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The Karabakh Conflict and the Image of the “Historical Enemy” in Azerbaijani Textbooks

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Abstract

The currently unresolved conflict over Karabakh supports the discursive image (myth) of the “historical enemy” having a central place in Azerbaijani educational texts. Along with Armenians, this image also includes Russians and Iranians (Persians). This conflict also has a determining impact on the interpretation of all previous clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, which took place in the early 20th century (1905, 1918–20). The policy that was conducted in the region by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is also interpreted through the context of this conflict. The situation in the field of the academic historical research and the teaching of national history in Azerbaijan, may be interpreted in the same way, because the discursive image of the enemy occupies a key role in the historical narrative and public as well as political debates.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, when war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was at its height, Stephen Griffiths wrote in his study on nationalism and ethnic conflict that “the prospects for a peaceful resolution to the [Nagorny Karabakh] conflict are practically nil; even if one side manages to achieve a decisive victory, instability will continue in the region for decades”.¹ More than two decades later, experts’ assessments remain pessimistic. In 2009, Thomas De Waal noted that “for one chief reason, the conflict can be said to be ‘thawing’. This is that the ‘losing’ side is growing more confident and more impatient to change the situation in its favor. The fact that, on top of the disputed region of NK [Nagorny Karabakh] itself, seven districts of Azerbaijan are wholly or partially occupied by Armenian forces is a source of continuing pain to Azerbaijanis and makes the situation unsustainable in the long run”.² In 2011, experts from the International Crisis Group noted a high degree of the danger of a resumption of the conflict.³

This worsening of the situation and the diminishing of chances of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict are, to a considerable extent, caused by an increase in militarist and revanchist sentiments in both societies over the past two decades. The modern territorial Karabakh conflict has been historicized both in Azerbaijan and Armenia and often described as a “war of history”. Both sides have contradictory views on the history and roots of the Karabakh conflict of 1992–94. These dif-

fering views are so deeply entrenched in both societies that no quick solution to the conflict can be expected. In the following, I will lay out what I mean when referring to these differing historical narratives, how they manifest themselves especially in Azerbaijani history textbooks for schools and in the mass media, and how these views impact the conflict.

The Karabakh Conflict in Azerbaijani Textbooks for Secondary School

In the early 1990s, following almost immediately on the heels of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of new educational narratives on national history began in many of the new independent former Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan. However, an Azerbaijani history course developed back in the Soviet era was, to a considerable extent, used as a basis for the new courses. The further back into the centuries, the greater the degree to which the Soviet version was adopted without a fundamental rewriting of developments; the new writing did not really affect the way certain national heroes, political figures or art workers had been portrayed in the earlier Soviet era.

Contrary to the minimal changes made in the descriptions of the far-away past, some key historical events relating to the 19th and 20th centuries experienced considerable revision. Among these were the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and in particular the situation of the Azerbaijani khanates in the 1810s and 1820s, the brief period of nation-building in 1918–20, and the process of Sovietization in the 1920s and 1930s. The conflict with the Republic of Armenia over control of Nagorny Karabakh, which developed in parallel with the collapse of the Soviet Union, led to the emergence of the image of the “historical enemy”, which began to be socially constructed in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Along with Armenians as the main “historical

1 Stephen Griffiths, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflicts. Threats to European Security*, SIPRI Research Report No. 5 (Solna: SIPRI, 1993), 79.

2 Thomas De Waal, *The Karabakh Trap. Dangers and Dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict* (London: Conciliations Resources, 2009), 2.

3 International Crisis Group, *Armenia and Azerbaijan. Preventing War*, Europe Briefing No. 60 (Tbilisi etc.: ICG, 2011), 1.

enemy”, this *collective* image (myth) of the enemy also included Russians and Iranians (Persians).

As in the previous Soviet version, the narratives that have been developed in the post-Soviet period give a considerable space to political history, which is presented as a chain of wars, rebellions and alliances either “for” or “against” outside powers, such as Ottomans, Russians or Persians. The compilers of new textbooks retrospectively interpreted the numerous conflicts and wars of the 19th and 20th centuries through the lens of the Karabakh conflict (1988–1994), which was contemporary for the authors. At the same time, Azerbaijan’s role in these conflicts and wars was, to a considerable extent, constructed in the framework of the country as part of a “single Turkic world” (the post-Soviet version of pan-Turkism, i.e., the idea of a united Turkish space stretching from Turkey via the Caucasus into Central Asia). Among the allied states and nations that are commonly described as “fraternal”, the central place is given to their regional neighbor Turkey.

The Evolution of the Armenian–Azerbaijani Conflict

Given the unresolved nature of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh, the central place in Azerbaijani textbooks on history is occupied by the myth of “historical enemies”, primarily Armenia and the Armenians. This conflict also has a determining impact on the interpretation of all previous clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians that took place in the early 20th century. The policy that was implemented in the region by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is also interpreted through the lens of previous conflicts.

The Karabakh conflict largely corresponds to the theory of nationalism, which, in Ernest Gellner’s opinion, holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.⁴ The conflict had started to emerge in the second half of the 1980s when “the Armenians for the first time openly raised the dangerous Karabakh problem again. The first petition about this, signed by hundreds of thousands of Armenians, was sent to [the Secretary General of the Communist Party], M[ikhail] S. Gorbachev, in August 1987”.⁵ The Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO), an enclave mostly populated by Armenians, was initially part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). On 20 February 1988, the Council of People’s Deputies of the NKAO adopted a resolution that demanded secession from the

Azerbaijani SSR with subsequent incorporation into the Armenian SSR. In the course of a fast-growing spiral of escalation, people were systematically driven from their homes, and the region witnessed a number of bloody pogroms, including the ones in Sumqayit (in February 1988) and Baku (in January 1990) that left many people dead.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan grew into a full-scale war. As a result of military action that took place what was now outside of the formal territory of the NKAO, Armenian troops occupied five additional Azerbaijani districts in full and two in part. Thus, the Azerbaijani refugees from the NKAO were joined by hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani *internally displaced people* (IDPs) from these districts. It was only in May 1994 that a cease-fire was concluded among the warring parties in Bishkek. However, a peace treaty that would make it possible to end the conflict has still not been signed. Notably, this conflict was one of the bloodiest that took place in the South Caucasus in the wake of the Soviet Union’s disintegration.

The transition of the war into a permanent state of conflict (“no war no peace”) may be viewed as the region’s key feature in the period after 1994. This state was caused by the reluctance of the main parties in the conflict to agree to mutual concessions and compromises and also by a quick spread of revanchist sentiments in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Despite numerous statements by the presidents of the two countries about their desire for a peaceful settlement, both sides have been increasing their military budgets and armies, which—amid a multitude of unresolved economic and social problems—can also be interpreted as actual preparation for another war. The situation in the field of historical research, as well as the teaching of national history in Azerbaijan, may be interpreted in the same way by considering that the discursive image of enemy occupies a key role in the historical narrative.

Politicians, Historians and the Construction of a Narrative about Continuous and All-Out Conflict

The special role and place of the historical narrative in the post-Soviet ideology of Azerbaijani nationalism are defined by several factors. First, the new interpretation of the events in the 19th and 20th centuries implies some sort of rejection of the Soviet version of history and the construction of a new version that can be viewed as more in line with a specific type of post-Soviet nationalism. Second, in the context of the Karabakh conflict, the new version of the historical narrative is called upon to dehumanize to the greatest possible extent the image

4 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca & New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 1.

5 Viktor Shnirelman, *Voini pamati. Mif, identichnost' i politika v Zakavkaze* (Moscow: IKZ Akademkniga, 2003), 114.

of the “historical enemy” and also to facilitate a successful mobilization of the population in the event of renewed hostilities.

The actual leaders of the country and well-known political and cultural figures at different levels have played a major role in promoting national history as a key part of the national ideology that fueled the Karabakh conflict. It is telling that among the leaders of the nationalists who created and led the People's Front of Azerbaijan Party (PFAP) in 1988 and who at different times held prominent posts in the government there were many historians and orientalist philologists who did a lot to form the ideological background against which the re-interpretation of history was carried out. Thus, for example, the second Azerbaijani president, Abulfaz Elçibay (1992–93), was an Arabist philologist by training who promoted the need to develop a new version of history in the context of ideas of pan-Turkism.

The former secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijani SSR, Heydar Aliyev, who returned to power this time as president (1993–2003), was also a historian by education. It is his words that accompany, as an epigraph, history textbooks for secondary schools, stressing the special significance of history as a discipline:

“(…) [W]hen receiving national education in school, every representative of the young generation in independent Azerbaijan must study well the history of his people, nation, starting from ancient times to present day. If he does not study it, he cannot become a true citizen. If he does not study it, he will not be able to value his nation. If he does not study it, he will not be able to take proper pride in his belonging to his nation”.⁶

For his part, İlham Aliyev, the incumbent president and son of Heydar Aliyev, is a candidate of historical sciences. There are also quite a few historians among the prominent representatives of the present-day opposition. For example, Etibar Məmmədov (former leader of the Milli İstiqlal Party of Azerbaijan), who came second in terms of votes in the 1998 presidential election, is a candidate of historical sciences. İsa Qəmbər, the permanent leader of the most well-known and influential opposition party of Azerbaijani nationalists, Musavat (meaning “equality” in the Azerbaijani language), is also a candidate of historical sciences (he is a student of Abulfaz Elçibay),

and he came second in the 2003 presidential election. This list could easily be continued.

The current political regime almost completely controls access to every field of the new (post-Soviet) version of Azerbaijan's history. Only one version of the textbooks, which were approved by the country's Ministry of Education, can be used at secondary schools. Only specialists that are deemed loyal to the political regime are authorized to prepare the texts for those textbooks (including those for universities). School teachers are not involved in the preparation of these textbooks. Almost all compilers of textbooks are doctors and professors of research institutes of the Academy of Sciences, Baku State University or the Pedagogical University.

I believe that history courses (both for secondary schools and universities) do not support, in principle, the formation of a thinking person, a person who is disposed to hold a discussion, and, possibly, to have doubts. Thus, not only are there no alternative textbooks for secondary schools, but textbooks developed in the post-Soviet period also do not offer any alternative material. The authors construct a single version of national history in the context of which all events receive only the official interpretation, which is considered to be the only true one. The authority of the master narrative is endorsed by professionals—doctors of sciences, professors and academicians (official nomination). The compilers of the new narrative are quite often given more than just scientific titles. Thus, for example, Professor Yaqub Məhmudlu is one of the leaders of a group of historians who are implementing a project to reconstruct national history and create new textbooks for schools; he is not only the director of the Institute of History at the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan (NASA) but also a member of parliament (Milli Məclis).

The New Historical Narratives and the Mass Media

The mass media also promotes the new version of the historical master narrative to the greatest extent possible. Practically all of the most popular newspapers (Zerkalo, Ekho, Musavat, Azadliq, etc.) have a section dedicated to national history. A number of documentaries devoted to different conflicts in the 19th and 20th centuries have been filmed in the post-Soviet period, which became topical in the context of the latest Karabakh conflict. In 2009, a new large-scale project was completed with support from the ruling political regime—the filming of a feature film entitled “Javad Khan”. The film depicts events in early 1804 when the Ganja Khan (Ganja is the second largest city in the present-day Azerbaijani Republic) heroically died while defending the city. The film was based on a work written by a doctor of philologi-

6 Cited from a textbook for the 10th grade of comprehensive school T. Veliev et al., *Istoriia Azerbaidžana. Uchebnik dlia 10 klassa obshchego obrazovatelnoi shkoli* (Baku: Chashiolu, 2004), 1, and the textbook for the 11th grade of comprehensive school T. Gaffarov et al., *Istoriia Azerbaidžana. Uchebnik dlia 11 klassa obshchego obrazovatelnoi shkoli* (Baku: Chashiolu, 2002), 1.

cal sciences and pan-Turkist writer and poet Sabir Rustamkhanli, who also composed the script to the movie. Rustamkhanli heads a rightist-nationalist populist party called the Civil Solidarity Party. Additionally, since 1990, he has held office as a member of parliament. In the 2000s, he also became a co-chairman of the World Azerbaijanis' Congress (WAC). In his opinion, this is a film about a national hero who tried to resist the seizure and division of Azerbaijan by the Russian Empire. The movie took about two years to film and featured up to 10,000 military servicemen, 130 actors, and used computer graphics for the first time in Azerbaijani cinematography. This might have been the largest project in the history of Azerbaijani cinematography.

It was Javad Khan of Ganja, a vassal to the Persian Shah, who in the post-Soviet historical narrative became the central figure of resistance against the Russian Empire and the Armenians who supported its policies (and who are quite often described as the “fifth column”). The authors of the new historical narrative often place the origins of the current conflict in the first half of the 19th century when the territory of present-day Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Despite its resistance, Ganja was seized by storm, and Javad Khan, who fought heroically, was killed, while “the brutal Russian soldiers killed all of the armless population of Ganja. Also killed were Ganja people who hid in mosques. In one of the city’s mosques there were approximately 500 people. The Armenians told the Russian soldiers that there were Lezgins among those. The use of the word ‘Lezgin’, which infuriates Russians, sentenced to death the people who were in the mosque. All of them were killed”.⁷

This type of description of these events dates the origins of the current Karabakh conflict back to at least the beginning of the 19th century. As a result, Armenian–Azerbaijani enmity acquires features of a confrontation that have lasted through centuries. Therefore, the current conflict is described as an inevitable one. The central component of the “historical enemy”—Armenians—only achieve “success” with invariable support from the Russians:

“In order to create a ‘reliable Christian state’, they started to resettle Armenians from all over the world to the lands of our Motherland north of the Aras—in Karabakh, Goycha, Zangazur, Iravan [Erevan], Nakhchivan... [regions of present-day Azerbaijan and Armenia, author’s note]. First,

they created an Armenian region and then also an Armenian state in the lands of West Azerbaijan where Oguz horsemen once showed their daring on horseback”.⁸

Thus, in the context of the Karabakh conflict, narratives regarding the borders of “historical territories” were also revised. During the Soviet era, Azerbaijani historians laid claims to part of the territory of present-day Iran; moreover, a large part of present-day Armenia is, as a rule, indicated as “West Azerbaijan”. In the post-Soviet version of Azerbaijani history, historians insist that the territory of present-day Armenia is an important part of the area of aboriginal habitation and of thousands of years of ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis.

The post-Soviet historical narratives give a special place to the events of the period of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR), which existed from May 1918 to April 1920. The tragic events that took place in Baku during the so-called “March Days” of 1918 acquired particular topicality. During the fight for power over Azerbaijan’s capital at that time, when the main participants were Musavatists (Turkish nationalists) and Bolsheviks who acted in an alliance with Armenian nationalists (Dashnaks), there were pogroms and massacres of Turks/Muslims in which several thousand people were killed.⁹ The official version of these events was reflected in a decree issued by President Heydar Aliyev on March 26, 1998, which declared the 31st of March the day of the “genocide” of Azerbaijanis. The history textbook for the first year of history studies in secondary school (5th form) shapes the story about the March 1918 events around a conversation among 10 to 15 Azerbaijanis. One of them exclaims:

“How can you tolerate Armenian detachments moving around the city and doing what they want? The Armenian government disarms you in your own land and prepares to annihilate all the people. What can you call this? (...) This is genocide. If the government is consciously annihilating the people who live in their own territory, this is called genocide. They want to exterminate our people”.¹⁰

The story is supplemented with the full text of the “Decree of the President of the Azerbaijani Republic ‘On the genocide of Azerbaijanis’”.¹¹ The decree represents the official discourse and is reproduced in the overwhelming majority of historical texts dedicated to an interpretation of the events of the Armenian–Azer-

7 Cited from a textbook titled “Fatherland” for the 5th grade: Yagub Mahmudlu, et al., *Otechestvo. Uchebnik dlia piatogo klassa* (Baku: Chashioglu, 2003), 137.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 See the text by Shalala Mammadova in this issue.

10 Mahmudlu, *Otechestvo*, 201–2.

11 Ibid., 17–18.

baijani confrontation. This attempt at using the victim resource re-appears now in the description of the tragic events of the current Karabakh conflict.

The tragic events in the town of Xocali in February 1992 have now also received the status of genocide in Azerbaijan. As a result, the story of the all-out and at least two-centuries-long confrontation with the invariably cruel and insidious “historical enemy” closes on the current unfinished conflict. Both events (March 1918 and the Xocali tragedy of February 1992) in the context of many other confrontations collapse into a type of a single line of enmity in the context of which the idea of a continuous century-long genocide of Azerbaijanis is constructed.

Conclusion: “Incomplete Sovereignty” and the Future of the Image of the “Historical Enemy”

The fight against the “Armenian fascists”, who are invariably supported by Moscow, is described as the most important component of the Azerbaijani fight for independence. The occupation of part of the territory of the

Azerbaijani Republic, as recognized by the world community, is a reason for the domination of a discourse that, I believe, can be called a discourse of “incomplete sovereignty”. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is a successful and independent state. On the other hand, Azerbaijan can only become completely independent after regaining control over all of its territory. At the same time, the “incomplete sovereignty” discourse, which is constructed by historians, goes beyond the description of the Karabakh conflict. “Historical territory” is thought of with borders far wider than the current ones. The reason for the loss of most “historical lands” is observed in the colonizing policy of the Russian Empire (which created Armenia) and the Persian Empire and its successor Iran, which controls Iranian (“Southern”) Azerbaijan. The possibility of the incorporation of these territories into the Azerbaijani Republic does not seem very likely in the current situation. Thus, the theory being constructed about the need for a full restoration of independence within “fair borders” supposes that the discursive image of enemy, who divided “our historical motherland”, may have a long history.

About the Author

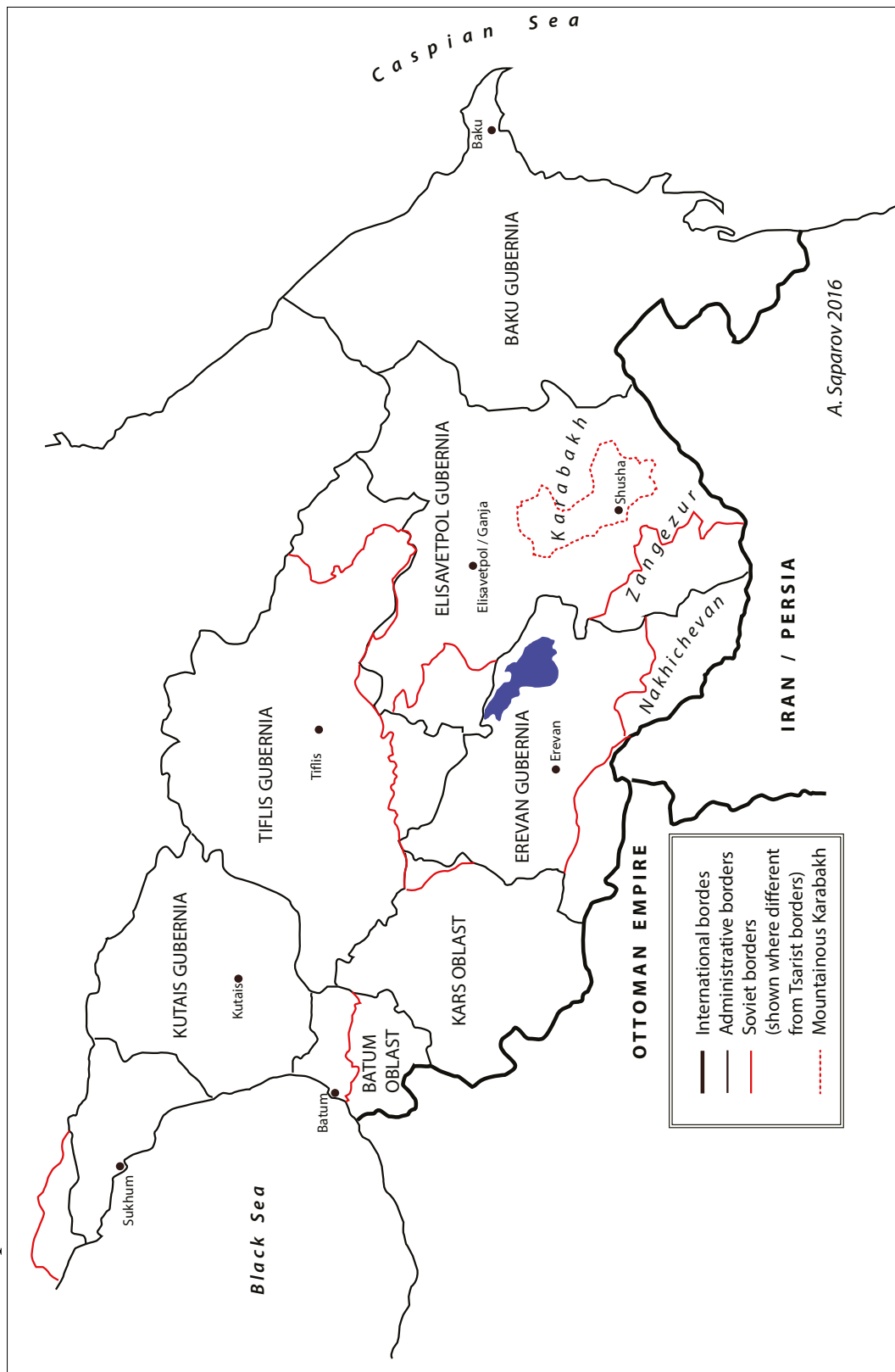
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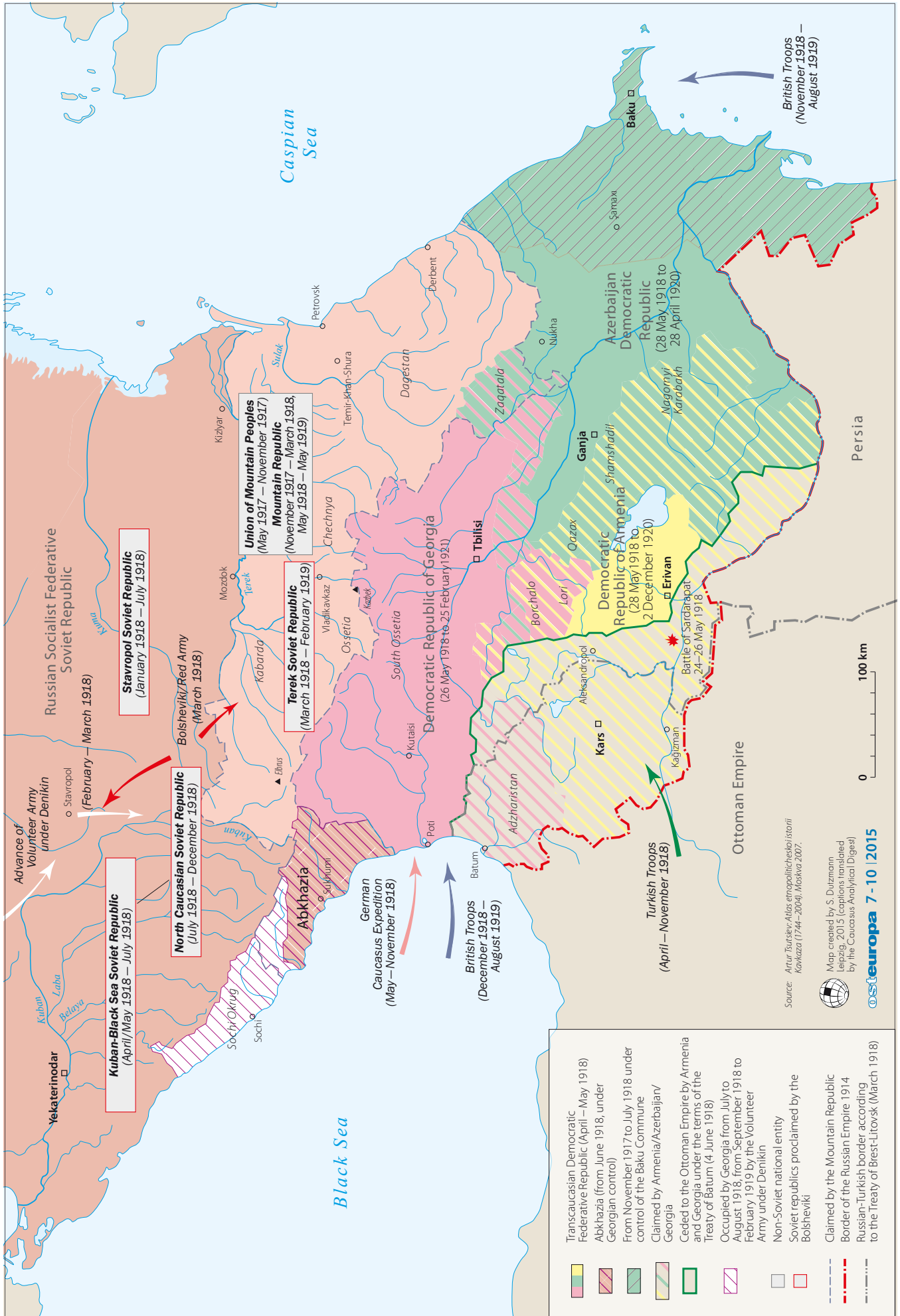
Maps of the South Caucasus from the Russian Empire to the Present Day

Russian Imperial and Soviet Borders in the South Caucasus

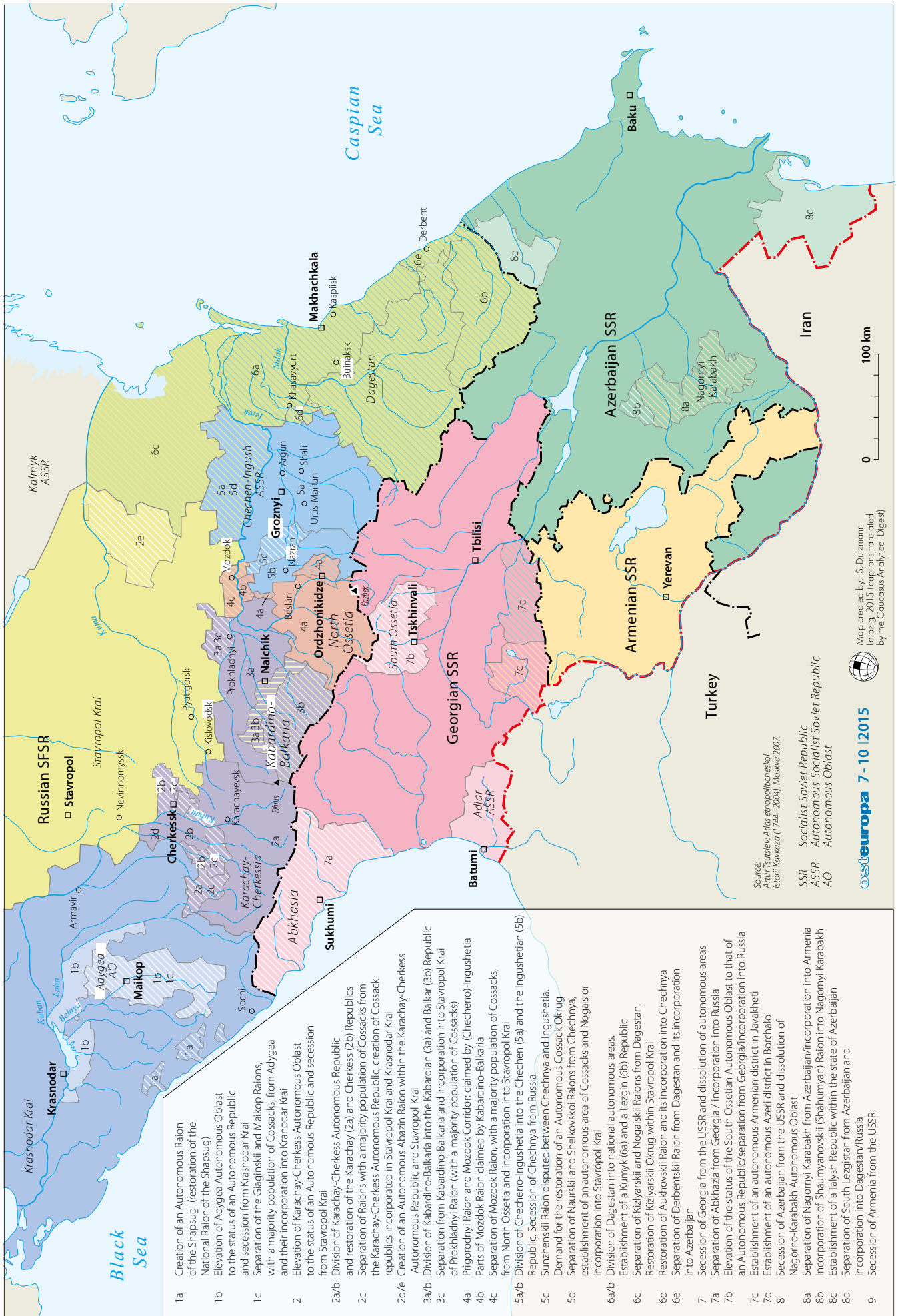


Map created by Arsène Saparov

The Caucasus 1918–1920: War, Civil War, and State Building



The Caucasus During the Period of National “Sovereignization”, 1990–1992



Nagornyi Karabakh General Map

