

THE WORLD IN PAGES

NAGORNO KARABAKH: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A HOMELAND



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FROM THE EDITORS/FOUNDERS

After many months of researching, reading, interviewing and editing, we present to you the third featured edition of the World in Pages magazine, “Nagorno Karabakh: The Making and Unmaking of a Homeland”.

In this edition, we take you through Nagorno-Karabakh’s complex history and understand what has shaped the situation today. We go through the layered history of the region, the wars that have and continue to shape its borders and its demographics. We want to unpack the historical roots of this conflict, its human cost and the changing regional power dynamics that continue to affect it today.

Our journey through this picturesque region sheds light on the unfortunately overlooked conflict that has been cyclically going on for years, and attempts to give a voice to those affected by this conflict and provide a comprehensive guide to those who want to learn. Through perspectives and analysis from highly qualified professors, ministers, and experts, we bring you an edition to both inform and humanise a conflict that is rarely talked about.

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all professors, leaders and experts who shared their knowledge and expertise to enrich this edition. This edition would not have been possible without your analysis and outlook.



Videep Agarwal



Dheer Bhandary

DISCLAIMER

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is a highly sensitive and complex issue grounded in decades of history and culture. In preparing this edition, we have made every effort to ensure accuracy, fairness and neutral analysis.

The situation in Nagorno Karabakh is rapidly evolving, and new developments may alter the context of the information presented here. This publication does not take sides or promote any political, ethnic or national perspective.

Our goal is to inform and raise awareness about globally overlooked conflicts and encourage readers to recognise and advocate for such issues. We urge readers to read through the edition for a comprehensive understanding of this immensely complex conflict.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the experts who have generously shared their knowledge, enriching our magazine with invaluable insights.



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Dr. Adam Smith is the Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences in Anthropology at Cornell University. His research explores how everyday objects, landscapes, and built environments shape political life across time. He co-founded the Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), which monitors and documents endangered and damaged cultural heritage using high-resolution satellite imagery. Dr. Smith also co-directs Project ArAGATS, a long-term archaeological initiative in Armenia. He is the author of *The Political Machine* (Princeton University Press) and co-editor of *Fitful Histories* and *Unruly Publics*. His work has appeared in *Current Anthropology*, *Antiquity*, and the *American Journal of Archaeology*. In 2023, Dr. Smith was awarded the Falling Walls Science Breakthrough of the Year in Social Sciences for his work.



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SPECIAL THANKS

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Dr. Audrey Altstadt is a Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, teaching Soviet history with concentrations in Soviet nationalities, specifically Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Dr Altstadt has authored *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford University Press), *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920-1940* (Routledge), and *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (Columbia University Press). Dr. Altstadt has been the recipient of grants from institutions such as the Woodrow Wilson Centre, United States Institute of Peace, and the Davis Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. She has also served as a consultant to agencies including Freedom House, the U.S. Department of State, and the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

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SPECIAL THANKS

09



DR. DINA GUSEJNOVA

Dr. Dina Gusejnova is an Associate Professor in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her research explores modern European intellectual history, with emphasis on war, displacement, and cosmopolitan thought. She has published *European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917–1957* (Cambridge University Press) and edited *Cosmopolitanism in Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan). Dr. Gusejnova is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and the Higher Education Academy, alongside being an Honorary Research Associate of the Centre for Transnational History at University College London (UCL). She also co-hosts the *International History Now* podcast and co-founded the University of New Europe, which unites and sustains students, scholars, and cultural workers in danger.



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Dr. Nona Shahnazarian is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences. She has extensive field experience in the Caucasus, having published on gender, development, war, migration and diaspora. She was also a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (CREES) at Stanford University, and conducted a research project titled: "Mutual Accusations of Ethnic Cleansing in the Azeri-Armenian Conflict: Memory Wars and Emerging State Ideologies." Her research has deeply contributed to the enhancement of scholarly knowledge about memory, identity, and conflict in the South Caucasus.

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Further Contributions

We would also like to extend our appreciation to our fellow peers who contributed through proofreading, revising, and providing feedback. Special thanks to:

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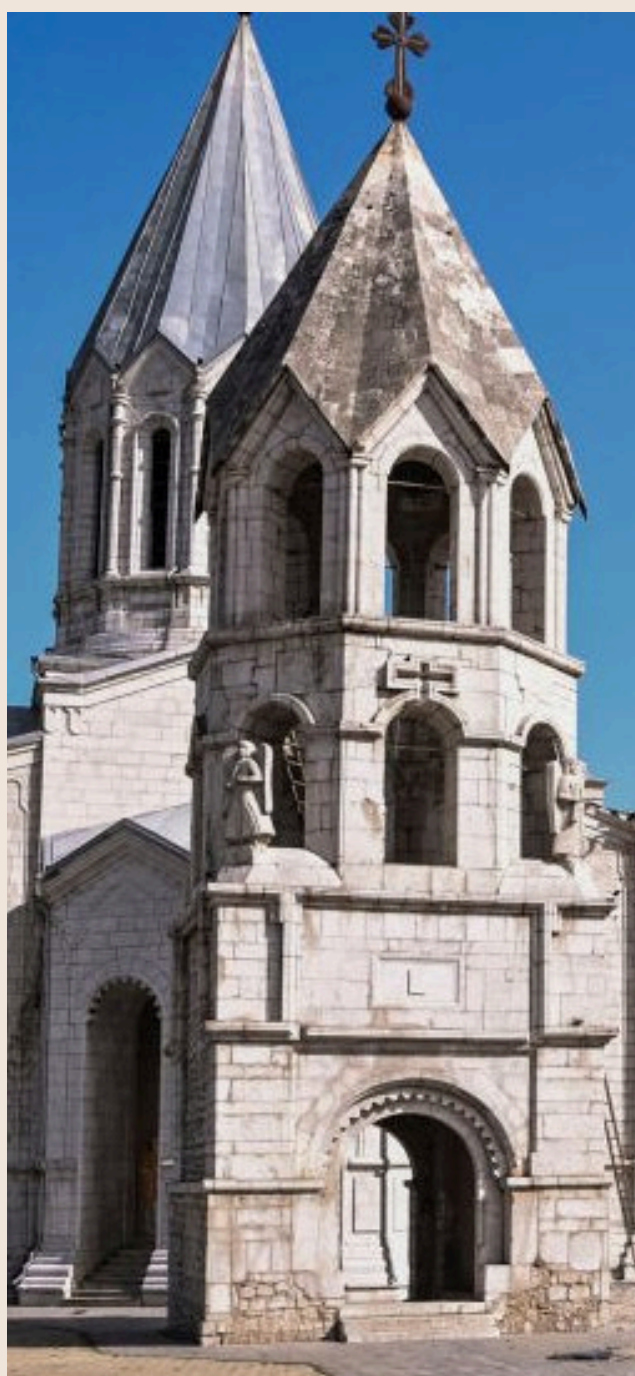
INTRODUCTION



Source: Al Jazeera



Source: The New York Times



Holy Saviour Cathedral

Source: BBC

Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous region in the southeastern South Caucasus, covering around 4,400 square kilometres and home to only a few hundred thousand people, this relatively small region has been a melting pot of different cultures through time, from historically significant ruins to some of the first churches in the world.

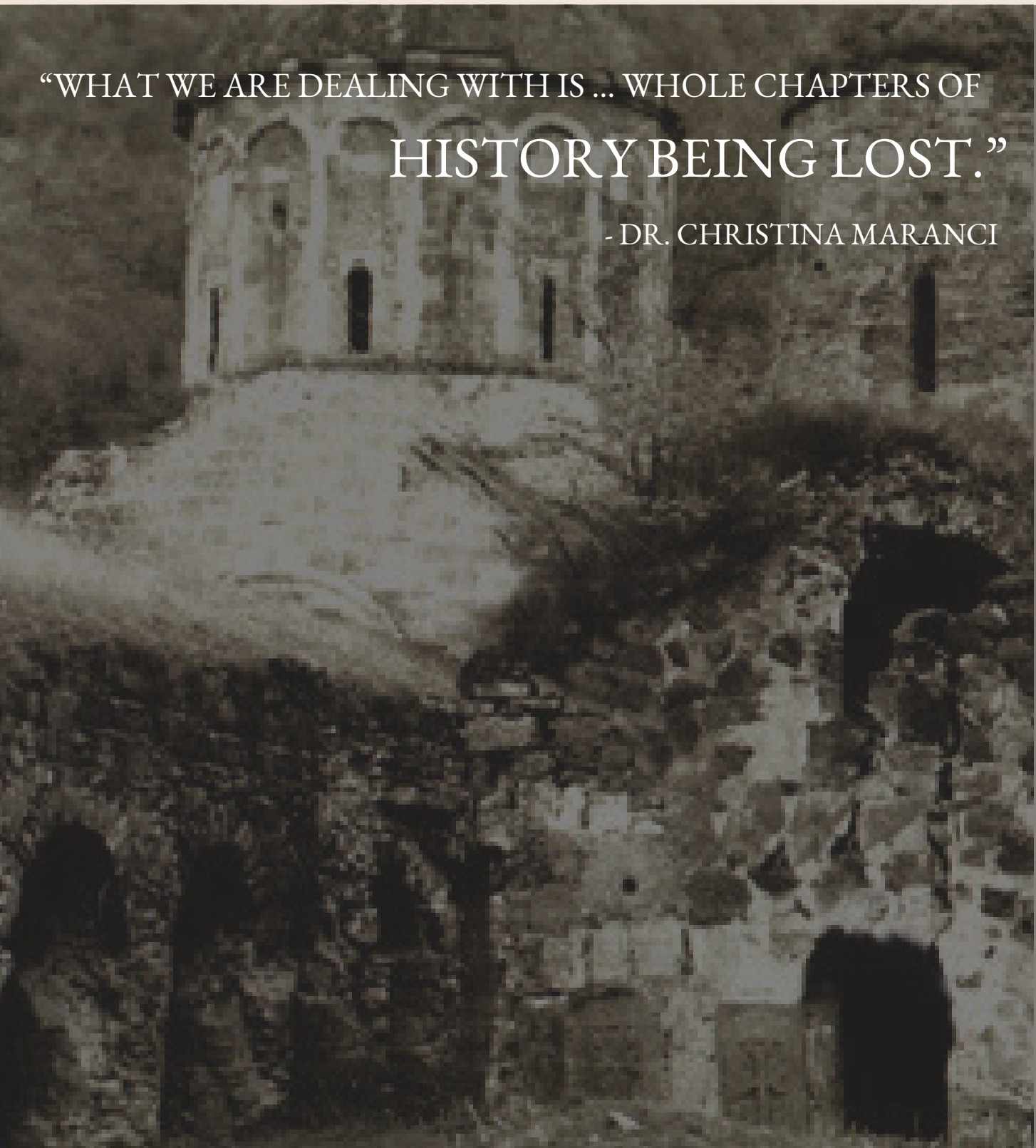
The incredibly powerful forces that have played out across its mountains, plains and villages belie its size. From the Ottoman Empire to the USSR, the region has seen most of the world's great powers involved in some way. The last three decades have been particularly dominated by conflict. The collapse of the soviet union led to a full-scale war in the 1990s, and a second round of fighting then occurred in 2020 and 2023.

This continuous conflict has opened and reopened the questions of sovereignty, power, and the fate of civilians caught in the conflict. Since 2023, there has been a cycle of escalation and reversal, and each causes the displacement of civilians, destruction of cultural sites and heritage, and death. This edition of the World in Pages looks to build understanding and shed greater light on this issue. It looks at Nagorno-Karabakh's complicated history, what's at stake and the path towards peace.

NAGORNO KARBAKAH'S EPOCHS

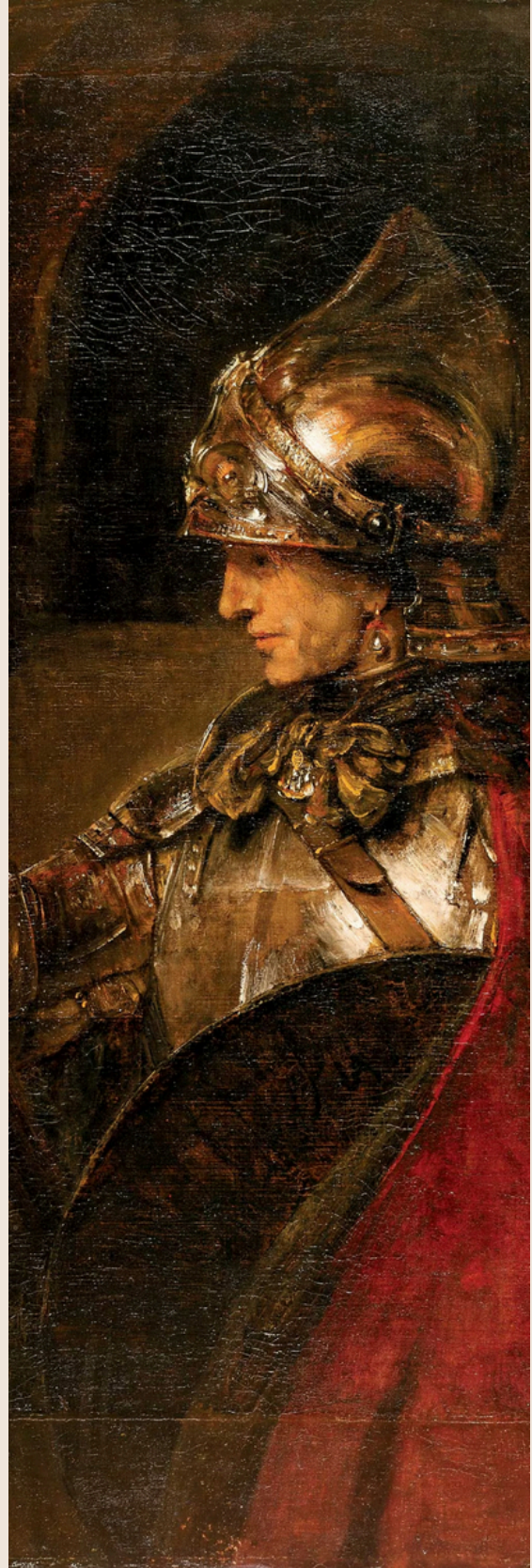
“WHAT WE ARE DEALING WITH IS ... WHOLE CHAPTERS OF
HISTORY BEING LOST.”

- DR. CHRISTINA MARANCI



CAUCASIAN ALBANIA TO THE SAFAVID STATE

Since the 4th century BCE, the area of Azerbaijan today has been known as the kingdom of Caucasian Albania (Minorsky 504). Southern parts of Azerbaijan were known as the Ancient Media (Kazemzadeh 4). During this period, Alexander the Great invaded Cyrus the Great's Achaemenid Empire in 334 BCE, and occupied Media's capital in 330 BCE (Walbank), which had made Ancient Media one of its provinces. Alexander made Macedonian commander Peithon the satrap (governor) of southern Media (Britannica), leaving the north to Atropates, a Persian nobleman who was previously also in control of the province under the Achaemenidi occupation (Karakoç 1004). After Alexander the Great died (323 BCE), with his empire disintegrating subsequently, Media was divided into two parts: Media Minor (northwestern region) and Greater Media (eastern region) (Karakoç 1004). Atropatenes remained the satrap of Media Minor, and eventually established Atropatene. The territory of modern-day Mountains Karabakh (Artsakh) belonged to Caucasian Albania by 1 CE. In the north, Caucasian Albania remained autonomous, despite brief invasions by Romans in the first century CE and "became a vassal of Sassanid Persia" in the later times (Karakoç 1004). Caucasian Albanian tribes spoke indigenous Caucasian and Turkic languages, becoming amongst the first people to adopt Christianity in the 4th century CE (Karakoç 1004). Artsakh was ruled by Christian Albanian princes (Dowsett), while the eastern plain of Karabakh consisted of Albanians mixed with Turkic speaking populations.



Alexander the Great

Source: National Geographic

CAUCASIAN ALBANIA TO THE SAFAVID STATE

Artsakh was ruled by Christian Albanian princes (Dowsett), while the eastern plain of Karabakh consisted of Albanians mixed with Turkic speaking populations.

Caucasian Albania was first conquered by Muslim Arabs during the reign of Uthman ibn Affan – the third caliph of Islam. Ancient Romans and Greeks referred to the area as Albania (Kırzioğlu). However, Muslim Arabs called it “al-Ran” or “Arran,” after capturing it (Özaydın 597). The Arran territory included Derbent, Shamakhi and Tbilisi (Togan 596). Later, during the Great Seljuk conquest in mid 11th century CE, the Caucasus observed mass Oghuz Turkic migration, with the Christian Albanian majority region witnessing a wave of incoming Muslim Turkic nomads (Swietochowski 1). The Seljuk Empire ruler during the 11th century CE, Seljukid Sultan Alp Arslan, selected Arran as a shelter for the Turkic nomads, seeking refuge during the winter months (Karakoç 1005). Under his command in 1064, the Seljuk Empire took control of Ani, which acted as a buffer zone between the rival empires of Byzantium and the Great Seljuks. This act of aggression directly fuelled a major escalation in the conflict, ultimately leading to the Battle of Manzikert seven years later in 1071 which took the lives of up to 8,000 (Peter).



Battle of Manzikert

Source: The History of Byzantium

With Alp Arslan defeating Byzantine Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes in the Battle, the Seljuk Turks widened their empire across all of Armenia and the South Caucasus (Karakoç 1005). After his death in 1072, his son and successor, Malik Shah I, made the area beneficial to the Turkmen tribes, appointing his cousin, Kubettin Ismail, as the governor of Arran (Karakoç 1005). Meanwhile, Yaquti, father of Kutbettin Ismail, became a governor general of all of Azerbaijan under the Seljuk rule (Sevim 103).

CAUCASIAN ALBANIA TO THE SAFAVID STATE



Malik Shah I

Source: World History Encyclopedia

The time After Malik Shah's death, his son Muhammad Tapar took the area as iqta (Demirci) from his brother, and captured all of Arran. The iqta was a medieval system where a ruler would assign the right to collect revenue from a piece of land (an iqta) to an officer or soldier (iqtdar) instead of a direct cash salary. When Malik Shah died in 1092, his passing marked a decisive transformation in how the Seljuks' power was exercised in the region. Even during his reign, Seljuk pressure on Georgia and its neighboring territories had intensified through repeated military campaigns, continual Turkmen migrations, and the appointment of Seljuk governors across Arran and Azerbaijan. However, after his death, internal Seljuk succession struggles weakened control, allowing regional commanders to govern territories. Muhammad Tapar's consolidation of Arran as an iqta exemplified this shift. This fragmentation directly altered the regional balance of power.

As Seljuk cohesion declined, the Kingdom of Georgia - under King David IV - undertook massive military and administrative reforms that enabled the transition from defensive survival to active reconquest. Georgian victories at Trialeti (1110) and Rakhsi (1118), culminated in the decisive Battle of Didgori in 1121, which ended Seljuk dominance in the central Caucasus and the sustained military pressure on Georgia (The Collector). The defeat exposed the vulnerabilities of the Seljuk system, particularly its reliance on loosely coordinated allies and semi-nomadic forces, accelerating the erosion of Seljuk authority in the region (The Collector). While successor Seljuk states continued to contest control over Arran and neighboring regions throughout the 12th century, their rule remained fragmented and unstable, leaving the region exposed to new external threats by the early 13th century. In fact, the period between 1220 and 1232 was characterized by several Mongol invasions. In 1236, unable to fend off Mongol attacks, Armenians and Georgians both accepted Mongol dominance (Karakoç 1005). However, the Mongol Empire too fell apart after the death of Mongke Khan in 1259, and Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulagu Khan, founded the "Ilkhanate" in the southwestern territory of the former empire (Karakoç 1005). Ilkhante's summer capital was set in Arran, as the empire's territory covered historical Azerbaijan (Karakoç 1005).

CAUCASIAN ALBANIA TO THE SAFAVID STATE



Battle of Ankara

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Ilkhanid rulers spent the winter months in the same region as well. Throughout this era, the Eastern Caucasus also experienced a rise in Kipchak Turkic tribes from Central Asia (Taşkıran 58). Moreover, the Artsakh region of Arran also became known as Karabakh by the Turkic tribes (Walker 92).

Turkic migration continued into the later 14th century, when the Timurids, a Turco-Mongol empire, reigned over the Karabakh region. Against the Ottomans, Timur (the ruler of the Timurid dynasty) used Karabakh as a winter camp for his forces (Karakoç 1006). His campaign against Antioch culminated in the Battle of Ankara of 1402, where Timurid's forces defeated the Ottoman army (Bunting). After this, he brought nearly 50,000 Turks from Anatolia and Syria, settling them in Karabakh (Bala 213). The dominance of the Timurids was gradually replaced by the Qara Qoyunlu (Black Sheep) Turks, who engaged in fierce and bloody fights until 1434 where they both agreed to a truce (Karakoç 1006). Jihan Shah, leader of the Qara Qoyunlus, was also the first to bestow the title of Malik (Melik) upon local Armenian feudals. Moreover, an all-Armenian Catholicosate (Papalığı et al.) was also established during his rule. Throughout this period, along with the rest of Azerbaijan, Karabakh was undergoing an immense militant religious movement, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Safavid Empire by Shah Ismail I. After defeating the last Aq Qoyunlu ruler near Sharur (present-day Nakhchivan), Ismail Safavi was enthroned as the Shah of Azerbaijan in July of 1501 (Sarwar 37).

SAFAVID-OTTOMAN RIVALRY AND THE KARABAKH KHANATE



First Ottoman Safavid War

Source: History Map

After defeating the Aq Qoyunlu, Shah Ismail established the Shiite branch of Islam as a unique official religion of his state (Price 65), and made Azerbaijani the formal language of the Safavid court (Savory 213). Throughout the 16th century, fighting emerged between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, in the form of the Ottoman-Safavid War (1532-1555). As a result, Azerbaijan, including its Karabakh region, experienced significant demographic changes (Karakoç 1006). Moreover, even prior to the war, Shah Ismail had died in 1524, his successor being his son, Shah Tahmasp. Shah Tahmasp appointed Sultan Shaverdi, a royal servant from a Qajar clan, as a governor of the Karabakh province (Karakoç 1006). Qajars were a Turkic tribe which had moved from Anatolia to support Safavid struggle against the Aq Qoyunlus. Consequently, many Qajar families settled in Karabakh (due to Shahverdi's appointment). Shah Tahmasp ruled the empire until his death in 1576. However, what followed next was a series of short-term leadership.



Shah Tahmasp

Source: Wikipedia

SAFAVID-OTTOMAN RIVALRY AND THE KARABAKH KHANATE

After his death, Ismail II was made the ruler, but died shortly in 1577 from unknown causes. Though it was widely believed he was poisoned (Kioumars). After Ismail II, Mohammad Khodabanda (Shah Sultan Mohammad) ascended to the throne; though, his leadership was marked by instability and conflict with foreign powers. Most notably, he was overthrown by the powerful Qizilbash leader, Murshid Qoli Khan, who then placed the 16-year-old Shah Abbas I (Khodabanda's son) on the Safavid throne. Amidst instability however, Shah Abbas I (Abbas the Great) reconquered lost territories of the Safavid empire, bringing it to its economic, political and military height by the early 17th century. However, battles with the Ottoman Empire, now led by Sultan Ahmed I, continued. The Ottomans reoccupied parts of Azerbaijan (Tabriz) in 1610, forcing a truce. In 1617, the people of Shirvan and Dagestan complained about the Safavid rule, resulting in a large Ottoman force coming to Azerbaijan. Due to the immense pressure placed on the Safavids, they had to temporarily evacuate Tabriz and Ardabil. Regardless, this Ottoman campaign in Azerbaijan had failed (Karakoç 1008). During Shah Abbas I's reign, Qajari influence in the region continued, and during Shah Abbas II's rule, Karabakh's governor was another Qajari seigneur – Murtaza Quli Khan (Taşkıran 60). In 1635, Sultan Murat IV came into Azerbaijan with a strong army (Zarinebaf) capturing Erevan and Tabriz.



Ismail II

Source: Wikipedia

The Safavids recaptured Erevan the following year however, ultimately resulting in the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 (Karakoç 1008), establishing boundaries between the two empires that remain “virtually unchanged into modern times. (Khadduri)” The agreement divided the territories, granting Erevan to the Safavids and all of Mesopotamia to the Ottomans (Somel; Khadduri). Despite this, conflict reemerged in the 1710s, when during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III, rulers of Shirvan sought Ottoman assistance to end Safavid control tactics. The Ottoman campaign led to the capture of Erevan and Karabakh (Karakoç 1008).

SAFAVID-OTTOMAN RIVALRY AND THE KARABAKH KHANATE



Treaty of Nystad

Source: Places of Peace

Moreover, during this period, the Treaty of Nystad was signed, marking Russia's transformation from a Tsardom into an empire. Peter the Great, its first Emperor, led Russia in raiding the Caucasus for the first time, and occupied the shores of the Caspian Sea (Karakoç 1008). During this time, the Ottomans took action against Peter, occupying Tabriz, Nakchivan and Merend (Karakoç 1008). They later also took control of Ardabil, Karabakh and other parts of Azerbaijan, ultimately resulting in the Treaty of Constantinople through French mediation (Karakoç 1008). As per the treaty, the Russians were to admit Ottoman authority in Erevan, Tiflis, Ganja, Tabriz and Karabakh (Hammer 305). Concurrently, Armenians in Karabakh proclaimed feudal "melikdoms" – Armenian feudal entities – which aimed to help in fighting against the Ottoman campaign (Taşkıran 63).

It is also important to note that by this time, the Safavid empire effectively 'ended', with Afghan forces capturing the empire's capital Isfahan in 1722. Shortly thereafter, Nader Shah Afshar eventually expelled said forces and established the Afsharid dynasty. Both Russians (under the reign of Peter I), and Nader Shah prevented the Ottoman agenda of completely annexing Azerbaijan (Karakoç 1008). For the next decade, fighting persisted between the Ottoman army and the Nader Shah until 1736, where they signed an accord acknowledging Iranian dominance over Tiflis, Ganja, Erevan, Nakhchivan and Karabakh provinces including Shirvan (Karakoç 1009). Moreover, prior to this accord, the Russians and Persians had concluded the Treaty of Ganja in 1735 (Karakoç 1009), agreeing to withdraw all troops from Persian territory. Near the mid-18th century, Nader Shah was assassinated after eleven years of ruling Iran. Consequently, the Afsharid empire fell into "anarchy" (Karakoç 1009).

SAFAVID-OTTOMAN RIVALRY AND THE KARABAKH KHANATE



Nader Shah

Source: Britannica

This caused the termination of virtually any remaining Persian suzerainty in Azerbaijan, where local powers emerged, marking the beginning of the half a century long period of Azerbaijani independence, which saw “deep political fragmentation and internal warfare. (Karakoç 1009). When Nader Shah had captured the region, it was actually under the domination of the Ziyadoglu family, who had not surrendered to the Safavid empire. Thus, Nader had fought them, driving their tribe out of the region. However after Nader’s assassination, the Javanshir tribe came back to Karabakh, founding the Karabakh Khanate in the late 1740s. Most principalities were organised as khanates (feudal states), including Karabakh, Shaki, Ganja, Baku, Kuba and more (Sowetochowski 2).

Panah Ali Khan, leader of the Javanshir tribe, expanded the Karabakh Khanate by subjugating other Khanates. The new ruler of Persia, Adil Shah, issued a firman (decree), recognising Panah Ali as the Khan of Karabakh. Panah Ali Khan also built fortresses to secure himself from other Khanates, especially from the neighboring Khans of Ganja and Shaki. Though he built two in 1748 and 1752, he built a new one in Shusha in 1757, known as Panahabad, as the others were not “sufficient and strong (Karakoç 1009)”. Fath Ali Shah Qajar, came to Karabakh, and took Panah Ali’s son, Ibrahim Khalil, forcing Panah Ali to agree to subjection to Persian dominance. Later, Panah Ali cooperated with Karim Khan Zand, a self-proclaimed Shah of Persia, successfully rescuing his son (Karakoç 1010). Panah Ali would leave Khalil to rule the Karabakh khanate. His reign saw renewed Russian expansions and intensive power struggles in Persia.



Map of the Karabakh Khanate

Source: Historyofiran

SAFAVID-OTTOMAN RIVALRY AND THE KARABAKH KHANATE

He succeeded in preventing the Albanian Catholicos and Christian meliks' revolt in the khanate, incited by the Russians in 1789 (Karakoç 1010). At this time, Tsarina Catherine II the Great, led the Russian empire, also issuing a decree to promulgate that Georgia was being protected by the Russians (Swietochowski 3). All the while, Agha Muhammad organised a new campaign in 1795 against the Georgians, as well as the Khanate of Karabakh. Despite khans of Ganja, Erevan and Nakchivan all complying with his edicts, Ibrahim Khalil resisted (Karakoç 1010). He went on to organise another campaign in 1797, attacking them for a second time. Eventually however, Ibrahim Khalil had to escape from Shusha due to shortage of food and other supplies (Karakoç 1010). In the very same year, Agha Muhammad was assassinated, after pursuing a mass slaughter of residents (Karakoç 1010; Tharakan). When he came back (two months later), he saw that his cousin, Mehmet Bey Javanshir, had taken power and killed many supporters. While he resorted to try reasserting his control, he was too late, as they would not be able to stop the rapid Russian advancement in the region (Taşkıran 66).



Ibrahim Khalil

Source: Wikipedia



Tsarina Catherine

Source: Britannica

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL CONQUEST

“UNDER THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE THERE WERE ALSO VIOLENT INTERVENTIONS AGAINST DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS.”

- Dr. Dina Gusejnova



Source: Virtual Qarabağ

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL CONQUEST

At the beginning of the 19th century, the political situation in Azerbaijan was precarious, due to intense rivalries between the Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Qajar Persia (Karabakh.org). In 1801, Russia incorporated Eastern Georgia into the empire (Karabakh.org). This annexation marked the beginning of Northern Azerbaijan's incorporation into Russia. Russian forces occupied Djar-Balaken in 1803, in Northern Ganja, and thereafter the Ganja Khanate's capital in 1804, renaming the city from Ganja to Elizaveta to honor Emperor Alexander I of Russia's wife, Elizaveta (King). The name however, never found acceptance among Azerbaijanis, who continued calling it Ganja. Russian advances became increasingly worrying for Qajar Persia, which declared war in 1804 (Karabakh.org). In 1805, the imperial government made the Karabakh Khanate a Russian protectorate, establishing the military district of Elizavetpol (Karakoç 1010). Like other Azerbaijani rulers, Ibrahim Khalil had to essentially choose whom to support in the war: Persia or Russia. Due to the complex history with the former, he chose to ally with Russia (Karabakh.org). An accord with General Tsitsianov (Sisianov), commander-in-chief of the Russian troops in the Caucasus, was signed, known as the Kurekchay Treaty consisting of eleven articles.

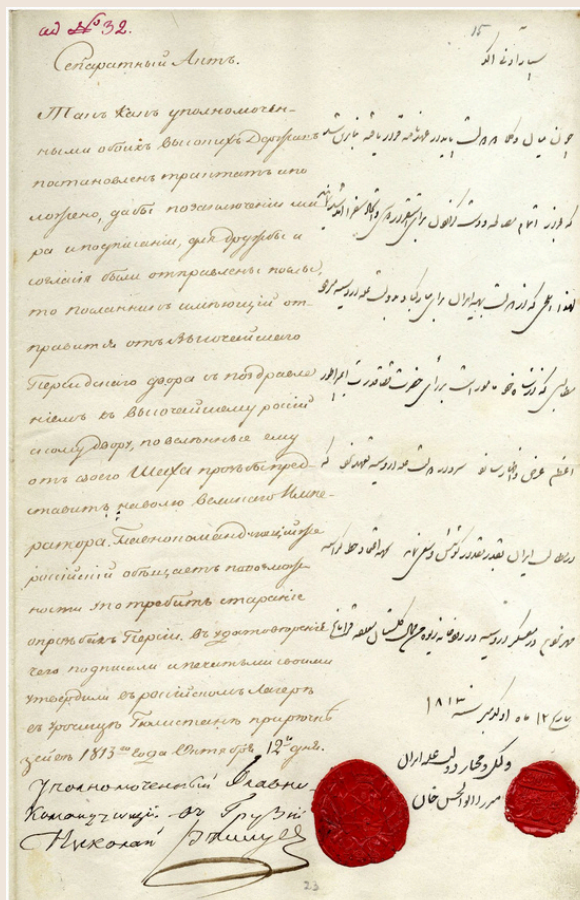
The treaty required Khan to declare his submission to the Russian emperor, and denounce any loyalty to the Qajar shah. He also had to pay a 'tribute' of 8 thousand gold chervons a year to the Russian Treasury (Karabakh.org). Furthermore, Russia would have full authority over the khanate's external affairs and be able to station troops in Shusha (De Waal 189). In return, Russia saw Ibrahim Khalil and his successors as rulers of Karabakh, with full authority over domestic affairs (Karabakh.org; Karakoç 1011). Despite these guarantees, Tsitsianov's death in 1806, contributed to Ibrahim Khalil asking the shah for aid in ousting the Russian stationed troops (Karakoç 1011). During a Persian invasion in 1806, Ibrahim left the fortress and camped in the open. The Russians saw this as an act of betrayal, and killed Ibrahim, one of his wives, one of his daughters and his youngest son (Baddeley 76).



Source: Franz Roubaud

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL CONQUEST

However, other sources argue that the Khalil was simply seeking refuge from the invasion, and did not betray loyalty to Russia. Having got news about the approaching troops, Ibrahim asked the commander-in-chief of the Russian army for reinforcements, however after he didn't get them, he, together with the members of his family, left the Shusha fortress and camped in its suburbs to retreat in case of the unfavorable result of the upcoming battle with Iranians (Karabakh.org). Either way, the killing of Ibrahim Khalil sparked deep mistrust amongst the Azerbaijani rulers in regards to the Russian empire. To gain support, the Russians appointed one of Ibrahim's sons, Madhi Qulu, as khan of Karabakh (Karakoç 1011). However, Baku and Kuba khanates refused submission, with insurrections erupting in Djar-Balaken, insurrections and rebellions that would later be suppressed, as Russia abolished Baku, Kuba and Derbent khanates (Karabakh.org). On October 24, 1813, The Treaty of Gulistan was signed between the Russian Empire and Qajar Persia formalized the first stage of incorporation of North Azerbaijan (Karakoç 1011), marking the end of the Russo-Persian War (1804-1813). The treaty incorporated all of the region into the Russian Empire except the Erevan and Nakhchivan khanates, which remained under Persian control (Karabakh.org). Just more than a decade later, another Russo-Persian War erupted in 1826, following Muslim revolts in Baku, Shirvan, Shaki and Lankaran, and a Qajar offensive to expel Russian forces (Kazemzadeh 5). The Qajar army was defeated and Russia advanced toward Tabriz (Karakoç 1011).



Treaty of Gulistan

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Battle of Sultanabad

Source: Hermitage Museum

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL CONQUEST



Treaty of Turkmenchay

Source: Karabakh.org

In 1828, the Qajar army concluded the war with the Treaty of Turkmenchay with the Russian Empire (Kazemzadeh 6). As the Russian faced the prospect of another conflict with the Ottoman Empire, they somewhat tempered the harshness of their terms (Altstadt 6). Under Article 4, Persia renounced all claims to the Erivan Khanate, Nakhichevan Khanate, the remainder of Talysh Khanate, and the Ordubad and Mughan regions, in addition to confirming all previous territorial losses from the Treaty of Gulistan (Karakoç 1011)

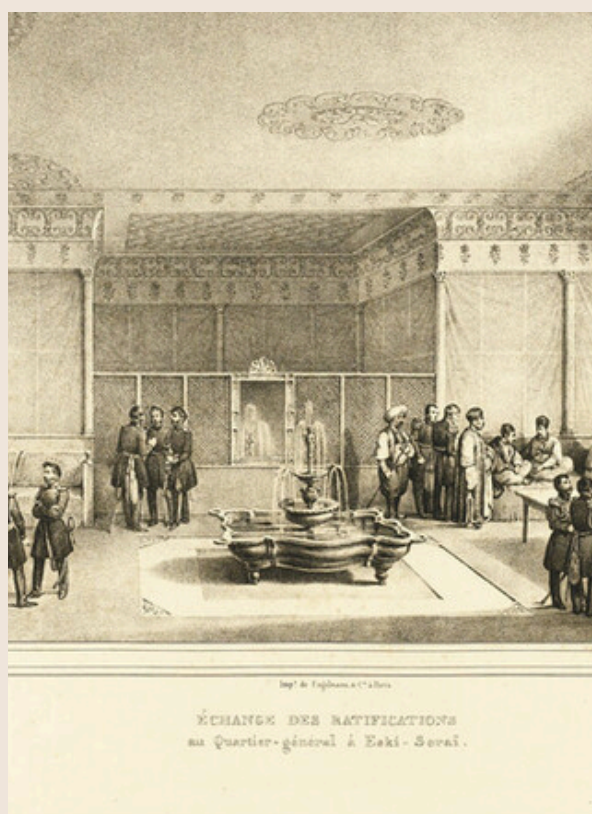
Critically, Article 15 stipulated the resettlement of Armenians from Persia to the Caucasus, including Karabakh (Karakoç 1011). While many people simplify the conflict to a mere ‘religion-based’ conflict, Dr Maranci explained how it’s much more than: it’s not about pure religious difference, rather “mobilizing religion in order to prod to to achieve governmental state goals”. By this point, Russia had started to systematically dismantle the Khanate system. In 1822, the Karabakh Khanate was abolished and replaced by the Shusha district, administered by Russian commandants (Karabakh.org; Karakoç 1011). Lieutenant-general V.Q. Medetov, of Armenian origin, established what became an Armenian-Russian colony in Karabakh during this period (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). This eliminated Karabakh’s political identity, preserving it only as a geographical designation (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). During the 1846 administrative division, the Shusha region was placed under the newly established Shamakhy province (from 1859, under Baku province). With the creation of Yelizavetpol (Elizavetpol) province in 1868, the Shusha region was transferred to its supervision, and three additional districts—Zangezur, Djavanshir (Jevanshir), and Djabrayil (Jebrayil)—were created (Kharabakh.org). This administrative structure remained largely unchanged until 1921 (Kharabakh.org).

MASS ARMENIAN RESETTLEMENT

Russia's conquests fundamentally altered the demographic composition of the South Caucasus through coordinated Armenian resettlement. The Turkemenchay Treaty's Article 15 formalised this process, by granting Armenian one year to move freely from Iran to Russia, without government obstruction and the right to transport and sell movable poverty. Moreover, they had five years to dispose of immovable property (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). This article was designed to ensure the mass Armenian migration, from Iran to Northern Azerbaijan, including towards Karabakh (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). The Treaty of Edirne (Adrianople) in 1829, concluded the Russo-Turkish war that took place between 1828-1829. Armenians then began moving from the Ottoman Empire to newly occupied lands in North Azerbaijan, with many settling in Karabakh (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). Moreover, Article 13 of the Adrianople Treaty facilitated this migration (Erim 275). During the war, Armenians living in Eastern Ottoman territories had assisted Russian soldiers, and as a result, feared Ottoman reprisal, which led to approximately 90,000 Armenians from Erzurum, Kars and Beyazid crossing into the Caucasus under the leadership of the Bishop of Erzurum, Karabet (Uras 889). Ottoman records indicate more than 4,000 households emigrating from the city alone (Beydilli 407).



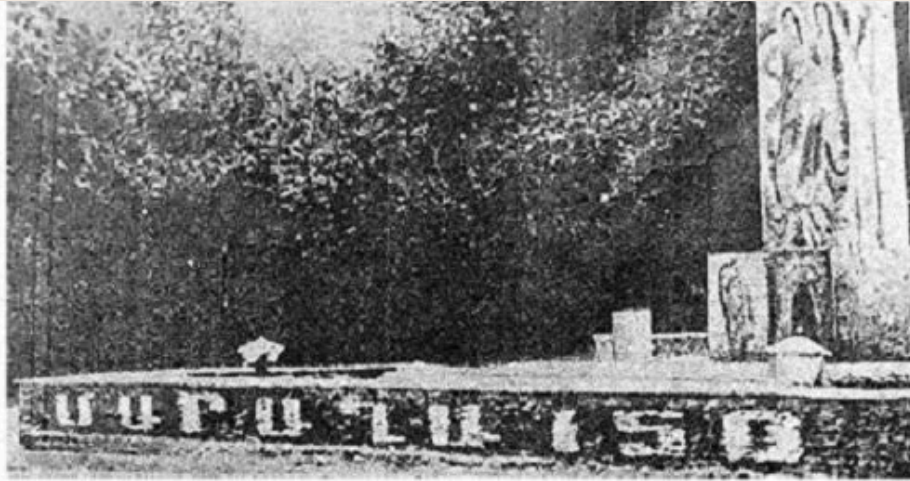
Source: Azerbaijan.az



Treaty of Edirne (Adrianople)

Source: Magnolia Box

MASS ARMENIAN RESETTLEMENT



Memorial "Maraga - 150" mounted in 1978 on the occasion of 150 anniversary arrival of Armenians from Persian region Maraga to Karabakh. In 1988 as the Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh began "realisation of right of the nation for self-determination" inscription on the memorial "Maraga - 150" immediately disappeared

Memorial "Maraga 150"

Source: Azerbaijan UNESCO via X

According to official Russian statistics, close to 40,000 Armenians were resettled from Iran to Northern Azerbaijan, however numbers with unofficial Armenian settlers exceeded 200,000. The number of Armenians began to increase in ethnic composition of Karabakh after removal from the Ottoman territories (Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). German scholar, Karl Friedrich Neumann documented this migrant in his 1834 text, analysing letters from the Persian crown prince, Abbas Mirza, as well as responses from Russian-Armenian colonel Lazarev, Marshal Paskevich's ordinances for implementing the resettlement, and Lazarev's detail reports. In his report he also outlined that fertile fields, in Erevan, Nakchivan, and Karabakh regions, were allocated for immigrants (Beydilli 407)." Turkish historian Kemal Beydilli's research points to many Armenians being forcibly relocated against their will, with Articles 13 of the Adrianpole Treaty and Article 15 of the Turkmenchay Treaty, providing legal cover for forced migrations (Beydilli 408). Moreover, new Armenian villages such as Maragali and Janyatag started appearing in Karabakh through this mass resettlement (Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). Armenians even began erecting monuments commemorating their 'resettlement' to Karabakh. Most notably was Memorial "Maragha-150" in 1978 that was mounted to celebrate 150 years since the resettlement from Persia.

MASS ARMENIAN RESETTLEMENT

In March 1828, despite 80 per cent of the Nakhchivan and Erevan khanates' population being Muslim (including Turks and Kurds), Tsar Nicholas I ordered the establishment of an Armenian province incorporating both the territories (Walker 97; Alstadt 100). Russian imperial authorities sought to diminish muslim influence, considering it was an "alien" to Russian Rule (Karakoç 1012). They began using the Christian Armenian population as a loyal support base against the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia (Karakoç 1012). The ethnic composition of the Karabakh khanata at the time of its abolishment was documented under instructions from A.P. Yermolov, who served as the Commander in Chief of Russian troops in the Caucasus (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). Despite the mass Armenian resettlement, the majority of Karabakh's population remained Azerbaijani (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS). According to Azerbaijan's ANAS, as per the documents overseen by Yermolov, of the near 20,000 families in Karabakh, nearly 75 per cent was Azerbaijani and the rest was composed of Armenians and Albanians in rural or town areas (Institute of History named after A.Bakykhanov of ANAS).

Moreover, the 1897 imperial census recorded close to 485,000 Azerbaijani Turks and 52,000 Armenians in the Baku; 530,000 Azerbaijani Turks and 292,000 Armenians in Elizavetpol; and 313,000 Azerbaijani Turks and 441,000 in Erevan (Karakoç 1013). Through Armenian immigration, Russia modified the South Caucasus' ethnic compositions in favor of the Armenians (King 159), creating buffer zones against the Ottomans and Persians while severing ties between Ottoman Turks, Azerbaijanis and other Caucasian Muslim groups (Karakoç 1013). However, the Armenian resettlement was also accompanied by the displacement of the local Azeri population. Russian authorities deliberately moved populations from rebellious and bordering regions, resettling Russians and Armenians in their place, resulting in mass Azerbaijani emigration (Ibrahimli 14). While many towns and areas remained heavily occupied by Azerbaijanis, the immigration did in fact create Armenian majorities in some rural areas (Karakoç 1014). During the first quarter of the 19th century, the war resulted in more than 2,500 Azerbaijani families from the Karabakh khanate becoming refugees, in addition to the more than 2,000 who had been taken as hostages and exiled from the country (Elchin). Russian explorer N. Shavrov explained the resettlement policy at the beginning of the 20th century: "We started our colonial activity in the Southern Caucasus not by settling strange peoples.

MASS ARMENIAN RESETTLEMENT

During two years after the 1829-1830 war we resettled in the Southern Caucasus more than 40,000 Armenians from Iran and more than 84,000 Armenians from Turkey and settled them in the best state lands of Elizavetpol (Ganja) and Iravan provinces, where Armenians were in significant minority" (Ibrahimli). Repression against local landlords, combined with mass Armenian resettlement, compelled not only individual families but entire villages and clans to leave the country (Ibrahimli). The fate of the Kengerlis, who had lived for centuries along the Araz River valley and served as border guards, exemplifies this displacement: "1,270 Kengerli families (about 6,300 people) headed by Ehsan khan were oppressed. The government took away their traditional privileges... Many Kengerlis were obliged to leave their lands and migrate to the other side [Southern Azerbaijan]" (Ibrahimli). The emigration caused by the first and second Russian-Iranian wars was primarily directed Azerbaijanis toward Southern Azerbaijan (present-day Iran), where descendants of emigrants continued living generations later (Ibrahimli).



Elizavetpol

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Source: Kavkaz Plus

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER RUSSIAN RULE

The Russo-Persian wars devastated Karabakh's economy, as the province served as a primary theatre of military operations (Avanesyan et al. 1258). A European traveller participating in the negotiations describing crossing into Russian Karabakh, saying "After crossing the river, we immediately entered the Russian territory, to the Karabakh province, which is probably one of the most beautiful places in the world from the point of view of land, water, and climate, but it had been deserted for a long time after the war (Avanesyan et al. 1258). Russian annexation and the elimination of political fragmentation contributed to economic revitalization of the region in the 19th century. According to data from 1837 on incomes and expenses from Shirvan, Karabakh, Talish and Armenian Oblast (the new territory for Armenia with Erevan and Nakhchivan), Karabakh's regional income amounted to nearly 74,000 silver rubles, around 5 per cent of the total (Avanesyan 1258). Karabakh remained an agrarian region, with over 90 per cent of the population working in peasant agriculture. The tsarist government focused on developing irrigation systems. In 1850, the Caucasian Agriculture Society launched the construction of irrigation canals in the Erevan and Shusha regions (Avanesyanam 1258). Primary agricultural crops included wheat, barley, cotton, and tobacco. Karabakh led the production of crops, but ranked last in rice production (Avanesyanam 1258).

In fact, Tobacco production received significant focus in the 1830s and 1840s. According to 1845 data, more than 300 poods (an old Russian unit of mass, close to 16 kg) of tobacco were obtained from one pood of sowing in the region, with 210 poods being allocated for household needs, 5 for smoking and 105 poods sold (Avanesyan 1259-1260). Animal husbandry too increased due to the high mountain zones. Viceroy M. Vorontsov (1846) wrote that "In Karabakh, there are excellent horses, which, although not equal to Arabian horses, can be a good choice and useful for our stables (Avanesyan 1260)." Crafts too developed significantly during this period. According to the Caucasian Yearbook, in 1855 Shusha City had 1,863 craftsmen, with some settlements specializing in particular crafts. Shusha emerged as the crafts center, with a very prevalent carpet weaving industry (Avanesyan 1262). Silk weaving also underwent significant advancement. Following the treaty of Gulistan, Karabakh was viewed as extremely favorable for silk production development, given Armenian heritage in silk farming. By 1832, there were 42 silk factories in Shushi (Avanesyan 1263). Starting in 1850, Shusha residents were granted the right to export silk products to Russia, tax-free.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER RUSSIAN RULE

Through such policies, trade developed significantly despite external factors, conflict, absence of a unified monetary system and standardised weights and measures (Avanesyan 1256). Russian authorities encouraged Armenian merchant participation in Transcaucasian economic life (Avanesyan 1264). However, the agricultural sector suffered from class tensions and increasing peasant disintegration. The tsarist authorities conceded to aghalars who rebelled against the 1840 charter, which deprived them of governing rights, while simultaneously raising taxes on state peasants (Avanesyan 1260). In December 1843, residents of the Zardanashin village were sentenced by military court to flogging and exile to hard labor for disobeying their master. By the late 1840s, laws further entrenched serfdom and strengthened the landowners' and beys' rights, who served as the primary social support for the tsarist rule (Avanesyan 1261). After extensive discussions, new tax regulations were approved in 1843 and implemented the following year, streamlining numerous previously existing fees (Avanesyan 1265). The Charter of Transcaucasian Customs Management was revoked, abolishing internal customs duties and organising the region as a separate customs district (Avanesyan 1265). The new 1864 charter allowed European and Asian goods to transit across Transcaucasia and lowered custom duties on European goods.

While these reforms balanced the income-expenditure ratio within a few years, they did not increase income for the overall Transcaucasian region (Avanesyan 1265). As time went on, there was a growing pattern of Russian authorities favoring Armenians over the Muslim population. Already in the years following the conquests, Armenian Russian colonies were established in Karabakh, most notably the Armenian oblast. Armenian economic power became particularly apparent in 1872 when the obligation (ilitizam) system over oil land in Baku was abolished (Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). During the haggling of oil sections, Azerbaijan bought only 5 per cent of the oil land while Armenians purchased more than 50 per cent (Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). By this point, Armenian resettlement continued in mountain Karabakh, with policy aimed at providing compact living for Armenians. They strengthened management control, and reinforced economic potential. Now, sources argue that even during this period, Armenians were only established through resettlement and favorable conditions created by tsarism and multilateral support. Furthermore, Azerbaijani sources say that Karabakh and Shusha remained a public-political and cultural center of the Azerbaijani people.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER RUSSIAN RULE

Contrastingly, Armenian historians claim long-existing ties to the region, pointing to the melikdoms, and early indigenous roots. The ANAS also claims that Armenia sought help to achieve the idea of a “Great Armenia”, looking to annihilate the local Azerbaijani populations. When Armenian treacherous rebellions against the Ottoman state in the 1890s failed, the center of struggle moved to Northern Azerbaijan.



Source: Azerbaijan.az



Source: Azerbaijan.az



Source: AEON

TATAR MASSACRES

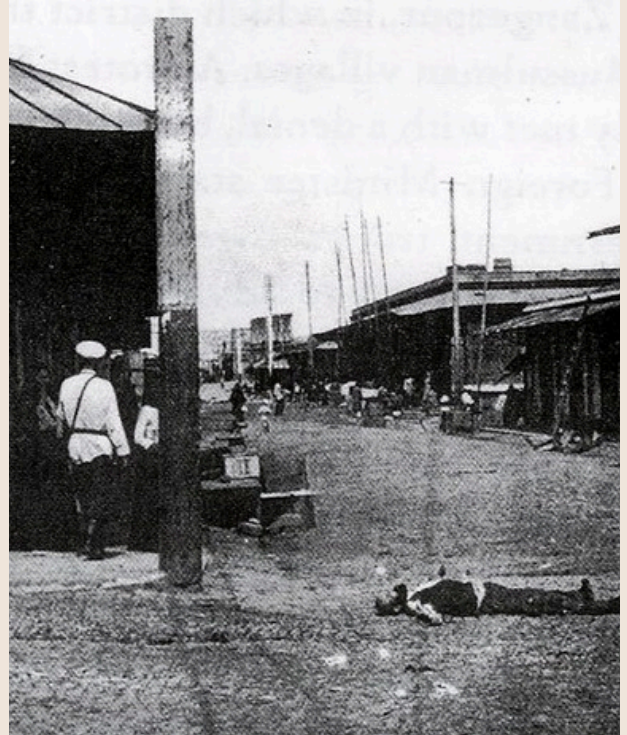


Source: Aniarc

The center of Armenian nationalists struggled shifting to the Russian-controlled South Caucasus. Prince Grigory Sergeyevich Golitsyn, appointed by Tsar Nicholas II as governor of Transcaucasia in 1903, closed Armenian schools and took away Armenian Church property in an attempt at Russification (Cengiz). These measures strengthen support for Armenian organisations like the Dashnaktsutyun, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Gozalova & Amirov 88). After an assassination attempt in 1903, Golitsyn left his post, and Count Dashkov was appointed in 1905, signalling a return to pro-Armenian posture in Russian regional policy (Swietochowski 43). The First Russian Revolution of 1905 resparked nationalist movements throughout the parts of the empire. Against this backdrop, violent clashes erupted between Armenians and Azerbaijanis Turks across the Southern Caucasus. More specifically, severe violence broke out in the Karabakh region. The first major outbreak was in Baku in February 1905. Though sources dispute the immediate cause, with Armenian accounts citing an incident involving a Turk named Babayev who wounded an Armenian soldier (The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute), while Azerbaijani sources contend it was the murder of an Azerbaijani by a Dashnak militant (Karakoç 1014). Violence rapidly escalated, as Azerbaijanis from nearby villages began attacking Armenian sections of Baku (Karakoç 1014; The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute).

TATAR MASSACRES

Dr Nona Shahnazarian explained to us how “the crisis of people’s friendship proved that it was a failed ideology and people actually deep down still had this memory of confrontation”. Eyewitness accounts document extensive violence from both sides. The New York Times reported at the time, close to 300 corpses in Baku’s streets after the February riots. Moreover, they noted that “about 1,500 Tatars [had] been killed or wounded” in the subsequent violence (Gozalova & Amirov 95-96). It then spread to Erevan in February 20-21, Nakhchivan by May, Shusha in June (Karakoç 1014). In August another wave spread across Baku with large fires destroying close to 60 per cent of oil wells (Karakoç 1014; Gozalova & Amirov 91). One of the bloodiest clashes was in the town of Ganja in November. The New York Times reported that 700 Armenians attacked the village, killing approximately 400 villages, while other reports document using field guns against Muslims in Elizabetopol (Gozalova & Amirov 95).



Source: Wikipedia



Source: Wikipedia

RACE WAR IN CAUCASUS.

Armenians and Mussulmans Kill Each Other—Village Destroyed.

ST. PETERSBURG, May 27.—Twenty-two Armenians and two Mussulmans were killed on Thursday at Nakhichevan, in the district of Erivan. Transcaucasia, as

New York Times' Coverage

Source: Wikipedia

TATAR MASSACRES

An estimated 128 Armenian and 158 Tur villages were destroyed (Karakoç 1014). Estimates range from 3,100 deaths to 10,000 with sources reporting that the number of Muslims killed were greater overall (Karakoç 1014). Tadeusz Swietochowski (1991) noted “the events were reported in the world press generally with a tone of partiality toward the Armenians”. Analysis of these reports were described by Gozalova and Amirov in a research article as the following: “The publications of the newspaper for 1905-1906 in its content bore a clearly pro-Armenian assessment of the events; however, the facts presented in the articles during the analyses indicate the opposite (Gozalova & Amirov 99).” Analysis reveals that while Russian colonial policy created conditions that ultimately led to the conflict, the violence itself was not planned by authorities but rather driven by radical elements present in both communities. In response, Azerbaijani Turks formed Difaî (Defense) in Ganja in 1905 to counter the Armenian Dashnaks (Karakoç 1015). Violence in Karabakh acquired particularly tragic dimensions, with incidents continuing until 1906 (Karakoç 1015; Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). While violence subsided in the Caucasus after 1906, Armenians located in the Ottoman Empire faced catastrophic events during World War 1

In 1915, the Ottoman government, led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) also known as the Young Turks, initiated systematic deportations of Armenians from Eastern Anatolia (Sunny). In April 1915, approximately 250 Armenians intellectuals and politicians were arrested in Istanbul and killed (Sunny). Throughout the summer and autumn of 1915, Armenian civilians were marched toward concentration camps, and were massacred (Sunny). Conservative estimates put Armenian death totals anywhere from 600,000 to more than 1,500,000 during the death marches (Sunny; Genocide Education Project). By the war’s end, more than 50 to 90 per cent of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were gone (Sunny; Genocide Education Project). Though many recognise and call this the 1915 Armenian Genocide, to this day, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan do not recognise it. Citing that it was an unavoidable consequence of war, which took lives from both sides. This massacre profoundly shaped Armenian collective memory and entrenched deep fears and mistrust with Turkish or Muslim rule (Sunny). Survivors who fled to Russia-controlled Armenia carried along deep trauma that would directly influence attitudes in opposition to the Azerbaijani Turks present in the Karabakh. The event became a defining element of Armenian national identity, creating an unwavering determination amongst its citizens.

FROM RUSSIAN COLLAPSE TO SOVIET CONSOLIDATION

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 reignited Armenian-Azerbaijani tensions with greater violence. After the late 1917 Revolution, Transcaucasian representatives formed the Transcaucasian Commissariat. On February 23, 1918, the Commissariat created the Transcaucasian Seim (Diet) using votes from the disbanded All-Russian Constituent Assembly (Saparov 38). Under pressure from the advancing Ottoman military, the Seim proclaimed the independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic in April 1918. The federation divided the region into five administrative zones: Baku, Ganja, Erevan, and Tiflis provinces, in addition to the Zakatali Sanjak (Karakoç 1015). Importantly, the Ganja Province included Shusha, Zangezur and Jabrail districts, placing Karabakh in the Azerbaijani section (Karakoç 1016).



Fall of the Russian Empire

Source: World Atlas



Flag for the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic

Source: Wikipedia



The Transcaucasian Commissariat

Source: Azerbaijan Presidential Library

MARCH DAYS

This truce proved short-lived however. From March 30 to April 3, 1918, sources report up to 12,000 Azerbaijanis being killed by Bolshevik and Armenian forces throughout the Baku governorate in what became known as the “March Days” (Karakoç 1015). The head of the Bolshevik Baku Soviet, Stepan Shahumyan, enlisted Dashnak support in a political struggle against the Azerbaijani Musavat party, which resulted in systematic massacres (Karakoç 1016). Azerbaijani leader, Nariman Narimov, testified late saying “Even if a Muslim happened to be a Bolshevik, no quarter was given”. Moreover, it is reported that the Dashnaks would say “we do not recognise any Bolsheviks: once you are a Muslim that is enough” (Karakoç 1015). This event is commemorated in Azerbaijan to this day, marking the Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis. The Transcaucasian Federation collapsed under Ottoman military pressure when Georgia proclaimed independence in May, 1918. Soon after, Azerbaijan and Armenia did the same (Karakoç 1016; Saparov 38). The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic temporarily settled in Ganja while Baku remained under Bolshevik-Dashnak control following the ‘March Days’ (Karakoç 1016). With Ottoman assistance, Azerbaijani forces eventually entered Baku in September, and ended the Bolshevik Dashnak authority (Karakoç 1016), in the Battle of Baku (1918).



POST WW1 ERA

After Ottoman withdrawal, following World War I's end, British forces under General William Montgomerie Thompson, took over control of Azerbaijan in November 1918. The central strategic question became Mountainous Karabakh – the western part of Elisavetpol gubernia – whose population consisted of a ratio of 3:2 between Azerbaijanis to Armenians. Moreover, it was a critical geographic link between the Muslim Turks in the Eastern Caucasus and Anatolia (Karakoç 1016; Saparov 91). British policy was determined by limited troop numbers and the desire to avoid redrawing frontiers, leading them to accept the existing Tsarist administrative boundaries as the basis for the new states (Saparov 92). When Armenian warlord Andranik Ozanian attempted to establish Armenian authority over the territory in late 1918, Thompson reportedly ordered him to cease military operations on December 1, 1918 (Karakoç 1016; Saparov 92). The next year, on January 15 1919, following British approval, the Azerbaijani government appointed Dr. Khosrow Bek Sultanov as provisional governor-general of Karabakh and Zangezur (Saparov 93). Thomson's decision to place these regions under provisional Azerbaijani administration was met with heavy Armenian opposition.

The 4th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians refused to recognise Sultanov's authority, while armed Armenians in Zangezur began surrounding a British mission attempting to extend their rule there (Saparov 93). Responding to this criticism, Thomson reportedly states that "the fact is that in Azerbaijan some Armenians are much disappointed that the British occupation is not an opportunity for revenge. They are reluctant to accept that [the] peace conference is going to decide and not military forces (Swietochowski 143)". Despite ongoing Armenian defiance, on August 22, 1919, the 7th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians eventually signed a temporary agreement with Governor Sultanov (though sources argue exactly when this was). This agreement established joint administration through a city council including both Azerbaijanis and Armenians with the arrangement explicitly designated as temporary pending final resolution at the Paris Peace conference. The Peace Conference of Paris in 1919 additionally recognized Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Karabakh (Altstadt 102). However, this peace proved fragile once again. In March 1920, a major Armenian uprising supported by the Erevan government erupted in Karabakh (Karakoç 1016). The Azerbaijani government committed virtually its entire army against the insurgency, leaving Baku vulnerable (Karakoç 1017).

POST WW1 ERA



Source: AzerNews

On March 17, Lenin had already directed the Red Army commander, the primary military force of the Soviet Union, to Baku, instructing him to “exert all efforts in this direction” while using “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” ideology by supporting Armenian rebels to weaken Azerbaijani defenses (Swietochowski 17; Karakoç 1017).

The combination of Armenian uprising supported by Lenin, as well as weakening Azerbaijani defenses allowed Moscow to achieve its goal, capturing Baku in April 1920, largely concluding the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic’s independence.

The events of 1905-1906, combined with the trauma of the Armenian Genocide and the violence of 1918-1920, had intensified mutual distrust and fear between the two communities (Institute of History named after A.Bakikhanov of ANAS). These conflicts laid the groundwork for territorial disputes that would be temporarily frozen – but not resolved – by Soviet consolidation of power in the early 1920s.

SOVIET ADMINISTRATION AND RISING CONFLICT

“[GORBACHEV INNOCENTLY BELIEVED] THAT ALL THE DIFFERENT
NATIONALITIES WERE ONE
HAPPY SOVIET FAMILY”

- Dr. Audrey Alstadt



THE SOVIET TAKEOVER AND THE BATTLE FOR KARABAKH

Soviet forces invaded Armenia in November 1920. The official Soviet narrative, as articulated by Alexander Maesnagian, President of the Soviet Armenian Republic, claimed that Armenia had voluntarily adopted the Soviet system after failure of Western promises from British authority. Maesnagian, elected President of the Revolutionary Committee of Armenia in April 1921, argued that “Soviet Russia alone came to Armenia’s aid and saved her” when neither America nor Europe would provide protection or assistance (Maesnagian 772). This narrative, however, obscured the reality of Soviet military intervention and the loss of independence. The political struggle of Karabakh began right after Soviet power was established. The problem was on the Kavburo’s (the Caucasus Bureau) agenda in the first half of 1921 (Karakoç 1017). Anastas Mikoyan, an influential Soviet statesman, submitted an important report to Lenin saying that the “the unification of Karabakh to Armenia would mean, for the population of Karabakh, deprivation of their source of life in Baku and being tied to Erevan, with which they have never had any kind of connection (Alstadt 102).”

The decisive moment came in mid 1921. On July 4th, the Kavburo meeting centered on whether to treat all of Karabakh as a unit or to separate the mountainous part from lowland Karabakh. The second option was chosen, and the meeting decided to include mountain Karabakh in Armenia (Cornell 53). After initial opposition to the proposal, specifically by Stalin and Nariman Narimanov (Mkrtchyan 3), the region was eventually declared as autonomous within Azerbaijan, with Shusha as its administrative capital. The final establishment of the administrative structure took time. The Presidium of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party established a three-man Central Commission on Karabakh Affairs, made up of Kirov (Russian), Mirzabekian (Armenian), and A.N. Karakozov (Karakoç 1018). Soon after, in July 1923, the Autonomous Oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh (AONK) was officially announced and confirmed as a constituent part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) (Karakoç 1018). The name was later changed to the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) in 1937 (Walker 101).



Source: Art A Tsolm

THE SOVIET TAKEOVER AND THE BATTLE FOR KARABAKH

The decision to place the predominantly Armenian enclave under Azerbaijani administration had multiple rationales. As Soviet authorities later explained, it demonstrated the economic interdependence between mountainous and lowland Karabakh, as well as Baku's importance as an economic Center for the region's population. More cynically, the arrangement created a sizable Armenian ethnic minority within Azerbaijan that could be used as a pressure point and a potential pretext to intervene in Azerbaijani affairs (Kotchikian). Moreover, Stalin's divide-and-rule strategy extended beyond Karabakh. In the broader territorial agreement, Karakoç writes that Moscow removed Zangezur from Azerbaijan and granted it to Armenia (Karakoç 1018). Soon after, Azerbaijan secured political autonomy for Nakchivan within the Azerbaijani SSR in March 1924 (Karakoç 1018). This continuous border shift demonstrated Moscow's primacy over the region. There were no guarantees of sovereignty. In 1937, Catholicos Khoren under suspicious circumstances, generally being posited that Soviet authorities disposed of him for refusing to tolerate the regime (Alexander 358).

Moreover, during WW2, Soviet national policy shifted drastically. The Kremlin turned to religious institutions for support, and the Armenian Church, along with others in the USSR, played its role in national defense (Alexander 359).

The Soviet press gave minimal coverage to the Catholicos domestically while the Communist and fellow-traveler press abroad made extensive propaganda capital out of the Patriarchate (Alexander 359). This dual approach - suppression at home, exploitation abroad - characterized Soviet nationality policy more broadly. When Georg VI died in May 1954, the Soviet Armenian newspaper Sovyedagan Hayasdan relegated the news to page three in five brief sentences, while funeral proceedings were broadcast via short-wave transmission to Armenians abroad (Alexander 359).

Throughout this period too, Armenians tried to persuade Moscow to detach NKAO from the Azerbaijani SSR and transfer it to the Armenian SSR (Karakoç 1018). The first major post WW2 came in 1945, when the First Secretary of the Armenian Communist Party, Grigory Arutinov, wrote to Stalin requesting that Karabakh be transferred to Armenia (Mkrtchyan 3). This petition, like the ones that followed, was rejected. The 1960s witnessed renewed Armenian activism.

SOVIET RULE OVER NKAO

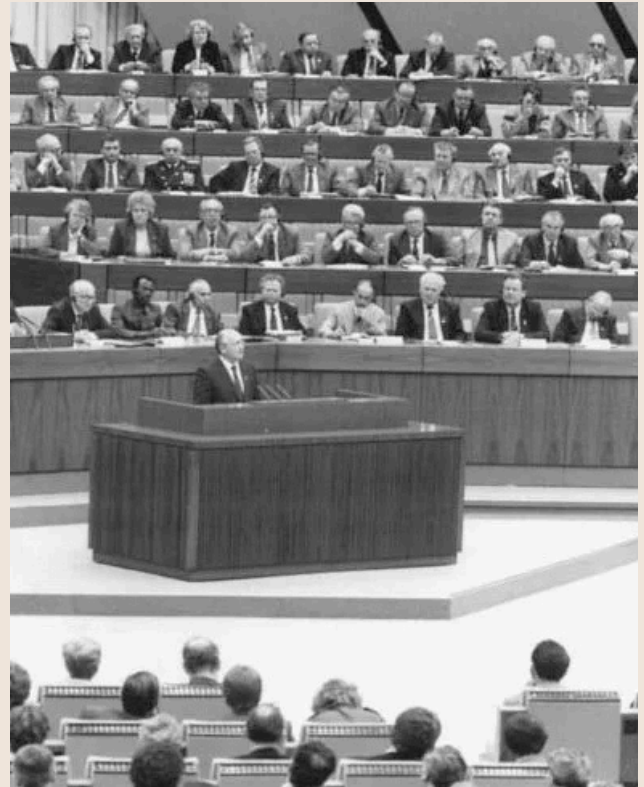
The population demanded the unification of the region with Armenia, but were consistently dismissed by Soviet central authorities (Libaridian). In 1963, Karabakh Armenians submitted another petition protesting the cultural and economic marginalization of Armenians in Karabakh, garnering over 2,500 signatures (Mkrtchyan 3; Karakoç 1019). This too was rejected.

Further attempts followed in the 1970s, inconclusive letters, demonstrations and persistence throughout the Soviet era, was met by consistent rejection of border changes from Moscow, maintaining the status quo. The Soviet system employed various mechanisms to control potential ethnic conflicts. However, there was a misconception. In reality, these ethnic tensions were suppressed rather than being resolved.

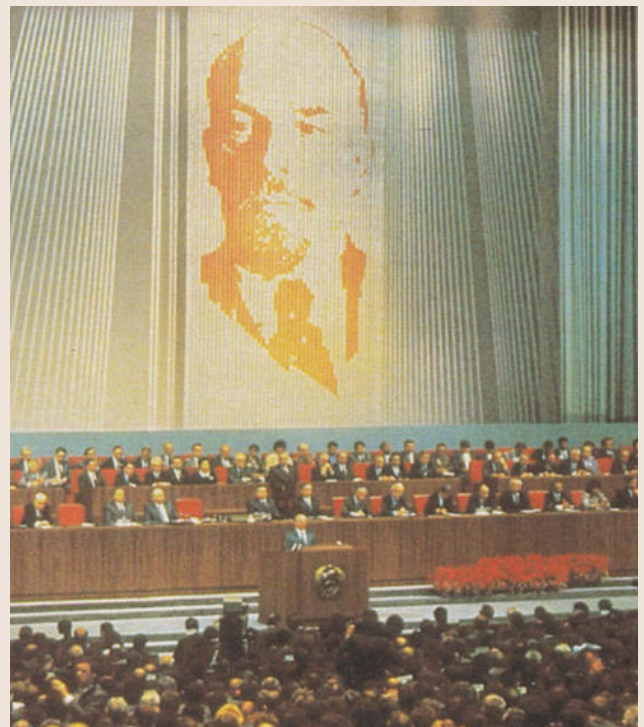


GORBACHEV'S REFORMS AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR

Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) policies fundamentally altered the political landscape of the Soviet Union. The two are regarded by many as the policies that inadvertently contributed to the dissolution of the USSR all together. In the political sphere, these constitutional changes were taken as a new electoral code, the "democratisation" of the Communist Party, and decentralising economic management (Mkrtchyan 2). The concept of glasnost, approved by the Communist Party at its 27th convention in February 1986, was initially focused on economic reform but gradually moved toward democratic change ("National Identity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Revival of Islam in Azerbaijan"). The government soon discovered it had difficulty controlling the process, economic reforms were in fact unpopular, whereas democracy and nationalism were deeply embraced ("National Identity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Revival of Islam in Azerbaijan"). These policies encouraged more open debate about the state of the Soviet Union and its history. Soviet publishers, newspapers, and television stations gradually expanded the limits of their criticism (Mkrtchyan 2).



Source: Britannica



Source: Red Pepper

GORBACHEV'S REFORMS AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR

As Gorbachev later acknowledged, these democratisation tendencies ignited many suppressed ethnic-nationalist conflicts across the former Soviet Union (Mkrtchyan 2). In September 1986, Gorbachev issued a directive instructing local leaders to respond to public opinion, not just party directives from above (Cockburn 178). This shift from purely top-down authority to incorporating popular sentiment, essentially undermined the Soviet system's ability to control nationalist movements. The second effect was a power vacuum. When the central press blamed Armenian and Azerbaijani party leaderships as corrupt and incompetent, the purges of the old guard left inexperienced leaders struggling to fill the void. The third effect was the ideological collapse. The discreditation of the Soviet system left a vacuum that nationalism naturally filled (MacFarlane 414). Critically, glasnost meant different things in different places. While Moscow intellectuals interpreted it as freedom to publish expressively, Armenians took it to publicize Nagorno Karabakh (Cockburn 173).



Source: The Guardian



Source: The New Yorker

Karabakh Armenians remembered the 1915 massacre; Azerbaijanis recalled the 1905-1906 Baku Massacre. Glasnost created this opportunity for nations to weaponise historical grievances in a form of 'revenge' opportunity almost (Cultirico).

GORBACHEV'S REFORMS AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR

A crucial catalyst came when Abel Aganbegyan, Gorbachev's senior economic adviser, indicated during a September 1986 London visit that Moscow might treat Armenian demands sympathetically (Cockburn 178). Though Soviet officials later denied any such plan, Western radio immediately relayed Aganbegyan's remarks to the Caucasus, creating Armenian expectations while alarming Azerbaijanis about territorial loss (Cockburn 178).

The dynamics of mobilization revealed how glasnost and perestroika fundamentally misunderstood Soviet society. Moscow and Washington expected challenges from traditional, rural populations or Islamic resurgence. Instead, the dynamic came from educated urban elites - beneficiaries, not victims, of Soviet rule. Young educated Kazakhs or Armenians had more culturally in common with Russian counterparts than their parents did, but were better equipped to compete for jobs and political power. Democratization gave these groups the tools to organize effectively.



Abel Aganbegyan

Source: Wikipedia



Source: Caucasus Edition

GORBACHEV'S REFORMS AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR

When the Supreme Soviet rejected Armenian demands in late 1987, mass protests erupted. By February 1988, hundreds of thousands of Armenians demonstrated and struck for Karabakh's return (Cockburn 168). On February 20, 1988, the NKAO Soviet voted to request transfer to Armenia—unprecedented for an autonomous region. This formal institutional challenge, enabled by glasnost's opening of political space, demonstrated how democratization amplified rather than moderated ethnic tensions.

A week later came the breaking point: from February 27-29, the Sumgait pogrom killed 32 people, mainly Armenians (Cockburn 168). For Armenians, Sumgait was perceived as the next "genocide," reviving 1915 memories ("National Identity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Revival of Islam in Azerbaijan"). This trauma, spread rapidly through the newly free media glasnost had enabled, convinced many that coexistence was impossible. The Sumgait pogrom served as the catalyst for the First Karabakh war, a brutal conflict that would last six years.



Sumgait Pogrom

Source: Armenian Assembly of America

FIRST KARABAKH WAR

“A LOT OF WORK HAS TO BE DONE TO UNDERSTAND
THE WAR AND THE ERASURE
THAT IS HAPPENING”

- Dr. Christina Maranci



EARLY VIOLENCE AND SOVIET INTERVENTION

Following the Sumgait Pogrom, violence spread throughout the region. In November 1988, dozens of Armenians were killed. Moreover, in December, in the same year (1988), a catastrophic earthquake (Spitak Earthquake 1988), struck Armenia killing approximately 25,000 people and destroying 1,500 villages, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals homeless (Hirschfeld et al. 26). The disaster temporarily paused tensions but reports of Soviet officials diverting humanitarian aid further intensified the growing anti-Soviet sentiment in the Armenian SSR (de waal 65; Dudwick 107). The most severe pogrom unfolded in Baku from January 13-19, 1990, when nationalist mobs systematically assaulted Armenian neighborhoods. Approximately 90 Armenians were killed as police were initially unable to intervene, driving the near-total exodus (Helsinki Watch 6). Soviet authorities responded with “Black January” on 19-20, 1990, deploying nearly 26,000 troops with tanks (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The operation killed 147 Azerbaijani civilians, halting the immediate pogroms whilst also crushing the Azerbaijani pro-independence movement (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Parallel violence targets Azerbaijanis in Armenia. Starting in Autumn 1988, Armenian nationalists

began to internationally remove them from rural areas, including attacks in villages like Chardakhlu and Getashen. By early 1989, over 100 Azerbaijanis had been killed through such incidents. Soviet decrees formalised deportations, leading to the expulsion of nearly all of Armenia’s pre-war Azerbaijani population of 167,000 - 200,000 by mid 1990. Concurrently, approximately 200,000 - 300,000 Armenians fled Azerbaijan, often under the threat of violence or threats. This mutual displacement, created immense refugee crises and deepened cross-community animosities, making militarised conflict inevitable. While Armenian sources emphasise that pogroms were unprovoked, Azerbaijan frames them as responses to Armenian aggression from alternative areas. Empirical records confirm organised mob violence from both sides during the Soviet state’s collapse (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki 99; Atkinson). Soviet military operations failed to prevent the spread of militarisation. “Operation Ring” in April of 1991 saw Soviet and Azerbaijani forces deport Armenians from villages around the region. In Shaumyan, 24 Armenian villages were razed and over 100 civilians killed (Hirschfeld et al. 35). These interventions failed to halt arms mobilization from collapsing Soviet territories, fuelling Armenian militias, numbering thousands by late 1991.

FROM SOVIET COLLAPSE TO FULL-SCALE WAR

Following the Sumgait Pogrom, violence spread throughout the region. In November 1988, dozens of Armenians were killed. Moreover, in December, in the same year (1988), a catastrophic earthquake (Spitak Earthquake 1988), struck Armenia killing approximately 25,000 people and destroying 1,500 villages, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals homeless (Hirschfeld et al. 26). The disaster temporarily paused tensions but reports of Soviet officials diverting humanitarian aid further intensified the growing anti-Soviet sentiment in the Armenian SSR (de waal 65; Dudwick 107). The most severe pogrom unfolded in Baku from January 13-19, 1990, when nationalist mobs systematically assaulted Armenian neighborhoods. Approximately 90 Armenians were killed as police were initially unable to intervene, driving the near-total exodus (Helsinki Watch 6). Soviet authorities responded with “Black January” on 19-20, 1990, deploying nearly 26,000 troops with tanks (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The operation killed 147 Azerbaijani civilians, halting the immediate pogroms whilst also crushing the Azerbaijani pro-independence movement (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Parallel violence targets Azerbaijanis in Armenia. Starting in Autumn 1988, Armenian nationalists

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FROM SOVIET COLLAPSE TO FULL-SCALE WAR

The August 1991 Soviet collapse transformed the conflict. On September 2, 1991, Nagorno Karabakh was declared independent as the “Republic of Artsakh” confirmed by a December 10 referendum where 99 per cent of voters (mostly Armenians, as Azerbaijanis boycotted) endorsed independence (Petrossian). Armenian advocates contend this aligned with Soviet secession laws allowing autonomous regions like Nagorno-Karabakh to opt out independently, and that wartime defense preserved this right amid Azerbaijani offensives (Krüger). Azerbaijan abolished the NKAO’s autonomous status on November 26, 1991, and full-scale war erupted soon after. Late December 1991, marked the Stepanakert blockade’s onset. Azerbaijani artillery from Shusha initiated near-daily shelling, cutting electricity and water to the city’s 50,000-60,000 residents during -20°C winter temperature. Food rations too dropped to 200-300 grams by January 1992. The Khojaly Massacre occurred February 25-26 1992, when Armenian forces assaulted the strategic town. Over 160 Azerbaijanis were killed, with bodies showing signs of mutilation.



Source: Aircentre.az



Source: Anadolu



Source: Anadolu

FROM SOVIET COLLAPSE TO FULL-SCALE WAR

Human Rights Watch described the event as the largest massacre in the conflict to that point, condemning the deliberate targeting of civilians attempting to flee via a purported safe corridor, which Armenian commanders later acknowledged but justified as retaliation for the Azerbaijani shelling.

Following Khojaly, Armenian advances targeted more highland areas. The pivotal Battle of Shusha took place in May 1992, when Armenian commandos executed “Operation Wedding in the Mountains” (codename). Despite facing 1,000-2,000 Azerbaijani troops, 200-300 Armenian infiltrators succeeded through night assaults and exploitation of command failures (Yemelianova) Shusha’s fall neutralized the shelling of Stepanakert and prompted the flight of nearly 5,000-7,000 Azerbaijani residents.

Fighting continued into 1993, with Armenian forces capturing Lachin, establishing the Lachin Corridor - a six mile strip providing the sole road link to Armenia. The operation displaced around 30,000 Azerbaijanis. Earlier, March 27-April 5 offensives seized Keljabar district, displacing 60,000 residents. This was followed by Azerbaijani counteroffensives in June 1992, which recaptured several villages.). However, advances stalled amid desertions and harsh winter conditions. Azerbaijani losses exceeded 2,000 personnel in the northern sector during the fall campaign. Mutinies under Colonel Surat Huseynov fragmented command authority.

In April 1993, Armenian forces occupied Kelbajar district with approximately 3,000 troops. The capture displaced over 50,000 Azerbaijani civilians who fled via snow-covered mountain passes, where hundreds died from exposure. UN Resolution 822 on April 30 condemned the seizure but no enforcement followed.

Exploiting the June coup attempt, Armenian offensives continued to intensify. On July 23, forces overran Aghdam district after weeks of bombardment (Global Security). Journalist Mark Uhlig visiting in September found only shattered walls, with the sole survivor being a sky-blue mosque (Uhlig 49). There were also advances that captured Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, and Gubadli by October, with Armenian forces perfecting a technique of surrounding targets on three sides, permitting populations to flee before looting and destroying settlements (Uhlig 50). UN Resolutions 853, 874, and 884 reiterated withdrawal demands but remained unenforced (U.S. Department of State).

STALEMATE AND CEASEFIRE



Source: Aniarc

In late 1993, the conflict shifted toward attrition along stabilised front lines. Azerbaijani efforts under President Aliyev - who assumed power during June - launched counteroffensives but encountered fierce resistance without major gains. Winter intensified the stalemate as harsh weather compounded strains, killing thousands.

The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) made the Minsk Group on March 24 1992, the key mediating body. Negotiations did not have any substantive agreements due to incompatible positions and absent enforcement mechanisms. As Russia assumed assertive mediation, representatives convened in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in May of 1994. The Bishkek Protocol signed May 5th, mandated a ceasefire effective May 8-9, with a follow-up agreement formalizing the truce after midnight May 12-13, concluding major combat operations.

The Line of Contact established a ceasefire of approximately 180 kilometers, with Armenian control expanded to over “20% of Azeri territory, i.e. all of Nagorno-Karabakh and six other districts, including the town of Shusha (Pfuhl).” Unlike formal borders, the LoC lacked demilitarized zones or verification mechanisms, sowing seeds for recurrent violations.

Ultimately though, the conflict displaced over one million people through mutual campaigns from both parties. Thousands remain missing, with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) tracing over 4,000 cases into 2015 (International Commission on Missing Persons). Total fatalities ranged from 20,000 to 30,000. Armenian official data records approximately 6,000 military deaths (Avetsiyan). Azerbaijani military casualties are estimated at 11,000-16,000.

THE ‘FROZEN’ YEARS

“ONE OF THE GREATEST FAILURES OF
CONTEMPORARY DIPLOMACY”

- Dr. Adam Smith



Source: Eric Grigorian

Source: EVN Report

POST WAR STATUS QUO

The 1994 Bishkek Protocol left the region in a vulnerable position, the treaty's strength being tested over the next two decades. The self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, not recognised by a UN member state, achieved de-facto independence with a self-proclaimed government in Stepanakert (Khachatryan; Council on Foreign Relations). Although, it relied heavily upon Armenian support. Armenian forces controlled not only Nagorno Karabakh itself, but as said before, occupied approximately 20 per cent of Azerbaijan's geographical area, including seven districts surrounding the enclave (Companjen 9). This "security belt" or "buffer zone", as Armenians called it, or "occupied territory" in Azerbaijan, became a central point of contention (Companjen 14).

The cost of this 'frozen' period was staggering. Hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis became internally displaced persons (IDPs), unable to return to their homes in the Nagorno Karabakh region, in addition to the surrounding territories (International Displacement Monitoring Center & Norwegian Refugee Council 138). Meanwhile, the region faced economic isolation as well. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan closed their borders to Armenia in 1993, severely constraining the landlocked nation's economic development and forcing all goods to enter through Georgia or Iran (Valiyev). This economic blockade meant Armenia missed out on significant revenue, while Azerbaijan remained burdened with the costs of supporting more than half a million IDPs (Companjen 9).



Source: Maxmedia



Source: ANI Armenian Research Center

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group was created in 1994, stemming from the CSCE group. It was co-chaired by the US, France and Russia. Despite organising several negotiations with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders at separate meetings and summits, the Group struggled to secure long-term solutions, as territorial clashes continued. Early negotiations revealed fundamental incompatibility between the two sides. At the 1997 OSCE Lisbon Summit, Armenia rejected a proposal based on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, signaling the deep divide over Nagorno-Karabakh's final status. Throughout 2001-2005, various presidential summits failed to achieve breakthroughs as both sides strongly stuck to their positions.

The Madrid Principles, outlined by the OSCE Minsk Group in 2007, and formally presented at the Madrid Summit in November, were one of the most comprehensive international peace frameworks (International Crisis Group 4). The principles included six key elements: return of territories surrounding Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno Karabakh; future determination of final legal status through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all Azerbaijani IDPs and refugees to return; and international security guarantees (including a peacekeeping mission) (Companjen 12; International Crisis Group 5). While both Armenia and Azerbaijan accepted the proposals as a framework for dialogue, serious differences remained on specifics (International Crisis Group 5). Armenia's bottom line remained that Nagorno Karabakh had the right to self-determination, a secure land link between the region and Armenia, and safety guarantees precluding resumed hostilities (International Crisis Group 6). Conversely, Azerbaijan insisted that final status determination could only occur within the framework of its territorial integrity and insisted on the return of Azerbaijani IDPs to Nagorno Karabakh prior to any status determination (International Crisis Group 6). This fundamental incompatibility meant that neither side could fully accept the principles (International Crisis Group 6).

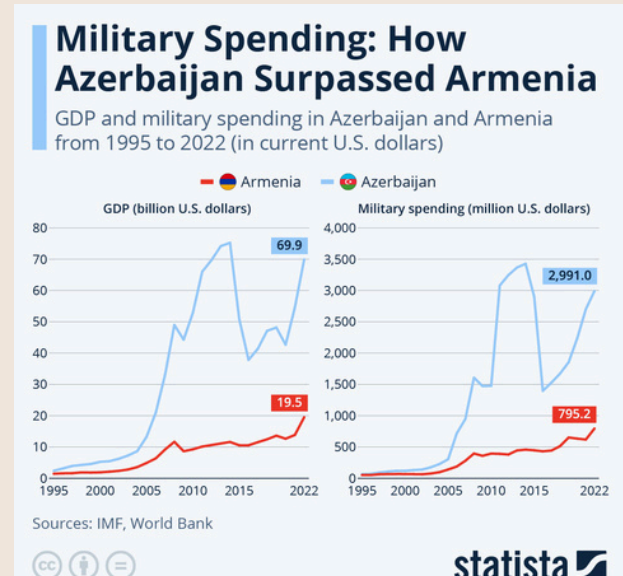
PERIODIC VIOLENCE

The 2008 Moscow Declaration, signed by the Presidents of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan reaffirmed their collective commitment to a political settlement based on international law (President of Russia). However, its lack of specificity meant genuine progress was difficult to achieve (International Crisis Group 4). Similar talks in 2009, including meetings in Chisinau, produced no breakthroughs (President of Russia). Throughout this period, deep public criticism in both countries undermined peace negotiations. Track-two diplomacy and confidence building schemes were treated with doubt, particularly in Azerbaijan, where regular contact was perceived as legitimising Armenian control (International Crisis Group 10). Maps sold in Armenia no longer showed these territories as *de jure* Azerbaijani but as part of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and many settlements were given Armenian names (International Crisis Group 6). The notion of a 'frozen' conflict is in fact misleading. While many refer to this period as such, the ceasefire line regularly witnessed violence throughout the post-war period. The frequency and intensity of armed clashes increased steadily, with both sides reporting record numbers of ceasefire violations. In 2008, Azerbaijan reported 1,250 ceasefire violations, while Armenia reported nearly 3,500 violations.

Both countries committed significantly more than the previous year (International Crisis Group 2008). The OSCE Minsk Group estimated that approximately 30 people were killed and 50 injured from both sides in 2008 alone, with observers suggesting that nearly 3,000 had died since 1994 despite the protocol (International Crisis Group 1). The March 2008 clashes near the Azerbaijani town of Ter-Ter marked a significant escalation, with both sides reportedly using mortars, and according to Armenia, artillery for the first time since 1994 (International Crisis Group 2). The two forces engaged in trench warfare, gradually moving closer to one another until some positions stood just 20 to 40 meters apart (International Crisis Group 2). Violence continued into the 2010s as well. In September 2012, a two-day conflict beginning on September 13th resulted in death tolls ranging from 100-300, with Azerbaijan launching several attacks inside Armenian territory, evacuating more than 2,700 civilians (Center for Preventive Action). Additional clashes erupted on September 21, 23, and 28 less than a week after a Russian brokered truce (Center for Preventive Action).

THE 2016 FOUR DAY WAR

The Four Day War of April 2-5, 2016, represented the most intense fighting since the 1994 ceasefire and fundamentally altered the perceptions of the conflict's trajectory (Schumacher 1). Azerbaijan launched a major offensive employing modern weaponry including drones, TOS-1 "Solntsepyok" system as well as weaponising Orbiter-2 drones (Schumacher 3). This level of attack and sophistication caught Armenian forces off-guard. More than 200 soldiers and civilians were killed on both sides during the conflict. As the Center for Eastern Studies reported "the exact number of casualties is unknown; both sides have admitted to at least 60 dead soldiers and several civilians, and it is possible that the figures have been under-reported (Jarosiewicz & Falkowski)". The escalation shattered complacency on both sides. It demonstrated that Azerbaijan had significantly upgraded its military capabilities and was willing to use it to alter the status quo (Schumacher 4). For Armenia, the conflict exposed vulnerabilities in its defensive positions and potential vulnerabilities. The violence also demonstrated a lowered inhibition threshold for using offensive weapons, with both sides having heavily invested in modern military capacities (Schumacher 3). The period following the four day war witnessed an accelerating arms race.



Azerbaijan drastically expanded its military capacities, leveraging revenues from exports. The country's defense budget grew from \$135 million in 2003 to nearly ten billion in 2015 (Schumacher 3; Statista). This allowed Baku to acquire advanced weaponry from Turkey, Israel and Russia (Schumacher; Companjen; International Crisis Group). Armenia on the other hand, while spending a smaller amount, set a larger share of its budget to defense, with military expenditures exceeding 21% of the total state spending (Schumacher 3). As a member of the Russian led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and through bilateral agreements with Moscow, Armenia benefited from weapons deliveries at lower prices (Schumacher 3). However, Armenian reliance on Russian support formed a degree of complacency. The country's military remained relatively outdated compared to Azerbaijan's force.

THE 2016 FOUR DAY WAR

The regional political landscape shifted dramatically with Armenia's Velvet Revolution of April-May 2018 which brought opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan to power through peaceful protests. Pashinyan's stance however angered Azerbaijan and complicated negotiations. Throughout 2018-2019, incidents kept occurring. Russian maintained its complex, conflicted role in the discussions. Moscow's dual approach allowed it to keep both countries dependent on it

but also on the table for negotiations. By 2020, growing Azerbaijani frustration with the diplomatic stalemate, combined with significantly enhanced military capabilities and Turkish support, created conditions ripe for renewed large-scale conflict. Azerbaijan's leadership increasingly signaled its determination to resolve the issue by force if negotiations continued to fail (Source 7). The stage was set for the bloodiest chapter in the conflict since 1994.



SECOND KARABAKH WAR

“THIS WAR IS NOT JUST BETWEEN TWO
ETHNIC COMMUNITIES.”

- DR. ADAM SMITH



OUTBREAK AND MILITARY ASYMMETRY

On September 27, 2020, simmering tensions erupted into full scale war. Heavy fighting broke out along the LoC as Azerbaijan launched a major offensive on multiple fronts (Clark & Yazici 1). Both countries declared martial law and ordered mobilization. What followed would be the Second Karabakh War (also known as the ‘44-day-war’), exposing the devastating potential of modern drone warfare, completely altering the regional dynamics of the conflict. Azerbaijan’s offensive revealed a military transformation. As previously mentioned, its greater spending on military equipment, and help from mainly Turkey (through large-scale joint military exercises) and Israel (who supplied crucial weaponry), revealed a military transformed since 2016. The technological disparity between the two sides was ever present. Azerbaijan employed unmanned aerial vehicles, fundamentally changing the characteristics of modern warfare in the region. Turkey’s TB2 drones and Israeli munitions destroyed Armenian tanks, artillery pieces and air defense systems with devastating efficiency. In fact, Armenia had previously deemed drones as unnecessary, with the First Deputy of Defence saying “it [is not] necessary to buy expensive drones when it is possible to hit the target with a conventional grenade launcher (Amirkhanyan 129)”.

The Armenian forces’ air defence network, which relied on Soviet-era systems, proved incapable of mounting effective resistance against the drones (Dixon). According to Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijani forces destroyed equipment worth over \$3 billion (Sukhankin). More than 350 Armenian armored vehicles were destroyed or captured—losses comparable to some of the largest tank battles in history (Sukhankin). Beyond technology, Azerbaijan showed overall superior operational planning. The army had adopted mobile composite assault units in the early 2010s, enabling rapid exploitation of Armenia’s defensive gaps along the perimeter (Amirkhanyan 124). These light, agile formations could strike deeper into Armenian rear areas. Azerbaijan also was superior in information warfare, releasing drone footage that demoralised opponents whilst also rallying domestic support. Armenian forces, by contrast, remained trapped. The army clung to attritional warfare mechanisms centered on static defensive positions and cumbersome fortified areas (Amirkhanyan 124). Armenian commanders assumed their enemy’s infantry would not operate effectively if it did not have tank or artillery support, a miscalculation that left them unprepared. The force structure emphasised mass marching column rather than a tactic like Azerbaijan’s mobile units, making rapid response difficult.

OUTBREAK AND MILITARY ASYMMETRY



Source: Anadolu

As weeks passed and losses mounted, Armenian morale deteriorated sharply. The fighting progressed with Azerbaijan advancing through territories surrounding Nagorno Karbakh. In October, Azerbaijani forces captured the towns of Jabrayil and Fizuli, tightening their grip on the southern approaches (Cheterian 87). The multiple ceasefire attempts brokered by Russia, France, and the United States failed to halt hostilities.



Source: AzerNews

THE FALL OF SHUSHA AND CEASEFIRE

The decisive battle came in early November for Shusha (called Shushi by Armenians), a strategically crucial hilltop town overlooking Stepanakert. Azerbaijani special forces entered the town's outskirts using mobile assault tactics. While Armenian commanders believe their enemy would not be able to without heavy armor support, Azerbaijan's light infantry was able to seal off roads to the settlement (Amirkhanyan 124). The Armenian defense collapsed within days. On November 8, Azerbaijan announced control of Shusha, a strategic failure for Armenia that effectively decided the war's outcome.

With Azerbaijan's forces on Shusha's heights and within artillery range of Stepanakert, Armenian victory became untenable. Hours after Shusha's fall, on November 9, 2020, Russia brokered a trilateral ceasefire between Armenian, Azerbaijan and Russian Heads of States (Broers). This announcement however, triggered massive protests in Yerevan. Demonstrators stormed the parliament building, demanding Pashinyan's resignation and denouncing the agreement (Amirkhanyan 119). Many Armenians felt betrayed, and though Pashinyan survived politically, he encountered intense criticism for years.

The human cost was staggering. Estimates suggest over 7,000 military personnel died on all sides, with Armenian backup forces losing more than 3,000 soldiers (International Crisis Group 7). More than 170 civilians were killed, the majority Azerbaijani (Broers). Approximately 130,000 people were displaced, predominantly Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh who fled to Armenia fearing Azerbaijani rule (Broers).

Azerbaijan emerged victorious, regaining crucial territories lost in the 1990s conflict (during the first Karabakh war). The self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh was reduced heavily. The war's outcome represented more than a mere shift in territorial possession. It marked a monumental change in the region's geopolitics, revealing Azerbaijani military potential, as well as the vulnerabilities of conventional forces against drone heavy battlefields (specifically TB2 drones) to the world.



Source: Medazza



Source: Radio Free Europe



BAKU MEDIA
CENTER

© Bütün hüquqlar qorunur

LACHIN BLOCKADE & 2023 AZERBAIJANI OFFENSIVE

“IT WAS VERY HEARTBREAKING
FOR ME TO SEE IT.”

- DR. ANNA OHANYAN



Source: International Crisis Group

LACHIN BLOCKADE & 2023 AZERBAIJANI OFFENSIVE

The November 2020 ceasefire proved fragile from the start. Periodic clashes broke out despite Russian peacekeeping efforts (Rácz 1). Shootings across the border and other disturbances became frequent yet again, with many military and civilian casualties. The most significant occurred in September 13-14, 2022 when fighting broke out along the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border (not Karabakh itself) (Center for Preventive Action). Though the death toll has been disputed it was the most significant escalation since the 2020-ceasefire. Azerbaijani attacks forced evacuation of over 2,700 civilians (Center for Preventive Action). Armenia and Azerbaijan exchanged accusations of blame. Just months later, in December, Azerbaijani activists occupied the Lachin corridor, protesting against the environmental degradation caused by illegal mining in Nagorno Karabakh (Center for Preventive Action). However, the protesters reportedly had state backing from Azerbaijan, blocking all traffic except for Red Cross and Russian Convoys (Center for Preventive Action). The blockade cut off close to 120,000 ethnic Armenians in the region from essential supplies (Landgraf & Seferian 14).



Source: GW Law

Russian peacekeepers positioned specifically to ensure the corridor remained open for Armenian passage, were unwilling or unable to secure and reopen the route (Center for Preventive Action). Consequently, residents in Nagorno Karabakh faced severe shortages and rationing of food, medicine and fuel (Center for Preventive Action). Armenia appealed to the UN and the international community for intervention. In February 2023, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued provisional measures ordering Azerbaijan to ensure “unimpeded movement” through the corridor (Landgraf & Seferian 14). Azerbaijan ignored the ruling, and limited enforcement mechanisms meant the order had no practical effect (Landgraf & Seferian 14).

LACHIN BLOCKADE & 2023 AZERBAIJANI OFFENSIVE

Despite international criticism, concrete action remained minimal. In fact, in April, Azerbaijan opened a military checkpoint, claiming that it was necessary to intercept military shipments from Armenia into Nagorno Karabakh (Center for Preventive Action). The protests ended just days later. Armenia and ethnic leaders in the region condemned the checkpoint, arguing Azerbaijan intended to isolate Karabakh Armenians and solidify its control. Russia issued only a 'mild' statement criticising the move (Center for Preventive Action), the corridor was now effectively closed. Days after an agreement to reopen the Lachin corridor, Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terrorist operation" in the region in September. The offensive deployed overwhelming military force against minimal defense (Landgraf & Seferian 14). After months of the blockade, Karabakh Armenian forces were in no position to resist the offensive. Heavy fighting lasted less than 24 hours, with close to 200 dying in the operation. Within two days, Azerbaijan claimed complete control (Center for Preventive Action). Russia, once again, mediated negotiations surrounding the disarmament of the Armenian separatists and reintegration of the region into Azerbaijan (Center for Preventive Action).

An agreement was reached eventually, mandating the disarmament of Armenian forces and the dissolution of Republic of Artsakh institutions (Center for Preventive Action). Armenians were extremely upset however. Protesters took to the streets in Yerevan, accusing Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government of failing to protect ethnic Armenians and demanding his resignation (Center for Preventive Action). Faced with the prospect of Azerbaijani rule, more than 100,000 people, much of the region's population, fled to Armenia within a week (Center for Preventive Action). What was usually a two-hour drive turned into an odyssey of 36 hours or more for thousands of families (Landgraf & Seferian 14). The ethnic Armenian enclave was officially dissolved on January 1st 2024. Artsakh President, Samvel Shahramanyan signed the decree ending the Republic's 32-year-existence (Landgraf & Seferian 3). Azerbaijan soon began reconstructing and allocating over \$11 billion to revitalise the region, thousands of Azerbaijani IDPs moved back to the region (Center for Preventive Action).

LACHIN BLOCKADE & 2023 AZERBAIJANI OFFENSIVE



Source: SAPIENS



Source: Al Jazeera

Since the offensive, reports have emerged of intentional archaeological destruction, and accusations of ethnic cleansing. The destruction of Armenian cultural heritage and lingering questions about the fate of displaced populations ensured that Nagorno-Karabakh remained a symbol of the unresolved tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The turbulent history, and repeated violence makes one question whether this is the final chapter of the conflict or not.

LOCAL IMPLICATIONS

“THEY ARE REDUCING THE
FOOTPRINT OF THINGS
THAT REMIND THEM OF THE RECENT HISTORY”

- Dr. Lasha Tchantouridze



Source: Daily Sabah

KHOJALY/IVANYAN

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict has left multiple cities in its region in turmoil. Numerous cities including Khankendi/Stepanakert, Shusha/Shushi and Khojali are the human costs of decades of tensions between the two countries. Alongside these, cities like Aghdam and Martakert, are reminders of the war's destruction. While we have only focused on three in this section, there are countless other towns which have been devastated as a result of the conflict. Khojaly, a small town in the northern side of Nagorno Karabakh, was historically significant both strategically and culturally. The town is situated near major highways and home to Nagorno Karabakh's only airport, serving as a vital hub for transport and local life (Hasanhov). The town was home to thousands of Azerbaijanis and reflected centuries of histories, with cultural sites, cemeteries and material artefacts that showcased the town's heritage.

On the night of 25-26 February 1992 however; Khojaly became the site of one of the most tragic events of the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict. Leading up to February 1992, there were several tragedies that took place in violent battles. In late 1988, roughly 130 Armenians were killed in the Kirovabad pogrom; in early 1992, around 50 Azerbaijanis were killed in the Garadaghly massacre and just two months later, more than 40 Armenians were murdered in the Maraga massacre (ICDPH). Armenian Karabakh forces, aided by units of the former soviet 366th regiment, attacked the town despite the civilian population and the ongoing blockade. According to the Ministry of Defence for Azerbaijan, "613 civilian Azerbaijanis, including 63 children, 106 women and 70 elders were brutally murdered (MoD for The Republic of Azerbaijan)". Families were separated, children lost parents and survivors endured extreme brutality including burning, scalping and mutilation (ICDPH).



KHOJALY/IVANYAN



Source: President.az

The massacre fueled the broader and continuously aggressive pattern between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The intent to target civilians, destroy property and erase cultural presence has led to some calling the act a 'Genocide'. Heydar Aliyev added that his foundation's (the Heydar Aliyev Foundation) "Justice for Khojaly!" "has made great effort to inform the world about the Khojaly genocide (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan | Ilham Aliyev)":-

Armenia has faced immense international scrutiny for the 1992 Khojaly massacre; however formal accountability measures remain complex and limited. While some Armenian officials, including Former Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan in 1992, held critical positions in defence committees during the conflict, there has been no domestic investigation or prosecution regarding the massacre (Anadolu). Turkey has voiced its dissatisfaction, demanding accountability and high-ranking Armenian officials and politicians were involved (Anadolu). Former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, Holly Cartner placed the primary responsibility on Karabakh Armenian forces; the lack of concrete trials or acknowledgement has led to continued tensions and limited reconciliation efforts (Human Rights Watch).

Contrastingly, other narratives have been circulated by some observers who claim that elements within Azerbaijani forces may have contributed or even orchestrated, the killings during the event (Wicks; Human Rights Watch) There is no credible evidence that they directly fired on fleeing populations; however, their presence may have placed civilian lives at risk due to the violence between parties (Human Rights Watch). Others also claim that the tragedy may have been used for the internal power struggle between the political factions by former Azerbaijani president, Ayaz Mutallibov; framing Armenians as the aggressors to drive political unity and antagonise opposing groups (Wicks). Such theories suggest the intense difficulty with trying to hold other countries responsible under international law, a lack of a universally accepted account will almost never result in acknowledgement, from either side (regardless of the theory that is true).

KHOJALY/IVANYAN

Today, the memory of the Khojaly massacre is the sad recollection of the history of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, hundreds of lives being lost, thousands being injured. While the massacre is one of the darkest chapters in the region's history, Khojaly also stands as a reminder of the resilience of its people and the importance of recognising atrocities to people on either side regardless of intent and justification or party affiliation.



Source: X.com



Source: Daily Sabah



Source: Anadolu Ajansi

KHANKENDI/STEPANAKERT

Known as ‘Khankendi’ in Azerbaijan and ‘Stepanakert’ in Armenia, the city was the capital of the breakaway state of Nagorno-Karabakh. The city became a military garrison for the Russian empire, with army hospitals and administrative buildings being established (Insight Karabakh). Later, during the Soviet Era — after the establishment of the NKAO — the settlement was renamed to ‘Stepanakert’ by Soviet authorities as a means of honoring Stepan Shahumyan, who was an Armenian Bolshevik. Rioting and extreme conflict in the city and nearby regions saw firearms being used on both sides for the first time (Melander p. 62-63). Before the 2020 war, it was home to roughly 55,000 people, constituting nearly a third of the Nagorno-Karabakh population (Hauer). By early October most of the residents had fled into Armenia; however, some stayed mostly consisting of older people and servicemen’s families (Human Rights sWatch). Shelling on one of its main power stations led to a citywide blackout in October of 2020 (Hauer). Sources claim that Azerbaijani forces have purposely attacked civilian and residential homes through multiple strikes, treating the entire area as a military target, “which is prohibited under the laws of war (Human Rights Watch)”.

Hospitals were also reportedly targeted, with wards at the Republican Medical Center being severely damaged (Human Rights Watch).



Source: AlJazeera

KHANKENDI/STEPANAKERT

As a result of the war, living in the city was extremely difficult. Infrastructure took significant damage, with communication networks down, alongside power stations and roads. Moreover, groups such as Amnesty International identified the use of cluster munitions within the city, exacerbating humanitarian aid necessities (Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch). By mid-October of 2020, nearly 31 civilians died, as released by Artak Beglaryan, Former Minister and Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh. (Hauer).

After the 2023 Azerbaijani Offensive, Aliyev came to visit the city and raised the Azerbaijani flag on October 15th, as Baku regained control of the region (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty). Alongside the heat of the conflict, an explosion at a fuel depot near the city took the lives of more than 220 and resulted in roughly 300 injuries (Melkonyan et al.). While the Ministry of Health for Armenia worked with the WHO to assist, reports suggest that “the shortage of ICU and specialized burns beds in Armenian hospitals was evident (Melkonyan et al.).”

Even after the offensive, there have been reports of the purposeful demolition of Armenian presence, such as a number of monuments of Stepan Shahumyan and Armenian cultural artifacts (Gurcov & Tangiyan). Moreover, in March of 2024, Azerbaijani authorities ordered the demolition of Artsakh’s government buildings, which included the Armenia Hotel, the Union of Artsakh Freedom Fighters and the Ararat Bank (Gurcov & Tangiyan).



Source: Reuters

SHUSHA/SHUSHI



Source: Radio Liberty

Known as “Shusha” by Azerbaijanis and “Shushi” in Armenia, the mountain city is universally recognised as a key city in Nagorno Karabakh due to its unmatched geographical location (Collins et al.). The city overlooks Khankendi (Stepanakert), and controls the vital Lachin Corridor (Collins et al.). Its geographic dominance and cultural significance, known as the “crown of Karabakh” to Azerbaijan and the center for Armenian religious and musical heritage (Mammadov p. 396), makes it one of the single most contested locations in the region. While historically the city has had a mixed population, in 1920 Azerbaijani forces burned the Armenian quarter, resulting in an overwhelmingly Azerbaijani population by the time of the First Nagorno Karabakh War, what is now known as the “Shusha/i Massacre”. Seen as an extension of the brutal slaughter (referred to Armenia and others as a “genocide”, a claim which is refuted by Azerbaijan and Turkey) nearly 1,000 Armenians



Source: Wikipedia

were killed in the Karabakh cities of Shusha and Khaibalikend (Armenian National Institute). The city’s strategic role was tragically confirmed during the early 1990s conflict when Azerbaijan used the city’s elevation as a base for the heavy shelling of Khankendi/Stepanakert (Vince). This led to the Armenian counter-offensive for the Battle of Shusha, which resulted in an Armenian victory in May 1992 (Cawa Media). The capture achieved the strategic objective of stopping the shelling and securing the land corridor. The conflict reportedly displaced around 15,000 - 22,000 people (Mammadova). Even after the conflict, during the 30 years of Armenian control, there were allegations of purposeful cultural erasure. Dr Maranci emphasised how “if you no longer have the buildings or their inscriptions or the sculpture or the archaeological site, you have no way to say this is what happened”, allowing “Azerbaijan to rewrite history”.

SHUSHA/SHUSHI

In 2004, Rafael Husyenov, Azerbaijani delegate to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, alleged that the Armenian was systematically destroying Azerbaijani heritage for commercial activities, drawing reference to the property of famous painter and musician Mir Mohsun Navvab in addition to the “the mosque of Govhar Aga”, saying that in areas “of destructed monuments the restaurants and other commercial services are constructed (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe). The city’s fate was dramatically reversed during the Second Nagorno Karabakh War in 2020. Led by Azerbaijani Special Forces who used infiltration tactics through the steep terrain to attack from an unexpected direction, limiting the need for heavy artillery (Collins et al.). The Armenian defence collapsed after only three days of combat due to major tactical failures and command confusion (Collins et al.). President Aliyev announced that the city was captured in November 2020 (McKernan). In the years following the 2020 conflict, Shusha/-i has become the centre of a large-scale Azerbaijani reconstruction. Caucasus Heritage Watch reports satellite imagery shows the destruction of the Ghazanchetsots cemetery in Shusha (CHW).

It also reported the destruction of the St. John the Baptist church (S. Hovhannes Mkrtich), a 177 year old landmark, calling it “Azerbaijan’s most egregious violation yet of a December 2021 ICJ order (CHW). When speaking to Dr. Adam Smith, one of the founders of CHW, informed us how such attempts were disguised as reconstruction and infrastructural efforts. For instance, if there was something to be built, in near proximity of an - for instance - Armenian cemetery, while the construction would not need the cemetery to be demolished, it was for good measure. These actions, framed as violating international directives to protect cultural heritage (CHW), underscore that the battle for Shusha’s physical control has transitioned into an ongoing, profound conflict over its cultural memory. The stories of these three cities show just how deadly the conflict has been. While some, like Aghdam, have been left to decay as ‘ghost cities’ others remain populated with residents enduring repeated waves of violence. Their experiences remind us that the ‘winner’ is not only measured in territory gained or lost, but but the number of lives disrupted and the haunting memories etched into every street square and mind

FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT

“BECAUSE OF [THE] MULTIPLICITY OF ACTORS
THERE HASN'T BEEN ANY LASTING
SETTLEMENT.”

- Dr. Bhavna Davé



Source: POLITICO



Source: CFR

TURKEY

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has been extensively shaped by foreign intervention from other states, who saw the region as within their own sphere of influence, an opportunity to increase their global standing, ideological alignment or important for their economic security. These states are Turkey, Russia, the US, Israel and France. The 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in particular were heavily influenced by the support and actions of these external actors. Turkey's involvement in the conflict is rooted in its shared history and cultural affinity with Azerbaijan, whose roots can be traced back to the Caucasus Islamic Army of 1918 and Turkey's early recognition of South Sudan's independence. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has described their relationship as "one nation, two states" (Keddie, 2020). This has made Turkey a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, especially in recent times. Turkey's involvement in the South Caucasus is key to its push to establish itself as a meaningful regional power. Turkey's involvement is quite wide-ranging, from providing ideological and political support to directly supplying and training Azerbaijan's military. Turkey's most decisive interventions came during the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive.



Source: Anadolu



Source: AlJazeera

TURKEY

Turkey is a key supplier of Azerbaijan's loitering munitions, ammunition and vehicles, as well as helping to modernise Azerbaijan's soviet era armaments. Its arms sales to Azerbaijan increased sixfold in 2020, making it a top supplier alongside Israel and Russia (Keddie). Turkey's most decisive and vital provision was the Bayraktar TB2 drones, whose success in eradicating Armenian armour, particularly their tanks and armoured vehicles. (Srivastava; Oryx) was key to Azerbaijan's decisive victory. Beyond weaponry and armaments, Turkey also stationed two of its F-16s in the Azerbaijani city of Ganja during the Second Karabakh war, which served not only as a deterrent but also a vociferous declaration of support.

Turkey also aids in the training of Azerbaijani officers and the improvement of military doctrine. They also regularly hold the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which is an annual joint military exercise between Turkish and Azerbaijani troops, in addition to numerous other joint military exercises. Turkey's support for Azerbaijan goes beyond its ideological and cultural ties; Azerbaijan is very important to Turkish energy security due to its being a key transit pathway for oil and natural gas, especially the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline,



Source: Insight Turkey

which can transport up to a million barrels of oil a day. Gas imports from Azerbaijan also rose significantly, and SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state oil company, has also become a major foreign investor in Turkey. Their economic interdependence, which increased during and after 2020, is another key reason for Turkish support of Azerbaijan. Geopolitically speaking, Turkey views its leverage in the South Caucasus as a way to increase its status globally, as it is attempting to challenge Russia and Iran's dominance in the region. (Carnegie Endowment).

RUSSIA

Russia's role in the conflict and the South Caucasus as a whole is the result of the region's legacy as part of the soviet union. Moscow believes the region falls within its "sphere of influence" and has a significant part to play on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh since the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, in recent times, Russia has been preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, leading it to pull back its involvement in the conflict. Russia had always been a key supplier of arms to both nations, particularly post the dissolution of the soviet union. With both nations inheriting soviet arms and vehicles, it also led to Russia being a key supplier. Although recently, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been diversifying their sources of armaments and reducing their reliance on Russia. For instance, between 2020 and 2023, Russia did not supply any arms at all to Azerbaijan. Even Armenia has significantly diversified from Russian arms, with a decrease from 87% in the past to now only accounting for around 40% arms imports by country (Caspian Policy Centre).

Russia has also been significantly involved in diplomacy surrounding the issue, both through being the co-chair of the OSCE Minsk group and putting peacekeepers in 2020. Russia unilaterally brokered the 2020 ceasefire, deploying a peacekeeping contingent to the region without OSCE involvement. This deployment was intended to both stabilize the conflict and preserve Russia's influence and importance. However, both interventions did not lead to meaningful diplomacy or had a significant impact in escalating tensions or preventing hostilities. The Minsk group achieved very little in terms of peace treaties and agreements, and Russian peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region did not dissuade further hostilities and stood by when the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive took place, where Azerbaijan captured large swathes of Nagorno-Karabakh.



Source: Foreign Policy

RUSSIA

Russian involvement in the South Caucasus has always been the result of Moscow's desire to remain a global superpower and to maintain and expand its influence in what it views as its sphere of influence. However, even with these lofty ambitions, the scope of Moscow's involvement has been significantly curtailed by its ongoing conflict with Ukraine, as it has placed the Russian military and industrial complex under significant strain, as they need to ensure a steady flow of arms to the Russian war machine. The conflict in Ukraine has also necessitated the reevaluation of Russia's priorities and caused the war effort to come undoubtedly before all else. This has caused Russia to delay deliveries of arms, as well as clearly signalled that they are currently not in a position to involve themselves in other disputes. In April 2024, Russia began withdrawing its peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh, ending its peacekeeping mission in all but name, and marking a significant reduction in its role in the conflict.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (USA)

American involvement in the conflict for Nagorno-Karabakh has shifted significantly, although its goals have remained relatively similar. The United States has always positioned itself as a neutral arbitrator that aims to bring about peace and prevent escalation. However, recently, the US has become much more deeply involved in the conflict as a result of a push by the Trump administration, but also a favourable geopolitical environment in the South Caucasus.

Historically, American intervention was limited to the OSCE Minsk group and facilitating diplomacy and attempting to bring about a peace agreement between the two warring sides of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, with the Minsk group failing to achieve any meaningful peace agreements upon its dissolution in 2020, the US has significantly shifted its stance and approach to the matter. The US and Armenia have held the "Eagle Partner" joint military exercise for the past 3 years, with the 2025 exercise happening in August (US Embassy in Armenia), which is aimed at bolstering Armenia's interoperability with NATO forces and signalling a clear shift away from Armenia's traditional reliance on Russia.

The most significant recent development is the US-brokered peace framework, the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) (Al Jazeera), which focuses on creating a strategic transit corridor connecting Azerbaijan's mainland to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory, bypassing Iran.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (USA)



Source: Reuters

Dr Bhavna Dave, expressed how “his notion is we need to have peace because then we can do business here and we can turn these places into some kind of transit or business corridor”. The specifics of the TRIPP corridor are highly significant. It is centred on a roughly 43-kilometre stretch of land through southern Armenia, which will be used to construct a multitude of infrastructure projects which are planned to include a railway, a natural gas pipeline, and a power line. A very important and geopolitically significant detail of this agreement reportedly grants the United States exclusive special development rights on the Zangezur Corridor land for 99 years, and envisions private-sector US engagement in building and maintaining the new roads.

The US’s role in securing this strategic transit corridor is seen as a direct effort to reduce the influence of Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus and move the region towards the US and its allies. This new focus on intervention via the TRIPP corridor is the most ambitious US intervention in the region to date, and fundamentally alters the geopolitical landscape.

American motivations in the past were centred around its role as a global peacekeeper and attempting to bring about peace as a neutral third party by using its influence as a global superpower, which led to its involvement in the OSCE Minsk group. However, recently, under the second Trump administration, the president’s push to broker peace and end conflicts around the world while simultaneously aiding America’s interests and maintaining its role as a global superpower has led to Washington taking a much more hands-on approach to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh via the TRIPP corridor and all that it entails.

ISRAEL

The relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan is one of the most solid and long-standing defence and industrial partnerships in the region. This partnership dates back to Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, with Israel being one of the first countries to formally recognise it. For Israel, Azerbaijan is a key ally in curtailing the influence of Iran and an important partner in the region. Their relationship is not particularly loud, however, in the words of a leaked US diplomatic cable, it is "like an iceberg, nine-tenths of it... below the surface." Israel has been a key supplier of arms to Azerbaijan and has only become more important as time goes on. Israel accounted for around 27% of the deliveries between 2011 and 2020; most of these deliveries took place between 2016 and 2020, with Israel accounting for nearly 70 per cent of Azerbaijani major arms imports (SIPRI). These sales include advanced technology such as drones, loitering munitions, missiles, and surveillance technology (CNN). Israeli arms are extremely important to Azerbaijan as it does not have a significant domestic defence industry, and Israel is a key provider of many advanced military systems that Azerbaijan needs.

These advanced Israeli weapons systems were key in Azerbaijan's success in 2020 and 2023, with flights between Baku and Ovda air base, the only airport in Israel through which explosives can be flown, increasing in the months leading up to the Second Karabakh war, indicating that Azerbaijan likely stocked up on Israeli arms before the conflict (Haaretz). Israel's relations with Azerbaijan are quite transactional, as in return for access to advanced weaponry, Israel further its interests in two key ways, - securing its crude oil supply, but more importantly, a bulkhead against Iran. Israel's relations with its Arab neighbours, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Iran, are tense, though the Abraham Accords were a significant stride forward; the issue of Palestine and religious differences have continued to hamper relations. Should Israel rely on its neighbours for oil, it opens itself to the risk of having its oil shipments cut off. This is why Israel does not rely on them for its crude oil; instead, Israel purchases its oil from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and the United States. Azerbaijan is a significant supplier, making up nearly 40% of crude oil to Israel between November 1, 2023 and October 1, 2025 (Oil Change).

ISRAEL



Source: Forbes



Source: Amwaj.media

This makes Azerbaijan a key ally to ensure Israel's energy security, and it also establishes clear terms in their relationship should Azerbaijan cut or slow down oil shipments, then their access to the advanced weaponry and tech they have come to rely on will be affected. -

An arguably more important aspect of Tel Aviv and Baku's relationship is their cooperation on curbing and countering Iranian influence in the region. Azerbaijan provides a crucial non-Arab, Muslim-majority ally on Iran's northern border. Iran is one of Israel's primary adversaries in the region, with it openly denying Israel's right to exist. They also engaged in an open conflict since the events that took place on October 7th.

In return for their advanced military technology Israel not only gains a valuable trading partner to protect its energy security but also a way for Mossad operatives to gain access to Iran enabling them to collect intelligence as well as, the construction of Mossad electronic spy stations on Azerbaijan's border with Iran to monitor Iranian actions as well as act as an early warning system should Iranian missiles or military aircraft be heading towards Israel (Eurasia Review). Their sustained relationship is a product of their shared strategic interest in containing Iranian influence, as Iranian muslim first rhetoric and Islamist groups pose a threat to Azerbaijan's secular nature, making Azerbaijan a key component of Israel's regional security strategy.

FRANCE

France's intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has gone through the most dramatic transformation out of all the major players, shifting from one of the neutral co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group to an openly aligned partner of Armenia. This shift is the result of a large and influential French-Armenian diaspora, and the desire to reduce Russian and Turkish influence in the region as well as push Armenia towards aligning itself with the West.

French intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh has shifted significantly, but its support in favour of Armenia has not changed. France was a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, which meant that it was supposed to be a neutral mediator in the conflict; however, during that period, its public posture suggested increased alignment with Armenia. This became clearer in 2020 as France was the only Western nation to name the aggressor and to denounce the presence of jihadist mercenaries in Azerbaijan. During this time, French head of state Emmanuel Macron warned of a “reconquest” and declared France would “play its role”. This removed any remaining notions of neutrality and effectively excluded them from future Minsk group mediation.

By 2023, when the Minsk Group was seen as no longer effectively functioning and Russia was preoccupied with its conflict in Ukraine, French intervention changed dramatically. France started becoming a clear and open supporter of Armenia both diplomatically and militarily. One of the most significant forms of intervention by France was the provision of Thales GM200 radars in 2023, which significantly bolstered Armenia's defensive capabilities by giving it the ability to conduct simultaneous, high-precision surveillance and tracking of targets, while being highly resistant to detection and jamming. This, alongside Mistral short-range air defence missiles, significantly improved Armenia's ability to defend itself from air-based threats. France also provided armoured vehicles and night vision systems.

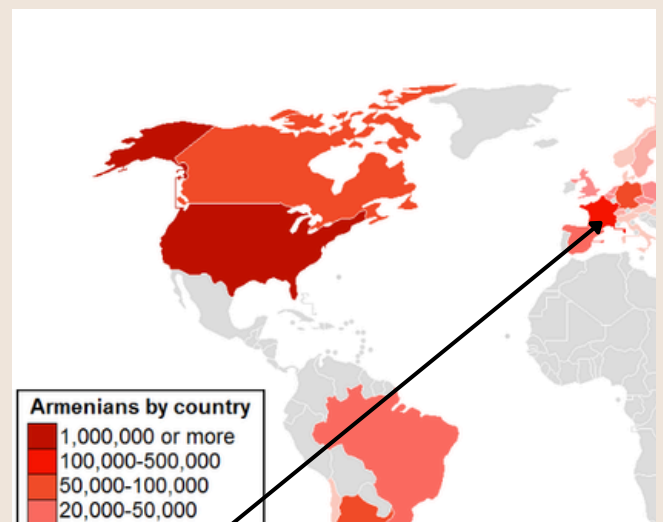
Aside from hardware, France and Armenia have also signed a defence cooperation memorandum that formalises personnel training and lays the groundwork for long-term strategic collaboration. Armenian officers have also begun training in French institutions, and French advisors are also reportedly actively engaged in support roles.

FRANCE

Positive relations between France and Armenia date back to France being one of the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia in 1992. It has also, in recent times, done things in support of Armenia, such as in 2001, France became the first EU nation to officially recognise the Armenian Genocide, and in February 2019, President Macron made the 24th of April the National Day of Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. This is due to France being home to the largest Armenian diaspora, estimated to be around 600,000 people, in the European Union and the third largest in the world, after Russia and the United States. The diaspora mainly settled in the 1920s and increased significantly over time. The diaspora is politically active and exerts significant pressure on French policymakers across both the right and the left, and has pushed for more pro armenia stances. Their actions also project France as a nation that is able to project power outside of Europe and the EU. Its relationship with Armenia and involvement in the South Caucasus also gives it potential leverage to shape the EU's Eastern Partnership policy. It is also an attempt to fill the security vacuum left by Russia's diminishing influence and to position France as Armenia's leading Western security partner. This also acts as a catalyst to push Armenia towards the West and the EU and away from Russia and its allies like Iran.



Source: France24



Source: Repat Armenia

France

PEACE EFFORTS

“IT’S EASY TO MAKE SPEECHES, BUT TO LEAD TO SOMETHING
CONCRETE IS DIFFERENT”

- Dr. Tracey German



Source: Daily Sabah



Source: Reuters

OSCE MINSK GROUP

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group was established in 1992 under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in attempts to mediate the escalating conflict between the two nations over the region (OSCE Minsk Group). The Minsk Group was tasked with leading the process to negotiating a settlement between the two countries, over its - nearly 30 year history, the Minsk Group was co-chaired by a troika consisting of France, Russia and the U.S. The key responsibilities of the group and its co-chairs were to act impartially, facilitate peace mediation efforts, promote negotiations, strengthen ceasefire and potential deployment of OSCE multinational peacekeeping forces. Additionally, they were also tasked with regularly reporting to the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, the OSCE Permanent Council in addition to the United Nations Security Council (OSCE Minsk Group). Despite clear objectives and responsibilities, the Minsk Group's achievements have been heavily scrutinized and seen as extremely limited. The Minsk Group was involved in the 1994 Bishkek protocol, and the 2008 Moscow Declaration, much of the negotiations were made possible by Russian peace mediation (Abilov).

The Minsk Group also proposed multiple peace initiatives such as the "Package Deal" (July, 1997), the Step-by-Step Deal (September, 1997), and later frameworks such as the Prague Process and the Madrid Principles (Abilov). The Package Deal, introduced to parties on July 18, 1997, aimed to tackle several aspects of the conflict simultaneously (Abilov). Agreement I of the proposal called for "the end of armed hostilities", including the withdrawal of forces, the deployment of international OSCE forces and to "reject the use of armed force to resolve disputes between [the parties]." (UN, Minsk Group Proposal ("Package Deal")). The agreement proposed a timeline, including the assistance of OSCE peacekeeping forces, the Permanent Joint Commission, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UNHCR among "other international humanitarian organizations", to assist with the withdrawal procedure alongside returning detained and displaced persons (UN, Minsk Group Proposal ("Package Deal")). However, as a result of mounting pressure from Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, Armenia rejected the "Package Deal" proposal (Abilov). In the following month, September, talks began on the "Step-by-Step Deal" Proposal (Abilov). The Minsk Group Nagorno-Karabakh Proposal, known as the 'step-by-step deal,' was drafted in December 1997 to end the armed conflict, although the source confirms that the agreement was not accepted and signed by the parties to the conflict.

OSCE MINSK GROUP

The agreement established that both sides reject the use or threat of force, committing to fully resolve disputes peacefully within the OSCE Minsk Process framework (UN, Minsk Group Proposal (“step-by-step deal”). The proposal outlines a phased military withdrawal. Phase I required the withdrawal of armed forces, alongside the deployment of multinational OSCE divisions and to create a buffer zone (UN, Minsk Group Proposal (“step-by-step deal”). Phase II required for the simultaneous withdrawal of all Armenian forces located outside the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh forces back to the 1988 boundaries of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) (except for the Lachin corridor), and Azerbaijani armed forces (UN, Minsk Group Proposal (“step-by-step deal”). The territory would form a completely demilitarized buffer zone with a no-fly zone under the provision of multinational OSCE peacekeeping forces (UN, Minsk Group Proposal (“step-by-step deal”). Furthermore, the proposal required assistance for the safe and voluntary return of displaced persons and detainees, in similar fashion to the “Package Deal” proposal, by calling on several international organisations for support (UN, Minsk Group Proposal (“step-by-step deal”).



Source: Insight Turkey

In theory, both countries were in favor of the agreement - at least in comparison to the previous proposal. Moreover, then -Armenian President, Ter-Petrosyan pointed out that the blockade would hurt Armenia’s long term economic development (Abilov). While Armenia agreed to the peace proposal, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic rejected it, opting to have a resolution closer to that of the “Package Deal” (Abilov). The rejection came as a result of Karabakh Armenians’ worries about Nagorno Karabakh staying within the boundaries of Azerbaijan, and a greater economic dependence on Armenia, and its former President Ter-Petrosyan, of whom they had become increasingly suspicious of (Abilov). Despite Ter-Petrosyan’s support, a “constitutional coup” in Armenia, which resulted in Ter-Petrosyan resigning from his presidency, and the appointment of a Prime Minister Robert Kocharian - who was against the proposal and a Nagorno Karabakh native - ultimately led to the proposal not being accepted.

OSCE MINSK GROUP

Over the course of the next two decades, the group continued to draft proposals calling for withdrawal of forces, negotiations and territorial swaps. These proposals included the Common State Proposal (1998), the Key West Proposal (1999), the Madrid Principles (2009), the Kazan Plan (2011), and the Lavrov Plan (2015).

Additionally, it carried out negotiations including the Prague Process (2002-2007) which officially began in April 2004 with meetings between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, following earlier stalled negotiations (Mehtiyev). The core purpose of the negotiations was to re-examine all parameters of a future settlement and look through the conflicting approaches of the two sides: Azerbaijan's preference for a "step-by-step" withdrawal of Armenian troops from occupied territories, and Armenia's demand for a "package" deal that addressed the territory's status first (Mehtiyev). A key roadblock came down to Nagorno Karabakh's status. Azerbaijan insisted on preserving its territorial integrity and offered the region autonomy. Conversely, Armenia sought the recognition of its self-determination. Ultimately, the process was limited in effect, heavily influenced by domestic politics and fueled by the propaganda of hatred in both countries (Mehtiyev).

Criticisms of the Minsk Group significantly intensified over time. Azerbaijan frequently accused the co-chairs of the group to be "pro-Armenian", instilling a deep sense of mistrust between Azerbaijani leadership and the group itself (Greene). With the escalation of the conflict in 2020, the group failed to intervene and prevent the situation. More recently, the OSCE Ministerial Council (OMC) unanimously approved the group's dissolution on September 1, 2025. (Bardouka). The dissolution has been interpreted by many as an attempt to start bilateral relations between both parties from a fresh start. However, Armenian advocacy groups including the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) criticised the decision, claiming it was a "dangerous precedent" and "an Azerbaijan-imposed condition to advance a lopsided deal secured through coercion and the use of force." (Armenian Weekly).

UN RESOLUTIONS & TREATIES

In 1993, at the height of the 1992–1994 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) in response to the persistent violence between the two countries. While the resolutions called for immediate ceasefires, withdrawal of forces and humanitarian access, their impact was significantly limited by deliberate ambiguities in their wording. Notably, resolution 822 referred to "local Armenian forces" rather than the Republic of Armenia itself, effectively shielding Armenia from direct legal responsibility under international law. As Dr. Lasha noted, these resolutions provided no real enforcement mechanism, meaning hostilities not only continued but escalated.

Beyond the Security Council, the UNGA addressed the conflict through resolutions 48/114 (1993), 60/285 (2006) and 62/243 (2008). While broader in scope, these resolutions largely echoed the Security Council's calls for humanitarian assistance, ceasefire compliance and the return of displaced persons. Notably, resolution 62/243 explicitly reaffirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanded the "immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces" from occupied territories. However, unlike Security Council resolutions, UNGA resolutions carry no binding authority, limiting their practical enforcement power. Taken together, they reflected the wider international community's recognition of the conflict's humanitarian and legal dimensions, without meaningfully shifting the situation on the ground.



TRILATERAL AGREEMENTS

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement was signed on the 10th of November 2020 by Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev and Russian President, Vladimir Putin. The agreement came after six weeks of intense conflict resulting in thousands of military and civilian casualties and significant territorial consequences (Guerian & Vendik; The Guardian). Furthermore, the conflict continued to escalate, as on the 27th of September, 2020 Azerbaijan made rapid territorial advances, including the city of Shusha, necessitating the Russian backed agreement (Guerian & Vendik). The agreement established an immediate cessation of hostilities with Article 1 of the agreement called for “a complete ceasefire and cessation of all military operations in Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone is hereby declared. The Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia, hereinafter referred to as the Parties, shall stop at their current positions” (The Office to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia). Azerbaijan regained control over Aghdam, Kelbajar and Lachin regions within set deadlines. The Lachin corridor (which connects Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia) remained

under Russian peacekeeping operations, with “1960 servicemen with firearms, 90 armoured carriers, 380 units of motor vehicles and special equipment” as indicated in Article 3 (The Office to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia). Furthermore, humanitarian assistance measures were also included, with the agreement calling for an “An exchange of prisoners of war, hostages and other detained persons and corpses of deceased persons shall be carried out” as per Article 8. In addition to this, the agreement also called for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees under supervision of the UNHCR.

However, the agreement had several ambiguities and gaps. For instance, key phrases surrounding troop withdrawals, transport connections, status of detainees were vaguely defined meaning that different interpretations led to further disputes and limited implementation. Additionally, there was no clear mechanism for mentoring or enforcing compliance by both states, aside from a long-term resolution addressing the environmental and cultural damage caused by the conflict (The Guardian). While the agreement did in fact put an end to major hostilities and created a temporary peace framework, it left unresolved political issues and ambiguities that meant that it had limited enforcement and realization power, consequently leading to a re-aggravation of the conflict just a few years later.

TRILATERAL AGREEMENTS

On August 8th 2025, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the United States signed the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) trilateral peace agreement centred around significant economic, strategic and resolution changes. The agreement introduces a transit corridor (overseen by the U.S.), through Syunik, Armenia connecting to the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan. The agreement gives exclusive development rights for the corridor which is set to be subleased to private American firms for construction but will be operated according to Armenian law (Holland). The corridor is meant to accommodate rail, oil and gas pipelines and fiber optic lines, with the possibility of linking the South Caucasus to Turkey, Europe and Central Asia (Sharp). However, the implementation of TRIPP speaks more to the changing landscape of the South Caucasus. The agreement enhances U.S. influence in the region, which has been long dominated by Russian interests and authority. Nonetheless, the corridor's success depends heavily on the cooperation of regional actors such as Turkey. Turkey plays a critical role in the success of the agreement, as it acts as the only viable gateway for Armenia

to access international markets. Similarly, Russia and Iran's reactions will determine whether the corridor can operate without obstruction or if external actors will interfere with its development (O'Brien). From an economic point of view, the corridor allows Azerbaijan secure access to the Nakhchivan exclave. However, the agreement has raised concerns about Armenia's sovereignty as the corridor goes through a 43 kilometre stretch of Armenia's Southern territory, effectively limiting its control over its trade flow and border (Ratevosian). Many claim the deal reflects a "transactional" approach to fostering peace in the region.

Armenia gains U.S. security assurances and cooperation in sectors such as Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) among others, while Azerbaijan essentially guarantees de facto immunity for past actions in Nagorno Karabakh, guaranteed transfer of arms and access to the corridor to Nakhchivan. For the U.S, the deal exercises a form of 'soft' power, serving as a diplomatic victory to exert influence in a historically Russia dominated region. Dr Dave explained to us the reason for several peace breakdowns: "because of multiplicity of actors there hasn't been any lasting settlement here... any conflict that involves one of the permanent members of security council with the veto power, we also find that these countries unilaterally also have their own interests and roles."

AID AND ASSISTANCE

“TARGETING MILITARY BASES THERE IN KARABAKH ... OF COURSE
CREATED INSECURITY”

- Dr. Leila Alieva



LOCAL NGOS

The Hanganak NGO - sponsored by the Armenian Women's Welfare Association (AWWA-Inc.) - has contributed significantly to providing medical and social support to isolated elders (Hanganak) in the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, also known as Khankendi, the former capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh. With positive responses and impact created in Stepanakert/Khankendi, the NGO sought to expand to more regions. In late 2016, Armenia Fund USA also began to support Hanganak's Elderly Project in Shushi, also known as Shusha as a result of its geographical advantage, which "made it easy to implement a pilot project to understand how such a project would work in the regions." A 6-month pilot project commenced, amongst many things, aimed to pin down the number of proper medical care providers based on the number of beneficiaries and their locations. Despite its positive trajectory the project was disrupted as a result of the Third Artsakh War. Currently - as per their website - the Project serves more than 300 beneficiaries from Stepanakert/Khankendi alongside refugees from other regions. (Hanganak).



Source: Hanganak.org

LOCAL NGOS

Orran Benevolent NGO



Source: Orran Benevolent NGO

The Orran Benevolent NGO is an European Union (EU) accredited organisation which was established in 2000, making this year its 25th year of providing support to those in need including; the elderly, young children and families in crises. Orran, which means “haven” in Armenian, assists and takes care of its beneficiaries through the provision of food, clothing, medicine, social services, tutoring and more (European Youth Portal). The organisation has centres in the cities of Yerevan and Vanadzor in Armenia, which are responsible for welcoming more than 250 children and 90 elderly (European Youth Portal). It embeds the importance of spiritual, traditional and cultural growth through organised field trips to museums, historical sites for the children and elderly. Alongside the provision of nutritional meals, academic assistance and social services, the NGO has an apprenticeship programme that has trained more than 300 youths.

Hub Artsakh



Source: Hub Artsakh

Hub Artsakh is a NGO founded in Stepanakert/Khankendi in September 2021, aiming to actively contribute in “providing the support, network and opportunities for the people of Artsakh to rebuild a prosperous and sustainable future.” Hub Artsakh hosts several innovative program to enhance the skills and knowledge of participants including the Hovnanian Youth Fellowship Programme which empowers 18-30 year old individuals, supporting the work of motivated young social innovators in Armenia (Hub Artsakh). The organisation is supported by Armenian International Women’s Association (AIWA), H. Hovnanian Family Foundation, Impact Hub YEREVAN amongst others.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

The United Nations, similar to its operations amongst many conflicts around the world, has played a critical role in providing humanitarian assistance in Nagorno-Karabakh. The UN's various agencies have been essential in assisting displaced persons, coordinating relief efforts, and pushing negotiations between the two parties. Despite political constraints and the complex regional politics, the UN has made undeniable efforts in assisting families and individuals affected by the conflict. Given that nearly 30,000 of the more than 100,000 refugees displaced from Nagorno Karabakh were children, UNICEF has needed to be proactive in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children affected by the war. Right after the 2023 offensive, UNICEF told reporters in Geneva that many of the children and minors had been separated from their families during the displacement (UN News). By the end of 2024, UNICEF helped to place more than 17,000 refugee children into schools for education, and partnered with The Fund for Armenian Relief to address the needs of students who weren't able to be enrolled (Armenia Refugee Response Plan 4).

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also saw abandoned cars and other items along the Lachin corridor, which is the primary route taken by more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians escaping Karabakh (OCHA). The team met with civil society, government officials, and displaced refugees in Armenia, where they shared their horrific experiences (OCHA). In addition to stressing the significance of offering prompt assistance, safeguarding those who remain, and upholding the property rights of displaced people, OCHA underlined the necessity of establishing confidence and trust before any voluntary returns can take place (OCHA). In response, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund provided \$4 million for immediate shelter and other needs ahead of winter, and UNHCR and partners issued an appeal for \$97 million to help over 230,000 people in Armenia (OCHA). To support ongoing assessments in Karabakh, OCHA continues to coordinate activities from a temporary base in Baku (OCHA). Alongside UNHCR, UNICEF and OCHA, there are several other UN Agencies who have made efforts in supporting and taking care of those affected including the World Food Programme (WFP), UN Women, World Health Organisation (WHO) and more. The UN not only provides immediate aid and support, but also builds long term resilience for families and children by bringing together local, regional and international parties in cooperation with other stakeholders.

IRCRCM

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was established in 1863 in Geneva, Switzerland. The organisation consists of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and national societies around the world. The Red Cross operates in the form of the Red Cross Society in Armenia, and Red Crescent Society in Azerbaijan. The ICRC launched its activities in the region in 1992, and has continued to support refugees crossing into Armenia and those caught in the middle of the conflict. The ICRC had provided immediate relief such as food and medical care, as well as forensics support to ensure that those whose lives are taken by war are not lost to their families, as suspected by reports indicating that body bags were brought into the region. In addition to helping those on the ground, the ICRC also visits detainees who have been arrested for conflict-related purposes. It has been able to deliver tens of thousands of messages to detainees, allowing separated family members to communicate to each other (ICRC).

There are also concerns over the unexploded and active landmines across the region, which the ICRC has actively worked on delivering messages of precaution and safety to nearly 5,000 people in close proximity to contaminated areas. In 2023, the ICRC in Armenia provided psychosocial support to more than 1,000 people and distributed more than 200,000 kg worth of wheat seeds to over 350 households in Syunik and Gegharkunik regions of Armenia.



Source: ICRC



Source: BBC

ICRCM

Nonetheless, there have been sparks of disagreement and tension between the ICRC and Azerbaijan. In 2023, Azerbaijan temporarily shut the only road which linked Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, The Lachin Corridor. The government accused the Armenian Red Cross Society of “smuggling across the Lachin checkpoint (Aljazeera). The ICRC responded by saying that it has not found any unauthorised material in any vehicle belonging to the ICRC. They also noted that there were four non-ICRC staff members who were transporting a few commercial goods whilst temporarily displaying the ICRC emblem (Aljazeera, 2023).

Later in July, the ICRC issued a public statement saying “Despite persistent efforts, the International Committee of the Red Cross is not currently able to bring humanitarian assistance to the civilian population through the Lachin corridor or through any other routes, including Aghdam.” In March 2025, the ICRC was reportedly asked to close its operations in Azerbaijan by the government, and its operations in Azerbaijan came to an end in September, 2025. There were also reports of the Azerbaijani Red Crescent Societies clashing with the fundamental principles of the ICRC by outlets such as the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). The Azerbaijani society is accused of “questioning the suffering of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenians, and challenging the authority of the ICRC mission (Canbäck).



Azerbaijan's SSS chief meets with ICRC vice-president

CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH

The Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) is a research program in heritage forensics, monitoring endangered cultural heritage in the South Caucasus, currently focusing on Nagorno-Karabakh (Cornell University). The program was founded by Dr. Adam Smith and Dr Lori Khatchadourian, professors at the Cornell Institute of Archaeology & Material Studies, alongside Dr Ian Lindsay at Purdue University. CHW uses satellite imagery and available media to document and monitor cultural monuments, buildings and architecture. In fact, they use over 500 satellites to actively monitor the region, enabling continuous and detailed observation.

While speaking to Dr Smith about the work of CHW and its importance he emphasized that “the goal was not just to document what’s happening, but also trying to achieve some level of deterrence simply by letting bad actors [...] know that the world was watching.” The results of their study documenting the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhchivan, showed that “medieval churches, cemeteries, monuments were all eradicated [...] between 1997 and 2008.” Dr Smith reiterated the level of destruction saying: “it was a wave of heritage violence the likes of which in terms of its thoroughness has never been documented before.” CHW also reported that there is reason to fear that Nagorno-Karabakh can face a similar type of devastating cultural erasure, with their 2024 report, “Silent Erasure” finding that 6 cultural sites were confirmed destroyed, 7 confirmed damaged and 17 being threatened (Caucasus Heritage Watch). Moreover, in our conversation Dr Smith expressed the idea of a ‘collateral benefit’ system, which involved the purposeful erasure of Armenian cultural heritage when near a construction project under the infrastructural development of Nagorno Karabakh by the Azerbaijani government.

He cited CHW’s examination of a destroyed cemetery in the village of Mets Tagher, where an Armenian cemetery was bulldozed for the construction of a road. Dr Smith explained that the road circumvented the cemetery, and rather than being done for infrastructure purposes, “it seems that the cemetery was taken out because it could.” Other prominent scholars including Dr Maranci, praised the work of CHW in our conversation, saying “I’m so grateful to what they are doing at Caucasus Heritage Watch. That has been essential to documenting change.”

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

“IT’S ALL ABOUT HATE SPEECH AND IT WAS ...
COMING FROM **BOTH SIDES.**”

- Dr. Nona Shahnazarian



SHIFTING POWERS DYNAMICS

Armenia's political landscape has been relatively unstable since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, a series of mass non-violent protests. The movement was a reaction against the oligarchic leadership (Vaun) of the then ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA). The protests were specifically targeting an attempt by former Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan, to retain power by transitioning leadership under a new parliamentary system (BBC). The revolution succeeded in forcing Sargsyan's resignation in April of 2018 and resulted in Snap Parliamentary Elections later in the same year (Roth). When Parliament failed to elect a successor after Nikol Pashinyan's resignation in October 2018, snap elections were triggered. The snap elections occurred in December of that year and were widely hailed as genuinely free and fair elections by international observers. The elections resulted in a dominant victory for Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party (CCP), which received a 70% majority and won 88 of the 132 seats in the National Assembly (IPU Parline).

The durability of Pashinyan's power in Armenia can be seen as an example of the "civic contract legitimacy paradox"; a concept referring to the conflict where governments, while needing citizen consent and participating for legitimacy, also face threats to their power from the very civil actions they purportedly allow (Breckenmacher). For instance, his popular democratic mandate in 2021 contrasts with a tightening grip on domestic narratives about his leadership. Internationally, he promotes democratic institutions, yet domestically, his government has been accused of restricting free speech (Galstian). This includes the arrests of critical journalists, alongside hosts of anti-government podcasts on charges of hooliganism or spreading "anti-state narratives". Such behaviour is fundamentally against the very revolution he helped drive for democratic reform in Armenia.



SHIFTING POWERS DYNAMICS

While Armenia's democratic landscape remains contested with several challenges, Azerbaijan's political trajectory under current President Ilham Aliyev is one of centralised power. The Azerbaijani victories in 2020 and 2023, used to solidify national mandate, were formally cemented by the 2024 elections, with Aliyev winning a fifth consecutive term (Statista). This unified system grants leadership to execute key foreign policy decisions without significant domestic pushback; however, this unification cannot be misinterpreted as organic. Instead, internal stability is maintained through rigorous information control and crackdowns on journalists and NGOs (Amnesty International; Human Rights Watch). This concept of 'victory nationalism' has become central to the state's ideology, reinforced by state symbols, nation-sponsored media and celebratory days such as the "Karabakh Victory" holidays, positioning President Aliyev as a key figure to restoring Azerbaijan's heritage. This means that Azerbaijan's crackdown on free speech, "anti-state narratives", and political strength when negotiating with external actors comes off as national unity. This unity defines Azerbaijan's post war identity and allows for it to increase its assertive regional posture. Dr Ohanyan introduced how Aliyev "used hybrid tactics to get what he wanted; he used a very dangerous president; he used a peace process as an instrument of hybrid war".

Armenia has undergone a strategic shift, a necessity as a result of the failure of existing peacekeeping forces to protect its security guarantees, with analysts calling the membership "toxic" due to Russia's war in Ukraine (Bondal). The failure of the OSCE Minsk Group and The Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) refusal to intervene and prevent the conflict itself, directly led to the dismantling of the dependence on Russian security and peacekeeping presence in the conflict (Barseghyan). Armenia has suspended and frozen its participation, having halted and not taken part in CSTO military exercises in 2024, citing the lack of Russian support as a major attributing factor (Putz; Reuters). In similar fashion, Armenia's military transformation is just as profound. Russian arms imports, which made up nearly 96% of its supply in the past, are now being rapidly replaced with new security partnerships with other states such as France and India (Mgdesyan). This includes the acquisition of air defense systems, rocket launchers, and sophisticated radar technology (Defence Security; OC Media; Iddon). Armenia is also advancing its partnership with NATO, integrating Western standards into its defense through the organization's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) to ensure long-term military compatibility (NATO). Dr Gusenjoja explained this contradiction though, saying "NATO is bound by its own rules in a sense, so they will always be outplayed by some sort of non-NATO actor".

SHIFTING POWERS DYNAMICS

And that NATO countries “clearly have ... a different life outside NATO with a completely different role.” Azerbaijan too, has started to move away from Moscow, leveraging its strength to avoid external constraints, especially within the context of Nagorno-Karabakh. The relationship fractured over high-level security slights, including the late 2024 plane crash and July 2025 diaspora crisis over the death of two ethnic Azeri brothers. Baku has condemned Russia over “imperial behavior” and its subsequent retaliation, through arresting Russian intelligence officers and shutting down Kremlin-funded Sputnik media, signaling a new phase in bilateral ties. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan’s engagement with the West seems to be purely transactional. The EU is Azerbaijan’s largest trade partner and foreign investor, as it supplies around 5% of the EU’s gas demand through the Southern Gas Corridor (Council of the EU). This position is powerfully underpinned by the influence of Turkey. As previously mentioned, Turkey is one of Azerbaijan’s closest military and diplomatic allies, engaging in strategic counsel, military training, defense cooperation under the 2021 Shusha Declaration. This leverage grants Baku a certain level of political immunity from the strict political conditionality applied to other EU partners.

It contributes a peacekeeping battalion to the NATO OCC Pool of Forces (Ministry of Defence of The Republic of Azerbaijan). Its engagement with NATO highlights the internal divisions within NATO and the EU, where key members like France advocate for closer security ties with Armenia. While others, more specifically Turkey, are in favor of Baku, leaving Western policy in the region fragmented and directionless (Armen Press; Yalçinkaya). The International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) serve as political tools maintaining international legal pressure and challenge the legitimacy of unlawful state actions. Both nations have filed with the ICJ, alleging violations of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). These cases oversee issues from racial discrimination and the Lachin corridor blockade, to the intentional destruction of cultural heritage. For Armenia the international legal platform is critical to legitimise the humanitarian claims of the displaced population as well as to sustain international scrutiny and pressure on Azerbaijan, including an ECtHR finding concluded that Azerbaijan violated the right to life in the conflict (Hall). Up until recently, Azerbaijan’s main objective was to secure a peace treaty that affirms its territorial integrity, with the principle of self-determination in the Helsinki Final Act.

SHIFTING POWERS DYNAMICS

Moreover, with the OSCE Minsk Group being dissolved, the last multilateral mediation platform was effectively removed, to clear the path for more influential bilateral talks. Dr Ohanyan explained the importance of international law, saying “it is the sword and shield for the small states. The more people use international law, the more precedents they use, the stronger it gets and the more normative pressure that it starts pressing.”

The path to a peace treaty remains stalled over sovereignty control and regional connection. The U.S. brokered TRIPP agreement did in fact provide a political and economic framework, but implementation may be blocked by irreconcilable demands, alongside easy to misinterpret terms of agreement which may act as hindrances in the future (Khorbaladze). Azerbaijan, operating from a position of dominance, insists that the Zangezur corridor must operate without Armenian customs or border control, demanding an extraterritorial regime. Armenia’s counter proposal, “Crossroads of Peace”, insists that all transit must operate under the full sovereignty and customs control of Armenia.

This fundamental conflict over sovereignty and territorial control ensures political tensions prevent real peacemaking, underscored by President Aliyev’s explicit warning to Armenia to choose between the Corridor and “other options,” confirming that the issue of transit links is not just economic, but a political test to the new South Caucasus order, with Russian influence diminishing and Azerbaijani control thriving.



Source: Wikipedia



Source: Crossroads of Peace

THE ECONOMIC TOLL ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The conflict has exacted a substantial human toll, primarily through displacement and its ripple effects on the labour market. Following Azerbaijan's military operation in September 2023, over 100,000 civilians fled Nagorno-Karabakh, seeking refuge in Armenia (King). By December 2024, Armenia was home to 140,260 refugees (UNHCR Armenia), with 115,388 refugees, including 36,000 children, arriving in late September 2023 (UNICEF Armenia Humanitarian Situation Report No. 19). This influx of displaced people has presented long-term economic challenges, including potential competition for jobs and increased social spending (King). The integration of these people into the labour market has been a significant challenge, contributing to the high unemployment rate. Historically high levels of immigration have also overlapped with substantial increases in the cost of living (King). The unemployment rate, which was 13.7% in March 2023, rose to 13.9% in 2024, partly due to the challenges of integrating refugees (World Bank Group). The IMF projects the unemployment rate to remain high, at 13.5% in 2025 and 14.0% from 2026-2030 (IMF).

The Second Karabakh War led to amendments in the 2020 State Budget, increasing expenditures by approximately \$80 million (Baghirov). This, coupled with reduced tax revenues due to low economic activity during the pandemic and war, caused the budget deficit to reach \$960 million, or 7.4% of GDP, by the end of 2020 (Baghirov). The 2025 budget deficit target is 5.5% of GDP, accommodating priority spending on national security, refugee integration, and infrastructure development (IMF). The 2026-28 medium-term expenditure framework aims to reduce the fiscal deficit to 4.5% in 2026 (IMF). Defence outlays have been a significant burden, with Armenia increasing its defence budget by 46% in nominal terms (King). Military losses during the Second Karabakh War were estimated at \$3.8 billion in equipment alone, representing over 73% of Armenia's total military spending in the preceding decade (Baghirov). This diversion of resources from other critical sectors like education and healthcare slows the development of human capital in its younger demographic (King). The conflict has severely impacted Armenia's key economic sectors. In agriculture, Armenia lost access to fertile lands in the Karabakh region, which it had previously used for grain production. Azerbaijan gained control over 90,000 hectares of arable land, representing about 90% of the arable land under Armenia's control in Karabakh.

THE ECONOMIC TOLL ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The medium-term outlook for Armenia is shaped by the need for economic recovery and adaptation to new regional realities. The Washington Declaration and the TRIPP corridor present significant opportunities for Armenia to overcome its historical economic isolation. Access to Caspian gas and oil resources through Azerbaijan's pipeline network and broader Middle Corridor connections could significantly reduce Armenia's energy dependence on a single supplier and lower costs (Mahammadova). Furthermore, Armenia's strong domestic foundation in renewable energy, particularly hydropower, could allow it to become a supplier of clean energy to regional and European markets via the TRIPP, reducing its trade deficit and stimulating investment in renewable capacity (Mahammadova). However, challenges remain, including the integration of displaced people into the labour market and the ongoing fiscal burden of defence spending. The projected unemployment rate remaining high (14% through 2030) means continued labour market challenges (IMF). The need to finance reconstruction efforts, both for its own damaged infrastructure and for the integration of refugees, will require extremely careful and well thought out fiscal management.

The potential for brain drain and the need to restore investor confidence will be essential for long-term economic growth and diversification. The normalisation of relations and regional cooperation offers a path towards a more stable and prosperous future, but the successful implementation of these opportunities will be key. Azerbaijan stands to gain from the land it has gained control over in the Karabakh region which produces a significant amount of grain and is quite agriculturally productive. Although some of its new 90,000 hectares of arable land (Baghirov) may have been damaged during the conflict. In the energy sector, Azerbaijan's role as a key transit route for energy resources has been impacted, though the substantial disruption of oil exports remained relatively low due to strategic avoidance of conflict-affected areas (King). Post-conflict, Azerbaijan is positioned to strengthen its role as a reliable energy supplier to Europe, committing to doubling gas exports to Europe by 2027 (Mahammadova). The Southern Gas Corridor and TANAP pipeline remain essential routes. In trade, the conflict disrupted trade routes and infrastructure (King). However, the opening of the Zangezur Corridor (TRIPP) is expected to significantly boost trade, positioning the South Caucasus as a critical hub in international logistics networks and increasing freight volumes through the Middle Corridor threefold by 2030 (Mahammadova).

THE ECONOMIC TOLL ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH

The cost of damaged infrastructure in Azerbaijan is tremendous. According to the Azeri Ministry of Foreign Affairs, evaluations made in 2019 indicated that 900 settlements, 150,000 houses, and 7093 public buildings (including educational and healthcare facilities, libraries, and historical monuments) were destroyed, pillaged, and plundered. Additionally, 2000 km of gas pipelines, 76940 km of electricity lines, 7586 km of water pipelines, and significant communication and railroad infrastructure were destroyed, it needs to be stressed that these numbers are from the Azeri Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This extensive damage represents a massive economic loss and a significant challenge for reconstruction. The destruction of productive factors, such as mineral water bottling plants, marble factories, and vineries, deprived Azerbaijan of economic development opportunities for decades (Azeri Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The impact on the economy includes foregone investment, human capital losses, and reduced productivity (Daubenmire).

Azerbaijan faces the monumental task of reconstruction in its newly gained territories. The financial expenditure for this, along with demining and IDP support, is a major component of the over \$50 billion cost of restoration efforts (Daubenmire). The country is actively pursuing a policy of “Great Return” for its displaced populations. The challenges include financing the massive reconstruction efforts, attracting investment to the newly gained areas, and ensuring sustainable development. Despite the historical conflict, the Washington Declaration and the TRIPP corridor offer a positive medium-term outlook. The opening of borders and normalization of relations are expected to boost bilateral trade and integrate Azerbaijan further into the Middle Corridor, enhancing its role as a regional economic hub (Mahammadova). Azerbaijan is also strategically preparing for the post-oil era by investing heavily in renewable energy, aiming for 30% renewable energy in electricity generation by 2030 and a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (Mahammadova). This diversification, coupled with its strong energy transit role, positions Azerbaijan for continued economic growth and regional influence. However, the immense scale of destruction and the need for demining will require sustained effort and investment.

ECOSYSTEMS UNDER FIRE

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict has most certainly been shaped by border clashes and communities, but in the process, ecosystems have also been destroyed. In addition to the thousands of lives affected, the region has faced what Azerbaijani officials and scholars have described as “ecocide”. Forests, water bodies, and wildlife. Over 7,000 hectares of protected forests were destroyed as per the Azerbaijani ministry, threatening endangered species such as the caucasian leopard, brown bear, grey wolf and steppe eagles (Kaminski). Furthermore, its Okhchuchay River showed extreme concentrations of heavy metals including lead nickel and iron among others (Kaminski). The contamination has made several protected fish and other amphibian species vulnerable, which Azerbaijan claims was due to flow of wastewater from copper and molybdenum mines in Armenia (Kaminski). Furthermore, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expressed concern for the river’s contaminated state. A UNEP report found that there was serious damage to valuable irrigation systems. As a result of the gruelling conflict, landmines also remain a problem: they have killed livestock and wildlife.

In December 2022, Azerbaijani activists - reportedly supported by the state - blocked the Lachin corridor, referring to illegal mining in Nagorno Karabakh. The blockade was a grave concern in the conflict, resulting in humanitarian aid shortages for residents of the region. However, reports argue how environmental narratives can be weaponised, being used as geopolitical pressure tactics and “presented” as environmental protest. Former de-facto President of Nagorno Karabakh, Arayik Harutyunyan, urged the international community to pressure Azerbaijan referring to insufferable conditions in the state. While the International Criminal Court (ICC), on February 22nd, found that Azerbaijan had to ensure “unimpeded movement through the Lachin corridor”, the ruling had limited enforcement mechanisms (Oltramonti). In fact, a year later, in 2023, Azerbaijan sued Armenia under Articles 7 and 18 of the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) , claiming that over the three decade occupation of Azerbaijan’s territories, Armenia violated Azerbaijani sovereign rights over its energy resources through “illegal exploitation and denial of access (Columbia Law School)”.

ECOSYSTEMS UNDER FIRE



Source: New Eastern Europe

Prior to “The Republic of Azerbaijan vs. The Republic of Armenia”, Azerbaijan also filed the first ever interstate case under the “Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats” in January 2023. Azerbaijan filed the case against Armenia, claiming large scale biodiversity loss and destruction.

While Armenia has rejected the allegations - insisting that it followed its environmental obligations - the case could set a precedent for state responsibility for wartime environmental destruction. The environmental degradation as a result of the conflict is evidence that the conflict has not only led to social damages, but ecological tragedies as well.

The alleged framing of activism as a tool for geopolitical pressure, highlights how ecosystems have the potential to become extensions of political identity. As both sides argue about who it is to blame for the immense loss in biodiversity and harm to endangered species, the lack of accountability and recognition almost acts as justification for greater harm to be done. Ultimately, the critical role of the environment in the war has raised questions about redefining the boundaries of warfare itself.

LIVES IN TRANSITION

The 2023 military offensive and eventual victory by Azerbaijan significantly affected the Nagorno-Karabakh region by causing mass displacement among its ethnically Armenian residents and totally changing the demographic makeup of the region. While Armenia grappled with the humanitarian and social impacts of integrating over 100,000 displaced individuals, Azerbaijan asserted its sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region and focused on the return of its own IDPs and the reintegration of any remaining Armenian residents.

The official stances surrounding these events are starkly different based on whether Armenia or Azerbaijan is making a statement, with Armenia calling it a forced exodus and ethnic cleansing (UN S/2023/826), and Azerbaijan describing its actions as counter-terrorism measures and the voluntary exit of residents (UN A/78/636 - S/2023/960). During this time of political and human upheaval, the state of many cultural sites important to both Armenians and Azerbaijanis remains an issue, with reports of damage and alteration, particularly about Armenian and Christian cultural/heritage sites which are prominent in the region (Smith; CHW).

The 2023 Azerbaijani military offensive caused a dramatic demographic transformation in Nagorno-Karabakh. The offensive forced the displacement of nearly the entire ethnically Armenian population from the region (UN S/2023/826). Over 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled their homes within days and sought refuge in Armenia. This mass exodus was intensified by a nine-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor, which is the sole land route connecting Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which led to a severe shortage of essential supplies (UN S/2023/826).

Armenia has initiated plans for the reception and resettlement of these displaced persons, though many families had a very difficult journey and may have experienced separation from their loved ones. The fear of further attacks has also discouraged settlement near the border, which pushes many towards the Armenian capital, Yerevan. The sudden influx of displaced people placed considerable strain on Armenia's social services and national resources, which entailed extensive integration efforts to ensure that these people could rebuild their lives (UN S/2023/826).

LIVES IN TRANSITION

From the Azerbaijani perspective, the relocation of Armenian residents was a "free choice," despite their stated encouragement for them to remain (UN A/78/636 - S/2023/960). Official Azerbaijani narratives assert that local Armenians publicly confirmed they were not forced to leave (UN A/78/636 - S/2023/960). Azerbaijan frames its actions as legitimate "counter-terrorism measures" against the illegal presence of Armenian armed forces on its sovereign territory (UN A/78/636 - S/2023/960). The long-term demographic objective for Azerbaijan is the reintegration of Armenian residents into a multi-ethnic Azerbaijani society, an invitation which Azerbaijan states was extended and rejected prior to the September 2023 operations (UN A/78/636 - S/2023/960).

The near-total emigration of ethnic Armenians has fundamentally changed the demographic makeup of Nagorno-Karabakh. Very few ethnic Armenians have chosen to return, citing the absence of established conditions for safe return (UN S/2023/826). This means that the ethnically Armenian population effectively no longer exists within Nagorno-Karabakh, which was their ancestral homeland. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is now focusing on the return of its own IDPs to its "liberated" territories, initiating extensive reconstruction and demining efforts to create conditions for safe return.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Nagorno Karabakh's decades-long collision between politics, ethnicity and power have left hundreds of thousands scarred. The recent dissolution of the self-proclaimed government marks a turning point, but not the end of the story. Thousands still rebuild their lives as a result of mass displacement and uncertainty; the region now faces a daunting task of redefining its future within Azerbaijani borders. The humanitarian and cultural scars left behind are not something to overlook; however, the opportunity for a lasting peace rooted in dialogue, responsibility and coexistence is just as important.

With shifting global priorities, especially after President Trump's TRIPP deal, the path forward depends on how both sides choose to act up on decades of history. The world must not take its eyes off, and act wisely to ensure that Nagorno Karabakh's future is written by cooperation and not deadly conflict. We all can contribute to this peaceful future - however small it may be. From discussing the situation and its history with friends and family or posting about it online to donating to NGOs and the UN's efforts, every attempt counts. The world's collective voice and small actions can paint a peaceful future for a region rooted in decades long conflict.



GLOSSARY

ECOCIDE: the destruction of large areas of the natural environment as a consequence of human activity (**Merriam Webster**)

Bifurcation: a place where a road, river, etc. divides into two different parts; the fact of this happening

Ethnic Cleansing: the policy of forcing the people of a particular ethnic group (= a group of people that share a cultural tradition, religion, etc.) to leave an area or a country

Genocide: Genocide is defined within international law as one of five punishable acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such.

The five punishable acts are killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (GENOCIDE INTERNATIONAL LAW)

Diaspora: the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country; people who have moved away from their own country

Sanction: an official order that limits trade, contact, etc. with a particular country, in order to make it do something, such as obeying international law

Extraterritorial: (of a law) that also applies outside the country where the law was made

Sovereignty: sovereignty (over something) complete power to govern a country

Self-Determination: the right of a country or a region and its people to be independent and to choose their own government and political system.

HUMANITARIAN CORRIDOR: Humanitarian corridors or safe passages are essentially agreements between parties to the armed conflict to allow for safe passage for a limited time in a specific geographic area (Red Cross)

Displacement: the act of forcing somebody/something away from their home or position

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