

Ethnic Conflict in Nagorny Karabakh - A Historical Perspective

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Note from the Special Editor

The essays that are collected in this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest draw on papers that were originally presented at the conference “Conflicting Narratives: History and Politics in the Caucasus”. The conference was held at the University of Zurich from December 9–11, 2015 and was organized by the Office of Eastern European History at the University of Zurich’s Department of History. The goal of the conference was to investigate the role that historical narratives have played and continue to play in the conflict-prone developments in the post-Soviet Caucasus region.

Among all of the current ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus, the conflict regarding the mountainous part of Karabakh (Nagornyi Karabakh) is probably the most complex, dangerous and difficult to solve. The Karabakh conflict is not merely a dispute over a piece of land, but it is a conflict that touches on the very core of Armenian and Azerbaijani national self-identification. Both sides lay claim to this territory and provide their own often mutually exclusive interpretations of the past to justify their historical rights. To better understand the nature of this conflict, it is essential to analyze each party’s specific views and ideas concerning the past. The essays in this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest conduct precisely this analysis. Their focus is on the history and politics behind the Karabakh conflict.

As with all issues of the Caucasus Analytical Digest, the views expressed in these essays are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.

Jeronim Perović

Ethnic Conflict in Nagornyi Karabakh—A Historical Perspective

By Arsène Saparov, Sharjah

Abstract

This article provides a historical perspective on the violent conflict in Nagornyi Karabakh. It focuses on three distinctive periods that are important for our understanding of the complexity of the current conflict. The first period considers political and economic relations in Karabakh during the 18th and 19th centuries, when they were evolving in the context of the social change brought about by Russian colonial rule. The way these evolving socio-economic relations shaped the identities of the local populations explains why their relatively peaceful co-existence turned into violent conflict between two communities toward the end of the 19th century. The period of the Russian Civil War is critically important for understanding the political organization of the Caucasus under Soviet rule. It was at this time that the foundations of the future conflict were laid. The Soviet period provides the context for understanding the development of the identities that became instrumental for the outbreak of conflict in the late 1980s.

Introduction

The outbreak of violence along the Armenian–Azerbaijani frontlines in early April 2016, which claimed the lives of scores of servicemen and civilians, once again brought this remote region into the spotlight of international politics. Rather than focusing on the current situation, I will take a historical approach to addressing two aspects of this conflict. I will try to answer some puzzling questions surrounding the origins of this conflict, namely: why was an area with a predomi-

nantly Armenian population allocated to Azerbaijan by Soviet authorities in 1921? What was the role of Iosif Stalin, who was ominously present when the decision was made? Was this a divide and rule policy that allowed Moscow to control both Armenia and Azerbaijan, or did economic considerations play a crucial role in the final decision? Dispelling conspiracy theories is important because the focus can then be shifted to the long-term factors that remain otherwise overlooked. This is another aspect of the conflict that I want to address in

this paper—the long-term factors that shaped the identities and mutual perceptions of the belligerents and can thus explain some of the immense difficulties involved in resolving the conflict.

Russian Imperial Rule 1805–1917

Prior to the incorporation of the South Caucasus into the Russian Empire in the early 19th century, the region remained, for millennia, a peripheral part of various empires. As with all pre-modern empires there was little centralization, and local cultural and political peculiarities persisted. In the middle of the 18th century with the disintegration of central rule in Iran, its Caucasian borderland provinces became de-facto independent. In the early decades of the 19th century they became sources of discord between the expanding Russian Empire and newly established Qajar dynasty in Iran. This general political background must be complemented by a brief discussion of the prevailing economic relationship in the region.

The geophysical and economic makeup of the Karabakh Khanate in the 18th and 19th centuries is important for understanding the mutual perceptions of the people inhabiting this area as well as the deeper causes of the modern conflict. The confluence of the Araxes and Kura rivers is a steppe that had been dominated by nomadic people since the time of the Mongol invasions. This steppe turns into hills and eventually into the mountains of the Lesser Caucasus Range to the West. This particular geophysical composition invites two important observations. Access to the mountains of the Lesser Caucasus is much easier from the steppes to the East, via gentle slopes, than across the rugged mountains to the West. The ease of access to the mountains from the plains determined specific economic relations in Karabakh. The Turkic nomads of the plains used to migrate into the alpine meadows in the mountains during the scorching summer months. The population of the mountains was composed of sedentary agricultural settlements inhabited by Armenians.¹ The relationship between sedentary and nomadic people was characterized by both conflict and cooperation. Both societies benefitted from exchanging the products of their economic activities, but at the same time the movement of thousands of herds across the agricultural belt during seasonal nomadic migrations led to the destruction of crops and contributed to tensions. Nevertheless, the

two societies found ways to co-exist side by side for several centuries.

It was against this geo-economic backdrop that the political organization of this area evolved. Until the middle of the 18th century the mountains were under the political control of the Armenian lords known as *meliks* (princes) who maintained allegiance to the Shah of Iran while the plains were controlled by nomadic tribes. This situation changed in the middle of the 18th century when the leader of the local Turkic tribe established himself in the mountainous fortress of Shusha and founded the Khanate of Karabakh, which united mountains and lowlands in one political unit. The Armenian *meliks* had to recognize his authority and their importance sharply declined thereafter. The Karabakh Khanate thrived, benefiting from the eclipse of the central authority in Iran until the late 18th century when the Qajar dynasty began consolidating its position in Iran. With the military advance of the Russian Empire in the early 19th century, the Karabakh Khanate quickly came under Russian control.

The establishment of Russian rule over the entire South Caucasus region, which was accomplished in the first third of the 19th century, dramatically altered the political organization of the space. Within a few decades, local autonomy all but disappeared and was replaced by direct imperial administration imposed from the center. Despite some initial setbacks, the Russian Empire succeeded in undermining the traditional political and social structures of the local societies by the middle of the 19th century.

The incorporation of the South Caucasus into the Russian Empire brought about a prolonged period of peace, political stability and economic integration of the various parts of the region. Toward the end of the century the region experienced rapid industrial development connected with oil production in the Baku region. Meanwhile, in Karabakh the combined impact of prolonged political stability and development of capitalist relations produced a peculiar development. The local economy experienced unprecedented growth. The statistical information from this period is sketchy but it is clear that the livestock of the nomads doubled between the 1840s and 1850s.² A similar process must have occurred in agriculture. While the increased number of nomadic herds crossing from the plains to the alpine meadows put additional pressure on the sedentary population, the increased agricultural production resulted in a reduction in the amount of pastureland reclaimed for

1 Anatolii Iamkov, “Traditsionnoe zemlepol'zovanie kochevnikov istoricheskogo Karabakha i sovremennyyi armiano-azerbaidzhanskii etnoterritorial'nyi konflikt”, in: Marta Brill Olcott [Martha Brill Olcott] and Aleksei Malashenko, eds., *Faktor Etno-konfessional'noi samobytnosti v postsovetskom obschestve* (Moscow: Moskovskii Tsentr Kornegi, 1998, 168–97.

2 Delira Ismail-zade, “Iz istorii kochevogo khoziaistva Azerbaidzhana pervoi poloviny XIX veka”, *Istoricheskie Zapiski* 66 (1960): 113.

agricultural purposes. These economic trends contributed to rising tensions between the two groups in the last decades of the 19th century. They became interweaved with the emerging nationalist movements, eventually spilling out into violent ethnic clashes between Armenians and the Turkic-speaking population (who would come to be generally known as “Azerbaijanis”) during the revolutionary upheavals of 1905.³

Civil War 1918–1921

The collapse of the Russian Empire in October 1917 set the region of Transcaucasia adrift. Insulated from the unfolding Russian Civil War by the Caucasus mountains, the region nevertheless experienced an immensely complicated three years of conflict and independent statehood. It is this period that is crucial for understanding the reasons behind the Soviet leaders’ decision in 1921 to join Karabakh with Azerbaijan.

When the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917, the local elites in the Caucasus did not immediately realize the importance of the event. At this historical juncture, the Russian Imperial Army still manned the Caucasian front (which, during the First World War, ran deep inside Ottoman territory) to keep the Ottoman Army at bay. The Bolshevik coup seemed to be just that—a coup. The initial expectation that a new democratic government would soon be elected by the Constituent Assembly never materialized. The Bolsheviks stayed in power, they dispersed the Constituent Assembly, and the Russian Imperial Army melted away, giving the Ottomans room for an offensive that aimed to recover their lost territories and to penetrate deep into the Caucasus with their forces.

Under these deteriorating circumstances, in April 1918 the local elites proclaimed the creation of an independent Transcaucasian Federation in a futile attempt to negotiate a peace with the Ottoman Empire. Under pressure from the Ottoman Army and mounting diplomatic demands, the Transcaucasian Federation was soon dissolved by its members in May 1918, and in its place, the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia each proclaimed their independence. One common element in their declarations of independence was the absence of any indication of the precise borders between these new states. This, in the long run, turned out to be the major source of conflict in the region.

The three new states almost immediately plunged into territorial disputes. One area where the territorial claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan overlapped was in the mountainous regions of the Elisavetpol and Yerevan provinces—the regions of Karabakh, Zangezur and

Nakhchivan. The population there was mixed—Armenians lived side by side with Turkic-speaking and Kurdish populations. The entire period of independence was characterized by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over these three areas. The outcome of the nearly three-year conflict left Azerbaijan in control over the Armenian-populated mountainous parts of Karabakh. In turn, Armenian irregular forces controlled Zangezur, while Nakhchivan was a contested zone of conflict between Armenian forces, the local Turkic population and the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk).

Meanwhile, by early 1920 the Bolsheviks and their Red Army broke the resistance of their most potent opponent in the Civil War—the Volunteer Army—and approached the borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The conquest of the South Caucasus was just a matter of time. The Bolshevik takeover of Azerbaijan in April 1920 occurred immediately after the Azerbaijani Army successfully crushed the Armenian rebellion in Karabakh and reaffirmed its control over that disputed territory. The arrival of the Bolsheviks in Azerbaijan dramatically changed the regional balance of powers. The Bolsheviks found that, apart from industrial Baku, they had almost no popular support in the rural areas. Although victorious in the Civil War, their forces were overstretched and insufficient to secure the entire territory of the South Caucasus. In this situation they had to win the hearts and minds of the local elites to ensure the support of the population. Less than a year after conquering Azerbaijan, the Red Army crushed the last remaining independent states in the region—the Bolsheviks established control over Armenia in December 1920 and Georgia was invaded by the Red Army in February 1921. Thus, by February 1921 the entire South Caucasus region was in the grasp of the Bolsheviks. There was only one exception: the mountainous area of Zangezur, situated between Karabakh and Armenia, still remained outside Bolshevik control. There the Armenian nationalists proclaimed an independent republic and continued to successfully defy the Bolsheviks and the forces of the Red Army.

With nearly the entire region under Bolshevik control, the territorial conflicts between the Caucasian states needed to be resolved. A conference on border delimitation was held in Tiflis in an attempt to solve territorial problems between three states. This attempt failed spectacularly as the disagreements proved unbridgeable. Thereafter, the question of borders was solved on a case-by-case basis. The fate of Karabakh was decided during one of the ad hoc conferences held by the *Kavburo* (the “Caucasian Bureau” of the Russian Communist Party)—the executive body appointed by Moscow to steer local

3 On the events of 1905, see the article by Shalala Mammadova in this issue.

affairs in the Caucasus. On July 4 and 5, 1921, the *Kavburo* adopted one of its most puzzling decisions. Late at night on July 4, the *Kavburo* members voted in favor of a resolution to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh (i.e., Nagorny Karabakh) to Armenia. The next morning, on July 5, following protests by the leader of the new Azerbaijani Soviet Republic, Nariman Narimanov, the same members voted again and reversed their previous decision. The ominous presence of Iosif Stalin during these two sessions of the *Kavburo* fueled speculation that he must have played an important role in the reversal of the previous decision regarding Karabakh.

Unfortunately, the transcripts of the two *Kavburo* meetings where the decision on Karabakh was made are not available. We do not know whether a written protocol of the meeting exists or whether Stalin indeed intervened during these sessions in favor of Azerbaijan. Additionally, we do not know what arguments the Azerbaijani leader Nariman Narimanov used to convince members of the *Kavburo* to change their decision. The only available evidence is circumstantial. By analyzing and contextualizing the previous Bolshevik decisions on Karabakh, certain logics can be deduced.

The first announcement regarding the question of Karabakh was made by Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Sergei Kirov on May 1, 1920, shortly after the takeover of Azerbaijan by the Bolsheviks.⁴ It confirmed the Azerbaijani claim to this and other territories that were the foci of disputes with Armenia and was intended to boost popular support for the new regime by embracing the territorial claims of Azerbaijan. The second announcement came in December 1920 in the context of the start of the Sovietization of Armenia. To gain popular support in Armenia, the Bolshevik leadership forced Nariman Narimanov to renounce the Azerbaijani claim to this disputed territory by granting it to Soviet Armenia.⁵ Yet, the newly established Soviet Armenian government never managed to benefit from that announcement or to establish its representative in Karabakh. The reason for was that, first, there was no territorial connection between Soviet Armenia and Karabakh, as the anti-Soviet nationalist Armenian forces were at that time still in control of a rugged and mountainous region of Zangezur that lay between Soviet Armenia and Karabakh. Second, the new government faced a set of tremendous socio-economic problems that within a few months of the Bolshevik takeover led to a mass uprising against Soviet rule in Armenia and thus prevented

the Soviet Armenian government from actually implementing its claim regarding Karabakh.

After the Red Army invaded Georgia in February 1921, the troublesome region of Zangezur remained the last pocket of anti-Soviet resistance within the South Caucasus region. Having previously suffered military setbacks in this region, the Bolshevik leadership preferred to avoid a full-scale military attack on Zangezur. Instead, they used political incentives to soften the resolve of the rebels by playing the Karabakh card once again. On June 3, 1921, the *Kavburo* authorized the Soviet Armenian government to make an official public announcement proclaiming that Karabakh was to be part of Soviet Armenia.⁶ Following this *Kavburo* decision, the Armenian government attempted to install its representative in Karabakh. Concurrently with this announcement, the Red Army started military operations against the rebel stronghold in Zangezur. The Red Army offensive was successful and the conquest of Zangezur was nearly complete by the beginning of July 1921.

In my opinion, the puzzling decision of the *Kavburo* to reverse its decision on Karabakh was directly connected to the situation in Zangezur. The Bolshevik leadership was prepared to grant the disputed territory to Armenia to facilitate the establishment of the Soviet authority there and later to undermine the rebels in Zangezur. With the rebels in Zangezur defeated and Karabakh still under the authority of Azerbaijan, the reason to grant Karabakh to Armenia disappeared and it was decided to leave things unchanged.

These cases demonstrate that Soviet decision-making was an ad hoc reaction to immediate challenges—sometimes the policy would make a complete U turn within a matter of few months. The cases of two other autonomous units—South Ossetia and Abkhazia (which I have studied in my book on the creation of autonomies in the Caucasus⁷) confirm this observation. This means that there was no long-term “sinister” plan to implement a divide-and-rule policy. The Soviet leaders in the Caucasus became entangled in a web of short-term and often contradictory decisions that eventually prevented them from implementing any coherent universal policy. Yet, a certain logic can be found in the way the Bolsheviks attempted to solve these conflicts. Unable to implement a coherent policy to solve ethnic conflicts, they opted for a policy that would satisfy both

4 Dzhamil Guliev, ed., *K istorii obrazovaniia Nagorno-Karabakhskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti Azerbaïdzhanskoi SSR 1918–1925. Dokumenty i materialy* (Baku: Azgosizdat, 1989), 41.

5 Segvard Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie Zakavkazskoi federatsii (1921–1923)* (Yerevan: Aiastan, 1969), 99.

6 Yurii Barsegov, ed., *Genotsid Armian. Otvetstvennost' Turtsii i obiazatel'stva mirovogo soobshchestva. Dokumenty i komentarii*, vol. 2, part 1 (Moscow: Gardariki, 2003), 504.

7 Arsene Saparov, *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus. The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh* (London: Routledge, 2015).

sides. The party that controlled the disputed territory would retain control, but as compensation the minority group would be granted political autonomy. This was the pattern used to solve violent ethnic conflicts in Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This solution worked as long as there was central authority in Moscow that could maintain the status quo.

Karabakh under Soviet Rule 1921–1991

Following the formal proclamation of Karabakh autonomy in 1923, its borders and legal status were only clarified by the mid-1920s. The Azerbaijani leadership was understandably reluctant to grant political autonomy to the restless minority group with a recent history of violent conflict and tried to delay the implementation of the decision on autonomy. There is very little evidence of the developments within Karabakh during 1930s and 1940s. The occasional glimpses of information indicate that inter-ethnic tensions persisted well into the 1930s. Thus, in the midst of the Soviet states' collectivization in 1933, a massive brawl broke out between the Armenian and Turkic peasants on the border of the Karabakh and Agdam regions over land distribution.⁸

The Karabakh issue briefly re-emerged at the end of the Second World War in the context of attempted Soviet expansion into Turkey and Iran. The USSR made territorial claims on behalf of the Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan appeared to benefit most from this proposed expansion. As Soviet troops had been stationed in Northern Iran since the Second World War, the population of those provinces was made up of Turkic speaking people ethnically close to the population in Soviet Azerbaijan. In this context of the eminent territorial aggrandizement of Azerbaijan, the leadership of Soviet Armenia attempted to annex Karabakh. In November 1945 the Armenian leader wrote a letter to Joseph Stalin asking for the attachment of Karabakh to Armenia, apparently hoping that the expected territorial expansion of Azerbaijan would make it possible.⁹ These Armenian efforts did not come to fruition, due to the resolute opposition of the Azerbaijani leadership. Thereafter, the issue was abandoned by the Armenian leadership.

This territorial question once again re-appeared during the liberalization of the political climate under Nikita Khrushchev in the 1960s. It occurred in the context of popular mobilization in Soviet Armenia in the wake of commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire. Such commem-

orations were not previously allowed in the Soviet Union, but in 1965 the Soviet leadership conceded to holding limited official tributes in Armenia. Moscow's blessing and the strikingly inadequate scale of the planned ceremonies triggered a grassroots movement and popular mobilization resulting in unauthorized mass demonstrations in the Armenian capital. At this point an important convergence of the two issues occurred in the Armenian national identity: the questions of genocide recognition and justice became intricately linked with the question of Karabakh. In the minds of the Armenian public, the return of Karabakh would be a restoration of justice.

It was against this background that another Armenian attempt to annex Karabakh took place: in 1966, several letters signed by several thousand people were sent to Moscow demanding the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia.¹⁰ These letters were the result of the popular movement that emerged in the wake of the 1965 demonstrations in the Armenian capital. These grassroots appeals, with thousands of signatures, clearly pointed to the persistence of the problem. Moscow responded by requesting the opinions of the leadership of both republics regarding the issue of Karabakh. The Armenian leadership used this opportunity to try to persuade Moscow once again to allow the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia.¹¹ As with all such previous attempts, this met with understandable resistance from the Azerbaijani leadership and the issue was eventually abandoned.

Following the 1966 events, Armenian and Azerbaijani intellectual and political elites were acutely aware of the importance of this emotionally charged issue. A number of subtle policies were developed and implemented by both sides. The Armenian side continued to emphasize Karabakh as a part of the historical Armenian homeland. The Armenian intellectuals developed a discourse that firmly included Karabakh within the imagined Armenian homeland, and the issue of re-unification was presented in the context of the Armenian genocide. In addition, a program was developed that allocated a number of places each year in the Armenian universities for youth from Karabakh, thus reinforcing the cultural ties between Karabakh Armenians and Armenia. The Azerbaijani authorities, having experienced several Armenian attempts to annex Karabakh, sought to implement a policy to counter these threats. On a symbolic level, the Azerbaijani response mirrored the Armenian efforts in the sphere of ancient history. Academic works produced in Azerbaijan focused on the periods when the Turkic presence was most obvious and

8 *Zaria Vostoka*, 3 October 1933.

9 ANA (Armenian National Archive), Fund (fond) 1, List (opis') 25, File (delo) 49.

10 ANA, Fund 1, List 46, File 65b; File 67, pp. 118–19.

11 ANA, Fund 1, List 46, File 65a, pp. 1–9.

coincided with political control over the region; such a focus tended to completely ignore the Armenian presence in Karabakh. The outcome of such selective uses of history was that both sides perceived the region as exclusively “theirs” and the claims of the other side became delegitimized.¹²

Another sphere in which the Azerbaijani government implemented policy designed to counter the Armenian irredentist threat was that of demography and politics. In terms of politics, a number of changes in the legislature detailing the rights of the autonomous unit were introduced in the early 1980s. The focus of these changes was to obscure the ethnic nature of Karabakh autonomy by removing any reference to ethnicity from the law on Karabakh autonomy.¹³ Combined with the demographic changes that aimed to increase the proportion of the Azerbaijani population,¹⁴ these policies were seen by Armenian intellectuals as an attempt to abolish the autonomous status of Karabakh once a favorable demographic balance was achieved. The outcome of these policies was mutual suspicion, mistrust, and in the case of Armenian intellectual elites, a sense of needing to challenge these threatening developments. The opportunity to voice these grievances arose during the perestroika campaign launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. The issue re-emerged in 1987 with another mass petition to Moscow and eventually culminated in the demands by the local Soviet to transfer the territory to the Armenian jurisdiction in 1988.

About the Author

Arsène Saparov, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations, University of Sharjah. He is currently working on the question of symbolic landscapes and political legitimacy in the Caucasus.

Recommended Reading

- De Waal, Thomas: *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War. 10th Year Anniversary Edition. Revised and Updated* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2013).
- Saparov, Arsène: *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus. The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh* (London: Routledge, 2015).

Conclusion

The forceful way in which the Karabakh question manifested itself during perestroika might appear surprising. However, given the subtle way in which the issue was perceived among intellectual and political elites in Armenia and Azerbaijan, this should hardly be unexpected. The conflict was a long time in the making throughout the Soviet period—on the levels of both identity and practical politics. Both sides held mutually exclusive perceptions of their opponent, and there was no space for the inclusive interpretation of the mutual past. This zero sum logic ensured the violent course of the conflict.

At the same time, we can assess Soviet decision-making in historical perspective. The imperfect and ad hoc solutions implemented by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s nevertheless stopped the immediate violence. This solution provided nearly seven decades of stability under the umbrella of the Soviet state. However, this solution worked as long as the USSR existed and could intervene to dispense justice and support the system. Yet, the fact that this solution was imposed against the wishes of both minority and majority groups left a subtle feeling of dissatisfaction among their intellectual elites. These feelings became more vocalized during the political relaxation of the Soviet system in the 1960s. With the economic crisis and decline of the ideological foundations of the Soviet state in the late 1980s, Soviet-era institutions came to be seen as illegitimate and it appears that their complete dismantling is the only way forward.

12 Viktor Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past. Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001).

13 Saparov, *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus*, 162.

14 See the interview with Hedar Aliyev on 22 July 2002 at <www.525ci.com> (accessed 20 May 2016).