told us that we should not worry about the Armenian Genocide and that we should forget about it”, said a student from the village of Merdzavan in Armenia about his Armenian history teacher (Harutyunyan 2025). This teacher has faced criticism from students, colleagues, and parents because of the way of teaching and behaving in class (ibid.). In protest, students have gone on strike and refused to attend the history lessons (Alpha News 2025). In response to these events, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport (ESCS) removed the school’s director and appointed a new one, protecting the history teacher (Ohanesyan 2025). The Ministry also announced that it would take action against the school and place it under special monitoring to look into all the issues (ibid.).

This incident is only the latest in a series of controversies in Armenian education. In 2024, newly published Armenian history textbooks sparked backlash among prominent scholars. Hayk Demoyan, former director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, pointed out that they were filled with mistakes despite having been corrected at least five times (Sputnik 2024). Demoyan stressed that the Ministry ignored criticism and negative feedback from over 100 scholars (ibid.). He argued: “according to the current procedure, the textbook was submitted for review to the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. The textbook failed the first stage, and at the second stage, an extremely negative conclusion was also submitted to the Ministry” (ibid.). These educational changes may reflect deeper geopolitical pressures facing Armenia, especially following recent conflicts and shifting alliances in the South Caucasus.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made statements in a press release following the *Activity Report 2023* from the Ministry of ESCS about the textbooks, showing broader political ambitions. According to Pashinyan: “we need to be sure that our textbooks convey those messages. Those messages that are conveyed should be state-centric… And we have to say

it, and we say it, there has to be state-centric content. The school is a state institution, and everything must be in line with it, absolutely everything" (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2024). This suggests that under Pashinyan, Armenia's leadership modifies textbooks and education to align with a specific 'state ideology'. Demoyan noted that a previous 10th-grade textbook was rejected for its portrayal of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, how the current leadership came to power, which did not align with the leadership's narrative (Sputnik 2024).

"Education is not a field that the government can come and take over and make changes according to its preferences", said the late Professor Artak Movsisyan, Doctor of Science and former Head of the Chair of Armenian History at Yerevan State University (Terth 2020). "It turns out that the reality was more terrible than we thought", Movsisyan also strongly objected and openly criticised the draft for new Armenian elementary school textbooks (Pastinfo 2020). In July 2020, the document outlining the ideas and standards for education appeared on the Ministry of ESCS's website, immediately sparking discussions (Terth 2020). These textbooks omit entire periods such as the early states and prehistoric origins of Armenian civilisation (ibid.). "The omission of such huge eras is in no way justified. We have 5,000 years of history and taking 2,000 years and putting them aside does not fit into any logic", concluded Movsisyan (ibid.).

These incidents, though different in time and scale, all point to a deeper transformation in Armenia's approach to history education. Together, they raise urgent questions about the role of the state in shaping national memory and identity through history education. This aligns with broader theoretical insights suggesting that states often reshape national identity by promoting state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651), using education as a key instrument of symbolic and ideological control.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding this thesis is: *"How does the Armenian leadership's post-war revision of history textbooks reshape national identity and project a new geopolitical narrative?"*

Armenia's case reflects a global pattern, highlighting its broader relevance. As will be discussed in the next chapters, governments often use history education to shape collective memory, support political goals, and influence relationships between groups. Revisions in history textbooks frequently result from ideological reasons, affecting how nations define themselves after conflicts, colonial periods, or government changes. Studying the Armenian case is relevant because of recent regional and geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020-2023 remains a very recent, painful, and memorable time for all Armenians. Textbook changes include updates on Nagorno-Karabakh, historically significant for Armenians worldwide. The recent territorial loss and the ongoing negotiation of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan make it especially important and socially significant to understand these educational revisions, the motivations behind them, and their potential consequences. While public debates have criticised these changes, there has been no academic analysis of how they reflect efforts to redefine Armenian national identity and promote a new geopolitical vision after the 2020-2023 conflict.

To address this complex issue effectively, it is also necessary to recognise how my personal background and identity influence my approach. I am Armenian, born and raised in the Netherlands. Travelling back to my home country at least twice a year and spending time with family there has given me a deep connection to Armenia, both as a country and as my homeland. Growing up in a traditional Armenian household and learning to speak and write Armenian and Russian, has strengthened my spiritual connection to Armenia, its traditions, values, and language. I believe this unique personal perspective will greatly benefit my thesis. Additionally, I teach Dutch, English, art, geography, and history in Dutch high schools. My background gives me extra motivation to apply my political science training to this personal topic.

With my perspective and clear research question established, the thesis will have the following structure. First, it provides a detailed background on the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020-2023 and its aftermath, followed by a brief overview of the Armenian Genocide and the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The theoretical framework explains the constructivist perspective used in the thesis and explores key concepts leading the analysis. A literature review follows, examining global cases of educational reform. After that, the methodology section will clarify the research methods used, along with the potential limitations and challenges. Finally, through analysis by themes using the key concepts, I will answer the research question, concluding with a summary of my findings and their relevance to the broader academic literature.

2. War, memory, and identity: background to Armenia's educational reforms

The 2020-2023 war was not only a military defeat but also a symbolic rupture in how Armenia views its past and future. On 27 September 2020, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev launched a full-scale attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, beginning a conflict that would end in the forced displacement of the entire Armenian population from the region. Beyond the violence, the war triggered an internal identity crisis and a redefinition of national narratives, particularly those surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian Genocide, and the Armenian Apostolic Church. These narratives, long embedded in Armenian education, are now being reshaped through newly revised history textbooks. Such revisions reflect the theoretical argument that states often reshape collective memory and national identity by promoting state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651), particularly following crises or conflicts. To understand the meaning of these reforms, it is necessary to examine the deeper historical and ideological background that shaped them. As this thesis focuses on post-war educational reforms, the Nagorno-Karabakh War is a key turning point for understanding the motivations and directions of these changes.

Nagorno-Karabakh itself was historically Armenian from 180 BC until the 4th century, ruled by prominent Armenian leaders like King Tigran the Great (Hewsen 1984: 43-68). From the 4th to the 19th century, the region was ruled at different times by Muslim khanates, mostly governed by Armenian leaders (Walker 1991: 10). Following the Russo-Persian War in 1828, Nagorno-Karabakh became part of the Russian Empire (Balayan 2007). After the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, tensions arose between newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region (ibid.). The British took over the region following the Ottoman defeat in World War 1 (Republic of Armenia Archives 1919). Despite Nagorno-Karabakh's predominantly Armenian population, the British-appointed Azerbaijani governor triggered local Armenian resistance (ibid.). Shortly after, Bolshevik control over Armenia and Azerbaijan led to the Sovietisation of the region (Cornell 1997: 2). Joseph Stalin deliberately placed Nagorno-Karabakh and the similarly Armenian-populated Nakhichevan within Soviet Azerbaijan instead of Soviet Armenia, aiming to weaken nationalist movements (Hovhannisyan 2020: 80). After the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum where 99.9% voted for independence, sparking full-scale conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Cornell 1999: 27). The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, aimed at negotiating peace and successfully brokered a temporary ceasefire in 1994 (Freizer 2014). For nearly three decades after the ceasefire, the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) operated with a democratic system, relying on military and economic support from Armenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic 2007). However, Azerbaijan viewed this as an occupation (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021).

These historical tensions escalated in 2020, leading to major geopolitical shifts. As Europe looked for alternatives to Russian gas, Azerbaijan secured lucrative energy deals with the European Union, significantly increasing its geopolitical leverage (Radečić 2020; Fitzgerald and Davis 2024). With limited European intervention possible, Azerbaijan launched a carefully

planned military offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh in September of that same year (International Crisis Group 2023). This offensive involved documented war crimes, including bombing hospitals, schools, and civilian areas, as well as acts of torture and mutilation of civilians (Bulut 2023).

In November 2020, a ceasefire mediated by Russia halted the violence, though Azerbaijan maintained its territorial gains without accountability for its war crimes (Center for Preventive Action 2024). Despite the ceasefire, hostilities continued. Azerbaijan breached the agreement in 2021 by attacking Armenian sovereign territory regardless of worldwide condemnation from the European Parliament, France, and the United States (Modebadze 2021: 103; Roth 2023). In 2022, Azerbaijan intensified its aggression by launching another assault and imposing a nine-month blockade of the Lachin corridor, the sole link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, severely impacting 120,000 residents by cutting off essential supplies (Snell 2023; UN 2023). After the blockade ended in 2023, Azerbaijan launched a new military offensive on September 19, forcing the entire Armenian population to leave their homes, effectively ethnically cleansing the area (Gurcov 2023).

While Russian peacekeepers took no action, the remaining authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh surrendered within 24 hours (Gavin 2023; IRC 2023). The Azerbaijani government claims the Armenians left voluntarily and can remain if they accept Azerbaijani citizenship (Caucasus Watch 2023). This final attack ended decades of violence and placed Nagorno-Karabakh completely under Azerbaijan's control, officially confirmed by Pashinyan in May 2023 (Prime Minister of Republic of Armenia 2023). Former leaders from Nagorno-Karabakh have been arrested, imprisoned, and charged unfairly (Amnesty International 2025). The Armenian government has faced criticism domestically and internationally for not responding effectively (Civilnet 2024). Opposition politicians claim that the Armenian authorities are purposely allowing the issue to fade from public attention (Panorama 2025).

Efforts towards achieving a stable peace agreement remain fragile. In March 2025, Armenia and Azerbaijan drafted a peace agreement aimed at ending nearly four decades of conflict (Reuters 2025). However, significant domestic political resistance within Armenia and the unresolved nature of key constitutional changes required by Azerbaijan threaten the stability of this agreement. Armenian opposition voices criticise the weakened legal status of a political peace *agreement* versus a formal *treaty* (UN Treaty Collection n.d.), underscoring the ongoing instability and political tensions within Armenia.

Beyond territorial issues, the conflict sparked battles over historical memory and identity. Armenia's historical claim is based on the region's ethnic Armenian majority and deep historical roots (Hewsen 1984: 43-68; Nationalia 2023). In response, Azerbaijan claims historical sovereignty, controversially labeling Armenian landmarks, like the ninth-century Dadivank monastery, as 'Caucasian Albanian' (Kucera 2021). Caucasian Albania was a Christian territory in the South Caucasus bordering South-Eastern Europe and Western Asia (Gippert and Dum-Tragut 2023: 1). In an effort to further erase Armenian cultural heritage from international memory, Azerbaijan hosted a conference at the Vatican in April 2025 to present Armenian cultural sites as Albanian, aiming to erase Armenian identity from global memory (Sookiasian 2025).

Regional alliances have significantly shaped these geopolitical dynamics. Azerbaijan's alliances with Turkey and Israel enhanced its military strength, while Turkey also achieved the weakening of Russia's centuries-old influence in the region (Carley 1998; Zartonk 2020). Armenia's historically strong Russian ties deteriorated under Pashinyan's pro-Western government (Gendler 2023). Another strong influence in the region is Iran, providing Armenia solely moral support (Agence France-Presse 2023). Changing geopolitical orientation is also visible in the reframing of historical narratives in Armenian textbooks, which now reflect a different set of foreign policy assumptions. These shifts are analysed in depth in the following chapters.

Beyond the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, broader historical and cultural foundations of Armenian identity have come under revision, such as the Armenian Genocide of 1915, during which more than 1.5 million Armenians were systematically killed by the Ottoman Empire (Suny 2015: 1). The Armenian Genocide has long been a cornerstone of Armenian historical education, presented as a key moment of national trauma and survival (Barkhudaryan 2013: 133). Its inclusion in school curricula preserved historical memory. This consciousness also justified Armenia's diplomatic efforts for international recognition and normalisation of relations with Turkey over the years. Recent downplaying of the Genocide in the new textbooks aligns with efforts to ease diplomatic tensions and reframe Armenia's foreign policy priorities, as will be analysed later in this thesis.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has historically played a central role in Armenian national identity, not only as a religious institution but also as a guardian of cultural and historical continuity, particularly during centuries lacking an independent Armenian state (Western Prelacy n.d.). Previous textbooks often portrayed the Church as a symbol of resistance, especially during Ottoman and Soviet repression, and as a unifying force for Armenians worldwide (Harutyunyan and Hovhannisyan 2019: 12; Barkhudaryan 2013: 15). The recent marginalisation in the curriculum may indicate a shift towards a more secular and state-centred narrative. These core historical and cultural elements are now being reshaped in Armenian history textbooks. These changes reflect the current political and international situation and will be explored further in the analysis.

The 2020-2023 war marks not just a territorial loss, but a rupture in the way the current Armenian leadership understands itself, its history, and its place in the world. This has led to a broader reconsideration of national identity, state authority, and foreign policy, all of which are now reflected in educational policy. As this thesis will argue, education in post-conflict societies is more than a pedagogical tool, it becomes a strategic arena for reconstructing

national narratives, legitimising political authority, and shaping foreign policy through symbolic means. These developments set the stage for this thesis, which analyses five key areas affected by the textbook changes: national identity, the historical timeline, religion and the Genocide, Nagorno-Karabakh, and classroom experiences. Together, these topics reveal how the reforms aim to reshape both national identity and Armenia's geopolitical narrative.

3. Approaching the puzzle

3.1 Reimagination through ideas: a constructivist framework

Scholars have approached state-led identity reconstruction in education through various theoretical perspectives. Realist frameworks tend to explain state behavior through material interests, power balances, and survival instincts (Korab-Karpowicz 2017), while liberalism emphasises institutional cooperation, peace, and individual rights (Van de Haar 2009: 35). Both perspectives have been used to analyse state behavior and educational reform, focusing respectively on external threats (Couch 2020: 2) or democratising influences (Davies 2017: 17). Other theoretical approaches also offer valuable insights, but are less directly suited to the research focus as they do not fully account for the role of identity, memory, and norms in shaping state decisions and domestic policies. The Armenian case reflects a deeper transformation in how the nation understands itself and its place in the world. For this reason, constructivism provides the most suitable theoretical framework for this thesis. It emphasises that identities and interests are not fixed but socially constructed through shared ideas, norms, and historical narratives (Wendt 1992: 412). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Armenia's leadership uses education to reshape national identity and project a new geopolitical vision.

Alexander Wendt (1999: 1) argues in his famous book *Social Theory of International Politics* that: “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by shared ideas rather than given by nature”. In this theory, he stresses the importance of collective beliefs in international relationships (ibid.). Wendt (1999: 225) explains that everything has a material basis, such as bodies for people or territories for states, but shared understandings (memories and consciousness) truly distinguish actors. He claims collective identity involves how one views oneself in relation to others, influencing actors to see others' interests as part of their own (Wendt 1999: 229). Based on this reasoning, Wendt (1999: 235) lists four main national interests: survival, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem. Thus, actors act according to their interests, which are shaped by shared beliefs. This perspective provides an insightful way to analyse educational reforms in post-war Armenia, suggesting that the current Armenian leadership is changing collective ideas through history education to serve its interests. Simply put, the Armenian leadership seems actively involved in changing these shared ideas about being Armenian, religion, and specific historical events, for its political goals. Inspired by rational choice theory, Wendt (1999: 231) shows that ‘identity’ relates to ‘belief,’ and ‘interest’ relates to ‘desire.’ Altogether, according to Wendt's (1999: 138) constructivism, identity and interests arise from shared understandings and material realities. Identity and interest influence each other and together shape actions (Wendt 1999: 138). Therefore, ideas form the foundation of action (ibid.).

In an earlier article titled *Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, Wendt (1992: 412) argues that international anarchy is socially built through interactions between states, primarily shaping state identities and interests through mutual understanding and relationships. He claims states' identities and interests are formed by continuous interactions and past experiences, indicating that states are not naturally aggressive or self-interested but learn these behaviors (Wendt 1992: 411). Armenia's experiences highlight this concept, given its difficult history with neighboring countries, such

as the Armenian Genocide of 1915 by the Ottomans and the Nagorno-Karabakh Wars against Azerbaijan.

This constructivist approach helps answer the research question by emphasising how Armenia's evolving national identity (shaped by shared ideas, interactions, and external influences) can lead to a redefinition of relationships with past adversaries, especially through education. According to Wendt (1992: 397), identities influence how states define their interests, friends, enemies, and appropriate actions. States attempt to reshape national identity by promoting state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651). In Armenia's case, this is reflected in state policy, particularly in education, where history textbooks are being revised to promote a new narrative. These changes both reflect and shape identity for future generations. Thus, state-centred narratives shape policy, policy shapes education, and education shapes identity in return. This thesis explores this dynamic in Armenian education today.

Another constructivist scholar, Martha Finnemore (1996), argued that Wendt (1996) overlooked international organisations in his theory, focusing predominantly on state interactions and neglecting the important role international organisations play in shaping state identities and interests. She argues that national interests are formed by international society, which promotes norms and defines appropriate state behavior (Finnemore 1996: 22). Finnemore (1996: 34-127) focuses on three main examples: UNESCO's influence on science policies, the Red Cross shaping humanitarian norms, and the World Bank influencing economic development policies. She demonstrates that international organisations shape states' perceptions of legitimacy, thereby influencing their identities, policies, and interests (Finnemore 1996: 22). For Armenia, Finnemore's (1996) insights help to highlight external influences and the role of transnational actors, such as the diaspora (Adamson 2012: 32), which carries strong historical memory, in shaping educational reforms and identity. This encourages looking beyond purely domestic explanations.

Similarly, Ted Hopf (1998), another influential constructivist, emphasises identities, ideas, beliefs, and social contexts in shaping international politics. Hopf (1998: 173) argues identity is central to constructivism because it determines, as Wendt (1992: 397) also states, how states perceive interests, define friends and enemies, and choose foreign policies. Hopf (1998: 191) particularly stresses domestic identity narratives in understanding state behaviour. He highlights how domestic elements such as historical memory, education, media, and culture actively shape a state's identity, impacting external relations and behaviors (Hopf 1998: 191). Identity narratives influence both domestic and foreign policy because they shape what is seen as desirable and legitimate for a state's behaviour towards its own citizens (ibid.). This perspective is useful in examining Armenia's educational reforms, where leadership actively reshapes national identity concerning territorial losses, historical narratives, and regional identity. The historical memories, such as the Armenian Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh Wars, have shaped Armenia's narratives domestically. These historical memories may influence Armenia's foreign policy, affecting relationships with neighboring countries like Turkey and Azerbaijan. As the following analysis will show, the revised textbooks can become tools for socially constructing domestic understandings of the Armenian nation and its geopolitical context.

This thesis examines how post-war changes in Armenian national identity are reflected in education policy, focusing on revised history textbooks that reshape and reinforce state-centred narratives about identity, lost territory and Armenia's international role. The constructivist perspective, as explained by Wendt (1992; 1999), Finnemore (1996), and Hopf (1998), offers a useful theoretical approach because it highlights how identities, norms, and interests are socially formed, exactly the processes studied here. Wendt's (1992; 1999) general constructivist framework, Finnemore's (1996) international normative perspective, and Hopf's (1998) domestic identity narrative support a complete and balanced understanding of Armenia's post-war education changes. A constructivist viewpoint allows careful examination

of domestic actions, such as Armenia's internal identity-building through textbooks, alongside external effects from geopolitical actors and the diaspora. This perspective reflects the broader argument that states strategically reshape national identity through state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651), further supporting the theoretical relevance of examining education policy.

3.2 Analytical concepts guiding this study

This chapter presents three main concepts that guide the thesis' analytical framework: symbolic power, curriculum politics, and critical pedagogy. These ideas are used to examine how the post-war changes in history education implemented by the Armenian leadership reshape national identity and communicate a new global narrative. They help position education not merely as a technical or pedagogical tool, but as a strategic medium of cultural and political power. Clarifying these concepts enables a clearer understanding of how textbook reforms function both within Armenia's domestic identity politics and in its broader international positioning.

3.2.1 Symbolic power

Bourdieu's (1989: 21) idea of symbolic power, explains how states shape beliefs and values inside their own borders, especially through history education. This kind of power is not based on physical force, but the ability to make ideas appear natural through words, symbols, and shared meanings (Bourdieu 1989: 23). As Bourdieu (1989: 23) puts it, it is "the power to consecrate or reveal things that are already there". It operates subtly through everyday practices, by shaping how people understand the world around them (idem: 20). People start to see social rules and hierarchies as fair or normal, even when they are not (idem: 21). This

kind of power is most effective when it is not noticed, when people accept the dominant view of the world as common sense.

Schools are especially powerful instruments for symbolic power because they are where the state teaches children what to believe about the nation, its past, and its place in the world, which is considered legitimate knowledge. As Bourdieu (1989: 22) notes, the state has the power to define official knowledge and identity. Through the school curriculum, dominant narratives become institutionalised and are passed on as truths. This becomes especially important during times of crisis or change. When countries go through political change, they often revise what is taught in schools, as discussed in the literature review.

In Armenia, the recent textbook reforms show how symbolic power is used through education, discussed later in this thesis. After the 2020 war, the government removed or changed some key parts of national history. These changes, as explored in the analysis, show how the government shapes students' understanding of what it means to be Armenian. For instance, the removal of Armenian Apostolic Church history or the downplaying of the Genocide illustrate how the state reclassifies what counts as essential national memory. These changes are not only educational but also political. By changing school books, governments can shape how the next generation understands history and identity. In this way, they try to build support for new political goals and ideas about the nation's future.

3.2.2 Curriculum politics

Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith (1991: 2) argue that the curriculum is never simply a collection of neutral content. It is shaped by political, cultural, and economic forces (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 2). Textbooks serve as tools that define which histories, values and identities are presented as normal or legitimate (idem: 3). Education plays a key role in spreading dominant worldviews and maintaining social control by making certain ideas appear

natural and widely accepted (idem: 2). As they explain, the curriculum is the outcome of struggles between different groups who have competing ideas about how society should be organised (idem: 12). These struggles determine what counts as official knowledge, whose voices are heard, and which perspectives are excluded (idem: 8). Although textbooks are often used to support the views of those in power, Apple and Christian-Smith (1991: 8) also note that they are not passively accepted. Teachers and students may resist these messages or reinterpret them in their own way, meaning that education is also a space of contestation and agency (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 14).

In the Armenian case, the concept of 'curriculum politics' helps explain how school textbooks are used not only to teach history, but also to reshape national identity and reflect changing political priorities after the war. Decisions about education are made by state institutions such as the Ministry of ESCS, which sets curriculum standards, selects authors, and approves textbook drafts. As will be discussed later in this thesis, the textbook review process in Armenia under the current leadership bypasses academic consensus, with politically aligned figures in control of final approval. This struggle over the curriculum reflects what Apple and Christian-Smith (1991: 12) describe as a conflict between groups with competing visions of society. In Armenia, it plays out between government actors promoting a new post-war identity and those resisting the removal of traditional narratives, such as church history and the centrality of the Genocide, which will be analysed later in this thesis.

The writing and approval of textbooks involve political choices about what counts as truth and which historical interpretations are legitimised. Textbooks are not neutral tools, but instruments shaped by ideological forces that reflect the agendas of those in power (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 3). These dynamics are closely connected to Bourdieu's (1989: 21) concept of symbolic power: by controlling the content of what students learn as 'truth', the state naturalises its version of national identity. Curriculum politics thus becomes a key site where symbolic power is exercised and legitimised. In this context, Armenian textbook reform is not

just a technical update to education, but a political act aimed at reshaping collective memory and aligning national identity with the state's post-war vision.

3.2.3 Critical pedagogy

The political nature of curriculum is further emphasised by Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy. Freire (1970: 34) argues that education is never neutral, it either controls or liberates. In his book, he speaks against the passive acceptance of the current system and the power structures that already exist (Freire 1970: 36). He compares two types of education: the 'banking' model and the 'problem-posing' model (idem: 72). In the first, teachers simply give information, and students receive it without thinking, where learners are treated as objects, not subjects (Freire 1970: 79). The second model is based on dialogue and interaction, where students and teachers learn together and think critically about the world (ibid.). Freire's (1970: 72; 29) critique of the 'banking model' illustrates how top-down education fosters predetermined worldviews rather than empowering critical thought, as explored later in this thesis about Armenia's post-war curriculum reforms. The state uses history textbooks to reflect a state-centred version of national identity. In contrast, Freire's (1970: 72) 'problem-posing' model encourages critical reflection and democratic participation, which is limited in the revisions of Armenian history textbooks analysed in this thesis. Freire (1970: 36) believed the goal of education should be the development of 'critical consciousness', allowing people to question dominant ideologies and reflect on the structures shaping their lives. The Armenian government's current reforms may instead do the opposite: by simplifying complex historical legacies and silencing dissenting interpretations, they work against critical thinking and instead promote conformity to a new state narrative. This will be further explored in the analysis.

Beyond classroom methods, Freire (1970: 157) also emphasises how culture and education serve broader systems of domination, which connects with Apple and Christian-Smith's (1990:

10) idea that textbooks support dominant values. For Freire (1970: 157), the control of culture and education is a key mechanism through which elites reproduce their dominance. In Armenia's case, educational reform following the 2020-2023 war functions to consolidate the ruling party's interpretation of the past, marginalising alternative narratives such as the central role of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Genocide, and diaspora-linked identity models, as will be analysed in the following chapters. This serves not only to legitimise the state's new geopolitical orientation, but also to silence resistance. Freire's (1970) framework helps analyse how education in Armenia functions not merely to transmit historical facts, but to construct a politically sanctioned reality that aligns with post-war state ideology while discouraging critical engagement with contested narratives.

3.2.4 Synthesis

Taken together, these three concepts provide a critical framework for analysing Armenia's post-war educational reforms not as neutral updates, but as deeply political acts. Bourdieu's (1989: 21) theory of symbolic power helps the analysis explain how the Armenian state asserts authority over knowledge by redefining what counts as legitimate history and national identity. This power is exercised through education, particularly within the controlled environment of state-approved textbooks and showing how the Armenian state may be using education as a strategic tool to promote a new national narrative both internally and abroad. These reforms do not only teach students what to know, but also shape how they understand what it means to be Armenian today. This process illustrates the constructivist logic of identity: once constructed, identity becomes institutionalised in policy and internalised through education.

This intersects directly with the idea of curriculum politics (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 10), which shows how educational content is shaped by political struggle. In the Armenian case, curriculum decisions are not the result of open scholarly debate, but of state-driven efforts to align historical narratives with a post-war, state-centric vision of identity, as the

following chapters will demonstrate. Curriculum becomes a site where symbolic power is institutionalised and enacted. Finally, critical pedagogy (Freire 1970: 34) highlights what is missing from this educational model: critical reflection, pluralism, and student agency. Instead of encouraging 'critical consciousness', Armenian history textbooks reflect a top-down, one-sided narrative that silences dissenting views and discourages independent thought, which are illustrated later in this thesis. This absence is not accidental but central to the state's symbolic project. Together, these concepts reveal that education is never neutral. It either reinforces dominant ideologies or challenges them. In the Armenian case, history textbooks function as instruments of cultural influence, political legitimation, and symbolic nation-building in the post-war context, all illustrated later in the analysis.

4. Global patterns of educational reform: a literature review

A growing body of research examines how history textbook revisions are shaped by nation-building, state censorship, and political agendas. Countries rewrite textbooks to support nationalism, peacebuilding, or send political messages. The research shows that history textbooks often become tools of state power and strengthen political divisions instead of encouraging critical thinking about history. However, existing studies rarely explore how these changes impact teachers and students directly. This literature review examines how history education shapes national identities after conflicts or political shifts, providing relevant insights for Armenia's recent textbook revisions following the Nagorno-Karabakh War. First, it will show how history textbooks serve nation-building purposes, looking at the findings in Cambodia's education system as an example. Next, it will discuss colonial influences and Eurocentrism by looking at France and the United Kingdom. Then, it will examine government control and ideology in the education systems of China, Russia and Ukraine. Finally, the review will address Rwanda, comparing reconciliation efforts with political division. These cases illustrate

diverse ways history education shapes national identity, providing valuable context for Armenia's recent textbook revisions.

4.1 Post-war reconstruction

How does education adapt to post-war rebuilding? Frederick Ngo (2014) examines how history education in Cambodia changed due to political shifts after the Khmer Rouge era. His study shows how history textbooks were repeatedly revised according to changes in government, often matching the interests of the ruling party rather than historical truth (Ngo 2014: 156). By examining the addition, removal, and later reintroduction of the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodian textbooks, he demonstrates how education is used as a tool for governments to shape public memory (idem: 158). The purposeful silence and later reopening of discussions about the Genocide (idem: 157) illustrates a broader pattern of governments controlling collective memory through education. Cambodia's experience highlights how post-conflict governments use textbook revisions to selectively shape collective memory, often prioritising political goals over accuracy and open discussion of difficult histories. Cambodia's textbook revisions reflect clear examples of symbolic power, as the government strategically reshaped public memory through curriculum politics, to promote political stability after the Khmer Rouge period.

Ngo's (2014) study offers key insights into Armenia's post-war textbook changes. As will be revealed further in this research, the current Armenian leadership also has selectively revised textbooks, altering narratives about territory, identity, and religion to match new political realities. Comparing these examples highlights common ways post-conflict societies reshape difficult histories through education. Ngo's (2014) research focuses on textbook content, but it leaves open how Cambodian teachers and students experienced these politically driven revisions in their daily lives. This crucial perspective remains unexplored and will be central in my own analysis of Armenia.

4.2 Colonial legacies and Eurocentrism

Beyond post-war reconstruction, colonial contexts also demonstrate how governments use textbooks to selectively shape historical narratives to reinforce national pride and justify past actions. This discussion continues with Kulvinder Nagre's (2025) study of British history textbooks, which shows a similar unwillingness to face colonial violence. British textbooks describe the empire's growth while hiding colonial cruelty (Nagre 2025: 151). Nagre's (2025: 151) research on British textbooks shows how Britain's view of its colonial past remains selective and positive. Famous works of literature, such as the controversial writings of Rudyard Kipling, also reflect this pattern. Like Nagre's (2025) findings about British textbooks, French textbooks also describe colonialism neutrally or even positively, showing France as a caring country that 'brings civilisation' to colonised people (Spiegelman 2022: 53). Following this, France is portrayed as modern, developed, and cultured, while non-European regions are depicted as inferior (idem: 59). These textbooks present the French-speaking world as an expansion of France, strengthening the belief that French is the language of civilisation and progress (idem: 52). Both British and French textbooks show how symbolic power promotes national pride and cultural superiority. At the same time, it should be noted that in some former colonising countries, history textbooks now pay more attention to their brutal colonial pasts, following years of criticism. For example, this can be seen in the Netherlands regarding Indonesia (Historiek 2023), and in Germany regarding Namibia (Welt 2021).

Similarly, as this thesis will explore, Armenian history textbooks after the Nagorno-Karabakh War appear to emphasise selective historical portrayals to support political goals, driven by recent military loss and colonial legacies. In Azerbaijan's case, the integration of Nagorno-Karabakh into the national narrative reflects a clear post-conflict nation-building strategy. However, this thesis does not examine Azerbaijan's textbook reforms, which would be a valuable direction for future research. Instead, it focuses on Armenia, particularly how these

narrative shifts impact teachers' and students' understandings of history, an important perspective overlooked in the existing literature.

4.3 Government control and ideology

Building on European post-conflict education, Shuqin Xu (2021) examines China's textbook reforms after 2012, showing how changes were made to strengthen ideological loyalty under Xi Jinping. Xu (2021: 751) uses Vivien Schmidt's (2013) legitimacy model to explain how China balances public expectations for high-quality education with the political need to support Communist Party rule. Xu's (2021: 750) idea of 'dual legitimisation' highlights how history education must satisfy both educational quality and ideological control (Xu 2021: 755). Like Ngo (2014: 157), Xu (2021: 758) argues that history education is rarely neutral but serves as a tool for state control to shape national identity. Xu's (2021: 751) study demonstrates how China tightly manages textbook content to reflect government priorities, promoting national unity and achievements while downplaying political repression. The state also extends its control by censoring online discussions about textbook changes to maintain official narratives (idem: 758).

Xu's (2021) findings align closely with Karina Korostelina's (2010) research on Russian and Ukrainian textbooks, where history education also supports national identities and political positions. By comparing portrayals of events like the October Revolution, Stalin's purges, and World War 2, Korostelina (2010: 130) reveals differences reflecting current political tensions. Russian textbooks show the Soviet era positively as a time of strength, while Ukrainian textbooks highlight suffering and oppression, especially related to the Holodomor (idem: 131). These contrasting histories demonstrate how textbooks are political tools that define national identities and reinforce divisions. Together, China, Russia, and Ukraine illustrate that authoritarian or politically charged contexts commonly use textbooks explicitly to strengthen government power, control public memory, and reinforce national identities. These revisions

suggest how symbolic power may operate through curriculum politics, to strengthen legitimacy and national cohesion.

As will be explored in the analysis, recent changes in Armenian textbooks may reflect efforts to exercise ideological control, highlighting unity of the Armenian citizens and the repositioning of the Armenian state in the region after heavy defeat in the war. Although Xu (2021) and Korostelina (2010) extensively analyse textbook content and state control, neither explores how these ideological narratives are received by educators or students.

4.4 Reconciliation vs. division

While China, Russia, and Ukraine show how textbooks deepen political divisions and reinforce state power, Rwanda provides a contrasting example of how history education can be strategically used to promote national unity and reconciliation after conflict. Susanne Buckley-Zistel (2009) studies how the Rwandan government used education after the 1994 Genocide. Throughout Rwanda's history, narratives have been used to create division and political tensions, causing ethnic violence and eventually genocide in 1994 (Buckley-Zistel 2009: 31). After the Genocide, the new government led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front created a new national identity by rejecting the ethnic labels of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa, and promoted a unified Rwandan identity instead (idem: 37). The policy of unity was enforced through state-controlled history lessons and civic education (idem: 32). The government introduced a new version of history, stating that distinct ethnic groups did not truly exist before colonial rule, describing them instead as flexible social categories (ibid.). This history removes conflicts that happened before colonialism and shows Rwanda as united before European colonisation (idem: 35). According to Buckley-Zistel (2009: 32), the Rwandan government blames German and Belgian colonisers for creating ethnic divisions by favouring one group over another. Textbooks present the Genocide as a direct result of colonial divisions and ethnic manipulation (Buckley-Zistel 2009: 40). The Rwandan Patriotic Front is portrayed as Rwanda's savior,

stopping the Genocide and restoring stability (idem: 47). Buckley-Zistel (2009: 38) finds that criticism of the Rwandan Patriotic Front's actions during or after the Genocide is silenced. The government does not allow alternative interpretations of history, preventing open discussions of past injustices (Buckley-Zistel 2009: 46). While the official narratives aim to promote unity, they also silence complaints, possibly leading to future tensions. Rwanda's educational reforms highlight the role of symbolic power within education to promote unity, reconcile social divisions, and improve the country's international image after genocide.

This tension between unity and historical openness sets the stage for understanding Armenia's textbook revisions. Like in Rwanda, as this thesis will explore, the current Armenian leadership appears to use history education selectively to promote what they see as national unity, possibly to justify territorial losses, push secular ideas, and support a new approach of regional reconciliation. Rwanda's example highlights these tensions clearly, providing insights relevant to Armenia's challenges after the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Understanding Rwanda's educational changes also raises critical questions about how these official narratives are experienced by teachers and students, questions that I will try to answer in my own study on Armenia.

4.5 Armenia and this thesis

As this thesis will demonstrate, Armenia presents a compelling case for examining the politics of textbook reform in a post-conflict setting. Following the 2020-2023 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the country has experienced significant political and identity crises. These rapid shifts have prompted the government to revise national narratives through history education, making Armenia a timely and instructive example for studying how educational tools are used to reshape national identity and political messaging. Armenian history textbooks have changed four times since 1990 (Maloyan 2025), reflecting political realities. Scholars show that textbooks shape collective memory, support state narratives, and reflect political conditions. Tigran Zakaryan (2018) has noted that these textbooks promote a uniform national identity while excluding minority perspectives, though his work does not analyse textbooks directly. Satenik Mkrtchyan (2012) further shows that Armenian world history textbooks adopt a Eurocentric lens and rarely address Armenia's relationships with neighbouring countries. These findings reflect broader concerns about state control over historical memory in the name of national security.

Recent reforms suggest a new direction for Armenia's history education. Smbat Hovhannisyan (2023), author of Armenia's controversial new history textbooks, defends including multiple viewpoints on historic events in the textbooks. However, lacking independent analysis, it is unclear how much narratives have truly changed. External influences matter as well. Armenian Report (2024) explains that Russia objected to the use of the word 'annexation' instead of 'liberation' in Armenian textbooks when referring to the outcome of the 1828 Russo-Persian War, leading to forced revisions. This highlights how international relations affect domestic education policy. A 2024 government report clearly states textbooks must include 'state-centred messages', aligning education with national priorities (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2024). As will be explored in the analysis section, Armenia appears to strategically employ education as symbolic power to redefine national identity domestically and

internationally. This raises questions about whether these revisions aim to modernise historical narratives, encourage regional reconciliation, or enforce a state-defined identity.

While previous research largely focused on textbook content, my research includes the overlooked question of how teachers and students experience these changes. Understanding how they interpret these narratives is crucial because they ultimately determine the effectiveness of these political and educational strategies. Given Armenia's recent military and moral defeat in the war and geopolitical pressures, this analysis offers alternate insights into how revising history education serves as an instrument to shape traditional perception of national identity in the younger generation and to reposition the society within shifting global dynamics.

5. Methodology

5.1 Tools for analysis

To understand how the current Armenian government's changes to history education after the war reshape national identity and whether they express a new geopolitical narrative, I used qualitative content analysis (QCA). This method focuses on how language is used as a form of communication and pays close attention to the meaning and context of the text (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1278). The data can come from many sources, such as interviews, open survey questions, observations, or printed material like books, articles, and manuals (Kondracki and Wellman 2002: 224). In QCA, the language is organised into categories to help find common themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1278). QCA identifies recurring patterns shaped by context and culture (Rosengren 1981: 9). This aligns with the constructivist view of this thesis, which sees meaning as socially constructed and embedded in broader political and cultural settings. It effectively identifies how state-centred narratives manifest within textbooks, capturing ideological shifts in national identity.

Armenia was selected as a case study due to its current period of post-war transition, in which state-led reforms to history education provide a clear and recent example of how governments may attempt to reconstruct national identity through curriculum. The political and symbolic significance of these changes and the public controversy and grassroot resistance which will be discussed later in this thesis, makes Armenia a highly relevant site for exploring the dynamics of curriculum politics, symbolic power, and critical pedagogy. QCA is especially suited to this research because it allows for a nuanced reading of how textbooks and state materials communicate ideologically loaded concepts such as identity, memory, and legitimacy.

In the first stage of the research, I analysed primary and secondary textual sources. I examined primary sources such as the Armenian history textbooks from before and after the 2023 reforms, specifically those used in grades 7 and 8, published between 2013 and 2024. Primary sources also include curriculum documents, educational policies, historical records, and official state materials. Press conferences and speeches are reviewed to reveal government reasoning, alongside both state and independent media reports identifying differing viewpoints. As both government and critics use social media, I studied selected public posts on platforms such as Facebook, X, and Telegram by key political figures, state institutions, and critics between 2023 and 2025. These posts were chosen based on their relevance to textbook reforms, national identity, or the post-war political narrative. Secondary sources, including academic research on the key concepts and global education reform cases, help contextualise Armenia's experience and offer interpretive frameworks for understanding the political and cultural implications of the textbook changes. As the data is reviewed, texts are coded according to themes relevant to this thesis. The coding process combined two approaches: it was deductive, using the theoretical framework and concepts as a guide, and inductive, allowing new themes to appear during the analysis. The codes and themes used for the QCA are listed in Appendix C and were developed based on the key concepts outlined in

the theoretical framework as well as recurring themes identified in the literature review on post-conflict education and textbook reform. Special attention is given to patterns related to national identity, territorial issues, historical narratives, and references to geopolitical positioning. The focus lies on how history education is being reshaped, the effects this has on Armenian national identity, and any indications of a changing geopolitical narrative. The analysis then explores Armenia's use of education as symbolic power and the extent to which domestic educational changes influence perceptions beyond national borders.

In the second stage, fieldwork is done through semi-structured interviews and a survey. "Semi-structured interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon" (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021: 1360). It helps the interview stay focused but also gives the researcher the freedom to ask about new ideas that come up (ibid.). During the interviews, I asked questions based on specific themes, which are explained in Appendix B. These themes include previous public statements made by the interviewees, the content and quality of the revised textbooks, the impact on national identity, international influences, education policies, fear in society, classroom experiences, and views about the future.

I interviewed Ashot Melkonyan, a historian, professor, and Director of the Institute of History at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. I also spoke with Ruben Karapetyan, a historian and professor who has served as Armenia's ambassador to Egypt and Italy, and has worked as an advisor to both the Foreign Minister and the President. In addition, I interviewed Arman Maloyan, a historian who used to lead the National Centre for Education Development and Innovations Foundation (NCDI). He was dismissed from this role after publicly criticising the recent changes made to the history textbooks.

To include the perspectives of history teachers in Armenia, I, along with my family and friends, contacted numerous individuals who might be able to assist. As the outreach was a joint effort, with several people making calls on my behalf, it is difficult to provide an exact number of those approached. We contacted several school principals whose schools have multiple history teachers, as well as many individual history teachers who use the new textbooks in their classrooms. Despite offering full anonymity and encouraging them to share their thoughts privately, only one teacher agreed to speak with me. She said: “a history teacher has no right to be afraid… feel free to mark any thoughts that I have written… Mark: ‘history teacher Arevik Sevoyan’”. This surprised me, since many had declined to be interviewed out of fear of losing their jobs or being criticised. Knowing she would be the only teacher included, I ensured the interview covered a wide range of relevant topics. To include diaspora views, I interviewed my former Armenian history teacher at the St. Grigor Narekatsi Sunday School in Amsterdam, Alisa Movsesyan. She shared the same opinion as Sevoyan and said she did not want to remain anonymous. The full list of interviewees is included in Appendix A.

I also created an anonymous survey for Armenian students in grades 7 and 8 who are learning history using the new textbooks. A survey is a way to collect information from a group of people (Scheuren 2004: 9). It allows researchers to gather clear and organised data that can be compared and studied easily, and it should always serve a clear purpose that fits the goals of the research (Roopa and Rani 2012: 273). In this thesis, the purpose of the survey is to help fill a gap in the research by including the experiences of students in studies about changes to education after conflicts. To protect everyone’s privacy, no personal information was collected, ensuring full anonymity. The survey was shared from student to student, across both cities and villages, so I do not know which student gave which answer. As Scheuren (2004: 13) notes: “the confidentiality of the data supplied by respondents is of prime concern”. The full survey is provided in Appendix D. Distributing the survey was not easy. After speaking with some teachers and parents, I learned that the survey would need to be shared quietly so that school administrators would not find out, as they might punish the history teachers. Thanks to

the students who shared the survey confidentially, a total of 56 students ended up participating. In the end, through five interviews with individuals from various social and political backgrounds, along with a student survey, I gathered a broad range of empirical data. This allowed me to answer the research question of this thesis and address a gap in the existing literature by including perspectives from grassroots society.

While textbook analysis reveals policy-level changes, speeches and social media help expose underlying political motivations. Surveys and semi-structured interviews, in turn, offer insight into how these changes affect teachers and students on a personal level. The analysis ultimately seeks to present a balanced perspective by comparing state narratives with independent and critical voices, ensuring a comprehensive view of the broader discourse.

5.2 Obstacles and insights: research in a sensitive landscape

One challenge in this research was finding fair and reliable information, especially in post-conflict areas where facts may be politically sensitive. This is partly because much of the available literature and many individuals tend to present events through the lens of their own perspectives, values, or political positions. To address this, I carefully double-checked factual information using multiple sources wherever possible to ensure accuracy and balance. Another challenge is the language used in official Armenian documents, speeches, and press conferences. I speak Armenian fluently, but the formal language used in such sources is very different from everyday Armenian. Thankfully, I can rely on my parents, who are happy to help me understand these official texts.

Another problem I encountered early in my research is that many teachers in Armenia are afraid to speak openly about the textbook changes. They are especially hesitant to say anything that might be seen as political. Even full anonymity does not help them feel safe. This was a major challenge because my thesis aims to study how these changes are experienced

at the grassroots level. On the other hand, the fear teachers expressed is itself being used as important data. It shows how people in Armenian society respond to the government and that even in education, there is fear of speaking out. Their silence becomes part of the story. The same was true for sharing the survey. It turned out to be more difficult than I expected. As mentioned earlier, the survey had to be shared quietly, without teachers or school administrators finding out. This atmosphere of fear and secrecy also became an important and meaningful finding for my research.

The biggest personal challenge in this research was that I have strong feelings about the topic. It is not possible to be completely neutral in any research, but this case is about my home country. I have seen and felt the effects of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, so it is difficult not to have an opinion. Also, since this is qualitative research, it often includes interpretation, which can be subjective and lead to bias. Still, these challenges did not prevent me from offering a fair and honest analysis. My background in political science gives me the tools to handle this responsibly. To avoid bias, I checked every piece of information by comparing it with at least two other sources before including it in the thesis. It is also important to remember that even though the Nagorno-Karabakh War has ended, the region still faces ongoing political changes, which might affect parts of this research. By carefully addressing each of these, this thesis aims to give a clear and in-depth view of how the Armenian government's post-war changes to history education affect national identity and suggest a new geopolitical direction.

6. Education in the New Armenia: textbooks as battlegrounds

To answer how the current Armenian leadership's post-war revisions of history education reshape national identity and project a new geopolitical narrative, it is necessary to identify the changes made to the textbooks. Therefore, the analysis is divided into five sections, starting with Armenian identity. This segment is included first because it is the base of national unity in history education, shaping how students see Armenia's right to exist, its independence, and its long history. Comparing how this topic is presented before and after the war reveals important shifts in how the state views itself and communicates its political message. The second section analyses the changes to the historical timeline in the revised textbooks. The shift in how Armenian history is taught reflects a clear change in how the nation's roots are explained. This move reduces older stories of a long unbroken history and shows a new way of building identity, based more on recent events than ancient times. The third section examines the role of religion and the Armenian Genocide in Armenian history education. The Armenian Apostolic Church has always been central to Armenian identity and schools. Its smaller role in the new textbooks reveals a clear move toward a more secular, state-led story, in line with the government's effort to change national identity and move away from old institutions. The Armenian Genocide is a major topic in history classes, strongly linked to national identity and memory. Changes in how it is taught reflects shifts in Armenian foreign policy, since the Genocide is important in global politics. The fourth section focuses on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a long-standing and central topic in Armenian history education. Changes in how it appears now show the government's aim to fit the story to today's politics and peace talks. In analysing these changes, key concepts such as symbolic power, curriculum politics, and critical pedagogy will guide the discussion. The final section covers in-class experiences to assess how the new history textbooks are implemented and whether they effectively promote the intended changes to national identity and Armenia's geopolitical narrative. This analysis will be supported by several interviews and the survey among students I conducted in April 2025.

6.1 Identity in transition: who gets to define 'Armenian'?

"The instruction is clear: target the most vulnerable areas - education and history - the foundations of national identity" (Karapetyan 2025)

Prime Minister Pashinyan stated that "education is the primary tool for implementing the state's development strategy" in point number 7 of his speech called "The Ideology of the Real Armenia" (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2025). This ideology aims to replace homeland with the state, promote civic unity, and make both state and citizens responsible for progress. As part of this ideology, the Ministry of ESCS changed the law 'On the Fundamentals of Cultural Legislation', which included renaming cultural institutions (National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia 2024). Specifically, the word 'national' was replaced with 'state' in their names. Although this change seems small, it has strong symbolic and political meaning for Armenia. The word 'national' usually refers to a wider cultural or ethnic identity, including the diaspora and shared historical experience, while 'state' refers more narrowly to Armenia's current borders and official institutions (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 1). Karapetyan (2025): "the interests of the Armenian state and Armenian nation never contradict each other, it is a very dangerous precedent to put it that way". He explained that the current government is dictated to prevent an Armenian united nation. "The effect on education is part of a general policy of not allowing the Armenian state to become Armenian in its essence" (Karapetyan 2025). Diaspora history teacher Movsesyan (2025) agrees: "their slogan 'homeland is where you live' contradicts everything that Armenian schools, churches, and communities of the Diaspora are engaged in. This is a process of separation of the Diaspora from Armenia". This shift in language reflects what Bourdieu (1989: 21) calls symbolic power: the ability to shape perceptions and values through control over categories and labels. It marks a wider political shift after the war, where the government is trying to strengthen Armenian identity within official, internationally recognised borders. Moreover, these reforms explicitly demonstrate how states attempt to reshape national identity by promoting state-centred narratives (Subotić

2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651), placing state-defined identity above broader cultural or diasporic identities.

This narrowing of identity is especially significant given Armenia's large diaspora, estimated at 11 million compared to 3 million within its borders, whose historical and emotional ties are increasingly excluded from the new state-centric narrative. Melkonyan (2025) explained that "one of the first steps taken by the current government was to dissolve the Ministry of Diaspora, which was quite surprising [given the large Armenian diaspora worldwide]. Naturally, this left a negative impression on the diaspora community, and I honestly do not see how this can lead to a positive outcome". Diaspora Armenian history teacher Movsesyan (2025) was steadfast: "patriotic young people who have grown up in European society, with a broad worldview and a wealth of knowledge, will not be indifferent to the problems facing our nation and homeland". This reality may reflect a broader shift in the current Armenian leadership's approach, aiming to lessen the traditional influence of diaspora perspectives. Wendt's (1999: 235) theory that identity is shaped by shared ideas and social structures helps explain this move. By reframing Armenian identity through legal boundaries and education, the state strengthens its control over which historical narratives are seen as legitimate, aligning national identity with its political interests. Comparable to China tightly managing textbook content to reflect governmental priorities (Xu 2021: 758).

Historian Maloyan (2025) criticised this direction in our interview, saying: "the obsession with rejecting everything national has become a line accompanying the policy of the current Armenian authorities". He added: "these efforts to replace national identity with something more global or universal have been visible for a while" (Maloyan 2025). Maloyan (2025) argued that those who do not value national identity may also struggle to appreciate other cultures and warned that critics of the government may face repression. He also pointed out the renaming of 'Armenian History' to 'History of Armenia' and called it 'barbaric', aligning with Karapetyan (ibid.). "You cannot expect this to go well when there is a growing distance from

love for Armenia and national values. These students live on Armenian soil, they should become carriers, defenders, and promoters of Armenian history, language, religion, and culture", is what Maloyan (2025) argued. History teacher Sevoyan (2025) also expressed worry: “the textbook does not contain any idea that characterises Armenians, that shows the national face of Armenians, it is simply the history of a people, without basic national characteristics”.

Another concern is that the new history textbooks were written by just one person: Smbat Hovhannisyan. His academic training is entirely in World History, and he has never taken a course on Armenian history during his studies (YSUPH n.d.). Former director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Hayk Demoyan, raised criticism: “there was no editorial board (besides the author’s wife), no specialists in different historical periods were involved, which is not so much surprising as it is troubling” (Ohanyan 2024). He warned that one person’s version of history cannot represent a whole nation: “the first 32 pages do not even include images related to Armenian reality” (ibid.). Demoyan underlined that history textbooks are strategic tools and must be written with care (ibid.). "There was no competition organised, [which is usually how the best textbook is selected]. Instead, the Ministry of ESCS simply ordered the textbook from this author [Hovhannisyan], with his wife serving as the editor”, Melkonyan (2025) said. “Previously, when we created textbooks for grades 5 to 10, we hired professionals to write the content, and we carefully edited everything. But the Ministry labeled us as ‘nationalists,’ making us unacceptable to them. As a result, they handed the task of writing the textbooks directly to Smbat Hovhannisyan”, Melkonyan (2025) elaborated. History teacher Sevoyan (2025) shared: “the new textbook does not form a national identity, moreover it very roughly eliminates what already exists”. This echoes Bourdieu’s (1989: 23) insights. By giving one state-approved author full control, the government exercises symbolic power through education. This one-dimensional approach also goes against the ideals of critical pedagogy, which promotes pluralism and critical engagement (Freire 1970: 34). It does not

only shape what students learn but also determines which historical narratives are elevated and which are erased from national memory.

To defend the new textbooks, the state-run channel *Lurer* (2023) aired an interview with Hovhannisyan. The show was hosted by Petros Ghazaryan (husband of Armenia's Minister of ESCS) and Tigran Hakobyan (Head of the Commission on Television and Radio) (ibid.). In the interview, Hovhannisyan said that the new textbooks present multiple perspectives on historical events, which he argued would help students in grades 7 and 8 think critically about history (Lurer 2023). While this may seem like a progressive approach, especially in Western education systems, in the Armenian post-war context it could weaken commonly accepted views on sensitive topics like national trauma and conflict. Maloyan (2025) explained the following: "in order to develop critical thinking, students need a textbook that gives an accurate picture of an event. They should be able to read all perspectives and then form their own opinion based on reliable facts. But if the textbooks are full of factual errors, incomplete information, and fragmented explanations, students cannot build real knowledge". Apple and Christian-Smith's (1991: 3) idea of curriculum politics helps explain this. Textbooks are not neutral, they are tools in ideological struggles over which stories get told (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 3). In this case, offering many 'views' may hide an effort to tone down or shift focus from painful national narratives. Hopf (1998: 191) argued that national identity is shaped at home and influences foreign policy. Changing how young people study history could affect how Armenia sees its future relationships with neighbours.

Pashinyan's (2023) earlier statement at the Ministry of ESCS clearly reflects this goal: "we need to be sure that our textbooks convey those messages. Those messages that are conveyed should be state-centric, they should be about the state, the history of the state, and literature should also be like that". Karapetyan (2025) noted that "there is no clear national ideology or state strategy… For example, Armenia's foreign policy has no strategy. A proper strategy is based on national interests, but we have never defined [what these interests are].

There is a fundamental strategic gap in our political thinking. As a result, our Armenian identity is slowly being lost". The government presents this as a neutral, balanced approach, avoiding nationalism and encouraging universal values. But in practice, it results in students being given confusing or contradictory messages about their country's past.

The group that developed these standards was led by Lilit Mkrtchyan, founder of the Association of Young Historians. She has worked closely with Turkish partners on Armenia-Turkey reconciliation projects (Akpinar et al. 2017). Mkrtchyan explained that the old textbooks treated patriotism as nationalism and painted Azerbaijanis as 'the enemy', something the new textbooks avoided. When criticising Mkrtchyan, Melkonyan (2025) explained: "when I was working as one of the editors, I wrote that 'the enemy surrounded Zeitun' [area of resistance of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire]. I was criticised for using the word 'enemy'. But when someone invades your country, are they not your enemy? They accused us of teaching children that Turks are criminals, saying it was unacceptable, but this is exactly what Turkey teaches [about Armenians in their schools]". Late Professor Movsisyan said Armenian schools were being targeted by Turkish-backed efforts (Manvelyan 2020). "Losing territory or falling under foreign rule was never the end of the Armenian story, as long as we had the spirit to rebuild our state. Today, it is that very spirit that is in danger, because the enemy's true goal is to destroy it", history teacher Sevoyan (2025) emphasised. This is part of a broader shift where emotional or nationalist content is replaced with language that supports peacebuilding or international diplomacy. While this might serve foreign policy goals like normalisation, it raises serious questions about which historical truths are being prioritised, and at what cost. In this way, the curriculum serves as a state symbolic power tool for shaping values and memory, intended to align domestic narratives with regional normalisation goals.

These shifts in language, authorship, and content are not random, but are part of a larger ideological project. They aim to redefine Armenian identity, moving it away from a history of suffering and memory of loss toward a new vision of citizenship, statehood, and diplomacy.

This is not merely an educational shift but a symbolic power strategy to reframe Armenia's image both nationally and internationally, demonstrating the constructivist logic that identity and policy shape each other through institutions like education (Bourdieu 1989: 34). As Melkonyan (2025) noted: "history is a political science, and it plays an important role in shaping a person's worldview, understanding of knowledge, and love for their homeland". The cases of China, Russia, and Ukraine also concluded the same occurrence: textbooks are used to strengthen government power, control public memory, and reinforce national identities (Xu 2021; Korostelina 2010).

6.2 Deconstructing history: fragmentation, gaps, and omissions

"There is not a single page without a mistake" (Maloyan 2025)

This section examines how the government's new ideas on statehood and identity are reflected in the textbooks. It draws on Apple and Christian-Smith's (1991: 3) concept of curriculum politics and Bourdieu's (1989: 21) notion of symbolic power to show how education becomes a tool for shaping collective memory and legitimising new political narratives. From a constructivist perspective (Wendt 1999: 138), state interests and identities are not fixed but socially constructed, often through institutions like schools. It shows how the state uses textbooks to teach history and reshape identity in line with post-war ideology.

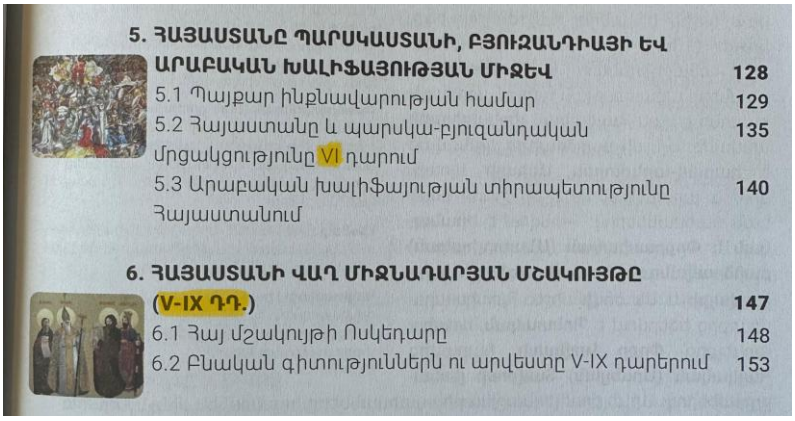
As mentioned earlier, the textbooks on Armenian history were written by a single author, Smbat Hovhannisyan. "He only wrote about ancient and mediaeval Armenian history, even though his area of expertise is modern world history, which does not match the topics he covered. When we pointed this out, the Ministry of ESCS told us it was not our concern and that they would decide whether the textbook would be approved", Melkonyan (2025) told me. This raises questions about appointing someone with no Armenian history background to write

textbooks. It suggests that deep knowledge of Armenian historiography was not the main priority, aligning with Cambodia's textbooks after the Khmer Rouge era (Ngo 2014: 157). Instead, Hovhannisyan's approach reflects the government's post-war emphasis on universal, state-centred narratives rather than ethnic or national ones.

The 7th-grade textbook omits key parts of Armenian history, such as tools from the Stone or Bronze Ages or the weapons used during the Urartian period (Iron Age kingdom in the Armenian Highlands, 860-585 BC), important examples of how ancient Armenians defended their homeland (Ohanyan 2024). This is unfortunate, as 50% of surveyed 7th and 8th graders said ancient Armenia is their favourite period to study. Mikael Badalyan, director of the Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Museum-Reserve and an expert on Urartu, shares many of these concerns. He says the textbook contains several errors about the Urartian period and clearly reflects the view of a single author (Ohanyan 2024). He also said Hovhannisyan refused help from Erebuni Museum staff when writing the Urartu section (ibid.). According to Badalyan, these mistakes could have been avoided if professionals had been involved (ibid.), echoing Melkonyan's (2025) views.

Badalyan explained: "nowhere is it mentioned that the written history of Yerevan begins with Erebuni. However, the author talks at length about the harem of King Menua. Perhaps that topic is interesting to someone, but I am sure it should not be the focus for seventh-graders" (Ohanyan 2024). This reflects a broader issue: shifting focus from key national events to unrelated side topics. "Teachers have told me that not only are textbooks full of mistakes, but also they are not written in chronological order. One page talks about modern times, the next jumps back to ancient Armenia, and then it switches back again. This creates a very fragmented and confusing picture of Armenian history for students", Melkonyan (2025) said. In Figure A, I included an example of the incorrect chronology from page 11 of the 7th-grade textbook, where chapter 5 covers the 6th century, but chapter 6 discusses the 5th to 9th

centuries. This disorganisation disrupts comprehension and prevents students from connecting events (Freire 1970: 72).



A. Example: incorrect chronology, 7th-grade textbook page 11

(photo by Avakyan 2025)

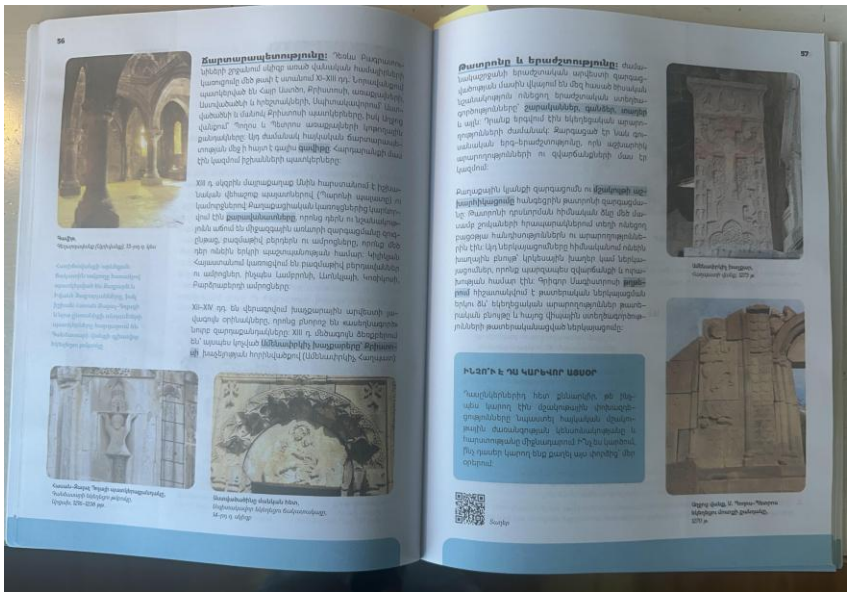
Badalyan also criticised the textbook for including the ‘Balkan hypothesis’, which falsely claims that Armenians are not native to the Armenian Highlands but came from somewhere else (Ohanyan 2024). “This theory was already disproven by genetic research, which confirmed that Armenians are native to this region. So why include it?”, Badalyan asked (ibid.). “It seems that they are trying to convince the younger generation that these lands were never really Armenian” (ibid.). Including a disproven theory may still give it credibility to students. This dynamic illustrates how symbolic authority operates in education, aligning with Bourdieu’s (1989: 21) concept. From a constructivist viewpoint, such narratives actively construct collective identity, challenging older understandings of indigeneity and national belonging. Following Apple and Christian-Smith (1991: 3; 12), the curriculum functions as a site of ideological struggle, rather than a neutral educational tool, which is similar to the Cambodian case where Ngo (2014: 157) found that political goals were prioritised over historical accuracy.

Building on this, my survey results show that students also notice gaps in the textbooks. Several students noted that the textbooks do not include the Battle of Vardanakert enough, where Armenian prince Smbat VI Bagratuni defeated a 5000-strong Arab army in Nakhichevan

and drove them out of the country. This shows that students are genuinely interested in learning about Armenian history. Others said the textbooks do not include enough about the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the 5th century by Mesrop Mashtots, an Armenian linguist and church leader. The Armenian alphabet is a unique writing system, created from scratch (Van Lint 2012: 400). It is something Armenians around the world are taught with pride, yet it is lacking from the revised textbooks. History teacher Sevoyan (2025) added an ideological concern: “for me, these issues are concerning, but what is even more unacceptable is the absence of moments in our history when Armenians resisted foreign rule and built a strong, independent state. With the new textbook, are we now portrayed as just a tribal group that submits to outsiders, does not value independence, and lacks spirit?” This supports the idea that education reflects political agendas (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 10; Freire 1970: 34). In this case, removing traditional and religious symbols and key events are part of a shift toward a more modern, state-focused approach.

Demoyan also criticised the textbook. He said that despite many complaints from experts, the Ministry of ESCS ignored over 100 negative reviews from scholars (Sputnik 2024). According to Melkonyan (2025), the Ministry said “they would leave the textbook as it is, and that students could read it, check the facts online, and decide for themselves what is true or false. Many students do not enjoy studying. So now they are expected to read the textbook, double-check the facts on their own, and somehow figure out what is correct? How can they learn the right information this way?” Maloyan (2025) had the same experience and explained that “during the meeting at the Ministry with professors, historians, teachers, and academics from various institutes and universities, the first thing the Minister said was that the textbooks would not be withdrawn, no matter what was said during the meeting". This shows how the state sidelines expert advice in favour of political goals. In this way, the textbook becomes more than just a learning tool, it becomes part of a wider ideological project.

Demoyan also noted that the 8th grade textbook is only 110 pages long, and if you remove the illustrations, just 70 pages remain, bringing it closer to the layout of a historical magazine rather than an educational textbook. Figure B shows how pages 56 and 57 of the 8th-grade textbook are mostly filled with large images, leaving little space for actual content. Maloyan (2025) also touched upon this matter: “the maps are not used as educational tools. They do not include a map legend. If a map does not show important details like borders, capitals, cities, or neighboring countries, students cannot learn anything from it. It ends up being just decoration or a way to fill space on the page". Figure C shows a poorly printed map with no legend or caption. In response to the open survey question about what students would change in the textbooks if they had the chance, one student said they would prefer to replace the QR codes with actual written information in the book. Figure C also shows the QR code that students refer to. 34 out of 55 answers mentioned the need to improve the clarity of the topics and writing, saying the text is hard to understand. Even students are calling for change. Teacher Sevoyan (2025) confirmed this: “the biggest problem for students is that they struggle to understand the material. This is largely due to poor formatting. Throughout the entire lesson, students constantly ask what certain words or sentences mean. This was not the case with the previous textbooks, or at least it happened much less”.



B. Example: large images taking up most of the space, 8th-grade textbook pages 56-57 (photo by Avakyan 2025)

C. Example: map without legend and use of QR code instead of text, 8th-grade textbook page 66 (photo by Avakyan 2025)

Following public criticism, 46 changes were made to the textbook. Fifteen of them were considered significant, thirteen were smaller changes, thirteen fixed incorrect dates, and five were spelling corrections (Ohanyan 2024). Still, the need for so many edits after publication raises doubts about the quality and honesty of the review process. It also supports the idea that the textbook was not written for academic accuracy, but to promote a specific political message (Ngo 2014: 157; Xu 2021: 758; Korostelina 2010: 130), one that reshapes Armenian history and identity to fit the current government's goals. This pattern reflects a deeper transformation in how the Armenian state defines its historical legitimacy and identity after military defeat and supports theoretical claims that states reshape identity by promoting selective state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651). Education here is not only a reflection of state ideology but a tool of symbolic power, aimed at aligning future generations with a new vision of Armenia's place in the world.

6.3 The Church and Armenian Genocide in new narratives

“The existence of Armenians is in danger, both in the homeland and in the diaspora”

(Movsesyan 2025)

The role of religion and memory has also been narrowed to serve post-war diplomacy. "I consider the textbook to be successful in the sense that it invites children to take a critical approach to historical events, which is sorely lacking in our reality. Children can evaluate events and perceive them in a playful way", Pashinyan stated in a video shared on social media (Avanesov 2024). However, the Armenian Apostolic Church disagreed and called for the textbooks to be removed from the school curriculum, arguing that it contains serious conceptual, methodological, and scientific errors and omissions, aligning with the professors and historians discussed above (ibid.). Bishop Arshak Khachartryan criticised the current leadership: “we see eloquent speakers on high platforms who, under the guise of realism,

preach betrayal of the homeland, denial of historical memory, and self-negation… We see manipulators of language who use the guise of freedom and modernity to promote moral laxity" (News.am 2025).

With the introduction of the new textbooks, the subject 'Armenian Church History' has been removed from the high school curriculum and said to be merged with 'History of Armenia'. "The only thing mentioned about the Armenian Church is the acceptance of Christianity in Armenia. Many periods in Armenian history where Christianity played a central role, the contributions of important religious leaders, and the holidays we still celebrate today are all missing from the textbooks", Maloyan (2025) criticised. In the survey, some students also noted that important events from Armenian Christian history were missing, such as the Vardanants War of 451 AD. In this battle, Armenians, led by national hero Vardan Mamikonian, defeated the Persians and won the right to freely practice Christianity (Hewsen 2016: 32). By removing church history from formal education, the state is redefining what counts as legitimate knowledge on secular, post-war terms. The Armenian Apostolic Church, a traditional source of symbolic authority, is being sidelined in favour of a more state-centric narrative, reflecting Bourdieu's (1989: 23) idea of symbolic power, demonstrating how the state redefines legitimate authority in memory-making.

This shift in how the Church is presented mirrors broader efforts to reinterpret other foundational elements of Armenian identity, such as the Genocide. So far, there have not been major changes in how the Armenian Genocide is presented in the textbooks, even though 84% of respondents in my survey said they feel the textbooks do not teach them enough about it. This is especially sensitive after Pashinyan said genocide recognition is no longer a foreign policy goal (News.am 2025). He stated that the Genocide took place during a time when the Republic of Armenia did not exist and that the Genocide's history needs to be revisited and reinterpreted (Asbarez 2025; Minoyan 2025). Melkonyan (2025) strongly opposed Pashinyan: "this is a delusion, because the issue of the Armenian Genocide is one of the strongest tools

we have to confront our two genocidal neighbours. Turkey is the successor of the Ottoman Empire, which committed the Armenian Genocide, and Azerbaijan is responsible for what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh between 2020 and 2023". Pashinyan's comments attempt to shift identity from grievance toward regional reconciliation at any price. The state may use historical reinterpretation as diplomatic strategy, reflecting Bourdieu's (1989) symbolic power. However, this strategy risks detaching domestic actors and symbolic capital accumulated through decades of memory politics. As former American National Security Advisor John Bolton in 2018 said: "Armenia should not be limited to historical clichés/stereotypes", seemingly instructing the current Armenian leadership (Alpha News 2023).

In response to Pashinyan's remarks, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin reaffirmed its strong position on the Genocide, which it considers a core part of the Church's religious and national identity (Minoyan 2025). The Church noted that as early as 1921, under the leadership of Catholicos Gevorg VI Surenyants, it officially declared April 24 as the day of remembrance for the Genocide victims (ibid.). The Holy See emphasised that the Genocide is not only a crime against Armenians, but a crime against humanity, and that recognition of this crime remains a moral and historical duty, both for Armenia and the world (ibid.).

Pashinyan's statements clash with this position. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) said his remarks insult the memory of the 1.5 million genocide victims and those who fought for recognition (ibid.). The ARF stressed that recognition of the Genocide is essential not only for national interests, but also for international justice (ibid.). They warned that giving up on genocide recognition would not stop Azerbaijan's territorial ambitions, it would instead encourage more hostile actions (ibid.). Similarly, the Armenian National Committee International (ANCI), an organisation that has fought for international recognition of the Armenian Genocide for decades, strongly criticised Pashinyan's comments. "The same arguments put forth by Turkey and Azerbaijan, who continue to deny the undeniable historical fact of the Genocide… [these remarks] are nothing less than an insult to the memory of the

innocent victims and to the hundreds of humanitarians and scholars who have fought for its recognition" (ibid.). Alongside this 'revision' of the Armenian Genocide, Pashinyan claims that "there is no Western Armenia outside the republic's borders" (Gadarigian 2025). Western Armenia traditionally refers to the eastern parts of what is now Turkey, as well as areas in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Chahinian and Bakalian 2016: 39). It is the ancestral homeland of Armenians who built a rich civilisation there over thousands of years (ibid.). Western Armenian, spoken by under two million people, was listed as endangered by UNESCO in 2010 (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 2023). Despite this, Pashinyan insists that Western Armenia does not exist. He ignores the fact that Aliyev refers to seventy percent of Armenia's recognised territory as 'Western Azerbaijan', which is a state-driven narrative meant to erase Armenia's historical presence and legitimise future territorial claims (Oskanian 2025).

This narrative shift may harm Armenia's position as Azerbaijan escalates territorial claims. "The more we give in to their policies, the worse the situation becomes, because the enemy grows bolder in its demands. We see this happening constantly, even today, with the so-called peace treaty, where Azerbaijan's list of demands keeps growing by the day, while our own demands remain unclear", Melkonyan (2025) noted. "At the same time, Armenia is gradually beginning to adapt to the expectations of both Turkey and Azerbaijan", he added (Melkonyan 2025). Karapetyan (2025) is also sceptical of the agreement: "Aliyev's regime will never sign any peace agreement. To sign peace with the enemy, it means to eliminate the basis of their ideology which is Armenophobia… To sign a peace agreement, means to kill that ideology". He argued that: "if there is no 'enemy', they need to create one just to consolidate internal power, the country, mass media, and the whole society. It is the typical dictatorial way of governing" (Karapetyan 2025).

In this light, the rewriting of historical narratives is not only a domestic cultural issue, but a move with consequences for regional power dynamics. The most prominent of these is the demand for the opening of the so-called 'Zangezur corridor' (ibid.). This would connect

Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan by crossing through Armenia's Syunik province (Aguiar 2025). Azerbaijan claims that this route is necessary for improving trade with Turkey and Europe (ibid.). Armenia, as of June 2025, continues to oppose the project due to concerns about sovereignty, national security, and unresolved historical conflict (ibid.). The corridor could also be used by Azerbaijan to apply military or economic pressure on Armenia, considering its past actions (ibid.). Yet Azerbaijani President Aliyev appears unconcerned: "this is not an issue that Armenia can decide unilaterally. We will take practical steps to ensure the establishment of this corridor, with or without Armenia's approval" (ibid.).

These developments raise questions about the future of Armenia's history education. As mentioned, the teaching on the Armenian Genocide has not changed significantly, yet. However, Pashinyan's recent statements show a clear shift in how the Armenian government talks about this issue. If future revisions reflect this shift, it confirms curriculum as a tool of symbolic power. Diaspora history teacher Movsesyan (2025) stated: "how can Armenians and Armenia be recognised in the world? As the biblical Kingdom of Ararat, home to Mount Ararat where Noah's Ark came to rest, the first Christian nation, a people with a unique culture, and the victims of the horrific 1915 Genocide". She continued: "this government is erasing all of that, trying to strip us of our memory and identity, to denationalise us and reduce us to nothing more than consumers and taxpayers" (Movsesyan 2025). As Apple and Christian-Smith (1991: 10) and Freire (1970: 34) argue, curriculum is not neutral, it is a political project. From a critical pedagogy perspective, omitting topics such as the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Genocide discourages students to reflect on the world (Freire 1970: 34). In this case, it becomes a vehicle for the state to renegotiate national identity, manage historical memory, and strategically reshape its foreign policy posture in line with changing alliances. This also affirms constructivist views that national interests are not fixed but socially constructed through institutions like education and shows how states strategically revise historical narratives, promoting state-centred interpretations to reshape identity (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651).

6.4 Territory lost, Nagorno-Karabakh unwritten

"We will never avoid talking about Artsakh, the rights of Artsakh Armenians, and our immortal heroes"

(Movsesyan 2025)

Nagorno-Karabakh, or *Artsakh* in Armenian, has long held a central place in Armenian historical consciousness as both an ancient Armenian region and a modern symbol of resistance and survival during thirty years of existence as the Republic of Artsakh. Its role in the national memory intensified during the First and Second Artsakh Wars, with the region becoming a key site of memory, sacrifice, and sovereignty. A key change in the textbooks is the replacement of 'Artsakh' with the international term 'Nagorno-Karabakh'. According to Demoyan, the removal of 'Artsakh' is intended to frame Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory in the minds of students, aligning educational discourse with post-war diplomatic realities (Ohanesyan 2024). This renaming shows how education aligns memory with diplomacy. By removing the emotionally resonant term 'Artsakh', the curriculum reflects a strategic redefinition of Armenian territorial identity. Through the lens of curriculum politics (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 3), it signals a state effort to depoliticise a contested space and move away from irredentist narratives.

The removal of the name 'Artsakh' from the textbooks matches Pashinyan's 'Real Armenia' ideology. The very first sentence of this policy states: "the Real Armenia is the Republic of Armenia, with an internationally recognised area of 29,743 square kilometers", highlighting that the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh is now officially accepted (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2025). Official recognition of borders signals willingness to normalise, even at the cost of national memory. The first point in this statement also calls for adopting a new Constitution (ibid.). The new Constitution removes references to territorial claims, easing peace negotiations with Azerbaijan (Light and Bagirova 2025). This is targeting the 1991

declaration of independence of Armenia (as referenced in the current Armenian Constitution), which assumed the reunification of Nagorno-Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia.

A particular example of this move towards normalisation appears on page 80 of the 7th-grade history textbook. Hovhannisyan (2023: 80) included a map of Armenia during the reign of King Tigran the Great, from the year 80 BC (Figure D). The map names ‘Azerbaijan’, which did not exist at the time. In his earlier interview with *Lurer* (2023), Hovhannisyan explained that he used modern names to help students understand what those regions are called today. However, this explanation is not written anywhere on the page or in the chapter. The author assumes students will understand this on their own. This may mislead students into believing Azerbaijan has ancient roots, reinforcing its territorial claims. While the author’s intent may be pedagogical, the lack of clarification opens space for politically charged misinterpretations. This shows how maps, seen as neutral, can shape students’ ideas of historical legitimacy. From a constructivist perspective, this reflects how the state constructs new understandings of national identity through visual and textual cues in the curriculum. It is not just what is taught, but how it is framed that influences students’ sense of belonging and geopolitical orientation. This framing alters how students view territory and indirectly supports Azerbaijani claims to Nagorno-Karabakh.

D. Kingdom of Tigran the Great with modern borders and names, 7th-grade page 80 (photo by Avakyan 2025)

In education, this reconciliation is clear, Maloyan (2025) argued: “references to national topics, including the Artsakh Liberation War and its heroes, have been removed”. He added that “the way the history of Artsakh has been modified, downplayed, or completely excluded from the Armenian history curriculum, along with the changes in how it is presented, leads us to believe that this was all planned, deliberate, and done with clear intent” (Maloyan 2025).

Public reactions reveal tensions over post-war identity and national pride. Simon Yesayan, head of the Union of Veterans of Armenia, shared his concerns: “I believe that the textbook should be filled with as much patriotic content as possible, because we are dealing with children's education. Through textbooks, children are instilled with an awareness of love for the homeland and the need to protect it”. He explained: “this is not necessary for veterans or marshals, this is necessary for the younger generation, which today is growing up in ignorance of its history. But they will have to create the future of the Armenian state” (ibid.). Diaspora history teacher Movsesyan (2025) aligns with Yesayan: “preserving identity has a broad meaning: it is self-knowledge, patriotism, and devotion to the nation”. These remarks show

textbooks shape collective identity and legitimacy. The loss of connection to history among young people can reduce the strength and future potential of the entire nation. Removing patriotic content reflects a broader narrative realignment that diminishes nationalist sentiment. Movsesyan (2025) added: “as for the textbooks published in recent years, we cannot use them, because I do not trust the Ministry of ESCS. I reject their approach led by people who view patriotism as a 'fascist concept'”.

This aligns with the 71.4% of students who said they do not learn enough about Nagorno-Karabakh in their history classes. In response to the open-ended question about which topics they would like to learn more about, several students specifically mentioned the history of Nagorno-Karabakh. One student wrote: “the history of Artsakh, which should be very important for us”, while another said: “I think there is very little written about the history of Artsakh in the books, which is very bad”. This implies that historical identity is not easily erased through top-down curriculum changes. Instead, it lives on through shared memory, family narratives, and cultural institutions outside the school system. Student responses reveal grassroots resilience: national identity endures despite state efforts to reshape it. The survey among students in Armenia does show patriotism exists, with 73.2% of 7th and 8th grade respondents saying they definitely feel proud to be Armenian when learning history, 25% saying ‘sometimes’, 1.8% saying ‘rarely’, and no one answering ‘no’. The curriculum reforms reflect a broader ideological shift in post-war Armenia: one that redefines national identity through education, aligns domestic narratives with external diplomacy, and illustrates how identity governance operates through institutional tools like textbooks.

6.5 Beyond the textbook: teachers, students, and quiet resistance

"A history teacher is the one who gives spirit and strength to the new generation"

(Sevoyan 2025)

Interviews and the student surveys revealed quiet, bottom-up resistance. This chapter addresses a gap in past research by including teacher and student voices. Collecting interviews and surveys was difficult, and I feared I would not be able to fill this gap. Many history teachers in Armenia were afraid to speak out (even anonymously) because they worried about losing their jobs. This fear itself was important information for my research. After many attempts, I finally found history teacher Arevik Sevoyan, who openly and willingly shared her opinion. Her input helped me understand the everyday challenges teachers face.

My first important finding came from a conversation with a 7th grade student who helped distribute my survey. Initially, the student and the student's parents told me it would not be possible to inform the teacher about the survey. They said the school could face repercussions if administrators found out. During our conversation, I asked the student about thoughts on the new history textbooks. The student described experiences from class: they do not just use the new textbooks, but also receive extra chapters from older textbooks. The teacher prints or shares PDF versions of these old materials. Melkonyan (2025) mentioned: "I believe that over half of history teachers use additional materials in class alongside the new textbooks". Surprisingly, in my survey, 60.7% of students said their history teacher did not use additional materials. This may reflect school differences or student reluctance to admit unofficial materials. Those who answered 'yes', mentioned videos, documentaries, and old textbooks. Sevoyan (2025) also said that she and all her colleagues use older textbooks and printed materials to help students learn better. She added: "the tragedy is that there is a history textbook, but it is a textbook that destroys and degrades the spirit of the Armenian people" (Sevoyan 2025).

When I asked Maloyan (2025) what he thought about teachers secretly using old textbooks and being afraid to share their opinions, he said: “teachers try to stay as far away from politics as possible. But we should not forget that this has social consequences. Students notice when teachers do not believe what they teach. Teachers cannot teach like that. It affects them on a personal level”. Melkonyan (2025) was pleased to hear teachers were resisting, saying: “they are patriots who do not want to adapt to this shameful situation. I only welcome that”. Diaspora history teacher Movsesyan (2025) also mentioned she is using older textbooks. She explained the unique situation in diaspora schools: “textbooks made for the diaspora to teach Armenian history do not match the language skills of students in one-day schools. Because of this, local schools create their own programmes, usually based on textbooks from Armenia” (Movsesyan 2025).

All this information helped me understand how the Armenian government’s recent changes to history education after the war are meant to reshape national identity and present a new political narrative. But the secret use of older textbooks, extra materials, and teachers' individual approaches strongly influence how students actually learn and understand history. Global examples of textbook reforms did not include teacher or student voices, so they missed hidden classroom resistance. State narratives may fail if teachers do not follow them in practice. These everyday acts of grassroot defiance reveal deeper theoretical issues around control and legitimacy in education and highlights how education remains a contested space, even when the state tries to control historical narratives through official textbooks. According to curriculum politics, the choice by teachers to secretly use older materials directly challenges state efforts to control ideas (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991: 12). This resistance reveals tension between state policy and classroom practice and how struggles over legitimacy in education reflect deeper social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1989: 20).

The hidden use of alternative teaching materials by teachers can also be viewed through the lens of critical pedagogy (Freire 1970: 34). Teachers shape learning by pushing back against official narratives. While the state promotes a new identity, grassroots resistance complicates the strategy. When teachers follow state-centred messages that are less nationalistic, resistance can emerge from the students themselves, as seen in the village school of Merdzavan (Harutyunyan 2025). Following Wendt's (1992; 1999) constructivist approach, national identity is negotiated and challenged at all levels, especially in classrooms. This means that even though Armenia's current leaders may attempt to reshape national identity in history textbooks and project a new geopolitical narrative, the success of this effort greatly depends on acceptance by the grassroot society. Teacher and student resistance shows that such acceptance is not guaranteed.

7. Conclusions

This thesis explored the research question *"How does the Armenian leadership's post-war revision of history textbooks reshape national identity and project a new geopolitical narrative?"* by using QCA, interviews, and a survey. Following the recent Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020-2023, the Armenian leadership introduced educational reforms reflecting broader political and ideological changes. These findings reinforce theoretical arguments that states strategically reshape national identities by promoting state-centred narratives (Subotić 2013: 306; Hayward 2009: 651). Armenia's revised history textbooks confirm that the current leadership considers education as a crucial instrument of ideological control, selectively promoting or omitting historical narratives to align with new political realities. These changes aim to redefine what it means to be Armenian, highlighting how education becomes a powerful tool for nation-building after war. Armenian identity has traditionally relied on themes of ancient roots, the Armenian Genocide, religious traditions, and a strong bond with the diaspora. However, the new approach moves away from these themes. Instead, it focuses on a state-

centric identity aligned with Armenia's current recognised borders. This reflects global patterns where education is used to reimagine identity after conflict, as seen in Rwanda (Buckley-Zistel 2009: 46) and Cambodia (Ngo 2014: 156).

Like in China, Russia and Ukraine, where school curricula are shaped to promote unity and regime legitimacy (Korostelina 2010: 131; Xu 2021: 755), Armenian textbook revisions align education with political strategy. Steps such as confirming territorial belonging of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, removing the use of its historical Armenian name *Artsakh*, and lowering the importance of international genocide recognition, signal the shift of the current Armenian leadership to apparent regional peace and normalisation at any price. To promote this desire, a consensus within society is needed. Downplaying the traditional role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in social life and leveraging symbolic power by reforming history education, helps accomplish this aim. The state seeks to control collective memory to support its political agenda.

This Armenian context fits into broader international strategies where education reforms after political shifts aim to reshape political narratives. Cambodia (Ngo 2014: 156), Rwanda (Buckley-Zistel 2009: 46), and China (Xu 2021: 758) also show that curriculum is often shaped for political purposes. The contested narratives in Russia and Ukraine (Korostelina 2010: 130) show how textbooks can become tools in broader ideological struggles. Armenia's reforms reflect these trends, showing that education is not just about learning facts but is also a political space where identity is shaped. The constructivist perspective helps explain this process: state-centred narratives shape policy, policy shapes education, and education shapes identity in return. Despite this strategy, the reforms have met grassroots resistance and criticism from the expert community. Interviews and the survey show that many Armenian teachers quietly reject the new textbooks and still use older materials. This reveals a clear tension between state policies and the beliefs of educators. Freire's (1970: 34) concept of critical pedagogy explains how teachers may act as silent resisters, using the classroom to promote reflection

rather than just repeating state ideas. Student survey responses show pride in Armenian history and spiritual heritage, emphasising that identity and collective memory are resilient and enduring and not easily altered through educational policy shifts.

In sum, this thesis adds to the literature on post-conflict education by showing a case where government reforms were met with bottom-up resistance. It supports the view that identity is socially built, but also shows that resistance can happen even within state schools. In refusing to treat students as passive learners, teachers and students in Armenia show how critical thinking can still grow even when the system control is tightening. While the state may attempt to control the narrative, identity remains rooted in people, who they are, what they remember, and what they pass on.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A: List of interviews

None of the people I interviewed wanted to remain anonymous, so I openly include their names, occupations, and relevant details about the interviews:

	Name interviewee	*Occupation*	*Date of interview*	*Format*
1	Ashot Melkonyan	Academician, Doctor of Science (History), Professor, Director of the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia	April 14, 2025	Online
2	Ruben Karapetyan	Doctor of Science (History), Professor, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, former advisor to the President and Foreign Minister	April 16, 2025	Online
3	Arman Maloyan	Historian, former director of National Centre for Education Development and Innovations Foundation (NCDI)	April 18, 2025	Online
4	Arevik Sevoyan	Armenian history teacher, Yerevan	April 18, 2025	Online
5	Alisa Movsesyan	Armenian history and language teacher, Amsterdam	April 18, 2025	Online

Appendix B: Themes in the interviews

Since all the interviews I conducted were qualitative and semi-structured, I asked each interviewee different questions based on their area of expertise. However, I used the same main themes to guide the questions in every interview:

Theme	*Explanation*
Previous statements	This was relevant only for the first and third interviews, as questions served to explain or expand on previous statements made by the interviewees in earlier interviews or press conferences.
Content and quality of textbooks	In this part of the research, I focused on questioning expert opinions about the content of the revised textbooks. Since I interviewed experts who had spoken out in the media about the textbook changes and were critical of the broader political situation in Armenia, I knew I could ask them specific questions about the textbook content. The teacher who uses these textbooks in her classroom also shared her views and answered several questions based on her experience with the material.
National identity implication	I asked all interviewees for their opinion on how the new textbooks affect the national identity of the children learning from them. For the teachers, this question was based more on their day-to-day classroom experience, while for the historians, it was approached from a more academic and analytical perspective.
International dimensions	Questions about the international dimension were mainly important in the second interview, as that interviewee's expertise

	is in that area. Questions were related to changes in history education affecting Armenia's foreign relations.
Educational policies	This theme was relevant again in the first and third interviews, as both interviewees have been outspoken about the educational changes and policies, and this area falls within their expertise. I asked them questions about what specifically had changed, what the implications of these changes might be, and what their personal and professional opinions were on the matter.
Societal fear	This theme became very important once I realised how difficult it was to arrange interviews because of the fear among teachers. Fear came up repeatedly in all interviews, as it is a major part of my research. I asked the interviewees about specific experiences, observations, and their opinions on this issue.
In class	This theme was especially important during the fourth interview, where I spoke with an Armenian history teacher who shared her experiences, observations, and opinions from inside the classroom. Her insights helped me address a gap I had identified in the existing literature.
Future	I ended each interview by asking the interviewees to reflect on the future: how they see developments unfolding, how future textbooks might change, and how national identity could be affected by the current textbook revisions.

Appendix C: Codes for QCA

I analysed a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including old and newly revised Armenian history textbooks, curriculum documents, educational policies, historical records, official state materials, press conferences, speeches, news articles, social media posts, and academic research. The table includes the themes, codes, and keywords used in my QCA.

Code theme	*Keywords*
Identity	(National) identity, Armenianhood, patriotism, (collective) memory, values, homeland, denationalisation, state-centric, pride, symbolism, ethnic, state, nation, tradition
Historical timeline	Continuity, chronology, historical periods, ancient Armenia, middle ages, modern history, Urartu, medieval, timeline, fragmentation, gaps, falsification, historical events, reframing, omissions
Religion + Armenian Genocide	Armenian Apostolic Church, Christianity, 301 AD, Mesrop Mashtots, religious heritage, holidays, denationalisation, secularisation, spiritualism, Etchmiadzin, Armenian Genocide, 1915, Ottoman Empire, Turkey, remembrance, denial, recognition, diaspora, trauma
Nagorno-Karabakh	Artsakh, territorial loss, Second Nagorno-

	Karabakh War, 2020-2023, displacement, ethnic cleansing, post-war, war, conflict, Turkey, Azerbaijan, removal, state-centric, borders, geopolitics, regional
In class	Classroom experience, teacher, observation, old textbook, new textbook, revised textbook, fear, secret, resistance, confusion, additional material, implications, silent resistance

Appendix D: Student survey

A survey with 14 questions was shared among 7th and 8th grade students in Armenia, both in the capital, Yerevan, and in local provinces and villages. To protect everyone's privacy, no personal data was collected, ensuring complete anonymity. The survey was passed from student to student, from cities and villages, so I do not know which student gave which answer. Below are the questions included in the survey:

1. What grade are you in?
    a. 7th
    b. 8th
2. What type of school do you attend?
    a. Public school
    b. Private school
    c. Other:...
3. Do you like learning Armenian history at school?
    a. Yes, very much
    b. Yes, a little bit
    c. Not really
    d. No, not at all
4. What part of Armenian history do you like learning about the most? (You can choose more than one)
    a. Ancient Armenia
    b. Medieval Armenia
    c. Armenian Genocide
    d. Soviet Armenia
    e. Nagorno-Karabakh
    f. Armenia today
    g. Other:...

5. Do you find the history textbook easy to read and understand?
    a. Yes
    b. Medium
    c. No
6. Are there topics you feel are missing or not covered enough in your history textbook?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I’m not sure
7. If you answered 'yes' in the previous question, please give an example:
8. When you learn Armenian history at school, does it make you feel proud to be Armenian?
    a. Yes, definitely
    b. Sometimes
    c. Rarely
    d. No, never
    e. I don’t know
9. Does your history teacher sometimes use materials other than the official textbook (like old textbooks, printed materials, videos, etc.)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
10. If you answered 'yes' in the previous question, please give examples of other materials:
11. Do you think your history textbook teaches you enough about Nagorno-Karabakh (*Artsakh*)?
    a. Yes, enough
    b. A little bit, but not enough
    c. No, it is not enough
12. Do you think your history textbook teaches you enough about the Armenian Genocide?
    a. Yes, enough

b. A little bit, but not enough

c. No, it is not enough

13. If you could change something in your history textbook, what would it be?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share or say about your experience learning Armenian history?