

# Karabakh Conflict

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## KARABAKH CONFLICT

*Special Editor: Jeronim Perović*

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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 (Nagorny 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 Nagorny Karabakh—A Historical Perspective

By Arsène Saparov, Sharjah

### Abstract

This article provides a historical perspective on the violent conflict in Nagorny 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> century with the disintegration of central rule in Iran, its Caucasian borderland provinces became de-facto independent. In the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Qajar dynasty began consolidating its position in Iran. With the military advance of the Russian Empire in the early 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

### 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 Caucasus<sup>7</sup>) 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> Combined with the demographic changes that aimed to increase the proportion of the Azerbaijani population,<sup>14</sup> 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. 10<sup>th</sup> 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](http://www.525ci.com)> (accessed 20 May 2016).



## Creating the “Enemy Nation”: The Difficult Historical Legacies of Armenian–Azerbaijani Relations

By Shalala Mammadova, Baku

### Abstract

The “four-day war” between Armenia and Azerbaijan in early April 2016 drew the attention of the international community to the mountainous region of Karabakh, the location of one of the so-called “frozen conflicts” in the South Caucasus. During intense fighting, dozens were killed, hundreds were wounded, and many driven from their homes. This military confrontation demonstrated that the ceasefire negotiated more than twenty years earlier between Azerbaijan and Armenia has not worked and has not helped to bring the two alienated neighboring nations any closer to a lasting, peaceful settlement. This article provides an overview of over a century of Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontation by analyzing the roots of this difficult relationship and how historical legacies still impact the situation today.

### A Short Historical Overview

Living side by side for centuries, the relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis has been shaped not only by conflict but also by long periods of peaceful coexistence. Despite differences in their historical trajectories, there are also many common traits these peoples share in terms of culture and way of life (i.e., cuisine, music, poetry, etc.). Armenians, who created their first historical narratives in the 5<sup>th</sup> CE, understand themselves as an “old continuous nation”. Their state was divided between the Sassanid and Byzantine empires in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, around the time that Armenians adopted Christianity. The territory was under constant pressure from rival empires and under threat of conquest by Arabs, Mongols, and Turkish-speaking groups. From the late Middle Ages, Armenians formed large Christian minority groups in both the Ottoman and the Safavid empires, where they faced considerable obstacles in the conduct of their social and religious life. The experience under foreign rule, the frequent migrations and the persecutions served as mobilizing factors, strongly shaping Armenian ethnic identity. The same cannot be said of Muslim Azerbaijanis whose ethnic identity as “Azerbaijanis” emerged only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was coincidentally precisely during the start of confrontations with Armenians.

The Armenians’ situation changed with the expansion of the Russian Empire, which emerged as the major military and political power in the region during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, pushing back the influence of both the Ottoman and Persian empires. Even in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Peter the Great advanced south with his armies, Armenians hoped to gain Russian protection and assistance in their goal of liberating “the majority of the Armenian people, who still lived under Ottoman rule”.<sup>1</sup> Peter the Great had to withdraw his forces from

the Caucasus, but Russian policy in the region remained directed at “liberating” Christians (not only Armenians, but Orthodox Georgians as well) and protecting them against Ottomans and Persians. In fact, it was also on these grounds that Russia would later justify its annexation of the whole of the South Caucasus, which was largely completed in the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The situation changed again towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of Slavophil nationalistic ideas as professed by Tsar Alexander III. Abandoning his father’s reform policies, which were prepared and directed by Minister of Internal Affairs Loris-Melikoff, an Armenian by ethnic origin, the new Tsar declared Russification and Russian Orthodox Christianization as the pillars of his strategy to modernize the Russian Empire. “The political, social and cultural origins of the new attitude, and of the policy which resulted from it, were rather complicated and remain in some respects obscure, but of the phenomenon itself there can be no doubt,” wrote British Historian Hugh Seton-Watson in a work published in 1977.<sup>2</sup> Russification, as Seton-Watson noted, first targeted “the most devoted subjects” of the Russian Empire and had caused a resonant protest among non-Russians, including the Armenians. In fact, during the 1880s, Armenian schools were closed and the study of the history and geography of Armenia was abandoned.

Tsar Nicholas II, who succeeded his father Alexander III to the Russian throne, continued this policy. On June 12, 1903, he ordered the confiscation of the properties of the Apostolic Armenian Church, which played a crucial role in Armenian national identity. Additionally, Armenian charitable foundations, theatres, newspapers, and magazines were closed down. Clergy and leaders of the Armenian community considered the attacks on the Armenian Church to be a direct threat to

1 Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States. An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (London: Methuen, 1977), 61.

2 Ibid., 186.

the existence of the Armenian nation. The anti-Armenian policy of the Russian authorities was supported by members of the Russian and local intelligentsia and Armenophobic scholars.

Armenians mobilized against this policy, and the Catholicos, the head of the Apostolic Armenian Church, turned to the socialist-oriented Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), also known as Dashnaktsutyun (or Dashnak, in short). The ARF was created towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Tiflis, which fell into the territory of the Russian Empire. The short-term goal of this party was to obtain Armenian autonomy within the Ottoman Empire to ensure the protection of the Armenian Church and defend against the armed assaults of Ottoman armed contingents against Armenians. The long-term goal of the ARF was to create a free, independent, and united Armenia, incorporating all territories populated by Armenians. Until 1903, the main area of operation of the ARF was in Ottoman Turkey. However, Russia's increasing anti-Armenian policy forced the Dashnaktsutyun to become more active in the Russian South Caucasus as well, especially in those parts where Armenians had established themselves with great success as bankers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, merchants, and leading cultural figures. Out of eight revolutionary committees of the ARF, three were located in the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan: Baku, Ganja, and Shusha; and the terror of this organization was soon felt in these parts, primarily in the city of Baku.

### The Bloody Upheavals of 1905–1906

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Baku, at that time the capital of the Baku governorate (*Bakinskaya guberniia*), had developed from a backward, tiny town on the Asiatic periphery of the Russian Empire into a quickly industrializing, multiethnic city of Transcaucasia with a population of some 140,000. This was due primarily to the development of the oil industry that dramatically changed socio-ethnic structure as well as political importance of the city. According to the 1903 Baku census, Turkish speaking Azerbaijanis ("Transcaucasian Tatars" in the official language of the time) comprised 21.4 percent of the city's population, while 35.5 percent of Baku's inhabitants were ethnic Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) and 19.4 percent Armenians. There was also a substantial Jewish minority living in the city—some 9,700 people, according to the 1903 census.<sup>3</sup> It was a multiethnic city but not a "melting pot" as each ethnic group lived in its own district, separated from each other.

3 Central State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, box 894, folder 10, file 99, page 90.

The city prospered thanks to oil production, which around 1900 achieved production levels similar to those in the United States. However, the wealth did not serve the indigenous Turkish-speaking population well, but instead enriched the owners of the oil companies, who were foreigners and Russians. Imperial legislation restricted native Muslims' economic, financial, military, and even cultural activity, creating serious obstacles for them to prosper. In practice, Baku and its oil industry were ruled largely by non-Muslims, that is, Christians. The City Statute issued in 1870 by Tsar Alexander II granted Baku a large degree of autonomy in matters of local governance and specified that "the non-Christian members of the City Duma [the parliament] should not exceed one third of the total number of councilors".<sup>4</sup> During the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no Muslim, no matter his ethnic background, rose to occupy high administrative positions in Azerbaijan. Additionally, Muslims were not subject to military conscription as they were not deemed trustworthy.

By the time the revolutionary movement started in central Russia in 1905, Baku was experiencing bloody ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This conflict was not so much over territory but over political and economic supremacy in the city. Between February 6 and February 9, 1905, "four bloody days of madness and horror raged in the city", as the local newspaper *Bakinskii izvestiia* described the tragic events.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic violence was largely felt in Baku but not confined to it. Violent clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis also took place in Nakhchivan (May 1905), Shusha (August 1905), and Elizavetpol (November 1905).

A year later, in February–March, 1906, an Armenian–Azerbaijani (Tatar) congress was convened in Tiflis to analyze the reasons for the extreme ethnic violence. The Russian administration, represented by the Caucasian vicegerent (*namestnik*) Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, mentioned cultural and religious differences as a main cause of the ethnic confrontation. The member of the Armenian delegation, Qeorgii Khatisov, blamed imperial authorities' fomentation of ethnic hatred towards Azerbaijanis. Muslims incriminated Armenian military organizations, especially the Armenian Dashnaktsutyun party. The Russian administration could not explain why, despite cultural and religious differences, Azerbaijanis' anger was not directed against Russians

4 Tsar Alexander II's decree (*Gorodskoe polozhenie*) of 1870 can be found on page 827 at: <<http://документы.рф/19/именно-указ-данный-правительству-ушchemu-senatu-1870-goda-iyunya-16-28/>> (accessed April 21, 2016).

5 Ivan Alibegov, "Mysli vysvannye krovavymi sobytiiami poslednikh dnei v gorode Baku", in: *Bakinskii izvestiia*, February, 12, 1905.

but at Armenians, who were not actually considered invaders and rulers of the Caucasus. Armenians could not answer the questions as to why they needed armed committees formed of members from the Dashnaksyuntun party, and for what purpose they were involved in the ethnic crime. In turn, Azerbaijanis refused to recognize their own crimes and instead indicted and convicted Armenians of all wrongdoings.

When Israfil Hajiyev, delegate to the Armenian–Azerbaijani congress, blamed the Dahsnaktsutyun for the terror against Muslims, Konstantin Khatisov, a member of Dahsnaktsutyun party, retorted that the party was fighting for Armenian liberation in Ottoman Turkey and, as democratic people, the Muslim delegation should understand the Armenian struggle for democratic values. “I completely agree with mister Khatisov and the Dashnaksutyun position”, was the answer by the Azerbaijani delegate to the congress, Qarabeg Qarabegov. “I welcome all attempts of the Armenian party in their struggle for the democracy and freedom of the Armenian nation in the territory of Ottoman Turkey. However, you Armenians are engaging in terror operations in the Caucasus. We don’t mind if you are going to improve the living conditions of your compatriots in Turkey, but concerning one million Armenians, who are pursuing narrow nationalist political aims in the Caucasus, we have completely different views.”<sup>6</sup> The Azerbaijani delegate at this point avoided openly asking the question of whether the ultimate goal of the Armenians was to create a state in the Caucasus. Armenians answered a hidden question thirteen years later when, in March 1918, the next and thus far most tragic clash occurred between the two ethnic groups.

### Revolution, Independence and the Establishment of Soviet Power

Soon after the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917, the non-Russian peoples of the former Russian Empire strove for autonomy and independence. During the ensuing Civil War, the Bolsheviks, with the help of local socialist parties, managed to gain brief control over Baku in the spring of 1918. The Baku Soviet (the “Baku Commune”) was a short-lived political entity that lasted only through the summer of 1918. It managed to establish its rule over the city after bloody ethnic conflicts broke out in March 1918 with the Muslim population (the so-called “March Days”). According to official Azerbaijani sources, more than 30,000 Azerbaijanis were killed and many more wounded; ethnic confrontation also broke out in other eastern South Caucasian prov-

inces.<sup>7</sup> Armenian sources also confirm a high number of casualties, particularly among civilians.<sup>8</sup>

In May 1918, Azerbaijan, together with the two other major South Caucasian nations, Armenia and Georgia, declared its independence from Russia. Thus, barely had the news of independence reached the international community when heavy fighting over disputed land started among the three new nations. The situation became more complicated with the engagement of outside powers: In September 1918, the combined forces of Ottoman Turkey and the newly declared Azerbaijan Republic (the so called “Caucasian Army of Islam”) reached Baku. They drove the British, whose forces under General Dunsterville had gained control over Baku for a brief period, from the city. According to the Armenian sources during and after the Turkish–Azerbaijani conquest of the city, between 10,000 and 30,000 Armenians were massacred, a number that equaled the number of Muslims who had been killed during the anti-Azerbaijani programs in March 1918.

The ethnic clashes of March and September 1918 were differently interpreted at the time. The leader of the Baku Bolsheviks, Stepan Shaumian, an ethnic Armenian, evaluated the March confrontation as a political struggle for Baku in which “Soviet power has always been left hanging up in the air because of resistance of the Muslim nationalist parties.”<sup>9</sup> The leader of the Azerbaijani Musavat party, Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh, described the March events as a struggle for national independence: “People who were killed during the March events were the Azerbaijani nation’s first victims in the independence of our country.”<sup>10</sup> Ordinary people considered these clashes to be a conflict of two ethnic communities for territory and political supremacy. With the Bolsheviks establishing firm control over the whole of the Caucasus in the early 1920s, internal borders ceased to have any real meaning as “from now on, all lands belong[ed] to Soviet power.”<sup>11</sup>

7 The tragic events of March 1918 were investigated and recorded by a special commission established in 1918 by the Azerbaijan Republic. The documents were published in 2009 under the direction of Azerbaijani historian Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi: Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi et al., ed., *Mart 1918 g. Baku. Azerbaidzhanskie pogromi v dokumentakh* (Baku: Nauchno-issledovatel’skii tsentr Ministerstva Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti, 2009).

8 Stepan Shaumian, *Pis’ma. 1896–1918* (Yerevan: Armgiz, 1959), 63–67.

9 Ibid., 63–64.

10 “Vtoroi s’ezd partii Musavat”, *Azerbaijan*, December, 6, 1918, 1.

11 “Reshenie Zakavkazskogo Chrezvychainogo Komiteta”, August, 22, 1922, in: Central State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, box 379, folder 40c, file 45, l. 2.

6 “Armano–musul’anskii s’ezd”, *Kaspii*, February 28, 1906, 3.

## The Karabakh War and its Aftermath

Although during the Soviet era, the government did not attach much meaning to internal borders and they were generally not considered important, the republics and regions of the Soviet Union that were created in the 1920s did have fixed administrative borders. The Soviet political leadership in the early 1920s included the mountainous part of Karabakh (Nagorny Karabakh) and Nakhchivan in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic; Soviet Armenia obtained the Zangezur district. As a consequence of these decisions, Armenia lost its connection to a territory that, at the time, was largely populated by ethnic Armenians, and Azerbaijan was denied a territorial connection with Nakhchivan.

The tragic events during collectivization, the Stalinist repression of 1934–37, and World War II temporarily eclipsed ethnic grievances and distrust between nations. The profession of “friendship of the peoples” and an intensified Russification policy that also played some role in this process. Stalin’s death in 1953 and the “thawing” period under Khrushchev brought changes in the political atmosphere in the country, opening up limited political spaces. During the 1960s, Armenia and the Armenian diaspora in Azerbaijan voiced their discontent regarding the territorial dispute with Azerbaijan on several occasions. On October 18, 1960, a US-based Armenian diaspora newspaper *Baykar* (“Struggle”), issued in Boston in Armenian language, published a letter addressed “to the President of Soviet Azerbaijan”. The letter recommended “fraternal Azerbaijan to grant Nakhchivan and Nagorny Karabakh to Armenia as a present on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia. The Central Committee of the CPSU decided to have the letter translated, added an explanatory note, and on December 9, 1960, sent the letter to the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party.<sup>12</sup> With this action, Moscow signaled to Baku that regional stability completely depended on the center’s (Moscow) position and asked the Azerbaijani comrades to contest Armenians’ territorial claims.

The Azerbaijani party leadership, when evaluating the letter initially published in *Baykar*, considered it a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In

response to Armenian ambitions, the Azerbaijani party leadership put together detailed documentation prepared by a group of lawyers, historians, and cartographers, supporting Azerbaijan’s claim to these territories and sent the material to Moscow. Acquainting himself with the Azerbaijani communists’ report and summarizing discussions concerning the territorial claims of Armenia, Soviet party leader Nikita Khrushchev made a final decision: We all will live friendly as one family. The Soviet leader actually expressed Moscow specialists’ decision that any territorial corrections are undesirable for the Soviet Union and would create a bad precedent for other republics.

Nonetheless, in the run up to Khrushchev’s visit to Armenia, rumors circulated that Moscow was indeed about to make a “special present” to Yerevan by granting it Nagorny Karabakh. According to the chair of the Azerbaijani KGB, Alexander Kardashev, the staff of Yerevan State University had already started to collect signatures in favor of the unification of Nagorny Karabakh with Armenia. The chair of the Nagorny Karabakh branch of the KGB, Vladimir Abramov, confirmed Kardashev’s information and added that Armenian leaders prepared two letters suggesting uniting Karabakh with Armenia and, if that was not possible, with the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic (RSFSR).<sup>13</sup>

The liberalization of political life in the Soviet Union ended with Khrushchev’s removal from his post in 1964, and a 20-year period of renewed hardening of the political situation followed. The glasnost and perestroika period initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev again opened up space for nationalist sentiments. Speaking at the Armenian National Congress in Paris, 1987, Soviet economist Abel Aganbegian stressed that as an economist, he is more than convinced that Nagorny Karabakh is economically more connected to Armenia rather than Azerbaijan. This indication marked the start of a “war of words” that would soon grow into violent ethnic clashes in the following year, as age-old grievances between Armenians and Azerbaijanis reemerged with a vengeance. In 1992, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, full-scale war broke out between the two independent states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Only in 1994 was a ceasefire established.

During the ceasefire regime that was established more than 20 years ago, nothing was done to reconcile the two rivalling nations. On the contrary, through mass media, history textbooks, the public commemoration of tragic historical events, images of the “other” as an

12 A copy of the letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party dated December 9, 1960, was obtained from the personal archive of Nazim Hajiyeve, head of the Department of Ideology of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party; a Russian translation of the article in the *Baykar* newspaper issue of October, 18, 1960, titled “The Greatest Present to the Anniversary” is published in: <[http://azeribooks.narod.ru/proza/aydin\\_gadjiyev/vse\\_ponyat.htm](http://azeribooks.narod.ru/proza/aydin_gadjiyev/vse_ponyat.htm)> (accessed May 12, 2016).

13 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (Russian State Archive of Modern History—RGANI), box 5, folder 31, file 172, pages 36–37.

enemy have been propagated. Today, anti-Armenian as well as anti-Azerbaijani propaganda is persistently kept at a high level. Intelligence services and prosecutor's offices of both countries are working hard in this direction. In April 2014, Azerbaijani journalist Rauf Mirgadirov, a correspondent for the Azerbaijani Russian-language newspaper *Zerkalo* and a supporter of "civic diplomacy" between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, was arrested in Turkey and deported to Azerbaijan where he was convicted of espionage for Armenia and sentenced to six years imprisonment.<sup>14</sup> Several months later, two political activists and critics of the Aliyev regime, Arif and Leyla Yunus, were arrested and charged with fraud, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and treason.<sup>15</sup> Interpreting the couples' arrest, mass media stressed Arif Yunus's Armenian origin and their "collaboration with the Armenian intelligence service".<sup>16</sup> A year later, the media circulated information about Rashad Mammadov (Martirosian), an owner of one of the largest companies in the country, AzImport, who was arrested because of his involvement in a scandal related to the International Bank of the Azerbaijan Republic. The public was not focused on discussing a financial or tax crime but Mammadov's ethnic origin, indicating that the Armenian minority has a luxurious life in Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup> Rumors spread through the media that Rashad Mammadov has been backed by Azerbaijani Prime Minister Artur Rasi-zadeh, also rumored to be half Armenian.

### The April War

Against this background of heightened political tensions, on the night of April 1 to April 2, 2016, military confrontation was renewed between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani officials and the mass media reported the Armenian forces' sneak attack and the Azerbaijani Army's retaliatory measures. These days were described as one of the most serious military clashes between the two nations since the start of the Karabakh war in 1992. Attention was paid to the military operation to liberate some strategic heights and the enemy's military, armament, and civilian casualties. The Azerbaijani population, even opposition leaders, expressed a deep wish to coalesce

around the republics' supreme commander-in-chief (president); the national flag's sale reached an apex within a few hours of the announcement of military operations; people marched with flags, crying the slogan "just command, Mister Supreme Commander-in-Chief!" The media and its broadcasts strengthened anti-Armenian propaganda, using unmasking photos and video footage of clashes in the recent past, especially of the Khochaly tragedy; scurrilous attacks from both sides were spread through social networking (Twitter, Facebook, V Kontakte, etc.)

Only a small part of the society could adequately react to the victims, interpreting the sudden fit of aggression as a political manipulation of the political elites. Ali Kerimli, leader of Popular Front of Azerbaijan, in criticizing Ilham Aliyev's revanchist sentiments has made several statements and addressed people via Facebook. He has also accused the political leadership of exacerbating the situation by hiding information about the real military casualties and keeping soldiers' funeral ceremonies from the public. A ceasefire declared on the fourth day of military operations was also severely denounced by the critics of the regime. In response, pro-governmental political parties and organizations arranged several day pickets and actions in front of Ali Kerimli's house with the slogan "Karabakh is ours and will be ours!"

Anti-Armenian attitudes are still high and evident in Azerbaijani society. Despite the critical economic situation, people approve and are proud of the serious expenditure on arms.<sup>18</sup> BBC Azerbaijani journalist Aleksey Manvelyan's blog entry on April 20, 2016, perfectly describes the psychological condition of both the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies: "Before struggling against corruption, money laundering, and officialdom tyranny, please think twice, otherwise any action that creates trouble for internal political power will be accompanied by 'external enemy's attacks'".<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontation is a classic example of extreme ethnic violence generated by complex causes. Ethnic hostility is being justified through historic memory and narrations; chauvinism is being spread by various political regimes' ideology; and politics are strengthening mistrust and ethnic hatred among the nations that have already promoted Armenian–Azerbaijani clashes for more than a hundred years. Educational programs and historical curricula based on narrations of

14 The sentence against Mirgadirov was suspended in March 2016 and he was released.

15 Leyla and Arif Yunus have since been released and left the country for medical care.

16 <<http://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2298756.html>>; <<http://haqqin.az/news/21826>> (accessed April 21, 2016).

17 <<http://metbuat.az/news/121750/bayraq-meydani-idaresini-kecmis-reisinin-kralseyagi-heyati-.html>> (accessed April 21, 2016); <<https://vetenim.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/anasi-erm%C9%99ni-f%C9%99rari-m%C9%99murun-xeyir-duasibas-nazird%C9%99n-g%C9%99lib/>> (accessed April 21, 2016).

18 <<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.715293>> (accessed April 21, 2016).

19 "Aleksey Manvelyanin blogu: Bize ne oldu?", April 20, 2016, <[http://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan/2016/04/160420\\_karabakh\\_manvelyan?ocid=socialflow\\_facebook%3FSThisFB](http://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan/2016/04/160420_karabakh_manvelyan?ocid=socialflow_facebook%3FSThisFB)> (accessed April 21, 2016).

hatred support official government ideology, spreading ethnic hostility. Scholars' studies, politicians' speeches, and mass media's broadcasts create an "enemy nation" image, constantly manipulating public opinion. The question of whether history should tell the truth or lie concerning the historical past or what part/piece of history should be publicly open is crucial for societies with unsteady democratic principles. Neither narratives of hatred themselves nor their political deployment could

be causes of the ethnic conflicts. Nations' right to self-determination and disputed territories' issues themselves also do not always lead to a bloody confrontation and genocide. However, when national memory, filled with hateful mythologies and directed by the state ideology, meets the political ambitions of internal and external actors, as happened in the Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontation, cultural differences become more visible and offences degenerate into violence.

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## A New Phase in the Karabakh Conflict

By Vicken Cheterian, Geneva

### **Abstract**

The "four-day war" in Karabakh in April 2016 was the result of a surprise attack by the Azerbaijani army. The fighting revealed that the military equilibrium has largely been maintained in spite of the massive military expenditure by Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev. The eruption of violence signals the end of the 1994 cease-fire and raises the question of whether it will lead to a new cycle of violence or stimulate diplomatic initiatives.

### **Introduction**

On the night of April 2, 2016, a full-scale war erupted in the Caucasus: Azerbaijani armed forces crossed the line of demarcation in a massive attack on three fronts of the Mountainous Karabakh front line using artillery, tanks, and air force. On the same day, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced that its forces "liberated" five strategic heights along the front line. The next day, Armenian military sources addressed the loss of eight areas along the conflict zone, although none more than 200–300 meters deep. In the first day of fighting, 30 soldiers were killed by both sides, while the final death count might be at a few hundred. Additionally, Karabakh defense sources spread images of a downed Azerbaijani helicopter, claiming a second one crashed on the Azeri side of the frontline and adding that its forces shot down two Israeli-made drones as well. Both sides have also lost dozens of tanks, revealing the intensity of the

fighting. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 48 hours after the start of the hostilities, Azerbaijani military sources announced a "unilateral ceasefire"<sup>1</sup>, yet on the ground, violent clashes continued for two more days, causing scores of casualties on both sides. Nationalist enthusiasm has gripped both the Azerbaijani and Armenian public, who display public support of their armies and their fight.

This was the worst military escalation since the cease-fire of 1994. The fact that the attack took place in several locations with combined arms, including ground troops, artillery and air force, reveals planning rather than a localized event that got out of hand. Why do we have this flare-up now of the Karabakh conflict? Who

1 "Azerbaijan takes unilateral decision to suspend military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh", *Report News Agency*, April 3, 2016, <<http://report.az/en/nagorno-karabakh/azerbaijan-takes-unilateral-decision-to-suspend-military-operations-in-nagorno-karabakh/>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

needs a new war in the Caucasus? What are the local mechanisms and what is the impact of external factors? Finally, how could this “four days-war” alter the Karabakh problem and enter this conflict into a new phase?

### Soviet Legacy

The Karabakh conflict dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a multi-ethnic Russian Empire entered a period of turbulence. In fact, the first major Armenian–Azeri violence dates back to the 1905 revolutionary period, when initial class solidarity quickly turned into ethno-national antagonism. In the aftermath of the collapse of Tsarism in 1917, independent Armenian and Azerbaijani republics emerged for the first time and, after a brief period of peace under the common umbrella of the Transcaucasian Federation, entered into a war over the control of towns and areas of mixed population: Nakhchivan, Zanzezour, and Karabakh. This war facilitated the Bolshevik take-over: when the Red Army invaded Azerbaijan in April 1920, it did not face any resistance as the entire Azeri army was deployed on the Karabakh front. The Bolshevik leaders imposed a compromise, which clearly served their interests of domination: They gave Zanzezour to Soviet Armenia, made Nakhchivan an “autonomous republic” but a part of Azerbaijan, and Karabakh an “autonomous region” that was still part of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan obtained the bigger share because it was bigger, it had strategic Baku oil, and also because of the Soviet alliance with the Turkish nationalists of Mustafa Kemal.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Soviet system failed to overcome the national divisions. Moreover, Soviet authoritarian rule and its hyper-centralized political system did not allow the development of local mechanisms of conflict resolution. Armenians complained that they were discriminated against under Azerbaijani rule: Nakhchivan had a 40 percent ethnic Armenian population in the early Soviet period but only 2 percent by the year the Karabakh conflict erupted in 1988. On February 20, 1988, encouraged by the new reform policies of the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Karabakh Soviet voted in favor of a resolution to transfer their region from Soviet Azerbaijan to neighboring Soviet Armenia. A week later, anti-Armenian massacres erupted hundreds of kilometers away in the industrial town of Sumgait, near Baku. What started as localized grievances would soon develop into a vio-

lent conflict, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would become a war between two sovereign states.

There are different interpretations of the causes of this conflict. One early interpretation is that Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalism clashed in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only to be stopped by the imposition of the heavy-handed Soviet order. However, once this Soviet totalitarian system collapsed, the old nationalist conflicts re-emerged.<sup>3</sup> “The nationalism of larger nations found a counterpart in the nationalism of national minorities,” writes Alexei Zverev.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this interpretation was that it neglected the impact of seven decades of Soviet rule in transforming the conflicts that had emerged following the collapse of the Tsarist Empire.

Another set of interpretations looks at the Karabakh conflict within the strict Soviet legacy arguing that Soviet policy choices and their failures shaped the emergence of Karabakh conflict as one among a series of ethno-territorial problems. In this sense, Karabakh was considered part of a broader tectonic change whereby Soviet institutional arrangements, with territorial divisions linked to ethnic particularism, had led to the strengthening of ethno-national identification, a force that surfaced at during the weakening and collapse of the USSR.<sup>5</sup> This school of thought sees the Karabakh conflict as part of a series of similar wars of Soviet succession that also plagued Georgia, Chechnya, Moldova and Tajikistan.

I have argued that while cultural nationalism was widespread in the Caucasus during the last two decades of Soviet rule, the emergence of social movements with a nationalist ideology was largely conditioned by the rapid disintegration of the Soviet totalitarian state and the security vacuum that it left behind, which was to be filled by various nationalist projects (those of the Union Republics as well as ethnic minorities within them). Yet the existence of nationalism is not a sufficient condition

2 For a historic background, see: Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat. Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations. The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations. The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 7–8. See also: Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule* (London: Routledge, 2010).

4 See Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988–1994”, in: Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 14.

5 For example, Svante Cornell has argued that autonomy was at the source of these conflicts, although the opposite argument could be made even more convincingly: it was the lack of real political autonomy that caused dissatisfaction, and violent conflicts erupted when the republican centres tried to repress the political identity of the autonomous entities by force, thus clashing with ethnic minorities. See: Svante Cornell, “Autonomy as a Source of Conflict. Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective”, *World Politics* 54, 2 (2002): 245–76.

for the emergence of violent wars. First, we have to consider that the newly emerging independent states chose to use excessive force to put down the social mobilization of ethnic minorities, transforming a political conflict into a military one. Second, all major conflicts in the Caucasus are the continuity of past, traumatic legacies that were never addressed. With sudden instability, the fear of the past re-emerged and the victim-perpetrator relationship cast its long shadow with thinly veiled threats of genocidal annihilation. Such examples can be drawn from the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict with the unresolved legacy of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, as well as Abkhaz fear of annihilation and Chechen memories of Stalinist deportations of 1944.<sup>6</sup>

### War and Diplomacy

A full-scale war erupted as the Soviet Union disintegrated by end of 1991 and Red Army battalions were withdrawn from Karabakh. The Armenians of Karabakh were encircled and under constant attack. Their only chance to survive was to go on the offensive, which is what they did. By the time of the cease-fire, they had taken over much of the Karabakh territories, linked Karabakh within Armenia, and also occupied seven Azerbaijani provinces, forcing the entire ethnic Azerbaijani population out of these areas.

The Armenian military victories can be largely explained by Azerbaijan's internal struggle. Each military defeat was conditioned by a power struggle within the Azerbaijani elite: the Brezhnevite ruler, Yaqub Mammadov, was replaced in 1991 by Ayaz Mutalibov, who lost power in March 1992 after a series of defeats to the nationalist opposition leader Abulfaz Elchibey. He was later overthrown following defeats in 1993 when the Soviet-era boss, Heydar Aliyev, came to power. On the opposite side, the Armenians showed an incredible national unity: even the transfer of power from Soviet party rule to the National Movement in 1989 happened without violence through parliamentary elections.

Aliyev also organized a military campaign but after its failure signed a cease-fire agreement in May 1994. The old but experienced Heydar Aliyev tried to achieve three objectives. First, he wanted to sign oil contracts with the West, which were completed in September 1994. Second, he wanted to sign a peace agreement with the Armenians and to resolve the Karabakh problem. He came very close to signing a peace agreement in 2001 on

the basis of recognizing Karabakh–Armenian self-determination in return for occupied territories with special status for Lachin and Kelbajar provinces, which divide Karabakh from Armenia proper. However, he faced strong internal opposition and backed out. Lastly, he wanted to pass the presidency to his inexperienced son, Ilham, which occurred after his death in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

### Ilham Aliyev Goes to War

Ilham Aliyev had no other source of legitimacy to rule Azerbaijan than being the son of Heydar Aliyev. For his first ten years in power, he was lucky: a major oil pipeline with the capacity of 1 million barrels per day was constructed in 2005, oil money started pouring in 2006, and world oil prices were high. Ilham Aliyev bought internal stability by distributing petrodollars among the Azerbaijani elite with lion's share going to his family, as has been revealed in the latest Panama Papers.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, Ilham Aliyev also took a hard-line position on Karabakh; he made the military budget of Azerbaijan equivalent to the entire state budget of Armenia. When he arrived to power in 2003, Azerbaijan spent \$175 million on defense; in 2015 the Azerbaijani military budget was \$4.8 billion. He also threatened that if the Armenians did not surrender Karabakh through negotiations, he would conquer that territory by war. Such threats have brought the diplomatic initiatives in search of a peaceful resolution to a complete stop. The Azerbaijani elite also gave lavish parties, spending millions on a Eurovision contest in 2011 or the European Games in 2015.

Yet Azerbaijan's party seems to be over. Oil output started declining prematurely. In 2012, Ilham Aliyev accused British Petroleum of having “made mistakes” leading to fall of Caspian oil production urged the company to restore production capacity. Even worse, global oil process collapsed in 2014, dropping from over \$110 per barrel in June of that year to below \$40 in March 2016. The fall in price created a severe economic crisis in oil-dependent Azerbaijan. The Azeri national currency lost a third of its value by December 2015, igniting mass protests throughout the country. Many analysts have drawn a parallel between the increasing internal problems of Azerbaijan and the escalation of violence on the Karabakh front, implying that the military offensive could be considered an attempt to divert Azerbai-

6 See: Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus. Russia's Troubled Frontier* (London and New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009). See also by the author: Vicken Cheterian, *Open Wounds. Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2015), 279–88.

7 See Vicken Cheterian, “Karabakh Conflict after Kosovo. No Way Out?”, *Nationalities Papers* 40, 5 (2012): 703–20.

8 Will Fitzgibbon, Miranda Patrucic and Marcos Garcia Rey, “How Family that Runs Azerbaijan Built an Empire of Hidden Wealth”, *The Panama Papers*, April 4, 2016, <<https://panamapapers.icij.org/20160404-azerbaijan-hidden-wealth.html>> (accessed May 20, 2016).



jani public opinion away from internal socio-economic problems. Yet the April war could also reveal a different tension in Baku: with decline of Caspian oil, Azerbaijan's strategic importance will equally decrease in time, hence the sense of urgency.

### Turkey and Russia

The "four-days-war" erupted at a time of heightened crisis between Ankara and Moscow, following the downing of a Sukhoi bomber by Turkey in northern Syria in November 2015. Although some attributed the recent Karabakh war to external, specifically Turkish–Russian tension, one should exclude external roles in triggering the fighting. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe the role and influence of the two powers over Karabakh.

Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan made a sensational and one-sided declaration saying that his country was with Azerbaijan "to the end", adding: "We pray our Azerbaijani brothers will prevail in these clashes."<sup>9</sup> Such an inflammatory position comes from the head of a state responsible for genocidal massacres against Armenians during World War I. Yet one need not exaggerate Ankara's impact on the Karabakh conflict as Turkey is a minor player; the large majority of Azerbaijan's arms come from Russia.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian position is equally puzzling. It has a defense alliance with Armenia, but it sells large quantities of arms to Azerbaijan. Anti-Russian sentiments developed in Armenia after Putin pressed Yerevan to abandon seeking rapprochement with the EU and join Moscow's Eurasian customs union. A week after the recent fighting in Karabakh, demonstrators marched towards the Russian embassy chanting, "Shame!" or "Free, independent Armenia!" Such developments are new in a country traditionally known to be Russophile. There is a new generation in Armenia that links local corrupt authorities with Russian political institutions. Russia's prime minister defended arms sales to Azerbaijan as well as Russian military support to Armenia by saying that it aimed to preserve "the military balance" in the South Caucasus. Yet Russia's cynical policies could undermine its institutions and raise questions about the value of its military alliances.

### Conclusion

The recent fighting has revealed that the cease-fire agreement of May 1994, which preserved relative peace on

the Karabakh warfront, is gone. Azerbaijan is dissatisfied with the outcome of the first Karabakh war. Instead of diplomacy and negotiations, in the last ten years it has chosen military escalation as a way to change the status quo. The April war revealed the new military balance around the Karabakh conflict after a decade of the Azerbaijani oil boom and arms purchases. It showed that the Azerbaijani side does have technological advantages and more advanced weapons systems, such as the Israeli drones it has used, yet this advantage failed to change the balance of power. The Armenian side revealed weaknesses in its intelligence (its defense leadership was taken off-guard by the Azerbaijani attack) and were surprised by Azerbaijani high-tech warfare; yet in spite of these weaknesses, the Armenians showed comparative coordination between the various sections of its armed forces and managed to hold the line. Karabakh defense planners are certainly evaluating failures of the April war, and in the next round, the element of Azerbaijani surprise will certainly be reduced.

What comes next? After the failure of its blitzkrieg, Baku could choose diplomacy. Moscow is already pushing for a new initiative aiming to bring Russian peacekeepers to the Karabakh conflict zone and profiting from the divisions among its Trans-Caucasian neighbors to project its influence over them. Yet both Armenia and Azerbaijan are skeptical towards the former colonial overlords' plans and thus far have resisted Russian plans for stationing peacekeepers in the Karabakh theatre.

Another consequence of the April 2016 war is the radicalization of Armenian public opinion and their rejection of territorial concessions, namely, the return of the Azerbaijani-occupied territories in return for Karabakh's self-determination. The argument heard even among civil society groups favorable for a peaceful solution is against the return of the Azerbaijani occupied provinces, which are considered the only possible security guarantee against future military attacks. Any peace deal needs concessions from both sides built on trust. Currently, this trust is broken and will need both time and effort to be bridged once again.

The other possible medium-term development is that Azerbaijan will change strategy and opt for a long-term war of attrition<sup>11</sup>. Azerbaijan has a larger population and resources compared to Karabakh and Armenia together. Yet such a strategy risks provoking an Armenian military response, including counter-attacks on Azerbaijan proper. The previous Karabakh war (1991–94) was the

9 "Nagorno-Karabakh Clash. Turkey Backs Azeris 'to the End' against Armenia", *BBC News*, April 3, 2016, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35953358>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

10 Joshua Kucera, "Report. Azerbaijan Gets 85 Percent of its Weapons from Russia", *Eurasianet*, March 17, 2015, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72581>> (accessed May 20, 2016).

11 Zaur Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan's War of Attrition: A New Strategy to Resolve the Karabakh Conflict?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13, 67 (2016), <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5btnews%5d=45281&no\\_cache=1#VytbEvWGw1](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btnews%5d=45281&no_cache=1#VytbEvWGw1)> (accessed May 20, 2016).

result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. New state institutions were emerging and struggling to determine their power and control over territory and population. Today, the nature of the conflict is different. Those new states have been formed, and military units follow strict command structures: it is the decision of presidents that leads to the start of a new war or the moment of cease-fire. War is their political choice and their failure to

make peace. It is the result of long-term policies of militarization, hate-speech, and military escalation that is creating an environment where war is favored over genuine negotiations.

In case current trends are not reversed, we are getting closer to a second war in Karabakh. The previous war (1991–94) caused the deaths of 35,000 people. The next one could be much worse.

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

By Sergey Rumyansev, Braunschweig / Tbilisi

### 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>1</sup> 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”.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, experts from the International Crisis Group noted a high degree of the danger of a resumption of the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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”.<sup>5</sup> The Nagornyi 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>6</sup>

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 Mammadov (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 Qambar, 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 Mahmudlu 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 Maclis).

### 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> grade of comprehensive school T. Veliev et al., *İstoriia Azerbaidžana. Uchebnik dlia 10 klassa obşhe-obrazovatelnoi shkoli* (Baku: Chashioglu, 2004), 1, and the textbook for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade of comprehensive school T. Gaffarov et al., *İstoriia Azerbaidžana. Uchebnik dlia 11 klassa obşheobrazovatelnoi shkoli* (Baku: Chashioglu, 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>7</sup>

This type of description of these events dates the origins of the current Karabakh conflict back to at least the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> The official version of these events was reflected in a decree issued by President Heydar Aliyev on March 26, 1998, which declared the 31<sup>st</sup> of March the day of the “genocide” of Azerbaijanis. The history textbook for the first year of history studies in secondary school (5<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>10</sup>

The story is supplemented with the full text of the “Decree of the President of the Azerbaijani Republic ‘On the genocide of Azerbaijanis’”.<sup>11</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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*

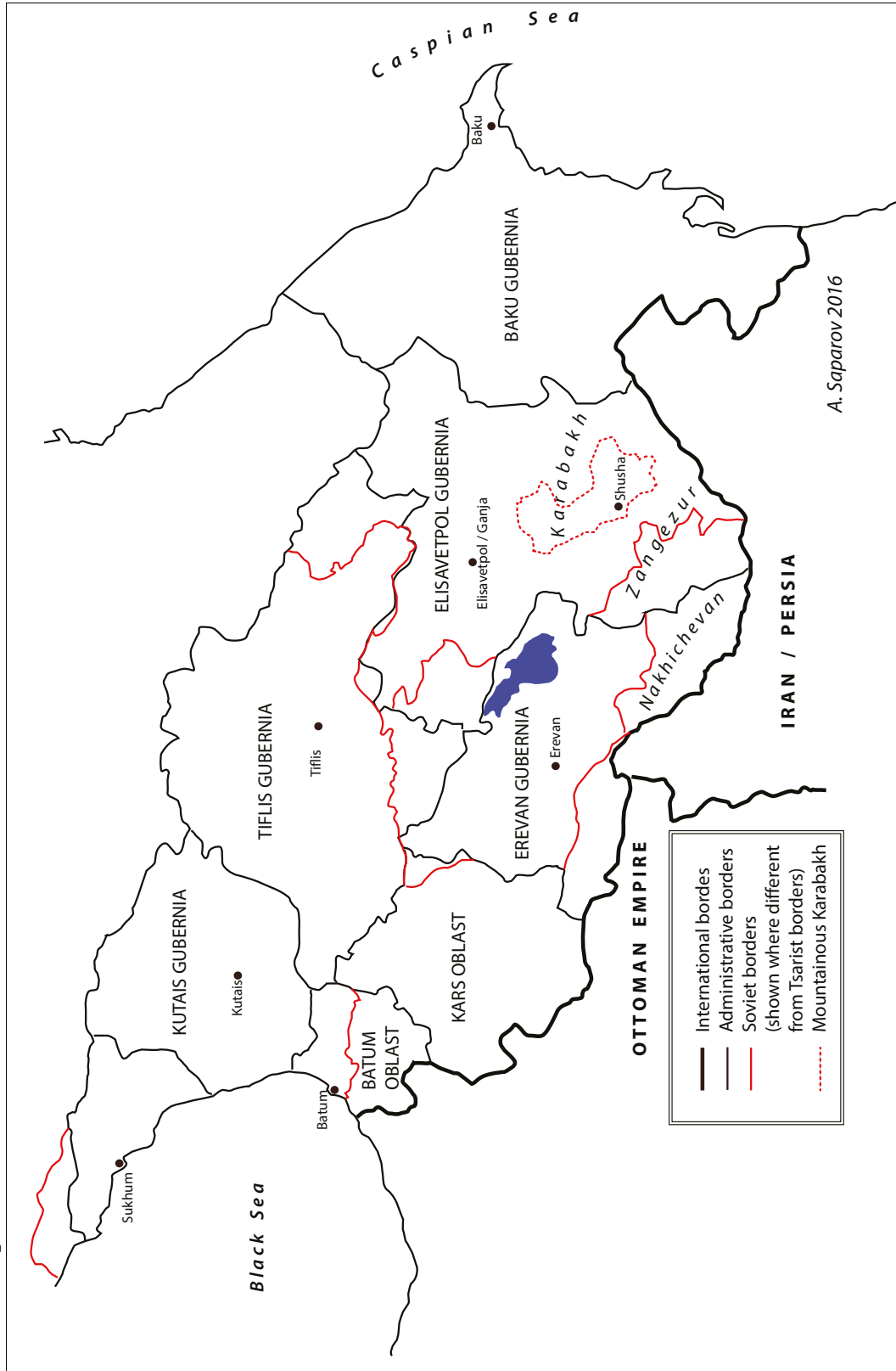
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## Maps of the South Caucasus from the Russian Empire to the Present Day

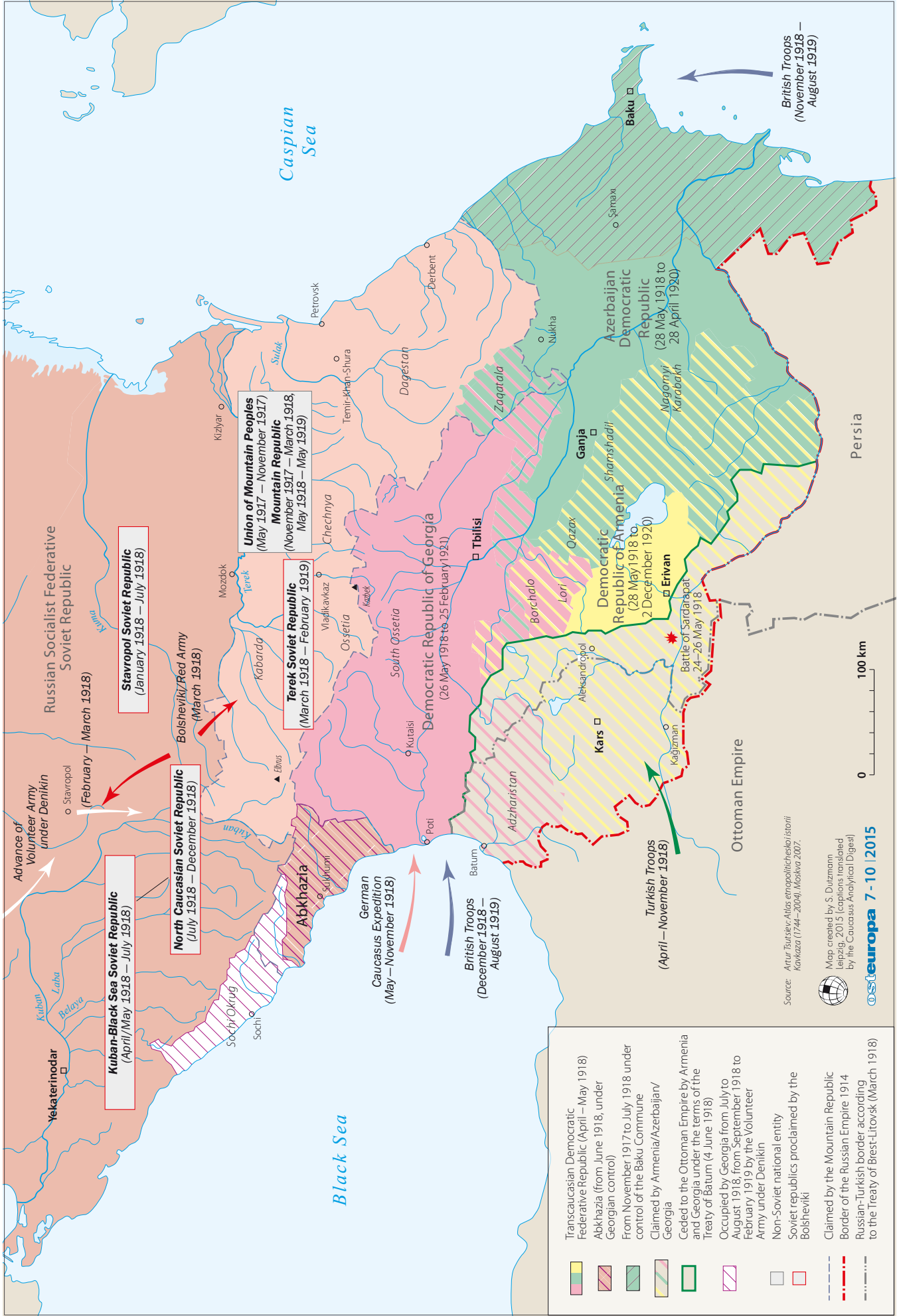
Russian Imperial and Soviet Borders in the South Caucasus



Map created by Arsène Saparov



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

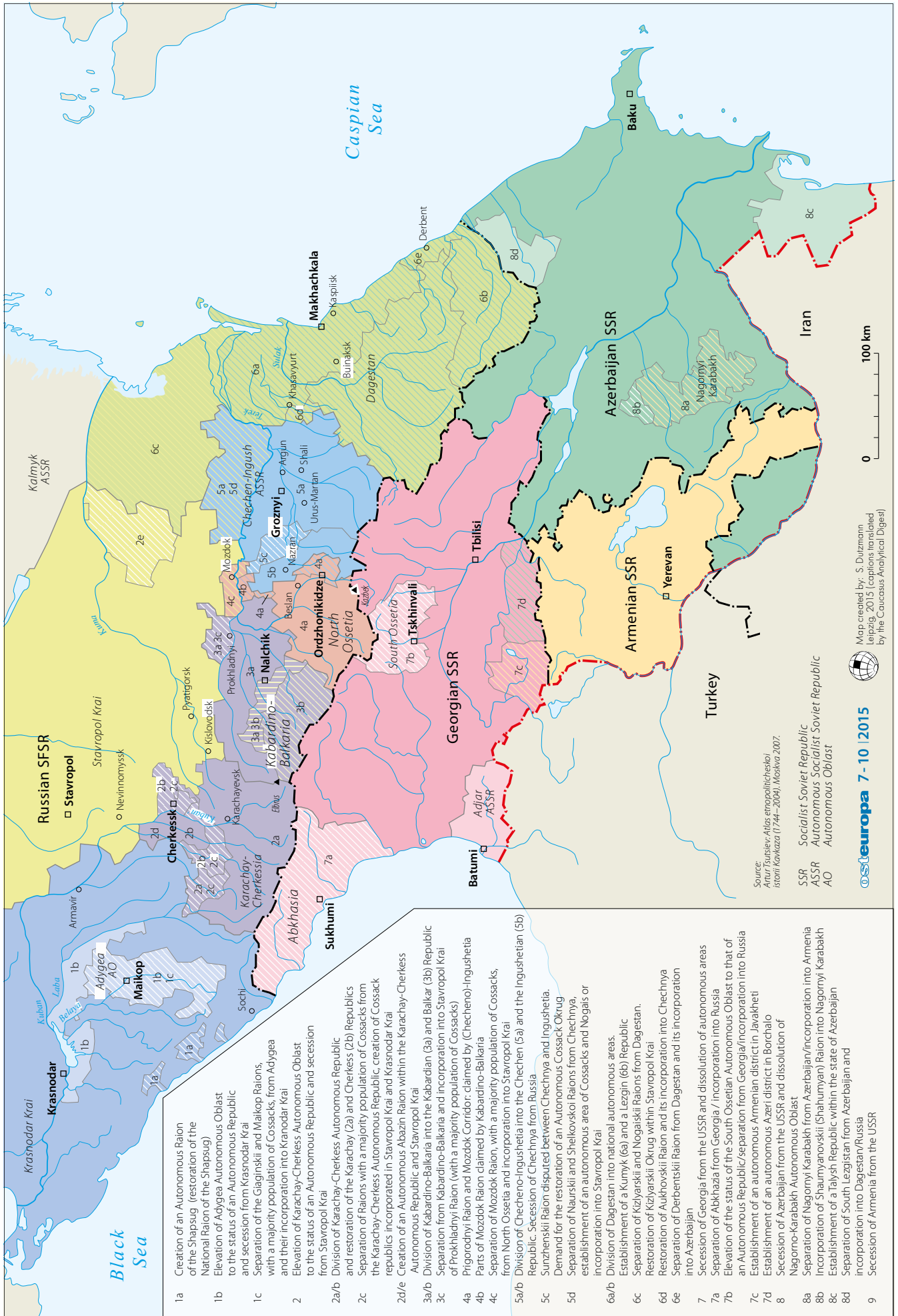


Source: Artur Tutsiev, *Atlas etnopoliticheskoj istorii Kavkaza (1744–2004)*, Moskva 2007.

Map created by S. Duizmann Leipzig, 2015 (captions translated by the Caucasus Analytical Digest)

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



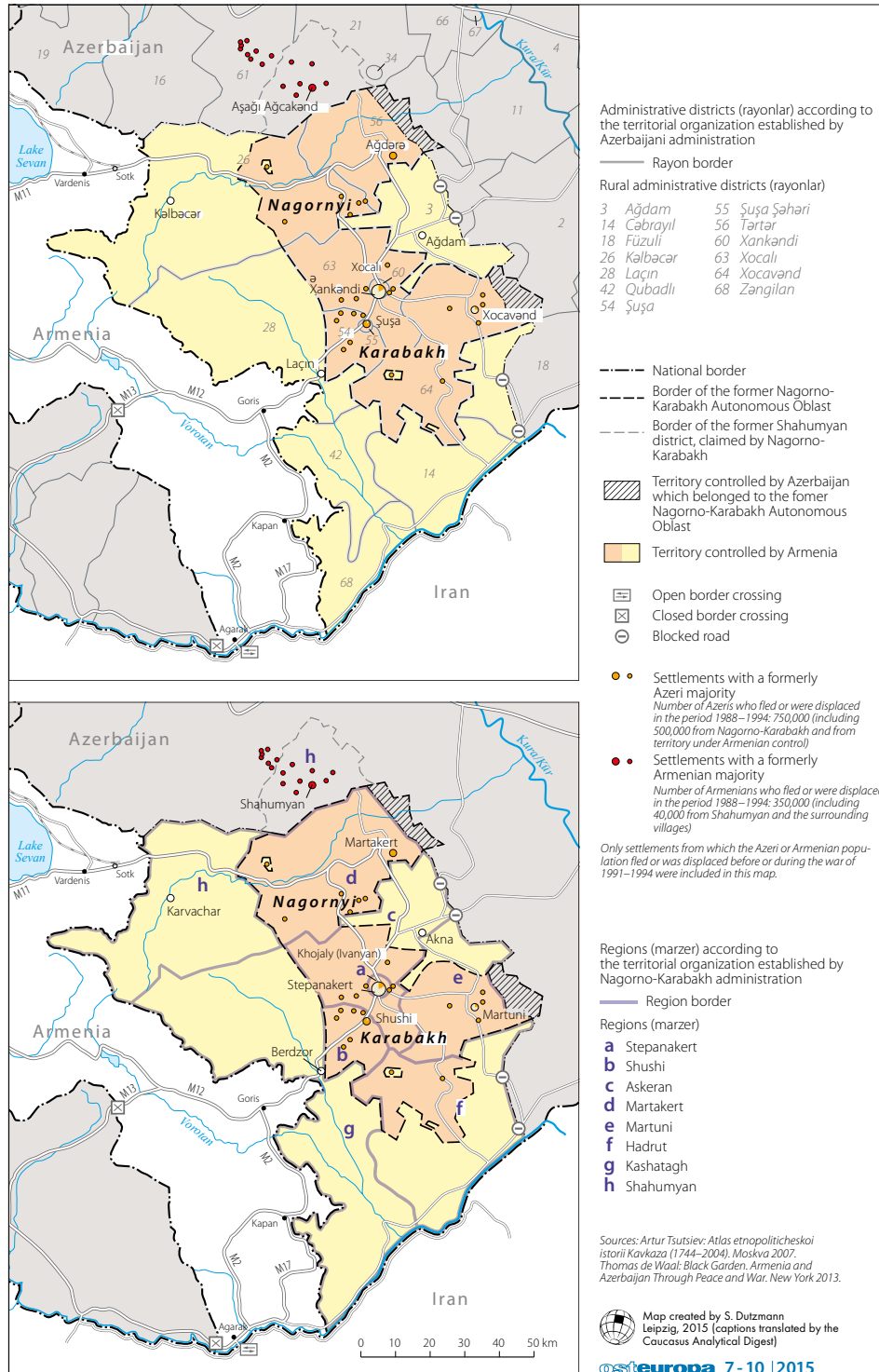
Map created by: S. Duzmann Leipzig, 2015 (captions translated by the Caucasus Analytical Digest)

Source: Artur Tsutsiev: Atlas etnopoliticheskoj istorii Kavkaza (1744–2004), Moskva 2007.

SSR Socialist Soviet Republic  
 ASSR Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic  
 AO Autonomous Oblast

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### Nagorny Karabakh General Map



## CHRONICLE

**From 13 April to 10 June 2016**

13 April 2016	Hundreds of Armenians protest in the streets of Yerevan against Russian weapon sales to Azerbaijan
14 April 2016	Georgia's Constitutional Court rules that Georgian surveillance agencies' unrestricted access to telecom operators' networks is unconstitutional
18 April 2016	The head of Armenia's State Bailiffs Service resigns following reports of alleged links to offshore companies revealed in the Panama Papers
18 April 2016	Georgian authorities detain six Georgians and Armenians suspected of trying to sell uranium
19 April 2016	Two prominent Azerbaijani human rights activists, Leyla and Arif Yunus, arrive in the Netherlands after having been granted permission to leave the country
21 April 2016	Armenian activists protest against the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov by marching from Liberty Square to the Russian Embassy in Yerevan
21 April 2016	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili meets with French President François Hollande during an official visit to Paris to discuss the implementation of Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU
23 April 2016	In Yerevan, thousands of Armenians commemorate the anniversary of the beginning of the mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey
26 April 2016	U.S. Vice President Joe Biden meets with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili at the White House and congratulates Georgia on the progress made over the 25 years since independence
27 April 2016	An ethnic Armenian from Kazakhstan is sentenced to jail in Russia for repeatedly trying to join Daesh (Islamic State) in Syria
2 May 2016	Baku and Yerevan accuse each other of artillery attacks in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict
5 May 2016	The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) buys 20 million US dollars (USD) as the Georgian lari (GEL) continues to rise against the US dollar
6 May 2016	The Russian Foreign Ministry criticizes the upcoming joint military exercises between Georgia and the United States as a "provocative step"
10 May 2016	A Stalin bust is covered in pink paint by local activists in Georgia
11 May 2016	Joint military exercises of US, UK and Georgian troops named "Noble Partner 2016" begin near Tbilisi
15 May 2016	Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey meet in the Azerbaijani city of Gabala and discuss holding military exercises in a trilateral framework
16 May 2016	Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Vienna to discuss a possible settlement of the conflict over the disputed region of Nagorny Karabakh
16 May 2016	A Tbilisi city court sentences five former Defense Ministry officials to prison on charges of financial mismanagement
17 May 2016	The 10 <sup>th</sup> World Congress of Families bringing together Christians from around the world starts in Georgia's capital Tbilisi
18 May 2016	Dozens of Georgian prisoners serving life sentences start a hunger strike to demand that the amnesty law be changed to have their sentences reduced
20 May 2016	The Azerbaijani parliament approves a proposal to grant amnesty to thousands of prisoners
22 May 2016	Several leading figures of the Georgian oppositional United National Movement party are beaten up close to a polling station in the village of Kortskheli in the Zugdidi municipality
25 May 2016	Azerbaijani journalist Khadija Ismayilova is released from prison and vows to continue her journalism work
26 May 2016	Thousands of people celebrate 25 years of Georgia's independence in the capital Tbilisi
26 May 2016	The breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia postpones a referendum on joining the Russian Federation until after the presidential elections in the region next year
30 May 2016	Former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili says that he will start campaigning for the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GDDG) party ahead of the October parliamentary elections
2 June 2016	A ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) orders Azerbaijan to pay compensations to the prominent human rights activists Leyla and Arif Yunus for "inadequate medical treatment"
2 June 2016	Germany's Bundestag declares the mass killings of ethnic Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 1915 a genocide

3 June 2016	China's Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli meets with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili during an official visit to Georgia. Kvirikashvili declares that the deepening of ties with China is an "important priority" for Georgia
3 June 2016	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili issues a decree confirming 08 October 2016 as date for Georgia's parliamentary elections
5 June 2016	Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli visits Georgian troops in Afghanistan in the third visit since taking her position as Minister
7 June 2016	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev says during a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin that the Nagorny Karabakh cease-fire "is not stable, it is fragile" and that he wants a peaceful solution to the conflict
8 June 2016	Czech President Milos Zeman says during a visit to Yerevan that he will ask the Czech parliament to adopt a resolution recognizing the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide
9 June 2016	Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili says that he hopes that the visa liberalization process will be finalized before Georgia's parliamentary elections in October 2016
10 June 2016	EU ministers discuss visa liberalization for Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey and Kosovo without reaching a decision at the meeting in Luxembourg

*Compiled by Lili Di Puppò*

*For the full chronicle since 2009 see <[www.laender-analysen.de/cad](http://www.laender-analysen.de/cad)>*

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