



BOSTON COLLEGE

MOUNTAIN FORTRESS:
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE ARTSAKH CONFLICT

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Author's Note

Many of the places discussed in this thesis have been known by multiple names during different time periods or by different groups. For the sake of consistency, I have defaulted to the most commonly used name even when doing so may be anachronistic. The notable exception to this rule was my decision to refer to Artsakh using its Armenian name rather than the more commonly used Nagorno-Karabakh. While Artsakh roughly falls within the borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, it is my belief that the two are separate and I believe my naming convention helps make that distinction. Furthermore, I believe that the choice of name should be left to the people of the region, who have elected to refer to it as Artsakh.

With accurate information hard to come by—both because of the recent nature of the topic and because of deliberate attempts to obscure the truth, I have had to rely upon some non-traditional sources to inform my research. Both the Azeri and Armenian governments restricted traditional journalism in order to present a favorable picture of the conflict, making many of the articles describing the course of the war inaccurate. As a result, I have occasionally used social media posts as a source about the course of the war, particularly when each side was in control of a particular place.

Lastly, while I make no secret my belief that Artsakh should be independent, it is my firm belief that what follows is an objective account of the history of Artsakh and the struggle between Armenians and Azeris for control of the region from ancient times through the present.

Dedicated to the memory of the more than 4,000 Armenian soldiers who died defending Artsakh

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Introduction

Early on the morning of September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an attack along the entire length of its border with the de-facto Republic of Artsakh—known to many internationally as Nagorno-Karabakh. By the end of the day, sixteen Armenian soldiers had been killed and over a hundred were wounded along with an unknown number of Azeris, the first casualties in a war that would claim the lives of approximately 4,000 Armenians and 3,000 Azeris.¹ While clashes along the line of contact between Artsakh and Azerbaijan had been routine for decades, it quickly became apparent that Azerbaijan’s most recent attack was something far more violent than the normal skirmishes. As Azerbaijan’s president Ilham Aliyev announced on October 4, Azerbaijan intended to keep fighting until Armenia agreed to—or was forced—to withdraw from Artsakh entirely. The fragile balance that had held since a 1994 ceasefire ended the first Nagorno-Karabakh War would be forever altered.

That 1994 ceasefire had been the culmination of almost six years of fighting between ethnic Armenians and Azeris preceding and following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The majority-Armenian population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast—which had long attempted to reverse the Soviet Caucasian Bureau’s 1921 decision placing the region under the control of Azerbaijan—took advantage of the gradual increase in political freedoms of the late 1980s to mount one of largest grassroots political movements the Soviet Union had ever seen. With cries of *Miatsum!*—“Unity!”—tens of thousands of Armenians demonstrated in the streets of Stepanakert and up to a million marched in Yerevan petitioning the Soviet government to

¹ “Pashinyan says about 4,000 Armenian troops killed in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *TASS*. April 14, 2021. <https://tass.com/world/1277921>; RFE/RL Staff. “Azerbaijan Says Nearly 3,000 Troops Killed in Nagorno-Karabakh Fighting.” *Voice of America*. December 3, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/azerbaijan-says-nearly-3000-troops-killed-nagorno-karabakh-fighting>

transfer Artsakh from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR. When the Soviet authorities rejected the idea, the Armenians of Artsakh took matters into their own hands and held a referendum for independence on December 10, 1991. With Artsakh's Azeri minority boycotting the vote, the referendum passed with overwhelming support—a margin of 108,615 to 24.² However, this declaration of independence also fell on deaf ears and Artsakh remained a de jure part of Azerbaijan.

Even before the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, the conflict between Armenians and Azeris had already escalated from hostile resolutions to violence and even massacres. In February 1988, the Armenian community of Sumgait was subjected to three days of brutal violence that left dozens dead and resulted in thousands of refugees. In January 1990, another wave of anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku killed scores more. By the time the Soviet Union officially dissolved in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan were already in the midst of a brutal war over Artsakh. Despite initial losses, Armenian forces eventually succeeded in retaking control of most of the territory that had formerly been Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast as well as seven surrounding regions of Azerbaijan. In May 1994, with both sides exhausted by the war effort, a ceasefire was brokered that ended the fighting, but did little to resolve the underlying sources of the conflict. Over the next twenty-five years, several attempts to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict would be made, but neither Armenians nor Azeris were willing to withdraw their claim to Artsakh and no deal could be reached.

In the intervening years with a tense but relatively stable situation along the border between Artsakh and Azerbaijan, both Armenia and Azerbaijan underwent significant internal change. For Azerbaijan, the change was driven by the development of its burgeoning oil and gas

² de Waal, Thomas. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*. New York: New York University Press, 2013, 175.

industry. Between 2001 and 2019, the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) collected over \$138 billion in revenues.³ While the fund's stated mission is to generate perpetual income for future generations, much of the fund's surplus was transferred to the government of Azerbaijan's budget for general use. By 2010, over 50% of Azerbaijan's budget was funded by transfers from SOFAZ, representing over 90% of SOFAZ's total expenditures.⁴ Along with contributing to the Aliyev family's near-complete control over Azerbaijan, this oil wealth allowed the state to spend billions of dollars a year on its military. The advanced weaponry Azerbaijan purchased proved to be a decisive factor in enabling its military success during the 2020 war.

For Armenia, the most notable domestic change came in the form of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which fundamentally altered the country's political environment. Serzh Sargsyan, who had led Armenia since his election to the presidency in 2008, was poised to continue his rule after being appointed to fill the newly empowered office of the prime minister. Sargsyan's Republican Party of Armenia, or *Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun* (HHK), had been in power since 1998 and was "a typical post-Soviet 'party of power' mainly comprising senior government officials, civil servants, and wealthy business people."⁵ Under the HHK's rule, Armenia had experienced widespread corruption and allegations of voter fraud and even violence had marred elections. However, shortly after Sargsyan was named Prime Minister on April 17, 2018, massive street protests erupted demanding his resignation. Led by Nikol Pashinyan, the mass demonstrations forced Sargsyan to resign, a move that was widely seen as ushering

³ Ibadoghlu, Gubad. "State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan: huge spending and overwhelming poverty." *Crude Accountability*. February 27, 2019. <https://crudeaccountability.org/state-oil-fund-of-azerbaijan-huge-spending-and-overwhelming-poverty/>

⁴ Aslanli, Kenan. "Fiscal sustainability and the State Oil Fund in Azerbaijan." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2, (2015): 114-121. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366515000056>

⁵ "Armenia's murky politics." *The Economist*. April 11, 2007. <https://www.economist.com/news/2007/04/11/armenias-murky-politics>

Armenia into a new era.

While the Velvet Revolution was greeted with jubilation by most Armenians and Western observers, the issue of Artsakh never disappeared from view. Even as they named Armenia their ‘country of the year’ for 2018, the staff of *The Economist* noted that “Armenia’s nasty territorial dispute with Azerbaijan has not been resolved and could ignite again.”⁶ While the Velvet Revolution had the support of the vast majority of Armenia, some Armenians—especially in Artsakh—feared that Pashinyan’s inexperience and his lack of ties to Russia, would prove dangerous. Compounding these fears was the fact that, unlike Armenia’s previous two leaders, Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, Pashinyan had neither served during the Nagorno-Karabakh War nor hailed from Artsakh. However, until 2020, it appeared that Pashinyan’s domestic policies and pivot toward Europe had little impact on the security of Armenia or Artsakh.

Then, on July 12, skirmishes along the border between Armenia’s Tavush Province and Azerbaijan’s Tovuz District—far away from Artsakh—escalated into minor border war that resulted in the deaths of 17 soldiers: 5 Armenians and 12 Azeris.⁷ While the conflict quickly dissipated without any territorial changes, it had a profound effect on Azeri society. During the four days of fighting, Azeri Major General Polad Hashimov was killed by an Armenian strike. The death of General Hashimov, a popular figure in Azerbaijan, sparked a pro-war protest in Azerbaijan’s capital of Baku. Yelling slogans like “Karabakh or death,” an estimated 30,000 Azeris took to the streets and even stormed the parliament building, in what became a protest against the government.⁸ Having long claimed that Azerbaijan’s army could easily overrun

⁶ “The Economist’s country of the year 2018.” *The Economist*. December 22, 2018.

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/12/22/the-economists-country-of-the-year-2018>

⁷ Hauer, Neil. “Armenia and Azerbaijan Are at War Again—and Not in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Foreign Policy*. August 24, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/24/armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-at-war-again-and-not-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁸ “Pro-war Azerbaijani protesters break into parliament.” *Eurasianet*. July 15, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/pro-war-Azeri-protesters-break-into-parliament>

Armenia, Aliyev now faced the possibility of significant domestic unrest if he did not or could not deliver.⁹

While the July clashes ended without further incident, they prompted a flurry of activity in Azerbaijan. In what now can be identified as preparation for war, Azerbaijan and Turkey held a thirteen day long joint military exercise involving a reported 11,000 Turkish troops in early August.¹⁰ At the same time, Azerbaijan dramatically increased its weapons purchases from Turkey, spending \$36 million in July and \$77 million in August, compared to just \$10 million in the first seven months of the year.¹¹ Finally, in the wake of the July fighting, reports began to emerge that Turkey was recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight in Azerbaijan, a tactic Turkey had already used in Libya.¹² While both Turkey and Azerbaijan denied the claim—and continue to do so—it has since become readily apparent that Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries fought for Azerbaijan in Artsakh. While it is unclear the extent to which the Armenian government was aware of these preparations prior to the September 27 attack, Armenian officials declared martial law within hours of the attack, indicating that they believed this renewal of hostilities was much

⁹ European Friends of Armenia. “Collection of war threat statements by the President Ilham Aliyev and other Azerbaijani officials.” July 31, 2018. https://eufoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AliyevWarThreats_update_31.07.2018.pdf

¹⁰ Huseynov, Vasif. “Azerbaijan, Turkey Hold Large-Scale Military Drills Amidst Escalation of Tensions With Armenia.” *Jamestown Foundation*. August 14, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-turkey-hold-large-scale-military-drills-amidst-escalation-of-tensions-with-armenia/#:~:text=On%20July%2029%2C%20Azerbaijan%20and,air%20forces%20from%20both%20countries>.

¹¹ Toksabay, Ece. “Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before Nagorno-Karabakh fighting.” *Reuters*. October 14, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-turkey-arms/turkish-arms-sales-to-azerbaijan-surged-before-nagorno-karabakh-fighting-idUSKBN26Z237>

¹² “Private sources ... Starting transfer of 1st batch of Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan.” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*. August 29, 2020. https://www.syriahr.com/en/181776/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=eddd2f4c2fef44ba624fd35611f19b43b74b1581-1605515208-0-ASpNVEuw-0IyJsHVJVR5vIdP-MxZ_8rOzq92j2TOS12nR2byKqUvfipJpBIU1_AZciUsRFpCNOLLtCC-bgQ8yETHdr2R4-JrGL7chAGpHlRyYu5hlDwGQsfabOUJdqAcRRkZOZQDIgZmcNhzi82fUp2McIZeXcQRDRx-jxfJil9f7e4Cz_J8KLK8Cqk0L5WhsoMoR_zSNHCKV_3CjHLpMOUBnGC3nhuibsbrj19JzKCPuJMwdrI6PCh7XZeEHuE55VSiITNy14vjjYeUeXiJrq24IrYFxY5P11Bc4cE4z4vB

more severe than previous ceasefire violations.¹³

While it had long been apparent that the conflict over Artsakh could erupt and that Azerbaijan's military capabilities had surpassed Armenia, Armenia had relied upon Russia to keep the situation relatively stable. This strategy had worked in the past, with a Russian orchestrated ceasefire bringing a quick end to the April 2016 Four Day War, although it has also been suggested that Russia initially greenlit Azerbaijan's 2016 attack to strengthen its position in the Caucasus.¹⁴ Of the three countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia is by far the closest to Russia. Not only does it host Russia's last remaining military base in the region, it also the only CSTO member state in the region. Especially after the Four Day War demonstrated Azerbaijan's improved military might, Russia was understood to be a necessary guarantor of the security of Armenia and, by extension, Artsakh. Under Article 4 of the CSTO Treaty, Russia and the other member states were obliged to treat an attack upon Armenia as an attack upon themselves. While such an obligation is ultimately voluntary and only ambiguously applied to Artsakh, Russia seemed to encourage such uncertainty. As Laurence Broers of the UK-based Chatham House think tank wrote in 2016, although Russia "both tolerates and encourages low-intensity warfare, it does appear to hold against an all-out war."¹⁵

However, faced with a full-scale war in the fall of 2020, Russia appeared unwilling or unable to prevent it. Beyond the fact that Turkey's greatly increased support for Azerbaijan made it more difficult for Russia to unilaterally impose peace, Russia's attempts to mediate the conflict were half-hearted. After being largely inactive for the first two weeks of fighting, Russia

¹³ Dallison, Paul. "Armenia declares martial law after clashes with Azerbaijan." *Politico*. September 27, 2020.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-declares-martial-law-azerbaijan-military/>

¹⁴ Jarosiewicz, Aleksandra and Falkowski, Maciej. "The four-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Centre for Eastern Studies*. April 6, 2020. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/four-day-war-nagorno-karabakh>

¹⁵ Broers, Laurence. "The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict: Defaulting to War." Chatham House. July, 2016. 21 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/07/nagorny-karabakh-conflict-defaulting-war>

mediated a temporary humanitarian ceasefire on October 10 in a marathon 10-hour long negotiating session in Moscow. However, just minutes after this ceasefire was slated to go into effect, Azeri forces launched fresh attacks on Armenian positions—ignoring the Moscow agreement, and drawing no meaningful response from Russia. Furthermore, while there were rumors that Russia was covertly providing more aid to Armenia than it publicly announced, President Putin explicitly stated that he did not consider Russia’s security agreements with Armenia to extend to Artsakh, giving Aliyev a green light to continue the war.¹⁶

Russia’s relatively relaxed approach toward mediating the war likely had origins in a desire to punish Armenia for taking a less Russo-centric approach to foreign policy under Pashinyan. While maintaining a pro-Russia line on official matters, Pashinyan made several moves that alienated Russia and Putin personally. First, despite emphasizing that Russia would remain Armenia’s key strategic ally, Pashinyan made a decided push to bring Armenia closer to the West. As the European Policy Centre noted in May 2020, there had been an “increased intensity in EU-Armenian relations since Pashinyan became prime minister... The European Union (EU) has played a crucial role in supporting Pashinyan’s ambitious reform agenda.”¹⁷ Second, Pashinyan’s crackdown on corruption—intentionally or not—implicated many prominent Armenians with close ties to Russia, including Yuri Khachaturov, the head of the CSTO military alliance, and Robert Kocharyan, Armenia’s former president and a personal friend of Putin.¹⁸ Finally, while downplayed by many observers of the Velvet Revolution in

¹⁶ “Russia’s Security Guarantees for Armenia Don’t Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says.” *Moscow Times*. October 7, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/07/russias-security-guarantees-for-armenia-dont-extend-to-karabakh-putin-says-a71687>

¹⁷ Sammut, Dennis. “Two years after the Velvet Revolution, Armenia needs the EU more than ever.” *European Policy Centre*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Two-years-after-the-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-needs-the-EU-more-than~33e910>

¹⁸ Baumgartner, Pete. “Moscow Watches Anxiously As Pashinian Realigns Armenia’s Foreign Policy.” *RFE/RL*. September 7, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-watches-anxiously-as-pashinian-realigns-armenia-s-foreign-policy/29477633.html>

2018, there is a strong anti-democratic and especially anti-revolutionary trend among Russia's elite; reports indicate that Putin himself "tends to take this issue personally, still feeling the old profound shock from watching helplessly as angry crowds marched by the Dresden KGB headquarters."¹⁹ The combination of these factors created an incentive for Russia to allow a military defeat that would weaken Pashinyan's support and potentially result in his removal and the return of the pro-Russian old guard.

While Pashinyan likely knew that he risked alienating Russia by taking a more pro-Western stance, he seems to have been counting on greater support from Europe and the United States. However, Azerbaijan's attack was perfectly timed to be ignored by the West. With the world facing the coronavirus pandemic and focused on a historically bitter election in the United States, Western nations made little effort to intervene. Overshadowed by these other news stories, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan received only minimal attention. While both France and the United States—the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group along with Russia—held negotiations that resulted in a ceasefire announcement, these agreements were as ineffective as the one brokered by Russia. Despite efforts from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora to invite greater involvement from Western countries—pointing to instances of atrocities committed by Azeri forces and the likelihood of ethnic cleansing if Azerbaijan captured areas populated by Armenians—there was little appetite to engage.

For Armenians who had assumed that their progress toward becoming a liberal democracy would result in greater aid from Western democracies, the lack of engagement came as a rude awakening. While Armenia certainly garnered more international sympathy than Azerbaijan, the sympathy did not translate to meaningful assistance. This attitude was perhaps

¹⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/07/what-explains-russias-uncharacteristic-indifference-to-the-revolution-in-armenia/>

best encapsulated by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement that the United States was "hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azeris are doing," but would not be taking any substantial steps to bring about an end to the fighting.²⁰ As Aris Roussinos wrote after the final agreement had been made, "The human rights NGOs who applauded Pashinyan's reforms were silent once the war began. EU officials who'd encouraged Pashinyan's westward path limited themselves to empty expressions of concern as the fighting raged."²¹ Disillusioned with the West and more dependent than ever on Russia's military protection, Armenia is likely to now be pushed even further into Russia's sphere of influence.

Azeri officials reportedly expected to easily overpower Armenian defenders, taking control of significant amounts of territory in three to five days before negotiating a new ceasefire to legitimize its gains.²² However, aided by 30 years of defensive preparations and Artsakh's mountainous terrain, the Armenians' defense proved to be much tougher than Azerbaijan expected. After the first week of fighting, Azeri forces had only taken control of two small pockets of land. In the weeks that followed, however, Azerbaijan succeeded in capturing much of the low-lying land along the Iranian border and had made incursions into more mountainous areas near the town of Hadrut. As the fighting dragged on, Azerbaijan's greater resources and technological advantage proved decisive. By the end of October, Azeri forces had taken an estimated 17.5% of the territory previously controlled by Armenians and was advancing toward the strategic Lachin Corridor that connects Artsakh to Armenia.²³ A little over a week later, at

²⁰ Baev, Pavel. "What explains Russia's uncharacteristic indifference to the revolution in Armenia?" *Barrons*. May 7, 2018. <https://www.barrons.com/news/pompeo-hopes-armenia-to-defend-itself-against-azerbaijan-01602780605>

²¹ Roussinos, Aris. "Armenia: another country abandoned to its fate." *Unherd*. November 13, 2020. <https://unherd.com/thepost/armenia-another-country-abandoned-to-its-fate/>

²² Giragosian, Richard. "Azerbaijan's 'five day' war turns uphill battle." *Asia Times*. October 30, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/azerbaijans-five-day-war-turns-uphill-battle/>

²³ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "Footage from last night (can tell from the sunset) confirms that the Azerbaijani advance was *much* further up the Hakari river valley, within 10km of the Lachin highway, which is Stepanakert's last road to Armenia." October 22, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1319312471048552450>

around 2:00 AM on November 10, Pashinyan took to Facebook to announce that he had made the “extremely heavy” decision to sign a Russian-brokered agreement to end the war.²⁴

The agreement not only locked in Azerbaijan’s territorial gains—including the culturally and strategically important city of Shushi—but also forced Armenia and Artsakh to agree to return the surrounding regions to Azerbaijan. While a corridor connecting Artsakh to Armenia would be left open, Armenia was forced to agree to grant Azerbaijan passage through Armenian territory to the exclave of Nakhichevan. To enforce the agreement, Russian peacekeepers were sent to Artsakh, arriving within hours of Pashinyan’s announcement. To many in Armenia, the agreement amounted to an unacceptable capitulation. Now it was Armenian protestors who stormed the parliament, demanding Pashinyan’s resignation and alleging that he had ‘sold out’ by agreeing to hand over territory to Azerbaijan. Once one of the most popular leaders in modern Armenian history, Pashinyan is now a deeply divisive figure and even some of his former supporters have begun referring to him as a *davajan*—a traitor. In April, Pashinyan acceded to the opposition’s demands that he resign, but did so as a formality to trigger snap elections.²⁵ Now, Pashinyan is facing off against a slate of opposition candidates—including Armenia’s former strongman president, Robert Kocharyan—in an election that will have a profound effect on the country’s future.

The future of the Artsakh conflict is just as uncertain. While the introduction of Russian peacekeepers has injected a degree of stability, the underlying conflict is perhaps even more dangerous than ever. The forty-four days of bloody fighting re-awoke tensions between Armenians and Azeris that are unlikely to soon heal. New sources of conflict have arisen as

²⁴ Pashinyan, Nikol. Facebook. “Միմեզի հայրենակիցներ, քույրեր եւ եղբայրներ” [Dear compatriots, sisters and brothers]. November 9, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/nikol.pashinyan/posts/2807204759599901>

²⁵ “PM Nikol Pashinyan Resigns, Formally Triggering Election Process.” *EVN Report*. April 25, 2021. <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/pm-nikol-pashinyan-resigns-formally-triggering-election-process>

Armenia and Azerbaijan negotiate the process of delineating the border between the two countries—which, due to Armenia’s erstwhile control over the territories between it and Artsakh, had never before been a truly international divide. Finally, and most importantly, the fundamental question of whether Armenians or Azeris will control Artsakh has yet to be answered. While Azerbaijan has taken control of significant portions of Artsakh, tens of thousands of Armenians remain in the pocket of territory that remains under Armenian control and Russian protection.²⁶ Without a negotiated solution—something that will almost certainly not happen without a concerted international effort—the question is not if there will be another war, but when.

²⁶ “More than 93,000 Artsakh Residents Took Refuge in Armenia, Official Says.” *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. January 21, 2021. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/01/21/more-than-93000-artsakh-residents-took-refuge-in-armenia-official-says/#:~:text=To%20date%2C%2049%2C%20827%20refugees,assistance%20and%20restore%20civilian%20infrastructure.>

Chapter One: The Mountain Fortress

Artsakh Through the Ages

The history of the Armenian people has long been shaped by the geography of the region that has come to bear their name. Stretching from central Anatolia in the west to the Kura-Aras plains in the east, and from the Caucasus Mountains in the north to the low-lying lands of Syria and Iran in the south, the terrain of Armenian Highlands exerted a significant influence over the course of Armenian history.²⁷ As the historian Robert Hewsen writes that, “there have been few countries in the world where geography has played a more important role than it has in Armenia. This role, in fact, has been decisive to the point where the destiny of the Armenian people may be said to have been largely predetermined by the location of the Armenian homeland and the nature of its terrain.”²⁸ Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the Armenian Highlands were a valuable prize for the many empires that surrounded it throughout history and, for much of that history, Armenia was subjected to foreign domination. Armenia frequently existed as a “precarious buffer spatiality, appearing ephemerally at moments of political vacuum in the rivalries between” empires.²⁹ The conquest of Armenia by these foreign powers was made easier by its internal political divisions. While Armenia was traditionally seen as being composed of fifteen provinces, in reality “Armenia consisted not of large provinces but of nearly 200 districts large and small.”³⁰ This lack of centralized rule, partially resulting from the difficulty of uniting such rugged terrain, made it easier for neighboring empires to conquer

²⁷ Hovannisian, Richard, ed. *The Armenian People From Ancient to Modern Times. Volume I. The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1997, 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Broers, Laurence. *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 64.

³⁰ Hovannisian. *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 15.

Armenia. At the same time, however, Armenia's geography enabled it to resist assimilation into the empires that ruled over it. While the mountainous terrain made it difficult for a single ruler to unite Armenia against foreign invaders, the same "lack of political unity meant the survival of its culture even when its kings were deposed and its capital cities destroyed."³¹

Perhaps nowhere in historical Armenia has the influence of geography been more decisive than in Artsakh—known more commonly in English as Nagorno-Karabakh. Located at the far eastern edge of the Armenian Highlands, Artsakh has long been "a quintessential borderlands."³² Although geographically on the periphery of the Armenian world and exposed to a multitude of outside influences, Artsakh was also a stronghold of Armenian culture during periods that saw the rest of the Armenian Highlands fall under the control of foreign empires. As Laurence Broers writes, "The list of suzerains who have ruled today's Karabakh from afar is long, encompassing Sasanid Iran, Arab Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, Bagratid Georgia, Ilkhanid and Timurid Mongols, the Qara-Qoyunlu and Aq-Qoyunlu Turkmen tribal confederations, Safavid Iran, Nadir Shah, and finally the Russian Empire."³³ However, Artsakh also has a long history of resisting external domination. The particularly rugged topography of the region made it difficult for outsiders to exert local control and Artsakh has been "a stronghold of Armenian national identity from at least the ninth century."³⁴

While it is unclear when Armenians first arrived in Artsakh, Hewsen places it within the lands controlled by the Orontid Kingdom—the first Armenian monarchy—between the fourth and second centuries B.C.³⁵ He later muddles the issue to a certain degree, writing that the

³¹ Bournoutian, George. *A Concise History of the Armenian People*. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2002. 8.

³² Broers. *Anatomy of a Rivalry*, 85.

³³ Ibid., 86-87.

³⁴ Hewsen, Robert. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 58.

³⁵ Ibid., 33

eastern frontier of Armenia was “acquired by the Armenians during the early second century B.C, when Strabo tells us that they conquered Phauēnē [Syunik], Otēnē [northwestern Azerbaijan and northeastern Armenia], and Kaspianē [northern Iran] under Artaxias I, and possibly the unnamed land of Arc’ax [Artsakh] which lay between the other three.”³⁶ Other historians contest Hewsen’s conclusion, arguing that Strabo “says nothing of Artsakh and Utik, since these provinces were certainly already a part of Armenia” having been so since the Orontid period.³⁷ Historian Levon Avdoyan takes a somewhat more conservative stance, arguing that “Armenians have been in the area now called Nagorno Karabakh since c. 370 A.D., if not before.”³⁸ However, given the fact that Artsakh was counted as one of the traditional provinces of Armenia since the second century B.C, the earlier date given by Hewsen and Donabedian is likely correct. While it is possible, as Hewsen recognizes, that Artsakh, “may also have been originally more varied in ethnic character,” it can safely be said that Armenians have inhabited Artsakh in significant numbers for “well over a thousand years.”³⁹

The advent of genetic sequencing has allowed for further research into the history of Armenians in Artsakh, but unfortunately has failed to provide a definitive answer. On one hand, a team of researchers studying the mitochondrial DNA of 52 ancient skeletons from present-day Armenia and Artsakh found that “during the last eight millennia, there were no major genetic turnovers in the female gene pool in the South Caucasus.”⁴⁰ While this would suggest that

³⁶ Ibid., 58.

³⁷ Chorbajian, Levon, Claude Mutafian, and Donabédian Patrik. *The Caucasian Knot: The History and Politics of Nagorno-Karabagh*. London: Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1995, 53.

³⁸ Avdoyan, L. “Nagorno Karabakh: An Historical Perspective.” *International Journal on Group Rights* 3, no. 2 (1995): 161-67, 163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24674479>

³⁹ Hewsen. 58.

⁴⁰ Margaryan, Ashot *et al.* “Eight Millennia of Matrilinial Genetic Continuity in the South Caucasus.” *Current Biology* 27, no. 13 (2017): 2023-2028, 2025. <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0960982217306954?token=E8756F556CB3E5348F10F87DFF63592AE5E52343D4EEF38A394711C2E4D047FE972BAC0EA7AE1346D76694E2D09A5F5F>

today's Armenians are the descendants of the region's original inhabitants, the oldest samples taken specifically from Artsakh date back to the late first millennium B.C. rather than the 8000 years of some of the other sites the researchers examined.⁴¹ Other research into the genetic history of Armenians supports the more conventional view that Armenians migrated into the Armenian Highlands between four and five thousand years ago. As the authors of this second study write, "Armenians show signatures of an origin from a mixture of diverse populations occurring from 3000 to 2000 BCE."⁴² While this study did not examine the origin of the Armenians of Artsakh specifically, their findings would be consistent with Hewsén's documentation of an Armenian conquest of Artsakh at or before 200 B.C. Regardless of whether Armenians are indeed indigenous to the Armenian Highlands or migrated into the region during the third millennium B.C, it is once again safe to say that genetic evidence demonstrates that Armenians have lived in Artsakh for thousands of years. While Artsakh has fallen under the political authority of a dizzying list of empires over the past two millennia, protected by their mountains, Armenians remained the overwhelming majority of the region's population throughout the political turmoil.

As was also the case for much of historic Armenia, control over Artsakh vacillated between independent *nakharars*—Armenian noble houses—and foreign rulers. Indeed, the first recorded mention of the territory that comprises modern-day Artsakh comes from an eighth century B.C. inscription of the Urartian king Sarduri II that documents his conquest of what was then known as Urtekhini.⁴³ After the Urartian Kingdom collapsed, Armenian kings took control

⁴¹ Ibid., 2024

⁴² Haber, Marc *et al.* "Genetic evidence for an origin of the Armenians from Bronze Age mixing of multiple populations." *European Journal of Human Genetics* 24 (2016): 931-936, 935.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4820045/pdf/ejhg2015206a.pdf>

⁴³ Chorbajian, Mutafian, and Donabédian. 52.

of Artsakh and would continue to rule over it with a few minor interruptions until 428 A.D. One of those interruptions came in 363 when the Persians defeated Rome and took control of Armenia, which had previously been a Roman vassal state.⁴⁴ “Intent on teaching the Armenians a lesson they would not soon forget,” the Persians ravaged the country and stripped Armenia of several border regions, including Artsakh, which was handed over to the Caucasian Albanians, a confederation of tribes from present-day Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ However, the tide quickly reversed and in the 370s the combined forces of Armenia and Rome “returned these territories to Armenia...and restored the Armenian-Albanian frontier at the Kura River.”⁴⁶

Although the Romans enjoyed a temporary superiority over the Persians in Armenia following their victory, their dominance did not last. Following conflict between pro-Persian and pro-Roman *nakharars*, Armenia was formally partitioned between the Persian Empire and Eastern Rome in 387, leaving Artsakh under the control of Persia but still part of a distinct Armenian state.⁴⁷ The status of Artsakh changed once again in 428 when the Sassanids dissolved the Armenian Kingdom and divided their Caucasian possessions into three administrative districts, beginning “a new period in which Artsakh (the future Karabagh) and Utik were politically cut off from Armenia.”⁴⁸ Following a Persian attempt to forcibly convert Armenia to Zoroastrianism, Armenians, led by Vartan Mamikonian, revolted against the Sassanids in a bid to reassert their independence.⁴⁹ While the Armenian forces were defeated at the Battle of Avarayr in 451, the military defeat turned into a political victory as the Sassanids adopted a more tolerant religious policy toward Armenia in the face of unexpectedly fierce resistance.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Hewsen. 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chorbajian, Mutaflan, and Donabédian. 53.

⁴⁷ Bournoutian. 53.

⁴⁸ Chorbajian, Mutaflan, and Donabédian. 55.

⁴⁹ Bournoutian, 59.

⁵⁰ Bournoutian, 60.

Although the uprising failed to liberate the majority of Persian Armenia, Artsakh, which had been one of the centers of Armenian opposition to the Sassanids, was annexed by Caucasian Albania during the rebellion along with the Armenian province of Utik to its east.⁵¹ Albania, which had formerly referred to the territory to the east of the Kura River, now shifted to the southwest as the tribes along the shores of the Caspian Sea broke off and became separate entities.⁵² Representing approximately half of Albania's territory and forming more homogenous group than tribes that made up the rest of the kingdom, "the Armenian element was progressively able to impose its language and its culture" on the rest of Albania.⁵³ Indeed, "some sources (mainly Armenian ones) suggest that the early kings of Albania were of Armenian origin, and descendants of an ancient noble family called the Arranshahik."⁵⁴ While still culturally and politically distinct from Armenia, Caucasian Albania came to have much in common with Armenians. The Caucasian Albanian church, having been largely established by Armenian missionaries in the fourth century, fell under the authority of the Armenian Church.⁵⁵ Albanian architecture, particularly ecclesiastical architecture, was influenced by Armenian designs.⁵⁶ Armenian tradition holds that Mesrob Mashtots—the creator of the Armenian alphabet—also developed the Albanian alphabet, although this claim is disputed.⁵⁷

The Albanians would continue to control Artsakh until the early seventh century, when it was captured by the Persian Mihranid dynasty.⁵⁸ The Mihranids would control Artsakh for close to 200 years, and "became related by marriage to the Aranshahiks, adopted Christianity, and

⁵¹ Chorbajian, Mutaftian, and Donabédian, 55.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ van der Leeuw, Charles. *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2000, 139

⁵⁵ Chorbajian, Mutaftian, and Donabédian, 57.

⁵⁶ Bournoutian, 67.

⁵⁷ Bournoutian, 54.

⁵⁸ Chorbajian, Mutaftian, and Donabédian, 58.

rapidly assimilated into the Armenian majority.”⁵⁹ Then, in the late eight century, an Arab invasion under the Umayyad dynasty forced the Mihranids to submit to the authority of the caliph, reuniting Artsakh with the rest of Armenia—albeit under a foreign power—for the first time in 350 years. The Arab conquest “had a twofold effect on Armenia. No counterbalancing power was left in the area to support and protect the Armenians against the new conquerors... Once this domination was established, however, Armenia found itself for the first time in almost a millennium outside the theater of international warfare.”⁶⁰ United for the first time in centuries, Armenia was able to attain greater unity than had been possible while divided between the Persians and Romans. While still definitively subject to Arab rule, “Armenia through almost the whole of the seventh century had the status of an autonomous, if tributary, state.”⁶¹

The decline of the Umayyad dynasty and rise of the Abbasids in 750 gave the Armenians, who had grown discontent with increasing taxation and decreasing religious tolerance, an opportunity to rebel against their Arab rulers.⁶² The uprising was led by the Mamikonians, the descendants of Vartan Mamikonian and the preeminent family among the *nakharars*, who were dissatisfied by the Umayyad’s preference for the rival Bagratuni family.⁶³ While the Mamikonians and Bagratunis temporarily joined together against the Abbasids, infighting between the two houses and a lack of hoped-for Byzantine support resulted in the uprising failing.⁶⁴ While another failed uprising in 775 would spell the end of the Mamikonian house, the Bagratunis succeeded in regaining and even strengthening their position, replacing the Mamikonians as the dominant force in Armenia’s domestic politics.⁶⁵ The Bagratunis continued

⁵⁹ Hakobyan, Tatul. *Karabakh Diary. Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace*. Antelias, Lebanon: 2010, 263.

⁶⁰ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 117.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128-129.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Bournoutian, 76.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

to consolidate power while remaining under the authority of the Abbasids, with their patriarch Ashot Msaker eventually being named Prince of Armenia by the caliph in 804.⁶⁶ While this put Artsakh at least nominally under the control of Armenians once again, the Iranian revolutionary leader Babak Khorramdin soon gained possession of it through a marriage to the daughter of the Armenian prince Vasak in 824.⁶⁷ However, only twelve years later, a military campaign led by the Abbasids captured Artsakh and other territories held by Babak, rejoining them to Abbasid Armenia.⁶⁸ This arrangement was also short lived, coming to an end in 850 when the *nakharars* united behind the Bagratunis mounted a second rebellion against Arab rule.⁶⁹ The Abbasids successfully put down the first rebellion, killing or capturing the leading *nakharars* and forcing Armenia into submission.⁷⁰ However, internal dissent among the Abbasids a generation later allowed the Bagratunis to finally seize power, taking control of much of Armenia between 855 and 862.⁷¹ The Bagratuni dynasty would be the last independent Armenian state until the modern era. Forming an alliance with the Bagratids of Georgia—a possibly related noble family whose name they adopted—the Bagratunis, now Bagratids, were able to establish “a new autonomous state based on the northwest portion of the plateau, such as Armenia had not known for centuries.”⁷²

Despite their success in creating the first independent Armenian state in almost half a millennium, the Bagratids were not able to unite the entirety of Armenia under their rule. Not only did they face external obstacles in the form of a resurgent Byzantine Empire and Arab emirates that had split off from the declining Abbasid Caliphate, “the five hundred years of

⁶⁶ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 136.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁹ Bournoutian, 80-81.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 82.

⁷² Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 149.

partitions and decentralization had resulted in political fragmentation and the loss of a framework for a single state” and the Bagratids were often challenged by rival *nakharars* who resisted their authority.⁷³ While the Bagratids succeeded in securing the loyalty of the *nakharars* from Artsakh, their control over the region—and most of Armenia—was tenuous, resting “ultimately on the personal authority of the ruler rather than on any traditional or legal foundation.”⁷⁴

This internal dissent proved nearly fatal to the Bagratid Kingdom, when, in 909, the Emir of Azerbaijan—a term that then applied to northern Iran rather than the Azerbaijan of today—Yusuf ibn Abi'l-Saj attacked the Bagratids with the assistance of rival Armenian factions.⁷⁵ Yusuf and his Armenian allies succeeded in routing the Bagratids, capturing and executing the Bagratid king Smbat and forcing the remaining loyal forces to retreat to more defensible positions, including Artsakh.⁷⁶ However, “the cruelty of Yusuf toward Smbat and other *nakharars* costs him the support of Gagik Artsruni and other Armenian leaders who now joined Smbat’s son Ashot II...and drove the Muslims out of most of Greater Armenia.”⁷⁷ The Bagratid dynasty would continue to rule Armenia for over another century, until a crisis of succession in 1020 exposed the fundamental instability of Bagratid rule. Aided by the threat of Turkic tribes from the east and the partitioning of the kingdom between rival heirs, the Byzantine Empire succeeded in annexing—through both invitation and force—the majority of Bagratid territory by 1064.⁷⁸ However, rather than joining the Byzantine Empire, Artsakh, together with the Kingdoms of Syunik and Lori, assumed an autonomous status that it would retain until 1450.⁷⁹

⁷³ Bournoutian, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 145, 150.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 157-158.

⁷⁷ Bournoutian, 85.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 87-88.

The Arrival of the Turks

While Turkic tribes had been present in the Caucasus since the middle of the fourth century, settling in present-day Azerbaijan between the fifth and seventh centuries, they were relatively few in number and did not significantly alter the region's demographics or politics.⁸⁰ Based on the writings of the tenth century historian Tabari's, it appears that the Khazars—a partly Turkic confederation—first began settling in Albania along the western bank of the Kura river in the mid-sixth century.⁸¹ However, while they would eventually come to occupy the lowlands of the Kura-Arax plain, the mountains of Artsakh remained almost exclusively populated by Armenians and Albanians.⁸² The arrival of the Turks combined with Arab rule beginning in the seventh century spelled the end of the Caucasian Albanians as a distinct people, with many converting to Islam and “the remaining Albanian people were driven into Armenia by the Khazars.”⁸³ However, the full impact of the Turkic tribes would not be realized until the appearance of the Seljuks several hundred years later. As Audrey Altstadt writes in her history of the Azeri people, “Complete Turkization of eastern Caucasia” did not occur until “the arrival of the Seljuks in the 11th century and [was] more fully consolidated with Turkish migration during the 13th-century Mongol eruption.”⁸⁴

The first to unite the various Turkic tribes that had come to inhabit the South Caucasus, the Seljuks, a tribe of Oghuz Turks, “managed to impose their authority over all the existing Turkic tribes north of the Kura river and even gain the loyalty of a majority of the local feudal

⁸⁰ Altstadt, Audrey. *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1992, 5-6.

⁸¹ Ibid., 5.

⁸² Rasizade, Alec. "Azerbaijan's Prospects In Nagorno-Karabakh." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 15, no. 2 (2011): 140-64, 141. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505076>.

⁸³ Swietochowski, Tadeusz and Collins, Brian. *Historical Dictionary of Azerbaijan*. London: The Scarecrow Press, 1999, 38.

⁸⁴ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 7.

princes.”⁸⁵ With the strength of this combined force, Seljuk commander Togrul-Bey conquered first Iran in the 1020’s and then most of the Middle East by 1055.⁸⁶ The Seljuks then turned their attention to the Byzantine Empire, which had taken control of much of the Armenian Highlands after the collapse of the Bagratid Kingdom. After defeating the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes in 1071, the Seljuks took control of most of Armenia.⁸⁷ However, just as they had resisted the Byzantines a few decades prior, “the *nakharars* of Artsakh (Karabagh), Siunik (Zangezur), Gugark (Lori), Sasun, and other mountainous regions...maintained viable military forces and remained autonomous.”⁸⁸

In Artsakh, the Kingdom of Khachen, which had been a vassal of the Bagratids since it first emerged in 885, assumed independence.⁸⁹ As one of the few kingdoms that successfully resisted the Seljuk invasion, Khachen served as a “refuge and bastion” for Armenians fleeing from nearby territories that had been conquered.⁹⁰ By 1000, Khachen had become “a formal kingdom,” and comprised a small pocket of independent Armenia surrounded by the Seljuks.⁹¹ While the Seljuks were unable to bring Artsakh under their rule and appeared content to allow it to remain independent, the decline of the Seljuks in the late eleventh century began a period of “incessant confrontations between generals, emirs, and Seljuk sultans, as well as between indigenous princes and Turkish chieftains, which would last until the second half of the twelfth century.”⁹² During this time of instability, Artsakh was administered by the Turkish Emir of Gandzak (present-day Ganja) and “the Armenian lords...lost a great deal in Artsakh as well, but

⁸⁵ van der Leeuw, 60.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Bournoutian, 107.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Chorbajian, Mutafian, and Donabédian, 61.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁹¹ Hewsen, 119.

⁹² Chorbajian, Mutafian, and Donabédian, 64-65.

were not completely eliminated there.”⁹³ Artsakh would be reconquered by a Georgian-Armenian military alliance in 1199, and for a few decades, Artsakh fell under the authority of the short-lived Zakarid Principality.⁹⁴

The Mongol invasion of the southern Caucasus in the middle of the thirteenth century conquered much of Armenia, driving the Zakarids out of Artsakh. However, Armenians led by “Hasan Jalal, the governor of Khachen-Artsakh managed to preserve the semi-independent status of the territory.”⁹⁵ While pledging loyalty to the Mongols, Hasan Jalal retained independence in domestic affairs.⁹⁶ Not only was Khachen’s autonomy a political achievement, it also helped foster a flourishing culture, and it was “during this period [that] valuable architectural ensembles such as the church and vestibule of Hovhannes Mkrtych in Gandzasar Monastery, the Dadi Monastery Cathedral Church, and Gtchavank Cathedral Church were built.”⁹⁷ Despite recurring Mongol invasions throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the subjugation and decimation of vast swaths of Armenia, the Armenian princes of Artsakh and a few other small mountainous regions managed to maintain a semiautonomous status, though even they too were periodically invaded by Mongol forces.⁹⁸ During the fifteenth century, the eastern portion of Armenia around Artsakh was ruled first by the Kara Koyunlu and then by the Ak Koyunlu Dynasties, both of which were comprised of Oghuz Turkic tribes.⁹⁹ However, as Dickran Kouymjian writes, “there were still autonomous and semiautonomous Armenian *nakhchars* units of varying size, especially in Siunik and Karabagh, but they affected only a small portion of the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 252-253.

⁹⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 263.

⁹⁶ Bournoutian, 109.

⁹⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 263.

⁹⁸ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume I*, 270.

⁹⁹ Hovannisian, Richard, ed. *The Armenian People From Ancient to Modern Times. Volume II. Foreign Domination to Statehood: The Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1997, 5-7.

population.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, “by the sixteenth century Armenian nobility (except in the remote areas of Karabagh) had all but vanished.”¹⁰¹

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman and Safavid empires battled for control over the Armenian Highlands. When the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab divided Armenia between the Safavid Empire in the east and the Ottoman Empire in the west, Artsakh fell under the lands ceded to Safavids.¹⁰² However, the Safavids encountered “a number of small principalities in Karabagh which were ruled by local Armenian mountain chieftains called *meliks*. Recognizing the impregnability of these mountain fortresses, the Safavids, like the Turkic and Mongol rulers before them, granted the *meliks* an autonomous status.”¹⁰³ Despite accepting the authority of the Safavids, the *meliks* retained “total independence in matters of internal government and the right to maintain an army.”¹⁰⁴ While they were able to maintain their individual independence, “rivalries among the *meliks* prevented them from becoming a formidable force against the Muslims.”¹⁰⁵ Although infighting may have prevented a larger Armenian state from forming, preserving some form of independence was no small feat. As Kouymjian writes, “it was in Mountainous Karabagh that autonomous rule seems to have survived best during the dark days of the sixteenth century.”¹⁰⁶

The collapse of the Safavid Empire in the 1720s brought both Russian and Ottoman armies into Transcaucasia.¹⁰⁷ While Russian assurances of support had inspired an Armenian resistance, the help failed to materialize and the Ottomans captured the vast majority of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰² Ibid., 81.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 85-86.

¹⁰⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 264.

¹⁰⁵ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 87-88.

Armenia.¹⁰⁸ For almost a decade, between 1724 and 1732, “the only unconquered land left for the Ottoman armies were Artsakh and Syunik, regions that had essentially achieved independence at the time.”¹⁰⁹ Although Ottoman forces attempted to conquer Artsakh in February 1725, their attack was quickly rebuffed by the *meliks*. In both Artsakh and Syunik, Armenian forces under the command of Davit Bek “managed to keep much of the highlands in Armenian hands until the revival of Persia” in 1735 forced the Ottomans to withdraw to the border established in 1639.¹¹⁰

The new Persian shah, Nader Khan Afshar, rewarded the *meliks* of Artsakh for their assistance against the Ottomans by “recognizing Karabagh and Zangezur as semiautonomous enclaves.”¹¹¹ However, the assassination of Nader in 1747 threw the Persians into disarray, allowing Turkic tribes to take control of Eastern Armenia, including Artsakh.¹¹² Taking advantage of the divisions between the *meliks*, the Turkic ruler Panah Ali Khan conquered Artsakh and declared himself the Khan of Karabakh.¹¹³ While Persian forces quickly reestablished their suzerainty over the region, the Karabakh Khanate under the Javanshir tribe remained semi-independent, just as earlier Armenian *meliks* had.¹¹⁴ In 1750, under the direction of Panah Ali, a new fortification was created on the site of Davit Bek’s former capital.¹¹⁵ Panakhabad—today known as Shushi to Armenians and Shusha to Azeris—would become the cultural center of Artsakh for both Armenians and Azeris. Politically, the Karabakh Khanate experienced a significant degree of turmoil. In 1796, Persia, now ruled by Afghan lords,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 265.

¹¹⁰ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 89.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 91.

¹¹³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 265.

¹¹⁴ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 91, 110.

¹¹⁵ van der Leeuw, 140.

occupied Shushi and began “plundering the former khanate while local land-owners fought petty wars over property—in all, a general state of anarchy.”¹¹⁶

Artsakh Under the Russian Empire

This period of anarchy was brought to an end by the conclusion of the 1804 - 1813 Russo-Persian War, when Russian forces invaded Artsakh and forced the Karabakh Khanate to become a Russian vassal.¹¹⁷ Following a period of military rule, the Russians reorganized the Caucasus’ administrative districts in 1840, creating the Georgian-Imeretian *guberniia* and the Caspian *oblast* with Artsakh in the latter and the majority of Armenia in the former.¹¹⁸ Only five years later, the Russians once again reorganized the Caucasus, this time placing Artsakh and most of present-day Azerbaijan in the Shemakhi—later Baku—*guberniia*.¹¹⁹ Finally, in 1868, the administrative status of the region was finalized with the creation of the Elizavetpol *guberniia*, which combined Artsakh and Syunik with the plains of present-day Azerbaijan to the north and east.¹²⁰ The Russians largely succeeded where the Persians and Ottomans had failed, directly governing Artsakh without the intermediary of a semiautonomous Armenian state. The Russians were able to achieve this accomplishment thanks to the cooperation of the local Armenians, who welcomed Russian rule, even forming volunteer brigades during the Russo-Persian War to support the Russians.¹²¹ To many Armenians, “Russia symbolized an advanced civilization and society, a champion of Christendom against Islam, and the hope for emancipation.”¹²² The

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁷ Swietochowski and Collins, 77.

¹¹⁸ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Hovannisian, Richard. *Armenia on the Road to Independence: 1918*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1967, 11

¹²¹ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 91, 112.

¹²² Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 7.

attraction of Russian rule was sufficiently powerful to induce large numbers of Armenian immigrants from the Ottoman Empire and Persia, creating “a compact Armenian majority on a small part of their historic homeland.”¹²³ While the majority of these arrivals from Western Armenia settled in present-day Armenia or Nakhichevan, some chose to settle in Artsakh.¹²⁴

The inclusion of Artsakh within the Elizavetpol *guberniia*, though not particularly contentious at the time, proved to be perhaps the most fateful decision made by the Russians in the Caucasus. During the following fifty years of Tsarist rule, Artsakh would become economically linked with the lowlands to its east rather than mountains of Armenia to its west.¹²⁵ While the Russians constructed roads and railroads connecting Shushi with Baku and other cities in present-day Azerbaijan, no such effort was made to allow for easier travel between Artsakh and Armenia.¹²⁶ As Michael Croissant explains, “By linking the highlands of Karabakh with the plains to the east, the Russians brought the economies and transportation networks of both areas closer together, with Nagorno-Karabakh becoming integrated gradually but completely into the economic system of eastern Transcaucasia.”¹²⁷ When national borders were drawn in the early 20th century, these economic ties and the assumption that Artsakh belonged in the same political unit as the rest of the Elizavetpol *guberniia* contributed to Artsakh being placed in Azerbaijan rather than Armenia.

While communal relations between Armenians and Azeris were generally peaceful throughout Russia’s rule of the Caucasus, the seeds of tension were already somewhat apparent. Armenians, while concentrated most heavily in the Erivan *guberniia*, were “scattered throughout

¹²³ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 91, 112.

¹²⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 164.

¹²⁵ Hovannisian, Richard. *The Republic of Armenia. Volume III. From London to Sevres: February – August 1920*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1996, 133.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹²⁷ Croissant, Michael. *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Causes and Implications*. London: Praeger, 1998, 12.

every province of Transcaucasia” and comprised a small but significant minority in Azeri cities such as Baku.¹²⁸ The status of Armenians as “a wealthy minority who enjoyed a special relationship with the Russians” formed a “basis for both conflict and cooperation.”¹²⁹ The economic success of the Armenians and their close relations with the Russians “caused feelings of resentment that gradually coalesced into anti-Armenian feelings” among many Azeris.¹³⁰ As the Azeri and Armenian nationalist movements developed and strengthened during the course of the nineteenth century, the two groups increasingly came to define each other—rather than the Russians—as the enemy. As Croissant writes, “Azeri national consciousness developed not so much against the Russian colonizer as against the Armenians...[and] the budding Armenian nationalist movement in Russia in the late nineteenth century tended to foment further anti-Turkish, and therefore anti-Azerbaijani, sentiment.”¹³¹ The fact that both Armenian and Azeri nationalism tended to concentrate on the other group rather than the Russians was not accidental. As Hovannisian concludes, the idea that Russian authorities in the South Caucasus encouraged “Ameno-Tatar conflicts so that both peoples would be distracted from the current of revolution...is not without validity.”¹³²

Revolution, War, and Genocide

As revolution and unrest spread across the Russian Empire in the early 20th century, “Violence erupted in and around Erevan in February 1905, in Nakhjivan in May, in Shusha in June, and in Ganje and Tiflis in November.”¹³³ Violence was also visited upon the Armenians of Baku and “For more than a month, mobs of Azeris rampaged through the Armenian quarter of

¹²⁸ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 13-15.

¹²⁹ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 40.

¹³⁰ Croissant, 8.

¹³¹ Ibid., 8-9.

¹³² Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 21.

¹³³ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 40.

the city...By the time the violence was brought to an end by the pleas of local religious leaders, 600 Azerbaijanis and 900 Armenians had been killed.”¹³⁴ Fighting was particularly intense in Artsakh. Armenian historian Mikayel Varandyan found that, “in none of Transcaucasia’s towns were the Armenian-Turkish clashes as furious and bloody as in Karabakh and its capital city of Shushi.”¹³⁵ During the fighting, Azeris captured and desecrated the *Aguletsots* church and launched attacks on the Armenian quarter but were pushed back while Armenians burned Azeri homes.¹³⁶ According to Italian diplomat and historian Luigi Villari, “the number of killed and wounded [in Shushi] amounted to about 300, of whom two-thirds were Tatars, since the Armenians were better shots and also enjoyed the advantage of position.”¹³⁷ Although violence in the major cities was relatively short-lived, intermittent fighting would continue for the following two years, resulting in “Thousands of casualties and property losses amounting to over forty million rubles.”¹³⁸

The violence spurred on the burgeoning nationalist movements in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Artsakh becoming “a hotbed for the growth of Armenian nationalism following the violence of 1905.”¹³⁹ While the 1905 clashes are often cited as the first outbreak of violence between Azeris and Armenians, suggesting a relatively recent origin for the Armenian-Azeri conflict, this is only partially true.¹⁴⁰ Armenians and the Turkic tribes from which Azeris are descended had been intermittently fighting for control of Artsakh since the arrival of the Seljuks. Even in 1905 there was already discussion of the “longstanding antagonism” between Armenians

¹³⁴ Croissant, 9.

¹³⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 271.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 21.

¹³⁹ Croissant, 9-10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

and Azeris.¹⁴¹ The nationalistic conception of the conflict that rose to prominence in the early 20th century, however, was a new development, one that would have significant impacts on the next century of the conflict. The re-imposition of firm Russian rule in 1907 brought an end to the violence, but did little to address the underlying sources of conflict which would emerge once again following the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917.

Although fighting along the Caucasus Front during World War I never reached Artsakh, the war had an extremely consequential effect on the region. While the Azeris, as Muslims, were banned from military service in the Russian Empire and thus were not conscripted, Armenians formed several volunteer units that fought alongside the Russian Army.¹⁴² Although officially subject to the Russian Caucasus Army Command, the “immediate contact and orders emanated from the special Armenian committee in charge of volunteer activities.”¹⁴³ In sharp contrast to the Azeris and Georgians, who were largely ambivalent toward—or even supportive of—the possibility of an Ottoman victory, “the Armenian populace was struck with horror, for little compassion was expected from Enver Pasha.”¹⁴⁴ The Hamidian Massacres of 1894-1895 that had resulted in the deaths of around 100,000 Armenians and the Adana Massacre of 1909 which killed over 19,000 more had shown Armenians that Russian rule was far preferable to the Ottomans.¹⁴⁵ In January 1915, a decisive Russian victory over the Ottomans at Sarikamish gave Armenians hope for an “expected occupation of the entire Plateau by Russian troops,” which could reunite Western and Eastern Armenia under the control of a friendly power.¹⁴⁶

This hope was dashed in cruelest of ways when, instead of being liberated by the

¹⁴¹ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 42.

¹⁴² Ibid., 74-76.

¹⁴³ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁴⁵ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 222, 231.

¹⁴⁶ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 47.

Russians, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were instead subjected to the horrors of the Armenian Genocide, beginning with the arrest and execution of prominent Armenians in Constantinople on April 24, 1915.¹⁴⁷ Blaming the Armenians for their military defeats against the Russians, the Young Turks orchestrated a campaign of mass killings and deportations against the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire that resulted in the death of well over a million Armenians and the removal of hundreds of thousands more from historic Armenia. The exact number of victims has become a contentious historical question, with “the most commonly accepted figure” of several decades ago and the number normally cited by Armenians today being 1.5 million.¹⁴⁸ Since then, there have been efforts by pro-Armenian and pro-Turkish scholars to respectively raise and lower that number with little conclusive results. In addition to the removal—through both killings and deportations—of over three-quarters of the Ottoman Empire’s Armenian population, the vast majority of those remaining were forced to adopt Islam in order to force assimilation into the Turkish population.¹⁴⁹ Just as the Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman Empire intended, the Armenian Genocide all but ensured that there would be no Armenian majority in the western portion of the Armenian Highlands that could mount a bid for statehood.

While Artsakh remained under Russian control and was not directly affected by the Armenian Genocide, the legacy and memories of the genocide would significantly impact the later conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Ever since 1915, the Armenian Genocide has “constituted a layer of collective memory that rested just below the surface of [Armenian]

¹⁴⁷ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 252.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 271

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

life.”¹⁵⁰ The Armenian Genocide, which “now provides the archetype by which Armenians understand grave or threatening events,” would become a powerful reference for the Armenian struggle for Artsakh in the 1980s and 90s.¹⁵¹ As Nora Dudwich—an anthropologist who witnessed the Armenian protests in the late 1980s—wrote, “every social and political problem took on additional significance as containing a threat to the Armenians’ continued existence as a people.”¹⁵² The Genocide also “embedded the trope of ‘lost lands’ at the heart of Armenian geopolitical culture,” which would later be applied to Artsakh.¹⁵³ Although Azeris themselves were not involved in the Armenian Genocide, their close association with Turkey—and their later denial of the Genocide—would further corrode the already hostile relationship between the two groups.

The overthrow of the Tsar in March 1917 and the Bolsheviks’ subsequent rise to power in November “threw Transcaucasia into turmoil.”¹⁵⁴ While “the Armenians, Georgians, and Muslims of Transcaucasia hailed the revolution that ended the 300-year reign of the Romanov dynasty,” they were “nearly unanimous” in their opposition to the Bolshevik’s rise to power.¹⁵⁵ With the exception of the Baku Soviet, where many members had already resigned in protest, the Transcaucasian territories rejected the authority of the Bolsheviks’ Sovnarkom.¹⁵⁶ Instead, “a multinational congress of Transcaucasian representatives met in Tiflis in November 1917 to create a provisional regional executive body.”¹⁵⁷ The resulting commissariat and the

¹⁵⁰ Malkasian, Mark. *“Gha-ra-bagh! The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996, 55-56.

¹⁵¹ Dudwich, Nora. “Memory, identity and politics in Armenia” University of Pennsylvania (1994), 83, <https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI9427530>

¹⁵² Malkasian, 56

¹⁵³ Broers, *Anatomy of a Rivalry*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 106.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.; Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 283.

¹⁵⁶ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 289

legislature—called the Seim—that was formed in February 1918 continued to maintain that “Transcaucasia formed an integral unit of the (nonexistent) Russian democracy.”¹⁵⁸ However, the mass desertion of Russian soldiers left Armenian and Georgian forces alone “to defend a 300-mile perimeter formerly secured by up to a half million Russian regulars.”¹⁵⁹ The position of the Transcaucasian forces was further weakened by the Bolsheviks accession to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that “recognized the right of the Ottoman Empire to regain all of Turkish Armenian and to occupy the districts of Kars, Ardahan, and Batum.”¹⁶⁰

As Georgian and Armenian forces fought the advancing Ottomans in the west, Azerbaijan was undergoing domestic turmoil. While most Azeris supported the Musavat Party—which advocated for “nationalism, *Türkchülük* [“Turk-ness”], *halkchilik* [populism] and modernization,” in Baku the Bolsheviks took control of the City Council and the local garrison.¹⁶¹ The Bolsheviks, led by an Armenian named Stepan Shaumian and enjoying the cooperation of the *Hay Heghapokhagan Dashnaktsutiun*—the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, commonly referred to as the *Dashnaks* or ARF—were seen by many Azeris as a pro-Armenian force.¹⁶² On March 30, 1918, the arrival and subsequent disarming of “the so-called Savage Division, manned by Azeri volunteers and soldiers of fortune and armed and paid for by Turkish agents” sparked an Azeri uprising against the Bolsheviks.¹⁶³ Overnight, “barricades went up in Muslim quarters” and the following morning “Azerbaijani spokesmen demanded that their community be armed like the others.”¹⁶⁴

Negotiations quickly turned violent, pitting the Bolsheviks and their *Dashnak* allies

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 289-290

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 291

¹⁶¹ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 81-83

¹⁶² Ibid., 85

¹⁶³ van der Leeuw, 112

¹⁶⁴ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 86.

against the Azeri troops.¹⁶⁵ The fighting turned into a massacre as the Bolsheviks unleashed artillery on residential areas, forcing “immediate capitulation and acceptance of the soviet’s ultimatum: unconditional recognition of the soviet’s power and withdrawal of all ‘Muslim’ forces from the city.”¹⁶⁶ The *Dashnaks*, who served as the primary ground force for the Bolsheviks, began “looting, burning and killing in the Muslim section of the city...for a day and a half.”¹⁶⁷ Shaumian estimated that the violence resulted in 3,000 deaths, but present-day accounts place the number as high as 12,000.¹⁶⁸ A parallel episode of violence would be visited on the Armenians of Baku five months later when Turkish and Azeri forces captured the city in September and “swarmed throughout the city plundering and killing...Conservative estimates of Armenian dead are close to ten thousand, while many sources claim that from twenty to thirty thousand Christians were slaughtered.”¹⁶⁹ The March Days—as the massacre of Azeris would come to be known thanks to the use of the Gregorian Calendar—and the September Days marked further episodes of violence between Armenians and Azeris that damaged the possibility of coexistence between the two groups.

In April, facing the possibility of having to fight against the Ottoman army and with Bolsheviks in now firmly control of Baku, the Seim’s “Muslim spokesmen made it known that they would not take arms against a kindred people,” marking the end of any remaining Azeri military support.¹⁷⁰ Georgian representatives initially “pledged...a resolute defense of the front,” but following the capture of Batumi—the defense of which had been the motivating factor behind Georgians willingness to oppose Ottoman forces—on April 14, 1918 they “bowed to the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.; Smith, Michael. "Power and Violence in the Russian Revolution: The March Events and Baku Commune of 1918." *Russian History* 41, no. 2 (2014): 197-210, 204. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24667169>

¹⁶⁹ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 227.

¹⁷⁰ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 293

Ottoman conditions for negotiations—a declaration of Transcaucasia’s total separation from Russia and the recognition of the territorial rights of Turkey.”¹⁷¹ Forced to choose between defending against the Ottomans alone or joining with Georgians and Azeris in declaring independence from Russia, the Armenians reluctantly chose the latter, and representatives of all three groups declared Transcaucasia independent on April 22, 1918.¹⁷² For Armenians, independence meant the loss of any remaining hope of Russian intervention and was seen by many as “a huge and horrifying stride toward consummation of the pan-Turkic goals of the Young Turk dictatorship.”¹⁷³ However, beset by internal division, the union of the three Caucasian states proved to be extremely short lived.

While the Azeris pursued “close collaboration with the Ottomans” and hoped “for a further Turkish advance,” the Christian Georgians and Armenians feared a loss of independence and massacres at the hands of the Young Turks.¹⁷⁴ Seeking to protect Georgia from Ottoman domination, Georgian leaders appealed to Turkey’s German ally for protection. However, doing so required “severing bonds with Armenians, for it was clear that they were doomed and Georgia could not afford to perish with them.”¹⁷⁵ The Georgians and Germans began a series of secret negotiations, adopting an agreement “whereby Germany would extend protection of Georgia in return for economic concessions.”¹⁷⁶ On May 26, 1918, the Georgian representatives at the Seim announced their intention to declare independence and sponsored a motion to dissolve the Transcaucasian Republic, proclaiming that “basic differences among the peoples who had created the Transcaucasian Republic” made its continued existence impossible.¹⁷⁷ The following

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 292-293

¹⁷² Ibid., 293-294

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 182.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 296.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 297.

day, the Muslim National Council declared independence as Azerbaijan and—again reluctantly—Armenians followed, declaring their own independence on May 28.¹⁷⁸

The departure of the Georgians seemed to many to signal “that the end of the Armenian people had come. Four Turkish divisions had begun an attack on Kharakilisa (today’s Vanadzor), Bash Aparan, and Sardarapat.”¹⁷⁹ With Yerevan—the last major Armenian city—only a few hours march away, “It seemed that there would be no deliverance for the thousands of natives and refugees in the province.”¹⁸⁰ However, a last-ditch Armenian defense beginning on May 21 kicked off “three days of fierce combat [after which] the Armenians remained firm and the Turkish regiments were in retreat.”¹⁸¹ The Armenians, saved from complete destruction by this victory, were nevertheless forced to sign an agreement with the Ottoman Empire that left Armenia with only around half of the Erevan province and to allow for “the unhindered transit of Turkish troops and supplies across the republic.”¹⁸² Azerbaijan likewise signed a treaty with the Ottomans, though their agreement “was more in the nature of an alliance” than a surrender.¹⁸³

The creation of three separate states out of the former Transcaucasian Republic, however, posed a significant challenge in regard to the creation of borders. With a significant dispersal of ethnic groups throughout the Caucasus, each of the three newly independent countries claimed territory that was also claimed by their neighbors.¹⁸⁴ While the question of control over these territories—including Artsakh—had been put aside during the brief period of cooperation that followed the Russian Revolution, the declarations of independence brought the issue to the forefront. At the same time that both Armenia and Azerbaijan laid claim to Artsakh, on July 22,

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 297-298.

¹⁷⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 278

¹⁸⁰ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 299

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 300

¹⁸³ Ibid., 301

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 316-317.

1918 the First Congress of the Armenians of Karabakh declared their own independence and set about creating their own state.¹⁸⁵ The combination of these territorial disputes and the existence of armed national units from all three republics, meant that “all Caucasia was set for armed conflict.”¹⁸⁶ Although Armenia had been turned into “a land of refugees” by the Armenian Genocide and forced to sign a humiliating treaty with the same government that had committed it, the Armenians were not at a complete disadvantage in their struggle with Azerbaijan over these disputed regions.¹⁸⁷ In contrast to the Armenian forces which had been hardened by their struggle against the Ottomans, “The Azerbaijanis were least prepared” among the three countries of Transcaucasia “because of their long exclusion from military service and a lack of equipment, training, and arms.”¹⁸⁸

The weakness of the Azeri situation in Artsakh was compounded by the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Armenians. While Azeris formed a majority in the Elizavetpol *guberniia* as a whole, in Artsakh they were outnumbered almost three-to-one by Armenians.¹⁸⁹ After seeking assistance from Baku—which was still in the hands of the Bolsheviks—to little avail, the Azeris of Artsakh turned to “the Turkish-Azeri alliance preparing to march on Bolshevik Baku. On September 22, shortly after the [Baku] Commune’s downfall, Turkish and Azeri troops moved into Karabakh...After three days, Shusha fell.”¹⁹⁰ The arrival of these Azeri and Ottoman forces in Artsakh, however, did not go unopposed. The Armenian military leader Andranik—who had broken with Armenia’s *Dashnak* leadership over the treaty with the

¹⁸⁵ Elbakyan, Edgar. “A New Legal Approach Towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Peaceful Resolution.” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 3, No. 5 (2014), 46. <https://artsakhlib.am/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Elbakyan-Edgar-A-New-Legal-Approach.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 83

¹⁸⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 141.

¹⁸⁸ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 83

¹⁸⁹ Hovannisian, Richard. *The Republic of Armenia. Volume I. The First Year: 1918 - 1919*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1973, 82.

¹⁹⁰ van der Leeuw, 150

Ottoman Empire and had been fighting the Ottomans in Syunik—“immediately set off to repel the Turks from Karabagh.”¹⁹¹ Andranik and his forces “pushed Nuri Pasha’s troops back from Mardakert (Agdara) while guerilla units under a young commander named Aslan Muradkhanian...forced them to withdraw from Veranda [Fuzuli]. Irritated by Nuri Pasha’s failure to place Karabakh under control, the Sublime Porte recalled him and his troops.”¹⁹²

With the departure of the Ottoman soldiers, Andranik was poised to consolidate Armenian control first in Shushi and then over all of Artsakh. However, “his force was stopped short of its objective when Allied officers intercepted him and insisted that he return to Zangezur [Syunik] and await the just decision of the Paris Peace Conference.”¹⁹³ While Andranik complied with the request, before a final verdict had been reached in Paris, the situation on the ground in both Armenia and Azerbaijan had rendered the conference’s decision redundant. The British, who had taken a position of authority in the Caucasus following the end of World War I, “motivated by strategic and economic concerns, embarked immediately upon a generally pro-Azerbaijani policy...In order to induce goodwill, the British set out to provide the Azerbaijanis with an important carrot: The attachment of Nagorno-Karabakh to the Republic of Azerbaijan”¹⁹⁴ Initially, the Armenians of Artsakh “refused to hear of even temporary Azerbaijani jurisdiction. But acts of Armenian defiance led to the massacre and razing of four Armenian villages in June.”¹⁹⁵ With the Republic of Armenia facing its own difficulties and unable to offer assistance, the military balance of power began to shift back towards the Azeri forces.¹⁹⁶ Following announcement that British forces would withdraw from the Caucasus,

¹⁹¹ Bournoutian, 298.

¹⁹² van der Leeuw, 150-151

¹⁹³ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 318

¹⁹⁴ Croissant, 15.

¹⁹⁵ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 318

¹⁹⁶ Croissant, 16.

taking with them “whatever restraint the British may have had on the Azerbaijanis, the Karabagh National Assembly agreed in August 1919 to “a 26-point document providing for the provisional authority of Baku over a quasi-autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh pending the final determination of its status at the Paris Peace Conference.”¹⁹⁷

Despite this provisional recognition of Azerbaijan’s authority, conflict between Armenians and Azeris in Artsakh continued. *Dashnak* activists continued to train Armenians in the countryside, Armenian travelers reported frequent attacks—including several deaths—and Azerbaijan deployed additional troops into Artsakh.¹⁹⁸ In response to these reports, the Armenian National Congress in Artsakh “categorically rejected” Azerbaijan’s request to consider the full integration of Artsakh into Azerbaijan, claiming that “Azerbaijan’s government had periodically violated the key points of the temporary agreement.”¹⁹⁹ On February 22, 1920, the “heightening interracial tension culminated in an outbreak of violence at Khankend (now Stepanakert) that left as many as 400 Armenians dead.”²⁰⁰ A month later, “On the night of March 22, about 100 armed [Armenian] men slipped into Shushi to disarm the Azerbaijani garrison in the Armenian quarter. But everything went wrong.”²⁰¹ In response, “Azerbaijani troops, joined by the city’s Muslim inhabitants, turned Armenian Shushi into an inferno. From March 23 to 26, some 2,000 structures were consumed by the flames.”²⁰² Estimates for the death toll range as high as 20,000, but Armenian historian Richard Hovannisian reports a much more conservative 500 victims.²⁰³ While Shushi had formerly been a mixed city of both Armenians and Azeris, the Armenian

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 299.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 300.

²⁰² Ibid., 300.

²⁰³ Public International Law and Policy Group. “The Nagorno Karabagh Crisis: A Blueprint for Resolution.” (2000), 8 <https://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/The-Nagorno-Karabagh-Crisis.pdf>; Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia, Volume III*, 152.

population was forced to flee and Shushi became a heavily Azeri city. As Hovannisian writes, “It was the end of Armenian Shushi.”²⁰⁴

While Azerbaijan had succeeded in establishing tenuous control over Artsakh following the March violence, the country soon faced an existential crisis in the form of the expanding Soviet Union. Hoping to take control of Baku’s valuable oil fields, which had produced 90% of Russia’s oil as recently as 1914, a Red Army armored train crossed into Azerbaijan in the early morning of April 27.²⁰⁵ By midnight, the government in Baku had accepted a Bolshevik ultimatum that brought a formal end to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and declared Azerbaijan to be a part of the Soviet Union.²⁰⁶ However, the declaration from Baku did not prevent resistance to the Bolsheviks elsewhere in Azerbaijan. While the most fierce opposition was centered in Ganja, where the opposition to Soviet rule was crushed in May and June 1920 resulting in over a thousand deaths, “Armed resistance to communist rule was widespread and would continue at least into 1924.”²⁰⁷

On August 10, 1920, the Allied powers in Paris signed the Treaty of Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire, which forced Turkey to “accept the boundary that President Wilson would lay down” for the borders Armenia.²⁰⁸ In November, Wilson unveiled a plan for an expansive Armenian state, incorporating the majority of the four Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire.²⁰⁹ However, even before Wilson had publicized his plans, the emergence of Mustafa

²⁰⁴ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 318

²⁰⁵ Saparov, Arsene. *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus: The Soviet Union and the making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh*. London: Routledge, 2015, 95; Sicotte, Jonathan. “Baku and its oil industry through war and revolution: 1914–1920.” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 5, no. 3 (2018): 384–392, 385, <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S2214790X17301648?token=3D1F4D42CB36947EB7431A12A8280D8C2CE7DB3A256AF25B8D942280832278BCB759B6A9CBF3D7C48EE728034F9B02E0>

²⁰⁶ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 108.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 110–111

²⁰⁸ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 332

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 333.

Kemal Atatürk as a leading figure in Turkish politics and his renunciation of both the Ottoman government and the Treaty of Sèvres made “Wilsonian Armenia” an unachievable goal for Armenians.²¹⁰ Under the leadership of Atatürk, Turkey signed a separate treaty with the Soviet Union declaring previous agreements to be void and sent its armies against Armenia once again.²¹¹ By November, Turkish forces had reconquered the territory they had lost during their retreat in 1918 and again threatened to entirely erase the Armenian state and people.²¹² Facing a near certain defeat, a new Armenian government was formed to “conclude peace and preserve the physical existence of the Armenian people at almost any price.”²¹³

Rather than succumb to a Turkish invasion, the new Armenian government agreed to join the Soviet Union. On December 2, 1920, the Republic of Armenia became the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, and “Soviet Russia acknowledged as indisputable part of that state all lands that had been under the jurisdiction of the Armenian government prior to the Turkish invasion.”²¹⁴ However, on the same day that Armenia joined the Soviet Union, “Turkey demanded that Armenia immediately sign a treaty renouncing Sèvres and all claims to western Armenia.”²¹⁵ Alexander Khatisian, the prime minister of Armenia, signed the Turkish treaty shortly after midnight on December 3, having “calculated that the Bolsheviks would denounce the treaty as null and void” as he no longer technically had any legal authority.²¹⁶ However, Khatisian’s gambit failed and the Soviets, while offering mild diplomatic objections, recognized the agreement, creating the borders of modern Armenia.²¹⁷ As was also the case in Azerbaijan,

²¹⁰ Bournoutian, 309.

²¹¹ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 340.

²¹² Bournoutian, 310.

²¹³ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 342

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

²¹⁵ Bournoutian, 311

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Hovannisian, *The Armenian People: Volume II*, 344.

the Soviets faced opposition even after the official agreement. In January 1921, *Dashnak* forces—disappointed with the Soviet’s failure to press the border issue and opposed to their harsh economic policies—staged a rebellion in Syunik and Artsakh.²¹⁸ By February 18, the *Dashnaks* had driven the Soviets out of Yerevan and established a new government.²¹⁹ However, in April “the Red Army returned to Armenia, overcoming the resistance of Dashnak forces” and re-establishing Bolshevik rule.²²⁰

A Frozen Conflict

In annexing both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Soviet Union inherited the complex issue of delineating the national borders between the two newly created republics. In 1920, the Soviet authorities announced their decision to award Artsakh, along with Nakhichevan and Syunik, to Armenia “apparently as a reward for its conversion to Bolshevism.”²²¹ The Soviets secured a concession from Nariman Narimanov, Soviet Azerbaijan’s first minister of foreign affairs, declaring all three disputed regions to be part of Armenia.²²² However, following the anti-Bolshevik uprising in Armenia in the spring of 1921, these early agreements were nullified.²²³ While in Syunik and Nakhichevan, control had “been decided by force of arms” with Armenians and Azeris respectively driving out the civilian populations of the opposite ethnicity in order to secure their claims, control over Artsakh was seen as more of an open question.²²⁴ On July 4, 1921 the Kavburo—the Soviet authority in the Caucasus—awarded Artsakh to Armenia, over the objections of Azeris. However, the following day, the committee reversed course, announcing that “the necessity for national peace between Muslims and Armenians and the economic ties

²¹⁸ Ibid., 350

²¹⁹ Ibid., 350-351.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 143.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 142-143.

between upper and lower Karabakh” meant it should be incorporated into Azerbaijan despite the fact that its population was 94% Armenian.²²⁵ However, in recognition of the Armenian majority, the Soviets created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and awarded it “wide regional autonomy.”²²⁶ As Thomas de Waal writes, “gallons of ink have been expended in discussing why Nagorny Karabakh was made part of Azerbaijan...[but] the longer-term considerations behind the Kavburo’s decision were probably as much economic as colonial.”²²⁷ The Soviet authorities placed an emphasis on creating “economically viable” territories and—thanks to the previous Russian decision to place Artsakh in the Elizavetpol *guberniia*—Artsakh had been economically linked to Azerbaijan rather than Armenia.²²⁸

The Soviet Union’s annexation of Azerbaijan also brought about significant changes in the Azeri national identity. As Broers explains, “the inchoate category of ‘Azerbaijani Turk’...was still ill-defined by World War I.”²²⁹ Before the creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918, “Azerbaijan” had historically referred to the northwest province of Iran and the people who lived in what would become Azerbaijan were referred to by a variety of names most frequently “Tatars,” “Muslims,” or “Azerbaijani Turks.”²³⁰ Entering the Soviet era, the Azeri people “continued to be known in Russian by the term *tyurki* and their language as *tyurkskiy*,” terms distinct from the Russian words for Turk and Turkish but clearly heavily related.²³¹ It was not until 1937 that *tyurki* and *tyurkskiy* were replaced by *azerbaydzhantsy* (Azerbaijanis) and *azerbaydzhanskiy* (the Azerbaijani language) respectively.²³²

²²⁵ Ibid., 144.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid., 145

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Broers, *Anatomy of a Rivalry*, 54.

²³⁰ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, xix

²³¹ These terms are distinct in the Russian language from *turok* (‘Turk’) and *turetskiy* (‘Turkish’). Ibid., 54.

²³² Ibid., 56.

The malleable nature of the Azeri identity was not limited to demonyms. Under the control of Soviet authorities, “The raw materials of nationhood – ethnonyms, scripts and theories of origin – could change with regional and international winds.”²³³ Before 1937, the Soviet Union had encouraged an emphasis on Azerbaijan’s Turkic heritage and identity in an attempt to influence the Turkic people of Turkey and Iran.²³⁴ However, this strategy also exposed the Soviet Union to the possibility of the process working in reverse. As developments in both Turkey and Iran threatened to undermine the Turkic-Azeri identity the Soviet Union was promoting, the Soviets reversed course and began a “quest for pre-Turkic ancestors in antiquity, with the emphasis on the homeland of the AzSSR rather than theories admitting migration.”²³⁵ This quest culminated with the claim, made in the 1960s, that the Caucasian Albanians were “the progenitors of most of the population of Azerbaijan.”²³⁶ While it certainly is true that some Albanians assimilated into the Azeri population, the main origins of today’s Azeris “are to be found, according to most sources, in the waves of Turkic immigrations” with “Mongol and particularly Indoeuropean foundations that made substantial contributions to the Azeri language, culture, and other traditions.”²³⁷

During the 75 years between the sovietization of the Caucasus and the beginning of the Karabakh Movement, the issue of Artsakh’s status would largely be obscured by the fact that both Armenia and Azerbaijan were in the Soviet Union and by the extreme difficulty of expressing political opinions in the Soviet Union. Despite this, there were periodic attempts by Armenians to bring attention to the issue and urge Soviet authorities to join Artsakh with Soviet

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid., 56-57

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 166

²³⁷ van der Leeuw, 20

Armenia.²³⁸ However, these efforts failed to achieve meaningful results, and “the cause of Mountainous Karabagh’s Armenians was generally forgotten outside the oblast.”²³⁹ Instead, during the Soviet era, “an odd slow-motion war [took] place between Armenians of the oblast and officials in Baku. The casualties were tallied in terms of demographic statistics and economic development, and the Armenians saw themselves as losing a conflict of attrition.”²⁴⁰ Not only did poor economic conditions, caused in part by a lack of investment from the government in Baku, result in many Armenians “leaving the oblast to seek their fortunes elsewhere,” the Azeri government deliberately attempted to alter the region’s demographic balance.²⁴¹ As Azerbaijani leader Heydar Aliyev said in 2002, “I was trying to change the demography... I tried to have more Azerbaijanis in NK and for the number of Armenians to decrease.”²⁴² While Armenians still constituted the significant majority of the population, between 1926 and 1979 these efforts resulted in the Armenian proportion falling from 89% to 76% while the Azeri population rose from 10% to 22%.²⁴³

Along with economic stagnation and concerns over the changing demographics of Artsakh, the Armenian population was also subjected to cultural repression. In 1957 the Azeri authorities declared Azerbaijani to be the republic’s official language and “whittled away the oblast’s education budget and closed twenty-eight Armenian schools.”²⁴⁴ During the Soviet period, a total of “167 churches, 17 monasteries, and 120 cemeteries in Mountainous Karabagh were destroyed either through negligence or state planning.”²⁴⁵ Azeri authorities also took aim at

²³⁸ Malkasian, 25

²³⁹ Ibid., 26

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 26-27

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 313.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Malkasian, 27-28

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

the regions history, banning textbooks teaching Armenian history and “quietly [removing] references to Armenians.”²⁴⁶ Not only did Azeri authorities attempt to erase the Armenian history of Artsakh, following the lead of Azeri historian Zia Buniatov, many Azeris began to claim that the historical rulers of Artsakh “were not really Armenians but *Armenianized Albanians*,” a claim that has been rejected by most academics outside of Azerbaijan.²⁴⁷ Although Soviet authority stifled any overt expressions of conflict, these issues of demographics, economics, cultural rights, and historical claims would come to a head in the late 1980s when the gradual loosening of political restrictions gave rise to one of the most powerful grassroots movements the Soviet Union had ever seen.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 165.

Chapter Two: Three Paths to Independence

Protests and Pogroms

While the roots of the modern struggle between Armenians and Azeris over Artsakh stretch back over a century, the most recent conflict emerged in the late 1980s when the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, began instituting the policies of *glasnost*. Emboldened by the loosening of political restrictions, the Armenians of Artsakh saw an opportunity to advance their longstanding goal of unification with Armenia. As they had done during previous attempts, the movement initially took the form of a letter writing campaign. In February 1986, the Artsakh Armenians sent “thousands of individual letters...along with more petitions from scientists, intellectuals, and senior military officers” to Moscow urging the Soviet Central Committee to unite Artsakh with Armenia.²⁴⁸ The following year, a petition written by Armenian writers and other intellectuals received 80,000 signatures, including 31,000 from Artsakh itself.²⁴⁹ While these early efforts to change the status of Artsakh were bold steps for the time, it was not until February 1988 that the movement exploded into a major campaign for change.

On February 13, 1988 the first large-scale protest took place in Stepanakert where—coinciding with the return of a delegation of Artsakhi writers and artists from a visit to Gorbachev—7,000 Armenians staged “an unprecedented event in Lenin Square: an unsanctioned political rally.”²⁵⁰ As would be the case throughout many of the subsequent protests, in order to make the movement more tolerable to the authorities, the rally’s organizers “devised slogans that

²⁴⁸ Malkasian, 28

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 29; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 12.

proclaimed that they were Soviet loyal citizens acting within the spirit of *glasnost*. Banners carried the slogan “Lenin, Party, Gorbachev!”²⁵¹ The success of the first protest—defined mostly as the lack of a severe crackdown from the local Communist authorities—inspired the Armenians of Artsakh and “For the next week, the square would be the site of an around-the-clock demonstration...The total number of protestors never dipped below 1,000, even with nighttime temperatures falling well below freezing.”²⁵² Unable to reassert control through the normal methods, Boris Kevorkov—the ethnically Armenian, but extremely loyal to Baku, Communist Party Secretary for the NKAO—dispatched party bureaucrats to the towns of villages of Artsakh but found that many of them “were besieged by local residents and forced to turn back.”²⁵³

While to outside observers these initial protests “occurred as if out of the blue and quickly acquired their own momentum... the initial phase of the Armenian campaign had been carefully planned well in advance.”²⁵⁴ Prior to the protest on February 13, “Ten thousand leaflets were printed and flown into Nagorny Karabakh” to be distributed to the residents of Stepanakert.²⁵⁵ Along with local leaders in Artsakh itself, the early stages of the Karabakh Movement received support from a loose alliance of prominent Armenians, many of whom had come from Artsakh but now lived scattered across the Soviet Union.²⁵⁶ Figures such as Abel Aganbegyan, Gorbachev’s economic advisor, Zhanna Galstyan, an actor from Artsakh, and Zori Balayan, a prominent writer and journalist, were instrumental in supporting to the movement that would later bring hundreds of thousands of Armenians to the streets in support of unification.²⁵⁷

²⁵¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 12.

²⁵² Malkasian, 29

²⁵³ Ibid., 30

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 29

²⁵⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 21.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 17.

²⁵⁷ Ibid/, 12-23

At the center of this loose network was Igor Muradyan, a politician who had moved from Artsakh to Baku at an early age, and became one of the driving forces behind the formation of the Karabakh Organizing Committee later in February.²⁵⁸ However, once the movement took hold in the mind of the Armenian public, it acquired its own momentum that even the initial organizers found themselves unable to control.

On February 20, a week after the first protest in Stepanakert, the regional soviet for the NKAO convened an extraordinary session to consider unification with Armenia. While officials loyal to the Azeri government in Baku had mounted a twin-pronged attempt to prevent the session by alternately attempting to soothe tensions and intimidate the Armenians into silence, the Armenian representatives would not be dissuaded.²⁵⁹ Shortly before midnight on the night of February 20, the soviet passed a motion by a vote of 110 to 7—including 13 abstentions and without the participation of 30 Azeri representatives who had boycotted the meeting—petitioning Armenia, Azerbaijan and “the Supreme Soviet of the USSR for an affirmative decision regarding the transferal of the NKAO from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR.”²⁶⁰ While the Politburo of the Soviet Union met the following day, rejecting the demand for unification and “blackening the disloyal Karabakhis as ‘extremists,’” the push for unification would only continue to gather steam, especially as it crossed the border into Armenia proper.²⁶¹ After making this transition to Armenia proper in the last weeks of February 1988, “The movement that had been nurtured so patiently in Mountainous Karabagh spread to Yerevan like wildfire.”²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Malkasian, 39

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 14.

²⁶² Malkasian, 32.

On February 18, a few days before the soviet in Artsakh met to pass their resolution, the workers of an chemical plant near Yerevan had held a rally raising concerns about environmental issues and asking for the plant to be closed.²⁶³ However, these environmental concerns were largely a cover designed to test the response of Soviet authorities and lay groundwork for future demonstrations about the fate of Artsakh. As Balayan, who helped organize the protest, later reported in an interview, “We gathered on Theater Square with purely ecological slogans...But among them was, let’s say, one slogan saying, ‘Karabakh is the historic territory of Armenia.’ No one paid any attention to it. At the next rally there were a few of these slogans... In this way people got used to the idea that they could talk about the national question as well.”²⁶⁴ After this initial gathering, increasingly large protests in Theater Square continued throughout the week. On February 20, “30,000 demonstrators rallied there. Every day, the number redoubled. On 22 February, it was above 100,000 people—a phenomenal number in any country, but especially in the Soviet Union of 1988. The next day an estimated 300,000 gathered.”²⁶⁵ A few days later the protests reached their peak when, “On Thursday, 25 February, there were perhaps close to a million people in the streets of Yerevan, or more than a quarter of the population of Armenia.”²⁶⁶

As the sheer scale of the protests demonstrated, “the Nagorny Karabakh issue had the capacity to touch a deep nerve inside Armenians...Even those who knew almost nothing about the sociopolitical situation in Karabakh itself felt that they could identity with the cause of Armenians encircled by ‘Turks’ (a word that in the Armenian vernacular applies equally to Turks and Azerbaijanis).”²⁶⁷ Despite the introduction of almost 5,000 Soviet troops and imposition of a

²⁶³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 15

²⁶⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 23.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 24.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 23.

curfew, Yerevan's "Theater Square had by now become a world unto itself...Even the most apathetic Armenians found themselves drawn into the square."²⁶⁸ For many Armenians, "Attending these rallies became almost an end in itself, a collective ritual of self-assertion...The Yerevan rallies were peaceful, but they also had a terrifying momentum."²⁶⁹ However, on February 26, Gorbachev found a way to—at least temporarily—halt the demonstrations, giving an address broadcasted on both the radio and television calling on Armenians to return to work and promising that the Central Committee would examine the situation in Artsakh.²⁷⁰ The same day, Gorbachev met with Balayan and the Silva Kaputikyan, a poet and another leading figure in the Karabakh movement, who returned to Armenia sufficiently optimistic to echo Gorbachev's call for a suspension of the demonstrations, proposing a halt to protests until March 26 that was accepted by the demonstrators in Theater Square.²⁷¹

While a feeling of optimism gripped the protesters in Yerevan, the situation across the border would soon take a drastic turn for the worse. A few days prior to Gorbachev's address, on February 22, several hundred Azeris from the town of Aghdam had marched toward Stepanakert "burning everything along the way."²⁷² While Azeris claim that the crowd was reacting to the rape of two Azeri women in Stepanakert, Armenian sources counter by arguing that "it was only in the beginning of the 1990s that the 'rape of two Azerbaijani girls' was put into circulation" to explain the motivation of the crowd.²⁷³ Whatever their motivation, the crowd was "met by a cordon of policemen and a group of Armenian villagers, some of whom carried hunting rifles."²⁷⁴ In the ensuing fighting, two Azeris were killed, one by an Azeri policeman and the

²⁶⁸ Malkasian, 43.

²⁶⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 24.

²⁷⁰ Malkasian, 43.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50

²⁷² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 26.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 16.

other by a hunting rifle likely fired by an Armenian.²⁷⁵ News of the incident quickly traveled across Azerbaijan, with Armenians blamed for the death of both men, stoking anger against the Armenian population of Azerbaijan that would soon explode into violence.²⁷⁶

That explosion occurred on the evening of February 27, when a rally in the coastal Azeri city of Sumgait “attracted thousands of participants, most of them young Azerbaijani men. The theme of the gathering was Mountainous Karabagh’s campaign for unification with Armenia. The mood was angry.”²⁷⁷ The crowd was whipped into further fury by an anonymous man who “said that he had escaped from Kapan with his Azerbaijani compatriots and that Armenians there had killed his and his wife’s relatives.”²⁷⁸ Despite attempts by officials to calm the crowd, the demonstration quickly turned violent and transformed into a vicious pogrom against the Armenians residents of Sumgait. For three days, the rioters “roamed around, smashing windows, burning cars, but above all looking for Armenians to attack” while the police force stood idly by.²⁷⁹ These “roving gangs committed acts of horrific savagery. Several victims were so badly mutilated by axes that their bodies could not be identified. Women were stripped naked and set on fire. Several were raped repeatedly.”²⁸⁰ By the time order was re-imposed on February 29, at least 29 Armenians and 6 Azeris had been killed and the Armenian population of Sumgait—between 14,000 and 19,000 people—had become refugees.²⁸¹ Although most sources cite the official number of 35 deaths, Armenians argue that the Soviet officials underreported the true extent of the violence and contend the real death toll reached into the hundreds.²⁸²

²⁷⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 28.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 29

²⁷⁷ Malkasian, 51

²⁷⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 36.

²⁷⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 34-35.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 40; Malkasian, 52

²⁸² Croissant, 28.

The Sumgait Pogrom had a significant psychological effect on Armenians in both Armenian and Azerbaijan, prompting them to see the struggle with Azerbaijan over Artsakh through the lens of a potential genocide.²⁸³ These worries were further exacerbated by the fact that the violence against the Armenians of Sumgait appears to have been at least partially planned in advance. The presence of “improvised weapons—sharpened pieces of metal casing and pipes from the factories—which would have taken time to prepare” and the fact that the attackers had the addresses of Armenians suggest some level of planning on the part of the attackers.²⁸⁴ Furthermore, the complete failure of both the government in Baku and Sumgait’s police force—composed almost entirely of Azeris—to put an end to the violence amplified fears that Armenians would not be safe living under Azeri rule.²⁸⁵ It took two days for the Soviet authorities to send reinforcements to Sumgait and when they did arrive, “the troops came unarmed and without orders to confront the mob.”²⁸⁶ In this regard, Sumgait marked a significant turning point that would alter the direction of the entire Karabakh Movement. As Mark Malkasian writes, “What had begun as a campaign for political change and human rights was recast overnight in the context of an ethnic feud.”²⁸⁷ To many Armenians, “the massacre had demonstrated that Azerbaijan could not responsibly govern Mountainous Karabagh.”²⁸⁸

While most sources recognize the Sumgait Pogrom as the first instance of widespread violence, the idea that Armenians in Kapan had previously committed acts of violence against the Azeri residents of the district has become a common refrain among Azeris. This claim has been made most prominently by Thomas de Waal, a British journalist and author of *Black*

²⁸³ Malkasian, 55

²⁸⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden* 36; Malkasian, 53

²⁸⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 34

²⁸⁶ Malkasian, 54

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 59.

Garden, who writes that “In November 1987, two freight cars arrived at the Baku trains station containing Azerbaijanis who had just fled Kafan as a result of interethnic violence.”²⁸⁹ De Waal also cites Arif Yunusov, the same Azeri historian who reported the rape of the two girls in Stepanakert, who says that in January 1988 four buses arrived in Baku full of Azeris fleeing violence in Kapan.²⁹⁰ However, as even de Waal acknowledges, there is no contemporary reporting of violence in Kapan and the claim rests on accounts given years after the violence allegedly occurred.²⁹¹ Armenian sources reject the idea that Azeris were violently expelled from Kapan before February 1988, instead claiming that “four busloads of young Azerbaijani men were recruited from [Kapan] and then crossed into Azerbaijan...The young men arrived at the [Sumgait] bus depot on 26 February, setting off the first round of anti-Armenian demonstrations.”²⁹² While exactly what, if anything, occurred in Kapan prior to February 1988 will likely never be known, the complete absence of any contemporary reporting suggests that any violence that may have taken place was on a very limited scale.

Back in Yerevan, Armenians were still observing the temporary halt to demonstrations agreed upon before the Sumgait Pogrom, and turned their attention to fundraising to help support refugees from Sumgait and elsewhere in Azerbaijan.²⁹³ A few days before demonstrations were scheduled to resume, Moscow unveiled its proposal intended to pacify Armenians. On March 24, Soviet officials announced a “400-million ruble package of economic and cultural reforms for Mountainous Karabagh.”²⁹⁴ However, many Armenians doubted the ability of the already weakening Soviet government to fulfill its promises and objected to the fact that Baku had been

²⁸⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 19.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 343

²⁹² Malkasian, 53.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

placed in charge of administering the seven-year long plan.²⁹⁵ Anticipating this discontent, the Soviets had deployed military forces to Yerevan on March 22, blocking off Theater Square and taking control of the city's major streets.²⁹⁶ In response, the movement's organizers "called on Yerevan residents to stay home Saturday, 26 March, to transform the republic capital into a 'dead city.' And 26 March was indeed quieter than most Saturdays, but government officials made sure that at least party members appeared on the sidewalks."²⁹⁷ In Artsakh, strikes and demonstrations had "resumed with full force in late March, only a few days after 40,000 Armenians in Stepanakert had celebrated the decision of the central committee of the oblast's Communist Party to support unification."²⁹⁸ However, Soviet "Troops blocked off Stepanakert's Lenin Square. As Karabakh Committee member Ashot Manucharyan put it, the events of March were like a punch in the stomach. They knocked the wind out of the Armenian people for a month, but the blow was not deadly."²⁹⁹

After a month of dormancy, the Karabakh Movement returned to center stage in May 1988, when, in an effort to regain popularity he had lost by failing to more actively support the unification movement, the head of Armenia's Communist Party, Karen Demirchyan, struck a deal with Igor Muradyan to allow further protests despite an official ban on public demonstrations.³⁰⁰ While the crowds numbered in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands, "Unlike February...curiosity had not brought the people out. Rather the crowd of 17 May consisted of the newly politicized. They came with a sense of purpose."³⁰¹ A subsequent demonstration on May 19 would prove to be the end of Muradyan's de facto leadership of the

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 64.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 65.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 70.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

Karabakh Movement, when he gave a speech on May 19 arguing for cooperation with Demirchyan, rejecting efforts to achieve greater democratization as a distraction from the issue of Artsakh, and suggesting “that atrocities against Armenians in Shushi be countered with eye-for-an-eye revenge.”³⁰² While Muradyan’s more militant message attracted some support, the majority of the crowd “answered with boos and whistles.”³⁰³ Following the demonstration, activists who opposed Muradyan’s vision formed the Karabakh Committee while Muradyan formed his own group called *Miatsum* (unification). For the following weeks “The split between Muradyan and the Karabagh Committee was to remain an irritant for the Karabagh movement.”³⁰⁴ *Miatsum* “attracted a small, committed following, but Muradyan did not regain his former stature” and the eleven-member Karabakh Committee came to dominate not only the unification movement but Armenian politics in general.³⁰⁵ The May demonstrations also failed to rescue Demirchyan’s political career, as widespread disapproval among the Armenian people prompted Moscow to remove him from office and replace him on May 21 with Suren Harutyunyan, an Armenian from Georgia who had spent most of his career outside of Armenia.³⁰⁶

A Union Collapses

Largely directed by the Karabakh Committee, by the end of May, “Armenia, formerly one of the most loyal of republics, turned into the leading rebel in the Soviet Union.”³⁰⁷ Strikes and demonstrations continued to be held throughout the late spring and early summer of 1988,

³⁰² Ibid., 72.

³⁰³ Ibid., 72-73.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 74.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 53.

³⁰⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 62

with numbers once again reaching a hundred thousand.³⁰⁸ On June 15, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia voted in favor of unification with Artsakh, firing “the opening shot in what came to be called ‘the war of laws.’ Regional Party organs, ditching the old Soviet principle of ‘democratic centralism,’ passed legislation that openly antagonized one another.”³⁰⁹ Two days later, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan responded with a resolution of its own, rejecting the idea of unification and restating its claim to Artsakh.³¹⁰ The first stage of this war of laws reached its peak on July 12 when the Stepanakert Soviet “voted to secede unilaterally from Azerbaijan and rename Nagorny Karabakh ‘the Artsakh Armenians Autonomous Region.’”³¹¹ However, less than a week later, at a session on July 18 focused on the question of Artsakh, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “ruled out any change in borders,” a decision that would be reaffirmed on November 12.³¹² While a special committee with the power to overrule Baku was formed to oversee Artsakh, the decision was a clear loss for the Armenians. The committee would be dissolved the following year, prompting the Armenian and Artsakhi parliaments to pass a joint resolution on December 1, 1989 unilaterally declaring that “The Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR and the National Council of Nagorny Karabakh announce the reunification of the Armenian SSR and Nagorny Karabakh.”³¹³ However, this bold pronouncement was ignored by both Baku and Moscow and had little effect on the situation on the ground in Artsakh.

Although Azerbaijan had come out the victor in the war of laws, Azeris—perceiving that the struggle for control of Artsakh was not over—began to organize their own counter-movement. Along with arguing that “the Russian intelligentsia, the Soviet and Western media,

³⁰⁸ Malkasian, 97.

³⁰⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 62.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Malkasian, 113; Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 199-200

³¹³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 72

and the central government” were biased in favor of Armenia, Azeris began collect “social-economic data,” such as the availability of housing and hospital beds, that they argued disproved Armenian claims of discrimination.³¹⁴ Rather, “Azerbaijani Turks said that within the NKAO, it was the Armenians who discriminated against them.”³¹⁵ On November 17, “a series of mass demonstrations began in front of the government buildings on Lenin Square” in Baku that would attract tens of thousands of people.³¹⁶ Just as the issue of Artsakh has served to rekindle a national consciousness in Armenia, it sparked a similar movement in Azerbaijan. While not as focused on Artsakh as its counterpart in Armenia, “A broad-based, multi-issue mass movement had begun in Azerbaijan. The people had come in part because of anxiety over the Karabagh dispute and the flood of refugees.”³¹⁷

By the fall of 1988 the flow of refugees between Azerbaijan and Armenia was becoming a serious concern for both countries. While Armenians had been fleeing Azerbaijan since the Sumgait Pogrom in February, the “Autumn of 1988 saw the Armenians turn against their Azerbaijani minority and expel them from Armenia...Armenian gangs raided Azerbaijani villages; many of their residents were beaten, shot, had their homes burned, or were forced to flee on foot. By the end of the year, the Armenian countryside had dozens of deserted villages that had been depopulated of most of Armenia’s more than 200,000 Azerbaijanis and Muslim Kurds.”³¹⁸ Likewise, in Azerbaijan violence and intimidation against Armenians continued, pushing more and more Armenians to flee to Armenia. In November, “General Viktor Omelchenko, the military commander of Kirovabad [now Ganja], recorded ‘more than seventy

³¹⁴ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 198-199.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 200

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 63.

attempts to organize pogroms against the city's Armenian community. Roving gangs remained on the offensive for several nights, seeking to set fire to Armenian neighborhoods. Soviet sources reported that sixty Armenian houses were burned down during the riots."³¹⁹ In response to this and other instances of violence, "by the end of the year the great majority of the approximately 300,000 Armenians in Azerbaijan outside of Mountainous Karabagh had either left or were planning to leave as quickly as possible."³²⁰

The same process of ethnic segregation took place in Artsakh, escalating after a violent clash between Armenians and Azeris in the town of Khojaly. On September 18, 1988, a convey of Armenian students entering the region in to deliver aid and help with the grape harvest was met by Azeris, who "stoned the trucks and then opened fire with hunting rifles and shotguns, wounding eighteen of the students."³²¹ When news of the incident reached Stepanakert, "hundreds of Armenians boarded buses and trucks, and headed for Khojalu. Others set off on foot. Many were stopped by MVD troops before reaching the village, but others broke through and traded gunfire with the Azerbaijanis well into the night."³²² The clashes served as the spark for the onset of broader violence, in which "all the Armenians were driven from Shushi and the Azerbaijanis were expelled from Stepanakert."³²³ By early 1990, in Artsakh as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan, the "Separation of Armenians and Azerbaijanis—a dynamic that had gathered momentum throughout the twentieth century" had been all but completed.³²⁴

Armenia, already dealing with substantial inflows of refugees, was soon hit by another humanitarian crisis, when, on December 7, 1988, a magnitude 6.9 earthquake struck northern

³¹⁹ Malkasian, 171.

³²⁰ Ibid., 176-177.

³²¹ Ibid., 143.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 70.

³²⁴ Malkasian, 176-177.

Armenia.³²⁵ While not especially powerful on an absolute level, “geology, poor construction, and unfortunate timing magnified the impact of the earthquake.”³²⁶ Due to widespread theft of building materials which were replaced with lower quality substitutes, “Every single multistory building built in Gorbachev’s, Chernenko’s, Andropov’s, Brezhnev’s, and Khrushchev’s time was totally destroyed.”³²⁷ The scale of the destruction was staggering: “More than 25,000 people died as a result of the earthquake; 530,000 people were left homeless, The disaster idled one-quarter of Armenian’s industry. Total damage was estimated at 13 billion rubles (\$20 billion).”³²⁸ However, “The catastrophe did not, as many had hoped, curtail the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute.”³²⁹ Gorbachev, who had returned from a trip to the United States to visit the impacted area, “stumbled into a shouting match with earthquake survivors” who, rather than focusing on the earthquake as he had expected, demanded “that he address the Karabagh issue.”³³⁰ After returning to Yerevan, “Gorbachev gave an interview to Armenian television in which he said that the Karabakh issue was being exploited by ‘unscrupulous people, demagogues, adventurers, corrupt people, black shirts’ who were ‘hungry for power.’ This was his signal for the arrest of the Karabakh Committee.”³³¹ Nine of the committee’s members were arrested at the Union of Writers building where they had established a headquarters for coordinating relief efforts, and the remaining two were arrested within a few days.³³²

Throughout 1988 and 1989, as both Armenians and Azeris became increasingly aware of the Soviet Union’s instability they began to explore the possibility of seeking independence. In

³²⁵ Ibid., 180.

³²⁶ Ibid., 180.

³²⁷ Ibid., 182.

³²⁸ Ibid., 180.

³²⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 65.

³³⁰ Malkasian, 184.

³³¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 66.

³³² Ibid.

Armenia, the push for independence was largely directed by the members of the Karabakh Committee. While careful to maintain enough of an appearance of loyalty toward the Soviet Union to not overly-alienate Soviet authorities, members of the Karabakh Committee had been considering the possibility of independence almost since its foundation. As Armenian journalist Tatul Hakobyan writes, “In May [1988], Karabakh Committee member Hambartsum Galstyan, assured historian Gerard Libaridian that the outcome of the events taking place would be the independence of Armenia. It becomes clear from various statements made by the committee members over time, [that] the agenda of the movement was expanding day by day and included not only Karabakh, but other issues such as the independence of Armenia.”³³³ After being released from prison in May 1989, the Karabakh Committee returned to Armenia as heroes and “resumed their opposition activities with vastly increased authority” among the Armenian people.³³⁴ Upon returning to Armenia, the members of the Karabakh Committee created the Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM), “which spearheaded Armenia’s efforts to break away from the Soviet Union.”³³⁵ As the Soviet Union showed further signs of weakening in 1989, the members of the Karabakh Committee became increasingly convinced of the need to pursue independence. In the words of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, a member of the committee and Armenia’s first president, “I myself came to the conclusion that the Soviet Union was ending and we would achieve independence only after the miner’s strikes in Russia in the summer of 1989...After that I said, ‘That’s it, we have to fight for independence.’ Because it would have been very dangerous if the Soviet Union had collapsed and we had not been ready.”³³⁶

³³³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 55

³³⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 73.

³³⁵ Media Initiatives Center. *Parts of a Circle: The Summary Film*. (2019) 23:05- 23:14. youtube.com/watch?v=N3yuVOK96RE

³³⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 73.

In Azerbaijan too, the idea of independence began to take hold—especially among members of the intelligentsia—as the Soviet Union began to show signs of weakening. While a number of political movements emerged in Azerbaijan in the waning years of the Soviet Union, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, formed in July of 1988, proved itself to be the most influential.³³⁷ Led by linguist Abulfaz Elchibey, the success of the Popular Front meant that for “the first time Azerbaijan had an alternative political banner around which activists could gather.”³³⁸ Formed as “a colourful coalition of over a dozen different political tendencies,” the Popular Front soon became embroiled in the conflict over Artsakh, with Popular Front-linked militia groups carrying out “a string of attacks on lines of transport between Karabakh and the rest of Azerbaijan” and attempting to “block the Lachin ‘corridor’ between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.”³³⁹ As the conflict with Armenia escalated, Azerbaijan would impose a formal rail blockade, affecting 85% of Armenia’s rail traffic and causing shortages of fuel and food.³⁴⁰

Across Azerbaijan, the Popular Front organized strikes, held meetings, and drafted public statements intended to “mobilise the people in defense of the nation.”³⁴¹ As the Popular Front matured, its agenda began to focus more on independence: “What had started as a round table around which everyone who for whatever reason showed hard feelings towards the Soviet regime and its Baku puppets was welcome, now all of a sudden had turned from a blurred coalition into a spearhead of clear-cut nationalism with a serene vision of independent Azerbaijan’s future.”³⁴² However, unlike in Armenia where “large sections of the Party hierarchy proved willing to work with the new nationalist movement...in Azerbaijan, there was no basis

³³⁷ van der Leeuw, 158

³³⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 83-84

³³⁹ van der Leeuw, 158

³⁴⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 88.

³⁴¹ van der Leeuw, 159

³⁴² Ibid.

for the authorities and opposition to strike a deal.”³⁴³ This lack of internal unity would continue to plague Azerbaijan throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, undermining Azeri efforts to secure control of Artsakh.

While 1989 largely saw the continuation of processes that had begun in 1988, both the Armenian and Azeri communities in Baku experienced tragedies in January 1990. The month began “with all the disturbing portents of mass violence already visible: a defenseless Armenian population, whom none of the security structures seemed ready to defend; a Popular Front, where radical elements had squeezed out the moderates; a local Party leadership losing power and looking for ways to hang on to it; and the Soviet leadership in Moscow, which was prepared to take any steps it thought necessary to prevent Azerbaijan’s breaking away from the Union.”³⁴⁴ While most Armenians had already fled other areas of Azerbaijan, “thousands of Armenians still remained in Baku. During the previous two years, they could have exchanged their apartments or simply saved their lives, but till the end, they believed in Baku’s internationalism.”³⁴⁵ However, on January 13, the hope that Azerbaijan’s capital could remain insulated from the anti-Armenian sentiment that had taken hold over the rest of Azerbaijan was brutally crushed when “murderous anti-Armenian violence overwhelmed Baku. A vast crowd filled Lenin Square for a rally, and by early evening men had broken away from it to attack Armenians. As in Sumgait, the savagery was appalling and the center of the city around the Armenian quarter became a killing ground.”³⁴⁶ As was also the case in Sumgait, the violence “was not entirely (or perhaps not at all) spontaneous, as the attackers had lists of Armenians and their addresses.”³⁴⁷ While the chaos that

³⁴³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 84

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 90.

³⁴⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 76.

³⁴⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 91.

³⁴⁷ Kushen, Robert and Neier, Aryeh. *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaidzhan*. Human Rights Watch (1991), 7.

descended on Baku makes it almost impossible to determine the exact number of victims, “Armenians talk about 150 – including those who were injured and died several days later in Turkmenistan and other places. Azerbaijani researcher Arif Yumusov mentions 86.”³⁴⁸

Once again, violence against Armenians raged for days without Soviet or Azeri officials intervening. Despite the presence of Soviet soldiers, who had been deployed before the pogrom began, “neither the local authorities nor the 12,000 Soviet Interior Ministry troops stationed in Baku did anything to stop” the killings.³⁴⁹ Even more troublingly, Azeri human rights activist Arzu Abdullayeva “remembers appealing to a policeman to go to the aid of a desperate Armenian being set upon by a mob and being told, ‘We have orders not to intervene.’”³⁵⁰ On January 15, the Supreme Council of the USSR declared a state of emergency in the NKAO and the surrounding regions, but “Inexplicably, Baku was not mentioned.”³⁵¹ It was not until January 19, “when, in reality, the massacre of the Armenians had ended and there were no Armenians left in Baku,” that Moscow declared a state of emergency in Baku.³⁵² While the reasons behind the Soviet authorities’ lack of action remain unknown, “Retired KGB men from both Baku and Moscow later agreed there had been instigation in Baku to provide Moscow with a pretext for using force,” although that does little to explain why Soviet authorities waited nearly a week to declare a state of emergency.³⁵³ While the potential involvement of Soviet authorities will likely remain a mystery, the Baku Pogrom marked with a “terrible flourish” the effective end of Azerbaijan’s Armenian population, with survivors being evacuated across the Caspian Sea to

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Conflict_in_the_Soviet_Union/ZHLuH7HAH2YC?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=no+at%20all

³⁴⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 77.

³⁴⁹ Croissant, 37

³⁵⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 91.

³⁵¹ Kushen and Neier, 8.

³⁵² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 80.

³⁵³ Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 215.

Turkmenistan and then flown to Armenia.³⁵⁴

During the pogrom, “Nationalist activists ruled the streets of Baku. They put up barricades of trucks and concrete blocks on the roads leading to the barracks on the edge of the city.”³⁵⁵ In doing so, they mounted a not-insignificant challenge to Moscow’s authority, one that Soviet officials could little tolerate. Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov reportedly warned the activists that Azerbaijan “was one step away from independence,” an implicit threat that Moscow would use force if necessary.³⁵⁶ Following the declaration of a state of emergency in Baku, Soviet authorities made good on that threat, deploying an additional 11,000 soldiers who “smashed through barricades erected by Popular Front supporters and entered Baku during the night of 19-20 January.”³⁵⁷ Troops coming from the south “were from local garrisons and did not fight their way into the city, but the troops who approached from the north entered Baku as if it were a city under enemy occupation.”³⁵⁸ Over the course of a five-hour long battle, “Some one hundred thirty citizens of Baku were killed and several hundred were wounded” along with twenty-one soldiers.³⁵⁹

While the soldiers were successful in asserting the Soviet Union’s military control of Baku, their violent methods ensured that “Moscow essentially lost Azerbaijan. Almost the whole population of Baku turned out for mass funerals of the victims.”³⁶⁰ In an all-night session, the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet passed “a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops and threatening secession from the USSR if the demand was not met.”³⁶¹ Nakhichevan—

³⁵⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 91.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 93.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Croissant, 37.

³⁵⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 94.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.; Croissant 37.

³⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 94.

³⁶¹ Croissant, 37.

which was classified as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Azerbaijan—even “became the first part of the Soviet Union ever to declare unilateral independence,” after doing so on January 20.³⁶² However, Moscow ignored both resolutions, arresting several leaders of the Popular Front and imposing martial law in Baku.³⁶³ While the Soviet authorities had reasserted their control of Azerbaijan, the events of “Black January” turned the Azeri population against the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of the end of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic.

Just a few weeks later, on February 8, 1990, the Communist Party made the momentous decision “to surrender its historic monopoly of power,” opening the door for elections to be held in the Soviet Union’s fifteen constituent republics.³⁶⁴ In Armenia, where elections were held on May 20, “the ANM and its sympathizers won half the parliamentary seats,” placing the government in the hands of a non-communist party for the first time since 1920.³⁶⁵ By August, the ANM had ascended to power, electing Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Vazgen Manukyan—both members of the Karabakh Committee—speaker of Armenia’s Supreme Soviet and prime minister respectively.³⁶⁶ The new leaders of Armenia soon made their intentions clear, when, on August 23, they declared independence, proclaiming that “Armenia is a self-governing state, endowed with supremacy of state authority, independence, sovereignty, and plenipotentiary power. Only the constitution and laws of the Republic of Armenia are valid for the whole territory of Armenia.”³⁶⁷ However, Armenia’s independence would not be recognized until after the final collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. As Armenia was advancing toward

³⁶² van der Leeuw, 163; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 95.

³⁶³ Croissant, 37.

³⁶⁴ Clines, Francis. “Upheaval In The East: Soviet Union; Soviet Leaders Agree To Surrender Communist Party Monopoly On Power.” *New York Times*. February 8, 1980. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/08/world/upheaval-east-soviet-union-soviet-leaders-agree-surrender-communist-party.html>

³⁶⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 84.

³⁶⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 111.

³⁶⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 377.

independence, Azerbaijan—still under a state of emergency and occupied by Soviet troops—held its own election on September 30, 1990.³⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly given the circumstances, the Communist Party won the majority of seats amidst claims of widespread fraud, including the murder of two opposition candidates.³⁶⁹

As the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union became apparent in the early months of 1990, violence between Armenians and Azeris within Artsakh became increasingly common. On January 11, “Azeri mobs attacked three Armenian villages on the border of the oblast...Gunfire and hostage-taking took place on both sides.”³⁷⁰ Distrustful of Soviet forces after the events of January 1990, Armenians began to form armed militia forces, “the largest and most active of which was the 5,000-strong so-called Armenian National Army (ANA)...Beginning in late March, armed groups on patrol in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the border with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) came into conflict with Azeri villagers, resulting in numerous deaths.”³⁷¹ The Armenian militias also “began to focus more and more on acquiring arms from local Soviet forces. Attacks on Soviet military convoys, weapons depots, and border checkpoints came to be a regular occurrence.”³⁷² Often, these attacks were carried out with the cooperation of the Russian forces themselves, who had been bribed in advance by militia members. As Ashot Manucharyan put it, “An attack was simulated and weapons were taken; in essence those weapons were bought.”³⁷³ This practice of bribing Russian soldiers to turn over their weapons would later be employed extensively by both sides during the war.

³⁶⁸ Staff of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. “Report on the Supreme Soviet Elections in Azerbaijan.” October 25, 1990, 1.
<https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/Report%20on%20the%20Supreme%20Soviet%20Elections%20in%20Azerbaijan.pdf>

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 14

³⁷⁰ Croissant, 36-37.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 38-39.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 83.

Despite a decree signed by Gorbachev on July 25 declaring militia groups illegal and giving them 15 days to turn their weapons over to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the ANA and other such groups refused to comply.³⁷⁴ Shortly after declaring independence, however, “the Armenian Supreme Soviet declared a state of emergency throughout the republic on 29 August and instructed all unauthorized armed formations to hand over their weapons and dissolve themselves immediately. Backed by the substantial force of Armenian Interior Ministry troops, officials were finally able to disband the ANA.”³⁷⁵ Even this measure could not stop the fighting and “sporadic raids on both Soviet forces and Azerbaijani settlements continued throughout late 1990.”³⁷⁶ The Armenian militias clashed with Azerbaijan’s OMON, Azerbaijan’s legalized paramilitary force, which was “deployed almost exclusively in and around Nagorny Karabakh. The ten thousand or so militiamen manned checkpoints, went on patrol, and made searches for weapons. They took over Karabakh’s airport at Khojaly, where they gained a fearsome reputation for shaking down passengers to whom they took a dislike and sexually harassing women.”³⁷⁷ The result was a bizarre scene as both countries’ governments “stood by and watched as both side’s armies which officially were not supposed to exist were waging full-scale battle, while the official Soviet-armed troops remained powerless for sheer lack of orders.”³⁷⁸

In March 1991, signs of a shift in the balance of power began to appear following a referendum organized by Gorbachev “to pass judgement on a new draft Union treaty that promised autonomy to the republics.”³⁷⁹ In another assertion of independence, Armenia's parliament had voted to boycott the referendum and declared that it would not recognize the

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 85; Croissant, 39.

³⁷⁵ Croissant, 39.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 110.

³⁷⁸ van der Leeuw, 164.

³⁷⁹ Croissant, 40.

results.³⁸⁰ In contrast, “dependent largely on Moscow for its continued grip on power, the Azerbaijani government headed by Ayaz Mutalibov became an early supporter of Gorbachev’s efforts to revive the Soviet Union.”³⁸¹ Despite the Azeri people’s distrust of Soviet authority, under Mutalibov’s leadership, Azerbaijan and Moscow grew strategically closer. According to Mutalibov, in exchange for securing Azerbaijan’s approval of the referendum, Gorbachev agreed to “give the orders to disarm the paramilitary units in Karabakh and conduct a passport checking operation.”³⁸² Under the guise of this ‘passport checking operation’ requested by Mutalibov, Soviet and Azeri forces conducted a military operation, codenamed Operation Ring, against the Armenians of Artsakh that marked a drastic escalation in the conflict for control of the region.

According to Azeri officials, the goal of Operation Ring was to “check the internal passports of residents in a series of Armenian-inhabited villages on the borders of Karabakh that were sheltering Armenian *fedayin*,” the word Armenian militia groups used to describe themselves.³⁸³ However, the operation actually took the form of “a systematic deportation of Armenians” from the Shahumyan district between the NKAO and Armenia.³⁸⁴ As de Waal writes,

What followed was a small Soviet civil war, fought on very unequal terms. On one side were units of the Soviet 4th Army, based in Ganje, whose entire 23rd Division, complete with tanks and artillery, was made available for the operation. They were joined by units of the Azerbaijani OMON and groups of Azerbaijani villagers, who engaged in looting and intimidation. On the other were the Armenian *fedayin*. There were far fewer of them,

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Media Initiatives Center, 24:22-24:59.

³⁸³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 114.

³⁸⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 90.

perhaps a few hundred in all.³⁸⁵

The first target of Operation Ring were the villages of Getashen and Martunashen, whose “three thousand villagers were gradually sealed off from the outside world” in late April.³⁸⁶ On April 30, Soviet soldiers and OMON forces entered the villages, killing a “dozen or so” residents many of whom were “in their eighties and nineties.”³⁸⁷ After putting up sporadic resistance and taking hostages who would later be exchanged for villagers taken hostage by the Azeri and Soviet forces, “The outnumbered *fedayin* slipped away.”³⁸⁸ Shortly after clearing the village of armed resistance, “the occupants of Getashen and Martunashen were deported forcibly to Stepanakert and replaced by Azeri refugees.”³⁸⁹

Over the next two weeks, “the activities of Operation ‘Ring’ expanded in scope and brutality. On 7 May Soviet and Azerbaijani forces backed by tanks and helicopters entered three towns in Armenia proper...More than 20 people were rounded up and arrested in the action, and numerous atrocities were carried out reportedly against the civilian populace.”³⁹⁰ Subsequent operations followed the pattern established at Getashen and Martunashen, “Armenian villages were ringed by tanks and armored personnel carriers, after which Soviet and Azerbaijani forces entered the area and began harassing the populace. Homes, and in some cases entire villages, were burned to the ground.”³⁹¹ Characterized by extremely high morale, the Armenian *fedayin* put up a fierce resistance, and “it took several weeks for the numerically superior Soviet and Azerbaijani forces, even using the tanks and heavy artillery of the 4th Army, to force out

³⁸⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 115.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Croissant, 41.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 42.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

Armenian irregulars.”³⁹² However, the *fedayin* ultimately could not prevent the Soviets and Azeris from achieving their goal. In total, Operation Ring “emptied twenty-three villages in and around the Shahumyan district, expelling 17,000 Armenians from their homes.”³⁹³

From the Azeri perspective, Operation Ring was successful insofar as it was intended “to block the Armenian *fedayin*, cut off their supply route, and create a new ‘ring’ of Azerbaijani villages around Karabakh.”³⁹⁴ However, it also redoubled Armenians’ resolve to resist Azeri rule, “virtually precluding the possibility of further coexistence between the two peoples within the border of Azerbaijan.”³⁹⁵ Furthermore, “In Armenia, the operation spurred a big recruiting drive for the *fedayi* movement, thereby undermining one of its main objectives.”³⁹⁶ Operation Ring was a much more abject failure from the Soviet perspective, who had intended to secure Azerbaijan’s support and force Armenia to turn back toward Moscow.³⁹⁷ While there were some signs of success, such as Ter-Petrosyan agreeing to attend talks on Gorbachev’s Union Treaty for the first and only time, Armenians predictably took an unfavorable view of Moscow’s involvement in the operation, “making it less—rather than more—likely for Armenia to return to the Soviet fold.”³⁹⁸ The Soviet authorities did succeed in strengthen their ties with Azerbaijan, but this victory would soon be overshadowed by events in Moscow.

War Comes to Artsakh

On August 19, 1991, Soviet hard-liners mounted a coup d’état against Gorbachev.³⁹⁹

³⁹² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 121.

³⁹³ Melkonian, Markar. *My Brother's Road: An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2005, 186.

³⁹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 121

³⁹⁵ Croissant, 42.

³⁹⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 122.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.; Croissant, 42.

³⁹⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 172.

While the expectation that the new leaders of the Soviet Union would take a tougher line against Artsakh initially “looked like a vindication of [Azerbaijan’s] loyalty to the Soviet system... within three days everything was turned on its head as the coup attempted collapsed.”⁴⁰⁰ While the Soviet Union would continue to exist on paper for another few months, the coup attempt marked the effective end of Soviet authority in the Caucasus. On August 30, Azerbaijan declared its independence, joining Armenia and a growing list of Soviet republics to do so.⁴⁰¹ In Azerbaijan, Mutalibov was elected president, “but it was a mechanical victory: his was the only name on the ballot.”⁴⁰² Following a referendum on September 21, in which 95% of Armenians voted in favor of independence, Ter-Petrosyan was elected president and “Ten of the original eleven members of the Karabakh Committee were given senior state posts.”⁴⁰³ With the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Armenian-Azeri conflict over Artsakh was transformed from a violent intrastate struggle into a full blown war.

Three days after Azerbaijan’s declaration of independence, on September 2, “The regional Soviet in Stepanakert declared the independence of the new ‘Nagorny Karabakh Republic.’”⁴⁰⁴ In a referendum held on December 10, the Armenians of Artsakh, the Azeri minority having boycotted, approved the Soviet’s declaration, voting almost unanimously—108,615 to 24—for independence.⁴⁰⁵ However, Artsakh’s attempts to secure independence would go unrecognized by any state, including Armenia itself which “sought to deny Baku its strongest argument for justifying suppression of Karabakh separatism, that Armenia was trying to annex Azerbaijani land” by refusing to be the first country to recognize Artsakh.⁴⁰⁶ In doing

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid. 175.

⁴⁰⁶ Croissant, 70.

so, Armenia also attempted to distance itself from the political fallout of the conflict, officially maintaining that Armenia's armed forces were not involved in the fighting despite ample evidence to the contrary.⁴⁰⁷ Instead advancing the idea that the conflict was a struggle for Artsakh's self-determination, the Armenian government insisted that "Karabakh Armenians should be allowed represent themselves in any negotiations on the future administrative status of the former NKAO."⁴⁰⁸

Having declared independence, Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan almost immediately entered into a state of war. While Boris Yeltsin and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev succeeded in getting both sides to commit to a peaceful solution in September at the Russian resort town of Zheleznovodsk, the effort to mediate the conflict soon collapsed.⁴⁰⁹ On November 20, a helicopter carrying Azeri officials as well as Russian and Kazakh negotiators "crashed over the Martuni region in southern Karabakh, apparently after being shot down by Armenian fighters."⁴¹⁰ Six days later, "Azerbaijan's new National Council voted to revoke Nagorny Karabakh's autonomous status," followed soon after by Artsakh's independence referendum.⁴¹¹ These developments precluded any remaining possibility of a negotiated solution, and ushered in the onset of a full scale war between Armenian and Azeri forces. However, having gained their independence from the Soviet Union only a little more than a month prior, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan began the war with an army or the state capacity wage a formal war.⁴¹² As a result, the fighting was mostly carried out by volunteer regiments on both sides which were only loosely under the control of their respective governments.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 175.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid., 181.

Examining the strength of the two sides on a purely material level, Azerbaijan possessed a massive advantage over the Armenian forces. With a population of almost 7.3 million people in 1991, Azerbaijan was just under double the size of Armenia's 3.5 million after accounting for the roughly 150,000 Armenians living in Artsakh who were included in Azerbaijan's official population.⁴¹³ Azerbaijan also enjoyed better access to abandoned Soviet military equipment. Whereas Soviet planners had envisioned Armenia "as a combat zone in the event of war and therefore only had three divisions and no airfields on its soil. Azerbaijan was a rear zone and the base for a much greater concentration of forces, with five divisions and five military airfields."⁴¹⁴ Although a May 1992 agreement between the newly independent states of the Soviet Union formally limited the amount of military equipment Azerbaijan and Armenia could inherit, both countries completely ignored the agreement, giving Azerbaijan the upper-hand in terms of equipment.⁴¹⁵

Armenia also was at a distinct economic disadvantage relative to Azerbaijan. While both Armenia and Azerbaijan had suffered a severe economic disruption from the collapse of Soviet supply chains and trading networks, Armenia faced a more challenging economic situation. Not only had the country just suffered an earthquake that left over half a million people homeless and destroyed a significant portion of Armenia's economic infrastructure, but Azerbaijan—with the assistance of Turkey—was able to impose a punishing blockade on rail traffic entering Armenia. As a result, "During 1992, Armenia's GDP dropped by more than 40 percent, about half of which was conditioned by the blockade."⁴¹⁶ During the winters of 1991-1992 and 1992-1993, "Armenian citizens were forced back into pre-modern living conditions. City dwellers collected

⁴¹³ World Bank. "Data for Azerbaijan, Armenia: Population, total." <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=AZ-AM>

⁴¹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 211.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210-211.

⁴¹⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 175.

their water from wells, cut down trees to feed wood-burning stoves, and lived by candlelight.”⁴¹⁷

In Stepanakert and the other cities of Artsakh, cut off from the rest of Armenia and surrounded by Azerbaijan, the situation was even worse.⁴¹⁸

However, while “In economic, military and human terms, Baku’s advantage over Yerevan and Stepanakert was obvious,” the Armenian forces enjoyed qualitative advantages of their own.⁴¹⁹ While Azerbaijan had relied heavily upon Soviet soldiers during Operation Ring, “A core of Soviet army officers had set about creating an Armenian army” in the waning years of the Soviet Union.⁴²⁰ More importantly, Armenians had a strong paramilitary force in the form of “*fedayin* fighters, who were already hardened from fighting in the hills. Independence brought a new flood of Armenian volunteers.”⁴²¹ As was also the case during Operation Ring, the morale of the Armenian forces was significantly superior to their Azeri opponents. As the celebrated Armenian general Monte Melkonian told an interviewer in 1993, “mathematically speaking, we should have lost long ago...[but] we’ve had big successes. Mostly due to the fact that our people are more motivated. Like I said, they’re defending their homes and their families, while the Azeris, they’re coming to a region that they really don’t know about.”⁴²² In contrast to the Armenians’ general unity and almost single-minded focus on the issue of Artsakh, in Azerbaijan “The fundamental issues of power had not been resolved and there were fears of civil war between President Mutalibov and the nationalist opposition. For many politicians, the war effort was less important than the domestic power struggle.”⁴²³ The comparative lack of prior

⁴¹⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 218.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 187-188.

⁴¹⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 176.

⁴²⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 176.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 176.

⁴²² Manoogian, Ara. “Monte Melkonian talks about Artsakh - Part 2.” Originally filmed, 1993, 6:24 – 6:47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jCys72ydQY>

⁴²³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 176.

experience, motivation, and domestic unity significantly weakened Azerbaijan's military efforts, enabling the Armenians to win a victory despite their smaller population and relative lack of military equipment.

With war underway, Armenian forces began the process of taking full control of Artsakh during the final months of 1991. While Armenians and Azeris no longer lived side by side anywhere in Artsakh, the region "was still a mosaic of Azerbaijani and Armenian villages. As Soviet forces pulled out, each side tried to redraw this complex map in its favor."⁴²⁴ Taking advantage of their numerical advantage within Artsakh, Armenian forces "began to intimidate Karabakh Azerbaijanis out of their villages" in an attempt to create a more defensible perimeter.⁴²⁵ The remaining Azeri controlled towns and villages were surrounded by Armenians, isolated outposts largely cut off from Azerbaijan and one another. However, "while the Azerbaijanis were in a number of traps," with Artsakh entirely encircled by Azeri-controlled territories "the Armenians found themselves in one large trap."⁴²⁶ With helicopter flights through the mountains serving as the only connection to Armenia, delivering food and fuel to Artsakh proved extremely difficult.⁴²⁷

Beginning in January 1992, Azeri forces also began indiscriminately shelling Armenian towns and cities.⁴²⁸ Located in a valley overlooked by the Azeri-controlled cities of Shushi and Khojaly, Stepanakert was particularly vulnerable to these attacks, and was subjected to intense bombardment. As de Waal writes,

"hundreds of rockets rained down from Shusha onto Stepanakert, causing havoc. Over

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 109.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

the course of the spring of 1992, the accumulated casualty figure from the bombardment probably ran into the hundreds... Residents spent every night in their basements; first, they lit gas pipes, then, when the gas ran out, they lived by candlelight. In the morning, they emerged to fetch water from springs several kilometers outside the town. Food and medicine supplies ran low.”⁴²⁹

According to a Human Rights Watch report compiled in July 1993, “Azerbaijani shelling and bombing were reckless and indiscriminate, and aimed at terrorizing and forcing out Armenian civilians...the death toll among Armenian civilians from October 1991 through April 1992 was estimated at 169.”⁴³⁰ Nor were the Azeris alone in using indiscriminant shelling. As Human Rights Watch reported, “Both Azerbaijani and Armenian forces actively shelled and engaged in sniper attacks on each other’s towns and villages.”⁴³¹ However, as the report continues, “Although both sides are guilty of these practices, Azerbaijani forces (while they still held Shushi) engaged in them with extraordinary ferocity and cruelty.”⁴³²

While the civilians of Artsakh faced both shortages and shelling, the Armenian forces were winning victories over the disorganized Azeris. In January 1992, three successive Azeri attempts to capture the Armenian village of Karintak to the immediate south of Shushi were met with fierce resistance, forcing the Azeris to retreat each time.⁴³³ These engagements were “the first time since the outbreak of the conflict that military had directly confronted military,” and the Armenian victory provided a boost to their morale.⁴³⁴ On the Azeri side, internal divisions

⁴²⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 187-188.

⁴³⁰ Human Rights Watch. “Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Indiscriminant Bombing and Shelling by Azerbaijani Forces in Nagorno Karabakh.” July, 1993, 11. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/USSR2937.PDF>

⁴³¹ Human Rights Watch. “Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Escalation of the Armed Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh.” September, 1992, 31.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Bloodshed_in_the_Caucasus/ywAU3VomIpkC?hl=en&gbpv=1

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 108-109.

⁴³⁴ van der Leeuw, 170.

and disorganization were severely hampering the effort to defend Shushi—Azerbaijan’s last major foothold within the borders of the NKAO: “Promised reinforcements failed to materialize...other units were simply abandoning the town.”⁴³⁵ However, while the Armenians in Karintak were only around half a mile away, “With cliffs on two sides, Shusha had been built as a fortress and was easily defensible.”⁴³⁶ Unable to pierce Shushi’s natural defenses, the Armenian forces instead turned their attention to Khojaly, an Azeri controlled town to the north of Stepanakert and home to Artsakh’s only airport.

Khojaly was also the site of “four *Grad* [rocket launchers] stationed inside the village which were systematically firing upon Stepanakert,” making its capture a priority for the besieged Artsakh Armenians.⁴³⁷ Overnight between February 25 and 26, Armenians, accompanied by armored vehicles from the Soviet 366th Regiment which had remained in Stepanakert even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, surrounded the village on three sides and attacked the outnumbered Azeris.⁴³⁸ What followed is widely regarded as the worst single massacre of civilians during the war. While the Armenian forces had left a corridor leading out of the village open to allow for the evacuation of civilians, when “the crowd of Khojali civilians, interspersed with a few militiamen, emerged onto open ground...they were hit by a wall of gunfire.”⁴³⁹ Both sides blame the other for firing the first shot, but the result was a massacre of the Azeri civilians.⁴⁴⁰ Other residents of Khojaly suffered—or even died—from severe frostbite as they had fled without adequate clothes for the cold weather.⁴⁴¹ While the total death toll is hotly contested, with estimates ranging from 200 to 600, “Probably the most reliable figure is

⁴³⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 189.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁴³⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 118.

⁴³⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 183.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁴⁰ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 119; Human Rights Watch, *Escalation of the Armed Conflict*, 21.

⁴⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, *Escalation of the Armed Conflict*, 21.

that of the official Azerbaijani parliamentary investigation, which put the death toll at 485.”⁴⁴²

The Armenian fighters—joined by some residents of Khojaly—claim that Armenians had warned of an impending attack and urged the Azeris to evacuate civilians. However, Azeri officials failed to respond to these warnings. As the mayor of Khojaly, Elman Mamedov, told the Moscow-based Memorial Civil Rights Center, “We knew that the corridor had been provided for the civilian population to leave.” There are also questions surrounding the mutilation of several of the victims’ bodies. While the natural conclusion is that the same forces that committed the massacre were responsible, photos and videos taken by Azeri journalist Chingiz Mustafiev in the immediate aftermath do not show any signs of mutilation, raising “the grisly implication that someone interfered with the corpses afterwards.”⁴⁴³ As the location of the bodies was quickly recaptured by Azeri forces, some Armenians contend that the bodies were subsequently mutilated by Azeri forces in an effort to discredit the Armenians, although the truth of the matter will likely remain forever uncertain.

Along with the loss of life, the Khojaly Massacre had wide reaching political ramifications. Shocked by the massacre and furious that Mutalibov’s government had failed to take steps to prevent it, “Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in front of the Azerbaijani Parliament building to demand Ayaz Mutalibov’s resignation.”⁴⁴⁴ On March 6, Mutabilov submitted to the protestors’ demands and resigned, leaving Yaqub Mamedov the speaker of parliament and rector of Baku’s Medical University acting president until new elections could be held in June.⁴⁴⁵ As was widely expected, the leader of the Popular Front, Abulfaz Alchibey, won,

⁴⁴² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 184.

⁴⁴³ de Waal, Thomas. “More War in the Caucasus.” *Carnegie Moscow Center*. February 9, 2011. <https://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=42579>

⁴⁴⁴ Green and Black, 123.

⁴⁴⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 185-186.

temporarily bringing an end to Azerbaijan's domestic turmoil.⁴⁴⁶ Khojaly also resulted in a surge of motivation among Azeris, and "Hundreds of men for whom Karabakh had hitherto been a distant dispute volunteered to fight."⁴⁴⁷

As is the case for many of the controversial events surrounding Artsakh, the Khojaly Massacre has spawned a number of conspiracy theories on both sides. Some Armenians, inspired in part by Mutalibov who once claimed that the massacre was organized by the Azeri opposition "to create grounds for [his] resignation," argue that Azeris and not Armenians were responsible for the massacre.⁴⁴⁸ However, most observers, and indeed most Armenians, accept that the massacre was committed by the Armenian forces. On the other side, Azeris, relying primarily upon an interview with Serzh Sargsyan, the chair of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic Self-Defense Forces Committee and later the president of Armenia, claim that the massacre was premeditated and planned by high-level Armenian officials. In the interview, Sargsyan told journalist Thomas de Waal that "Before Khojalu the Azerbaijanis thought that they were joking with us, they thought that the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We needed to put a stop to all that."⁴⁴⁹ However, as de Waal and most other observers conclude, Sargsyan was not referring to a premeditated plan to massacre civilians and Khojaly was almost certainly not a "deliberate action approved from above... it was a war, it was a very chaotic situation."⁴⁵⁰

The Khojaly Massacre was closely followed by the worst single massacre of Armenian civilians when, on April 10, Azeri forces captured the village of Maraga. While Armenian

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 356.

⁴⁵⁰ "Том де Ваал: Трагедия в Ходжалы - результат хаоса, "спонтанная", а не "преднамеренная" акция" [Tom de Waal: The tragedy in Khojaly is the result of chaos, "spontaneous", not "deliberate" action]. *Regnum*. November 10, 2010. <https://regnum.ru/news/1345021.html>

officials had attempted to evacuate the village ahead of the advancing Azeri forces, they were not aware that “several families had stayed behind in their basements.”⁴⁵¹ Armenian troops recaptured the village the following day, but in the five to six hours that Azeri forces controlled the town “around 50 people, mostly women and children, were killed and 45 more taken prisoner.”⁴⁵² After receiving permission to exhume the bodies, a fact-finding mission by Christian Solidarity International found “decapitated and charred bodies.”⁴⁵³ In addition, of the 45 villagers who were taken prisoner, 19 were never returned, bringing the total number of victims to 62.⁴⁵⁴

After capturing Khojaly, the Armenian commanders had turned their attention back to Azerbaijan’s other stronghold in Artsakh: Shushi. Under the command of Arkady “Komandos” Ter-Tadevosyan, Armenian forces began to “encircle Shusha, capture the villages around it and draw some of the Azerbaijani garrison away from the defense of the town.”⁴⁵⁵ The Armenian offensive was aided by continued disorganization among the Azeri ranks. According to Chechen commander Shamil Basaev, who participated in the Azeri defense of Shushi, by the time Armenian forces began their final assault on May 7, “There were four mujahedeen and there were 11 Azerbaijani along with them. Almost everyone left, but 15 people held out in defence on their own for one and half days – 15 men. And a 2,800 strong garrison left everything and ran away...Shusha was just abandoned.”⁴⁵⁶ As Samvel Babayan, one of the commanders who led the attack, explained, the Armenians had attempted to encourage the Azeri defenders to leave the city without a fight: “Shushi was seized using military tactics and not by brute force...We

⁴⁵¹ Media Initiatives Center, 36:05-36:10.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 36:44-36:52.

⁴⁵³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 188.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁵⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 130.

attacked from the direction from which the enemy was not expecting us and tried to make the enemy fear that unless he left his positions as soon as possible, he would be completely cut-off.”⁴⁵⁷ The Armenians’ tactics were largely successful and during the operation that captured Shushi only “58 people were killed from the Armenian side; none of them in Shushi.”⁴⁵⁸

At the same time that Armenians in Artsakh were mounting their attack on Shushi, Ter-Petrosyan was meeting with Mamedov in Tehran. On May 9, the very same day that Armenian forces took control of the city, Ter-Petrosyan and Mamedov signed a statement declaring that “within a week after the arrival of the special representative of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran...ceasefire is established and simultaneously all communication roads are open with the purpose of meeting all economic needs.”⁴⁵⁹ However, the news from Shushi cut short any realistic possibility of the agreement taking effect and “proved to be a public relations disaster for the Iranians—and this proved to be their first and last attempt at mediation.”⁴⁶⁰ The revelation “was also a grave embarrassment for Ter-Petrosian, who had known that an assault was planned on Shusha, but not its specific timing...Some suspected that the delay in starting the attack was not due to bad weather but was a deliberate ploy by the local leaders in Karabakh to wreck the talks in Iran and humiliate Ter-Petrosyan”⁴⁶¹ The loss of Shushi plunged Azerbaijan into an even more severe lack of political unity, as “former Communist deputies suddenly staged a constitutional coup d’état to restore Ayaz Mutalibov to office...The maneuver was effectively a declaration of civil war.”⁴⁶² Supporters of the Popular Front and their Gray Wolf allies responded by storming “the parliament building and the

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 130-131.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 386.

⁴⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 192.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 194.

television station. Astonishingly, fewer than a dozen people were killed in the shooting as Mutalibov was ousted again, this time for good.”⁴⁶³

With Shushi under Armenian control, Azeri forces had been pushed almost entirely out of the territory comprising the NKAO, but still controlled the vital Lachin Corridor connecting Artsakh and Armenia. For the Armenians, Azerbaijan’s brief civil war proved helpful as “The Popular Front ‘Geranboi Battalion’ and many other smaller units had left the front and hastened to Baku to help overthrow Mutalibov. More seriously, no one was bothering to reinforce Lachin.”⁴⁶⁴ By May 18, less than two weeks after Armenians took control of Shushi, “Lachin was captured and a land corridor was opened between Armenia and NK” for the first time in over two years.⁴⁶⁵ In large part the capture of Lachin was an opportunistic measure taking advantage of the chaos on the Azeri side. As had been the case with the capture of Shushi, the disorganized Azeri defenders put up little resistance, with many Azeri fighters reportedly not even sure of who they were supposed to report to.⁴⁶⁶ As a result, despite the presence of nearly 3,000 Azeri soldiers and significant amounts of munitions, almost “no shots were directed at the advancing Armenian force.”⁴⁶⁷

War Comes to Azerbaijan

With the capture of Lachin, the war entered a new phase. Whereas earlier fighting had almost entirely taken place within the borders of the NKAO, the war had now spread to the surrounding regions. While fighting outside of the NKAO was not a new development—indeed,

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁶⁵ Hakobyan, *Black and Green*, 137

⁴⁶⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 195.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.; Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 137.

the earliest fighting during Operation Ring occurred in the Kalbajar District—the capture of Lachin was the first time that Armenians took control of land outside the borders of the NKAO. This change brought about a new attitude from the international community, which had formerly largely viewed the Armenians as victims of Azeri aggression, but slowly began to become more sympathetic to the Azeri side. However, many in the international community recognized the need to connect Artsakh and Armenia in order to lift the blockade of Artsakh and took comfort in Ter-Petrosyan’s assurance that “Neither Armenia nor the NK intend[ed] to occupy more land than that necessary for a link between the republics.”⁴⁶⁸ Regardless of the incipient threat to their goodwill abroad, the capture of the Lachin Corridor was an important strategic victory for the Armenians, enabling reinforcements and supplies to be sent to the embattled region.⁴⁶⁹

However, the Armenians’ string of victories soon came to an end as an Azeri offensive beginning on June 12 “quickly overran the whole northern part of Nagorny Karabakh...Over the next three weeks, the Martakert region was conquered.”⁴⁷⁰ Coming only 5 days after Elchibey was officially elected president of Azerbaijan, the offensive seemed to signal a new stage in the war, with a more internally united Azerbaijan taking advantage of its material advantages to beat back the Armenian forces. The success of the Azeri offensive was made possible by “a phalanx of armored vehicles and tanks—by some accounts as many as 150 of them—which swept aside the poorly armed Armenian defenders.”⁴⁷¹ Both the tanks and their drivers were Russian, having been recruited by the Azeris from the remnants of the Soviet 4th Army.⁴⁷² In a rather ironic twist, these Russian tanks would later be stopped by Russian attack helicopters in early July, which had

⁴⁶⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 137.

⁴⁶⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 195.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 209.

been persuaded by Armenians to intervene on their side.⁴⁷³ The Azeris also benefited from the “festive mood” among Armenians following the capture of Shushi and Lachin, after which many of the *fedayi* from Armenia proper “believed that they had done their share of fighting” and returned to Armenia.⁴⁷⁴ Finally, while Armenian commanders had expected a counterattack, they believed it “would come from the east and had left the northern sector poorly defended.”⁴⁷⁵

The Azeri offensive succeeded in capturing roughly half of the NKAO, putting the Azeri army only half an hour east of Stepanakert.⁴⁷⁶ The offensive created a new humanitarian crisis in Artsakh as thousands of Armenians were forced to flee their homes—many of them for the second time having returned after being deported during Operation Ring.⁴⁷⁷ In coordination with the ground offensive, Azerbaijan began using bombers to renew their attacks on Armenian towns and villages, once again most heavily targeting Stepanakert, where bombardments “destroyed dozens of houses that had escaped the artillery battering of the winter and spring.”⁴⁷⁸ The renewed attack proved even more deadly to the Armenian inhabitants of Artsakh, with Human Rights Watch reporting that an estimated 1,500 civilians were killed between June 1992 and January 1993—almost 10 times the number of civilians that had been killed during the fighting through April 1992.⁴⁷⁹

While Azerbaijan was enjoying a period of national unity, the collapse of Armenian defenses caused political chaos in both Stepanakert and Yerevan. In Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan and his Defense Minister Vasgen Sargsyan accused the *dashnaks* of not using funds raised by the

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Hakobyan. *Green and Black*, 163-164.

⁴⁷⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 208.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 207-208.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch. “Indiscriminant Bombing and Shelling,” 11.

Armenian diaspora to aid in the war effort.⁴⁸⁰ On June 23, the Armenian opposition—including the *Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaksutyun* (HHK) or Republican Party of Armenia which would later rise to power—formed the National Alliance Unity to challenge Ter-Petrosyan’s leadership.⁴⁸¹ In Artsakh, “The local parliament was in disarray,” struggling to respond to the changing fortunes on the ground. However, both governments soon managed to regain unity. In Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan appointed opposition leader Vazgen Manukyan Defense Minister and in Artsakh, a new State Defense Committee, led by Robert Kocharyan, was formed on August 15.⁴⁸² The new Artsakhi leadership undertook sweeping measures to ensure Artsakh’s defense, drafting the entire male population between the ages of eighteen and forty-five and putting all businesses in service of the military.⁴⁸³

Although the Azeri offensive achieved significant territorial gains in the first two months, “The fall of 1992 was the high-water mark of Azerbaijan’s military success in the war... The Ministry of Defense in Baku was making plans to bring in buses to ship the Armenian civilian population out of the territory Azerbaijan planned to conquer. By October 1992, however, the advance had halted and the offensive had run out of steam.”⁴⁸⁴ Two factors help explain the Armenians’ success in turning aside the Azeri offensive. First, the Armenian leadership took a more localized approach to their defenses. Beginning in 1993, “defensive battles were allocated to the territorial units. To put it roughly, each village was protected by the battalion unit of that village... The men fought with the realization that two hundred meters behind them there was their village, their children, wives and mothers.”⁴⁸⁵ At the same time, the Armenians’ “irregular

⁴⁸⁰ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 170.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 177; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 210.

⁴⁸³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 210.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁸⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 179.

fighting force became more organized” and centralized under the new Defense Committee.⁴⁸⁶

What had formerly been a loose network of fighting groups was shaped into an army under the direction of Manukyan and Samvel Babayan, the newly appointed commander of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Army.⁴⁸⁷

With these innovations, the Armenians were able to halt the Azeri attack and then undertake an offensive of their own. On March 27, 1993, Armenian forces launched an attack on Kelbajar, “a sliver of land running between the Northwest of Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia.”⁴⁸⁸ As had been the case a year earlier when the Armenians captured Lachin, the offensive faced little resistance as “Kelbajar had only a small group of defenders protecting it and no reinforcements came to assist them.”⁴⁸⁹ By April 5, the Armenians had taken control of the region, forcing Kelbajar’s 60,000 residents to flee to across the mountains to the north.⁴⁹⁰ Commenting on the exodus, Human Rights Watch reported that the “Refugees claimed that hundreds of people froze to death attempting to flee.”⁴⁹¹ The loss of Kelbajar prompted another political crisis in Azerbaijan, as “the old communist nomenclature gathered around [Heydar] Aliyev, [and] removed Elchibey from power by exploiting the loss of Kelbajar and the failures in Martakert.”⁴⁹²

Aliyev had long been a fixture of Azeri politics under the Soviet Union, serving first as the head of Azerbaijan’s Communist Party and then as a member of the Politburo, but was forced to resign in 1987 after a falling out with Gorbachev.⁴⁹³ Returning to his home of Nakhichevan,

⁴⁸⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 222.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 182.

⁴⁹¹ Human Rights Watch. “Human Rights Watch World Report 1994 – Azerbaijan.” January 1, 1994.

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/467fca891e.html>

⁴⁹² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 182.

⁴⁹³ Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity, 132-133.

Aliyev began rebuilding his base of power, becoming elected Nakhichevan's speaker of parliament in Azerbaijan's first elections after independence in September 1991.⁴⁹⁴ Despite not holding any national office, Aliyev "continued his subtle campaign to be a 'third force' in Azerbaijan" between Mutabilov and Elchibey.⁴⁹⁵ In the spring of 1993, Aliyev's planning came to fruition when General Suret Husseinov capitalized on the Popular Front's weakness in the wake of the Armenian capture of Kelbajar to mount a coup against Elchibey, marching his army from Ganja to Baku.⁴⁹⁶ In response, a "desperate Popular Front government then invited Heidar Aliev to come from Nakhichevan to Baku to its aid."⁴⁹⁷ However, with Husseinov still marching on Baku, Elchibey fled to Nakhichevan—where he also was from—and Aliyev was granted extraordinary presidential powers by the parliament on June 24.⁴⁹⁸ Aliyev acted quickly, securing Husseinov's support by appointing him prime minister on June 30 and holding a nationwide referendum on August 28 in which Elchibey was officially removed from office.⁴⁹⁹ By October 3, Aliyev had been elected Azerbaijan's new president, completing his takeover and marking Azerbaijan's final transition of power until 2003 when Aliyev was replaced by his son.⁵⁰⁰

The Armenians were also facing internal divisions, albeit on a much milder scale than was occurring in Azerbaijan. Ter-Petrosyan, who had not been informed of the full extent of the plans to capture Kelbajar by Manukyan and Kocharyan, traveled to Stepanakert on June 14 to meet with Kocharyan.⁵⁰¹ While Manukyan and the Artsakh Armenians favored pressing forward

⁴⁹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 174.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 226-227.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 224-225.

to capitalize on Armenia's military advantage, Ter-Petrosyan attempted to convince them to accept a peace plan proposed by Russia, the United States, and Turkey that "stipulated the Armenians would withdraw from Kelbajar in return for security guarantees for Nagorny Karabakh."⁵⁰² Aware of the importance of not alienating Russia by outright refusing the deal, but unwilling to accept a deal that did not secure their independence, the authorities in Artsakh agreed to the deal, but "asked that the implementation of the demands of the document be delayed for 30 days," hoping that Azerbaijan's chaotic political scene would give them the opportunity to secure a better deal.⁵⁰³

The Artsakhis hopes were soon fulfilled, as Husseinov's attempted coup "left the Karabakh front almost undefended."⁵⁰⁴ On June 26 and 27, the Armenian forces "attacked and liberated Martakert" with relative ease.⁵⁰⁵ On July 23, "facing almost no resistance, they took the strategically vital city of Aghdam. A month later, they advanced south and captured Fizuli and Jebrail."⁵⁰⁶ With the Azeris preoccupied with their domestic power struggle, the Armenian forces easily captured vast tracts of land. In the entire operation to capture Aghdam—a city of 28,000 people—only 11 Armenians were killed, four of whom were killed by a land mine rather than enemy combatants.⁵⁰⁷ Indeed, according to a western diplomat in Baku, the Armenian offensive more closely resembled a "military stroll" than an invasion.⁵⁰⁸ Between July and October, "the Azerbaijanis lost a staggering five regions of their country as well as the North of Nagorny Karabakh itself...an area of almost five thousand square kilometers, or nineteen hundred square

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 193-194.

⁵⁰⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 227.

⁵⁰⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 194.

⁵⁰⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 227.

⁵⁰⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 201.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

miles.”⁵⁰⁹ The offensive was largely undertaken by the Artsakh Armenians, and Ter-Petrosyan, who took a more conservative line regarding advancing into areas outside the NKAO, was often informed of new operations only after they had already taken place.⁵¹⁰

Aliyev, like Elchibey before him, began his presidency by launching a concerted effort intended to recapture territory lost to Armenian forces.⁵¹¹ This October offensive contrasted with the apparent willingness to make peace that Aliyev had shown while serving as acting president from July through the end of September. In September, Aliyev had approved a meeting between Azeri officials and Artsakhi officials, “thereby conceding for the first time that the Karabakh Armenians were ‘a party to the conflict.’”⁵¹² On September 13, Armenian and Azeri officials “agreed to prolong a cease-fire, which later did not hold” but was significant insofar as it signaled a willingness to end the conflict.⁵¹³ Aliyev had even agreed to personally meet with Kocharyan on September 25 in Moscow.⁵¹⁴ However, three weeks after his election, “Azerbaijani forces launched a sudden attack in the Jebrail region on 21 October. Spearheading the raid was a group of about three hundred Afghan *mujaheddin* fighters, part of a 1,000-to 1,500-strong force hired by the Azerbaijani government in a last-ditch effort to reverse the tide of battle.”⁵¹⁵ However, “the Afghan fighters made little difference on the battlefield and local Armenian forces went on the counter-offensive after repulsing the assault.”⁵¹⁶ The counterattack proved successful, and “During the last week of October, the NK forces occupied Horadiz, Minjevan and the entire region of Zangelan.”⁵¹⁷ By the end of October, Armenian forces were

⁵⁰⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 227.

⁵¹⁰ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 202.

⁵¹¹ Croissant, 94.

⁵¹² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 238.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Croissant, 94.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 214.

almost fully in control of five districts of Azerbaijan—Lachin, Kelbajar, Qubadli, Zangilan, and Jebrayil to the west and south of Artsakh—as well as parts of Aghdam and Fizuli to the east. While extraordinarily successful from a military perspective, the capture of the surrounding regions brought international condemnation on the Armenians. The Armenian offensive also created a refugee crisis in Azerbaijan, forcing 350,000 people to flee in advance of the Armenian forces.⁵¹⁸

The occupation of the surrounding territories prompted the United Nations' Security Council to pass four resolutions calling on Armenian forces to withdraw back to the NKAO and urging both sides to come to a diplomatic solution. On April 30, 1993, UN Security Council Resolution 822 demanded the “immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from the Kelbadjar district and other recently occupied areas of Azerbaijan.”⁵¹⁹ This was followed by Resolution 853 on July 29 condemning the seizure of Aghdam, Resolution 874 on October 14 calling for more negotiations in the wake of a high level meeting between the sides in Moscow, and Resolution 884 on November 12 condemning the occupation of Zangilan and the city of Horadiz in Fizuli.⁵²⁰ In each of the four resolutions, the Security Council reaffirmed “the respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all States in the region,” specifically referencing Azerbaijan in the latter three resolutions, as well as “the inviolability of international borders and the inadmissibility of the use of force for the acquisition of territory.”⁵²¹ While three of the four Security Council Resolutions were passed in direct reaction to Armenian expansion into Azerbaijan, the reference to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of “all States in the region” rather than Azerbaijan in particular was perhaps calculated to allow enough ambiguity for the

⁵¹⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 228.

⁵¹⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 387.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 388-390.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 387-390.

possible inclusion of Artsakh.

By December of 1993, the war had entered a new and bloodier phase. Between December 1993 and May 1994, when a ceasefire put an end to fighting, an estimated 2,000 Armenian and 5,000 Azeri soldiers were killed.⁵²² In contrast to earlier fighting that had been waged largely by locals and experienced soldiers, beginning in the late fall of 1993, “both sides relied heavily on young and inexperienced conscripts, thousands of whom died in pitched battles.”⁵²³ As the composition of the armies changed, so too did the nature of the fighting: “There were no longer local battles, but a massive front line.”⁵²⁴ With the fighting growing more intense, both sides struggled to make significant territorial gains. In December, “The Armenians attempted to push east of Fizuli but met with unprecedented resistance and fell back.”⁵²⁵ Azerbaijan launched an offensive of its own, “moving forward 25 km in the direction of Horadiz and Beylagan” but lacked the force necessary to advance further and were compelled to stop when “soldiers and officers began abandoning their posts.”⁵²⁶

In January 1994, Azerbaijan launched its biggest offensive of the war, sending a large contingent over the mountains into Kelbajar.⁵²⁷ Initially, the Azeri forces made significant gains against the inexperienced Armenian forces stationed in the region, announcing on January 24 that “they had encircled and destroyed almost an entire Armenian battalion of 240 men.”⁵²⁸ While the offensive came close to capturing the town of Kelbajar itself, a February 12 counterattack by more experienced Armenian troops forced the over-extended Azeris to “retreat in panic and hundreds of young soldiers were reported missing or frozen to death. By 18

⁵²² Ibid., 215.

⁵²³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 247.

⁵²⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 215.

⁵²⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 248.

⁵²⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 215

⁵²⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 248.

⁵²⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 248.

February, the Azerbaijanis were in full retreat over the Omar Pass.”⁵²⁹ With the situation reversed, “Two Azerbaijani brigades had now been completely cut off and tried to fight their way back north through the narrow pass” but were hit with an Armenian Grad missile barrage that killed up to 1,500 Azeri soldiers.⁵³⁰ After repelling the Azeri attack, the Armenians launched one of their own in the east, “liberating several Armenian villages that had been occupied earlier... Opposing calls from Yerevan to cease the advance, the NK side initiated operations to take Mir Bashir [Terter] and its adjacent territories. At the end of April about 50 thousand Azerbaijanis abandoned the villages and found shelter in Barda and Yevlakh.”⁵³¹

While attempts by foreign officials to negotiate a ceasefire between the Armenians and Azeris had begun almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, none of these efforts had yielded practical success. Both the Armenians and the Azeris had agreed to ceasefires at various points, but “neither side thought seriously about cease-fires; they were tactical ruses. There was no trust.”⁵³² In addition, the sheer number of potential interlocutors meant that both Armenians and Azeris were “encouraged to ‘shop around’ for whichever mediation effort suited them best,” further damaging the possibility of the two sides coming to an agreement.⁵³³ Numerous attempts to mediate the conflict—most notably under the auspices of the OSCE’s Minsk Group—had failed to bring the two sides to an agreement that could put an end to the war. However, with Azerbaijan suffering defeats on the battlefield and Armenia facing a shortage of food and fuel resulting from the Azeri blockade, by May of 1994 both sides were ready to discuss terms for peace.⁵³⁴

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 217.

⁵³² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 240.

⁵³³ Ibid., 241.

⁵³⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 206-207.

On May 4, the leaders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Artsakh, along with officials from Russia and other CIS countries, met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to agree to a peace deal.⁵³⁵ The resulting “Bishkek Protocols,” signed the following day, “called on all conflicting sides [in Nagorny Karabakh] to heed again the voice of reason: to cease fire at midnight on 8 to 9 May.”⁵³⁶ However, Aliyev had not attended the meeting in Bishkek and the Azeri representative—deputy speaker of parliament Afiyettin Jalilov—refused to sign the document without his approval.⁵³⁷ Back in Baku, on May 8, Aliyev and other top Azeri officials met and agreed to the deal “if they could make two minor alterations to the document and add the signature of the Karabakh Azerbaijani leader.”⁵³⁸ The new agreement was faxed to the Armenian leaders and signed by Serzh Sargsyan, who had become Armenia’s defense minister, and Samvel Babayan, Sargsyan’s successor as the defense minister for Artsakh.⁵³⁹ By midnight of May 11-12, both sides declared a ceasefire, that—although extremely fragile and frequently violated—would prevent the return of sustained war for the next twenty-six years.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁵³⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 250.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 220.

⁵⁴⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 251.

Chapter Three: An Irreconcilable Divide

A Ceasefire Takes Hold

While both the Armenians and the Azeris were exhausted from over six years of fighting, the ceasefire had opponents on both sides. In Azerbaijan, the announcement of the Bishkek Protocol was met with “a storm of protest from the opposition.”⁵⁴¹ Aliyev, apparently giving himself time to gauge the public’s reaction, “waited for a few days for the storm to pass” before publically supporting the agreement.⁵⁴² Aliyev himself had earlier been resistant to Russian efforts to negotiate a peace, not yielding to a concerted Russian campaign to pressure Azerbaijan into accepting a ceasefire that had begun in February 1994.⁵⁴³ However, by May, Azerbaijan, facing the possibility of Armenia capturing more territory as well as increasing Russian diplomatic pressure—and persuaded in part by Russia reframing negotiations as occurring under the aegis of the CIS—was ready to accept a ceasefire.⁵⁴⁴ However, by acquiescing to a deal that consolidated Armenian control over approximately 13.6% of Azerbaijan’s de jure territory, Aliyev had undermined his legitimacy in the eyes of many Azeris.

Aliyev soon faced challenges to his authority, first from pro-Russian elements in the Azeri government who objected not so much to the ceasefire as they did to Aliyev’s ‘contract of the century’ that gave a consortium of Western companies the right to develop Azerbaijan’s Caspian oil fields.⁵⁴⁵ In October 1994, Azerbaijan’s deputy speaker of parliament, Afiyettin Jalilov, was assassinated and “elements of the paramilitary police force, the OPON (successor to

⁵⁴¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 250.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Croissant, 110.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ van der Leeuw, 185.

the OMON)” mounted a revolt against Aliyev’s rule.⁵⁴⁶ Aliyev, who was in New York for a meeting of the United Nations, “hurried back to Baku, where, with theatrical suddenness, he turned on Prime Minister Suret Husseinov and accused him of plotting to seize power.”⁵⁴⁷ Husseinov, who had been instrumental in bringing Aliyev to power a year earlier, had since become his domestic opponent, leading the pro-Russian faction in the government that sought to “station Russian troops in Azerbaijan...reintegrate the country’s oil output into the Russian one, and install a regime that would dance to Moscow’s tune.”⁵⁴⁸ However, faced with Aliyev’s accusation, Husseinov fled to Russia and Aliyev “Having dealt with the pro-Russian opposition...turned on a different set of enemies.”⁵⁴⁹

In March 1995, with Aliyev once again out of the country for a United Nation’s conference—this time in Copenhagen—a pro-Turkish opposition mounted its own attempted coup.⁵⁵⁰ Following Aliyev’s announcement that he intended to disband OPON, its “leader, Rovshan Javadov, who had been cleared of involvement in the previous coup attempt, seized a barracks in Baku and refused calls to disarm.”⁵⁵¹ While never confirmed, Javadov is suspected to have had the support of “rogue elements of the Turkish security establishment and members of the ‘Gray Wolves’” Turkish nationalist movement.⁵⁵² However, Turkish officials had reportedly warned Aliyev of the impending coup attempt, giving him the opportunity to surprise Javadov by returning to Baku rather than traveling to Pakistan as he had planned.⁵⁵³ Forces loyal to Aliyev attacked the barracks Javadov had made his headquarters, and “An armed confrontation took

⁵⁴⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 262.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 262-263.

⁵⁴⁸ van der Leeuw, 185.

⁵⁴⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 263.

⁵⁵⁰ Hakobyan, *Hakobyan, Green and Black*, 235.

⁵⁵¹ van der Leeuw, 187; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 263

⁵⁵² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 263.

⁵⁵³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 235.

place which lasted two days...in which 43 people died, including Rovshan Javadov. This time there was to be no mercy: anyone related to the revolt was pursued [and] hundreds were arrested.”⁵⁵⁴ In parliamentary elections held in November 1995, Aliyev’s *Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası* (YAP), the New Azerbaijan Party, won a “commanding majority” amidst widespread allegations of fraud.⁵⁵⁵ Observers from the OSCE reported that the elections “did not meet international standards for free and fair elections...And this was the OSCE/ODIHR finding for every election in Azerbaijan observed since 1995.”⁵⁵⁶

Opposition to the ceasefire was perhaps to be expected from Azerbaijan, but there were also Armenians—particularly from Artsakh—who were reluctant to accept the agreement.⁵⁵⁷ Among those who, at least later, expressed disapproval of the ceasefire was Artsakhi Defense Minister Samvel Babayan, himself a signatory of the Bishkek Protocol, who maintained that the Armenians could have secured a more favorable agreement by continuing the war. Interviewed in 2006, Babayan claimed that “If we had advanced the 5-6 km remaining to Mir Bashir [Terter], today we would have NK's territory set down on paper.”⁵⁵⁸ The idea that Armenian forces were on the verge of advancing further into Azerbaijan was relatively widespread at the time, with another Armenian commander later arguing that, “If military actions had not been halted we were going to enter Mir Bashir, within a maximum of three days if not in one.”⁵⁵⁹ Nor was the opinion limited to the Armenian side, Azerbaijan’s then-speaker of parliament Rasul Guliev says that before signing the ceasefire, “he had just returned from the front line near Terter, where he

⁵⁵⁴ van der Leeuw, 187.

⁵⁵⁵ Altstadt, Audrey. *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 70.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁵⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 328.

⁵⁵⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 221.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 218.

had seen that Azerbaijani positions were at a breaking point.”⁵⁶⁰ Likewise, Boris Kazimirov, the Russian diplomat who was the architect of the Bishkek Protocol, concurred, arguing that diplomatic “efforts would have yielded no results if Aliyev’s situation hadn’t been critical. Essentially, Aliyev faced losing not only other territories but his power as well.”⁵⁶¹

However, President Levon Ter-Petrosyan and other Armenian leaders who favored a quick end to the war won out over those who believed Armenia should leverage its military advantages to capture more territory. While their view was partially motivated by the toll the war was taking on Armenia and Artsakh, particularly the economic effects of Azerbaijan’s and Turkey’s blockade, Armenians were also largely willing to accept peace because they had little to gain from further territorial gains. The capture of the regions surrounding the NKAO had been driven in part by the desire to gain leverage that could be used to force political concessions from Azerbaijan as Babayan suggested, but the Armenian advances were primarily concerned with securing a defensible perimeter around Artsakh. As Robert Kocharyan explained in 2000, the Armenian leadership “seriously began to think about [a cease-fire], when we came to borders, where we could seriously organize the defense of Karabakh.”⁵⁶² By May of 1994, the Armenian forces had created the defensible perimeter they desired. Not only had the Armenians pushed the front line away from Artsakh’s population centers and drastically decreased the length of the front line they would have to defend, they had also, with the exception of Artsakh’s northern border, driven the Azeris out of the mountains, providing their forces with a natural defensive advantage. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this had been the Armenians’ goal throughout the entire war: “As early as the winter of 1991, the first Karabakh Armenian leader, Artur

⁵⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 250.

⁵⁶¹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 222.

⁵⁶² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 251.

Mkrtchian, had sketched out a map of what he thought of as ‘defensible frontiers,’ which was remarkably similar to the one eventually drawn on the battlefield.”⁵⁶³

With the Armenians victorious and Azerbaijan forced to accept what amounted to a surrender, the conflict over Artsakh moved from the battlefield to the negotiating table. Understandably, the earliest post-war diplomatic efforts were more focused on the more urgent issue of “eliminating the consequences of the conflict” rather than resolving the underlying political dispute.⁵⁶⁴ However, even without addressing the more contentious issues, negotiations between Armenians and Azeris almost immediately became bogged down. On May 16, four days after the ceasefire became official, delegates from Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan met in Moscow to begin negotiations.⁵⁶⁵ While Russia proposed deploying 1,800 peacekeepers to enforce the ceasefire, Mammadrafi Mamedov, the Azeri representative, rejected the idea of a Russian military deployment.⁵⁶⁶ At a subsequent meeting in August, “all three parties endorsed the idea of ‘international’ peacekeepers being dispatched,” but disputes over the composition of such a force prevented it from ever being realized.⁵⁶⁷ Only Russia and Turkey were willing to deploy peacekeepers, but “The presence of the Turks was unacceptable for Armenia and NK, and that of the Russians, for Azerbaijan.”⁵⁶⁸ The result was an “unusual situation of a cease-fire line, which had no neutral troop contingent to patrol it and was, in effect, self-regulated.”⁵⁶⁹ While the OSCE soon established a monitoring mission, it consisted of just six unarmed observers whose visits to the frontline had to be announced in advance.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 240.

⁵⁶⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 226.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁶⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 251.

⁵⁶⁷ Croissant, 113.

⁵⁶⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 227.

⁵⁶⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 251.

⁵⁷⁰ de Waal, Thomas and von Twickel, Nikolaus. *Beyond Frozen Conflicts: Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020, 218.

These early negotiations did, however, see the beginning of a framework for peace emerge in the form of a Russian proposal for a “six-part process by which a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute would be achieved.”⁵⁷¹ The plan called for the introduction of a “primarily Russian” peacekeeping force followed by the staggered withdrawal of Armenian forces from the surrounding territories—with the exception of Lachin.⁵⁷² The most contentious—and least clear—part of the Russian plan called for “Discussion of the ultimate legal and administrative status of Nagorno-Karabakh for an undefined period of time beginning at the time of the accord’s signing.”⁵⁷³ Future proposals for peace would follow a similar program, calling for security guarantees and the return of the surrounding territories while postponing a final decision on the status of Artsakh to an unspecified future date. Predictably, Armenian negotiators tended to object to frameworks that required the Armenian side to make concrete concessions without securing Artsakh’s status, but the formula nevertheless became the basis for mediation efforts.

The Rise of the Minsk Group

While Russia had been the driving force behind the ceasefire and early efforts at resolving the conflict, an international body known as the Minsk Group soon emerged as the primary forum for negotiations. The origins of the group dated back to March 1992, when the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe—renamed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in December 1994—inducted the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Realizing that “the organization had just admitted two members,

⁵⁷¹ Croissant, 112.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, who were at war with each other... CSCE foreign ministers resolved to hold a peace conference on Nagorny Karabakh—for which another new delegate, from Belarus, suddenly volunteered his capital, Minsk, as a venue.”⁵⁷⁴ While Azerbaijan’s demand that Armenian forces leave Shushi and Lachin—which they had captured just before the scheduled conference—as a precondition to negotiations prevented the conference from actually taking place, it lent its name to the Minsk Group that was subsequently created to mediate the conflict.⁵⁷⁵ Initially chaired by Sweden with representatives from several other countries, including Russia and the United States, the Minsk Group brought significant potential international pressure to bear on the conflict.⁵⁷⁶

However, the multilateral nature of the Minsk Group introduced difficulties of its own. After the Russian-brokered ceasefire, the Western members of the Minsk Group scrambled to reassert their influence in the region, creating tension among the mediators themselves. In May, “Minsk Group chairman Jan Eliasson shuttled back and forth between Yerevan and Baku in an effort to convince the sides not to accept hastily the most recent draft Russian peace plan—a plan that minimized the CSCE’s role.”⁵⁷⁷ Continued tension between Russia and the West hindered efforts to negotiate peace throughout the rest of 1994, perhaps most acutely symbolized by the fact that “the Swedes twice scheduled meetings of the Minsk Group, in Paris and Prague, that clashed with CIS meetings in Moscow at which the Russians were intending to hold peace talks.”⁵⁷⁸ As Ter-Petrosyan put it, “the mediating countries and international organizations are not interested so much in settling the conflict, as in settling their own accounts.”⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 241.

⁵⁷⁵ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 125.

⁵⁷⁶ Croissant, 85.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁷⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 265.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

Azerbaijan, which had long believed Russia to be pro-Armenian, particularly encouraged the OSCE to take on a leading role, with Aliyev backing out of Russian-sponsored meetings in favor of those held under the auspices of the Minsk Group.⁵⁸⁰ In addition, improving relations between Russia and the West as well as the OSCE acknowledging “Russia’s special role in the dispute by promoting it to become one of two co-chairs of the Minsk Group, alongside Sweden” convinced Russia to stop pursuing mediation efforts outside of the OSCE.⁵⁸¹ By April 1995, when Finland replaced Sweden as co-chair, the group’s internal “conflicts were pretty much settled between Russia and the West.”⁵⁸² However, the composition of the Minsk Group meant that mediation efforts would permanently remain tied “to the wider issue of the West’s engagement with Russia,” becoming a more significant obstacle as that relationship declined.⁵⁸³ In 1997, the group took on its current form when the European chair—which had previously been rotating—permanently passed to France and the United States joined as a third permanent co-chair.⁵⁸⁴ With the Minsk Group established as the primary forum for negotiations over Artsakh, its three co-chairs would come to dominate the international response to issues concerning Artsakh.

The Minsk Group faced a multitude of complex issues in their efforts to resolve the conflict. While fighting had stopped, the fundamental question—the status of Artsakh and control of the surrounding territories—remained unanswered. While the “Armenians were ready in principle to return the six districts they occupied outside Nagorny Karabakh...they said their continued possession of Shusha, inside Nagorny Karabakh, and Lachin, giving them a land

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 228

⁵⁸³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 241.

⁵⁸⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 237.

bridge to Armenia was non-negotiable.”⁵⁸⁵ Azerbaijan, on the other hand, held that “the loss of both regions was unacceptable” and firmly opposed any plan that included Artsakh either becoming independent or joining Armenia.⁵⁸⁶ Not only were the positions of Armenians and Azeris, at least regarding Artsakh itself, diametrically opposed, both sides were able to cite the norms of international law in support of their position. As de Waal writes, any potential “resolution of the issue had to reconcile the competing claims of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and Karabakh’s self-determination.”⁵⁸⁷ As a result, “little common ground was found during the first round of discussions” that took place in the summer of 1994, and there was no international body willing and able to force either side to accept a deal it opposed.⁵⁸⁸

Along with negotiations over the political status of Artsakh, the war had also raised the new issue of refugees. The Armenian capture of territory outside Artsakh had resulted in the expulsion of an estimated 530,000 Azeris in addition to the approximately 220,000 that had fled Armenia prior to the outbreak of the war.⁵⁸⁹ These refugees overwhelmed Azerbaijan, giving it one of the highest proportions of displaced people per capita in the world.⁵⁹⁰ With Azerbaijan unable to accommodate the immense numbers of refugees, many of the displaced people ended up “in a vast archipelago of sanatoria, student hostels, and makeshift accommodations. All remained in a terrible limbo while the conflict remained unresolved.”⁵⁹¹ With conditions for refugees improving only gradually, their plight—perhaps intentionally on the part of the Azeri government—served as a lasting reminder of Azerbaijan’s defeat at the hands of their smaller neighbor to the west. Even as the Azeri elite grew fabulously wealthy from the country’s oil

⁵⁸⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 266.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 266-267.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Croissant, 113.

⁵⁸⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 327.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 230.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

resources, many of these refugees remained in conditions of poverty. It was not until 2007 that the last of the ‘tent camps’ was closed and even after that, many refugees remained isolated from broader society.⁵⁹²

At the same time, Armenia was confronted with 350,000 refugees—including around 40,000 from areas of the NKAO that remained under Azerbaijan’s control—that had fled Azerbaijan before or during the war, a much smaller number on an absolute basis but around the same in proportion to its population.⁵⁹³ However, unlike Azerbaijan’s refugees, many of whom hoped to return to their former homes if Azerbaijan regained the territories around Artsakh and therefore remained somewhat separate from Azeri society, the Armenian refugees had little desire to return to Azerbaijan after the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku and instead largely attempted to forge new lives in Armenia. Whether or not the refugees on both sides would be allowed to return to their former homes—or, especially in the case of those who had previously lived in the other country, other arrangements would be made—further complicated negotiation efforts. While little progress was made on the issue of refugees, a May 1996 agreement, brokered once again by Russia, would provide for the return of 39 Armenian and 71 Azeri prisoners of war that had been held for almost exactly a year after the war ended.⁵⁹⁴

The return of these POWs was made possible by a new series of talks that had begun several months prior. In November 1995, Ter-Petrosyan and Aliyev had met at an OSCE summit in Bonn, Germany and agreed to begin direct negotiations between the two countries. The result was a series of talks, led by Vafa Guluzade and Gerard Libaridian, held “every month to work on

⁵⁹² Ung-Kono, Veronica. “10 Facts About Azerbaijan Refugees and Internally Displaced People.” *The Borgen Project*. September 24, 2016. <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/10-facts-azerbaijan-refugees/#:~:text=In%202007%2C%20the%20last%20of,schools%2C%20hospitals%20and%20other%20services>.

⁵⁹³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 327.

⁵⁹⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 229

the status question in particular” that “made substantial progress.”⁵⁹⁵ 1996 also saw “several stages of the trilateral talks as well as the Minsk Group meetings [that] took place in Moscow, Helsinki and Vienna. However, the settlement process continued to bog down on the same spot.”⁵⁹⁶ That central bone of contention—the status of Artsakh—re-emerged in a December 1996 OSCE summit held in Lisbon, where negotiators attempted to make affirmation of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over Artsakh one of three “broad principles for the resolution of the dispute.”⁵⁹⁷ The Armenians refused to agree to a condition that they believed would impose “the constant threat of genocide and forced exile” on the Armenians of Artsakh, insisting that the people of Artsakh be allowed to exercise their right to self-determination, which would certainly result in Azerbaijan losing control of Artsakh.⁵⁹⁸ The Armenian push for Artsakh to either be recognized as independent or be allowed to join Armenia met with predictable opposition from Azerbaijan, which had the support of the summit’s OSCE organizers.⁵⁹⁹ In the end, Armenia vetoed the Lisbon Summit’s final communique and the re-exposed rift between the two sides “effectively ended the Guluzade-Libaridian negotiating track.”⁶⁰⁰

An Armenian Power Struggle

Meanwhile, Armenia was undergoing domestic turmoil of its own as opposition politicians mounted a challenge to Ter-Petrosyan, largely as a result of differing opinions on the proper approach to negotiations over Artsakh. Aiding the opposition’s quest to unseat Ter-Petrosyan, his Armenian National Movement no longer possessed the monopoly on political

⁵⁹⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 267.

⁵⁹⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 230.

⁵⁹⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 267.

⁵⁹⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 231.

⁵⁹⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 267.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

power it had once held: “Ten years in positions of power and leadership had taken their toll...The ANM had lost its top leadership to the legislative and executive branches. Particularly following the 1995 legislative elections, the governing party had become complacent, arrogant, self-confident, and careless.”⁶⁰¹ Along with the proliferation of opposition parties—74 parties had registered by 1999, although most lacked the size or capability to have any noticeable impact—the army had established itself as a significant center of power in Armenia in its own right.⁶⁰² The military officially received between eight and nine percent of Armenia’s GDP, though “unofficially, it probably received much more than that.”⁶⁰³ The army also exercised political and economic power through a veterans’ organization known as the “*Yerkrapahs* (Homeland Defenders), the group in parliament responsible for Ter-Petrosyan’s loss of parliamentary support” that also controlled “large areas of the economy.”⁶⁰⁴ Vazgen Sargsyan, Armenia’s defense minister and founder of the *Yerkrapah* union, was by all accounts one of the most powerful men in Armenia, perhaps even superseding both Ter-Petrosyan and Kocharyan.⁶⁰⁵

However, despite the incipient threat posed by Sargsyan and other members of his own administration, Ter-Petrosyan appeared poised to win the September 1996 presidential elections with little opposition. The *Dashnaktsutyun* or ARF, which was popular among the Armenian Diaspora and was “the only other party with strong grassroots support,” had been banned in December 1994 for refusing to separate itself from its international organization, which was not led by Armenian citizens and therefore violated Armenia’s laws regulating political parties.⁶⁰⁶ In addition, prosecutors alleged that the ARF “had instituted a secretive ‘security council’ within its

⁶⁰¹ Libaridian, Gerard. *Modern Armenia: People, Nation State*. London: Transaction Publishers, 2004, 216.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 224.

⁶⁰³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 268.

⁶⁰⁴ Libaridian, 223; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 268.

⁶⁰⁵ Croissant, 123.

⁶⁰⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden* 268; Libaridian, 239.

own structure...that seemed to be accountable to no one and was clearly involved in illicit and illegal activities.”⁶⁰⁷ However, even after sidelining the main opposition party, Ter-Petrosyan still faced a difficult task: “His popular support had ebbed. Tens of thousands of professionals were emigrating, and the country was desperately poor. Disillusionment with the ruling elite was strong.”⁶⁰⁸

Capitalizing on the opportunity, Vazgen Manukyan—who had previously been both Ter-Petrosyan’s political opponent and served as his defense minister during the war—returned to the opposition to challenge Ter-Petrosyan in the presidential elections.⁶⁰⁹ Manukyan united the opposition forces, mounting a not-insignificant challenge to Ter-Petrosyan’s reelection. Indeed, “most international observers concluded that Ter-Petrosian had failed to win the first round of the election outright,” but the Central Election Commission nevertheless announced that he had won 52% of the vote, voiding the need for a run off.⁶¹⁰ Manukyan’s supporters responded by storming the parliament building, leading Ter-Petrosyan, who had the crucial support of Vazgen Sargsyan and the army, to order tanks into the streets of Yerevan and arrest several members of the opposition, effectively securing his victory.⁶¹¹

Ter-Petrosyan had staved off Manukyan’s challenge, but his popular support had been further eroded by the way he had won reelection.⁶¹² In January 1997, seeking to shore up his legitimacy, Ter-Petrosyan appointed Kocharyan—whose reputation as one of the chief architects of Armenia’s victory had made him popular in Armenia as well as Artsakh—Armenia’s prime minister.⁶¹³ Kocharyan had led Artsakh—first as chairman of the defense committee, then as

⁶⁰⁷ Libaridian, 239.

⁶⁰⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 268.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 232.

⁶¹³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 269.

prime minister, and finally as president—since August 1992, and had recently won Artsakh’s first elections in November 1996, receiving 89% of the vote.⁶¹⁴ However, while Ter-Petrosyan sought a quick settlement of the Artsakh issue with Azerbaijan, Kocharyan—together with Vazgen Sargsyan and Serzh Sargsyan, an Artsakhi who had served as both Armenia’s Minister of National Security and its Minister of Interior—“was included in the ranks of those who towed [sic] a ‘hard line’” and were willing to put off a political solution until Armenia was presented with a more favorable deal.⁶¹⁵ These two factions came to a head in 1997, when the newly reconstituted Minsk Group undertook a concerted push to resolve the question of Artsakh.

In May 1997, the Minsk Group co-chairs unveiled their proposal, aimed at a “simultaneous resolution of the issue of returning the territories (apart from the Lachin region), as well as the deployment of peacekeeping forces, the lifting of the blockade, the return of refugees and the creation of separating/buffer no-fly zones on the NK-Azerbaijan border.”⁶¹⁶ While both sides generally agreed to these elements, the proposal also envisioned a status for Artsakh that “was unequivocally based on the principle of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity.”⁶¹⁷ According to Libaridian, from Armenia’s perspective the proposal “was bad; not to say fatal, but bad. NK refused. Azerbaijan's response was not clear and we [Armenia] agreed to it in principal as a basis for negotiation, while presenting our arguments in detail.”⁶¹⁸ The Minsk Group’s proposal revealed the fault lines in Armenia’s government. While Ter-Petrosyan, concerned that a continued blockade would cripple Armenia’s economic potential and arguing that international recognition of Artsakh as either independent or as part of Armenia was impossible, favored

⁶¹⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 161, 235.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 245.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 237-238.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid..

compromise, the more conservative elements of Armenian society viewed such compromise—which would put Artsakh under to Azerbaijan’s control—as a betrayal of the Artsakh Armenians.⁶¹⁹

In July, the Minsk Group negotiators visited the region and presented an updated version of the plan, split into two stages.⁶²⁰ The first stage called for the complete withdrawal of Armenia’s troops and for Artsakh to return to the borders of the NKAO, with Minsk Group peacekeepers taking control of the surrounding territories.⁶²¹ The strategically vital Lachin corridor would be leased to the OSCE, who would guarantee free transport to Artsakh and oversee the construction of a road that bypassed the town of Lachin itself.⁶²² However, once again the plan foundered on the second stage, the status of Artsakh, attempting to forge a compromise that would see Artsakh return to Azerbaijan but have its own constitution that would take precedence over laws passed by Baku.⁶²³ Perhaps representing the increasing influence of the hardliners in Armenia’s government, Libaridian reports that the July proposal was seen by Armenia as “even worse than that in May. NK rejected that one too and we opposed it with even more serious arguments.”⁶²⁴ The plan also faced opposition from the both Artsakh and Azerbaijan, neither of which was willing to accept the compromises that the agreement would entail.⁶²⁵

In September, the Minsk Group presented a third version of their proposal, which “was accepted by Azerbaijan and Armenia as the basis of renewed negotiations, but rejected by

⁶¹⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 270.

⁶²⁰ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 238.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid., 238-239.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁶²⁵ Libaridian, 237.

Karabakh leaders.”⁶²⁶ However, while Ter-Petrosyan had accepted the principles of the step-by-step plan, the hardliners in his administration did not. Ter-Petrosyan attempted to take his case to the Armenian people, arguing that Armenia had to accept a compromise, even if it meant Azerbaijan gaining control over Artsakh. On September 26, he “used his first major press conference in five years to set out his arguments in favor of compromise.”⁶²⁷ The following week, on November 1, Ter-Petrosyan published an article in Yerevan’s daily newspapers entitled “War or Peace: The Moment to Become Serious” in which articulated his thoughts on a potential settlement of the Artsakh conflict.⁶²⁸ As he wrote, “The refusal to compromise and maximalism is the shortest route to NK's complete destruction and the deterioration of Armenia’s situation... Today Armenia and NK are stronger than ever, but if the conflict remains unresolved, they will incomparably weaken in one to two years.”⁶²⁹ While Ter-Petrosyan’s article is now regarded as “one of the weightiest analyses...on the NK settlement to date,” it met with harsh opposition, including from officials in Artsakh’s government.⁶³⁰ On November 6, Artsakh’s Foreign Ministry “issued an unprecedented statement in which it disputed several of Ter-Petrosian’s points.”⁶³¹

Led by Kocharyan, the opposition within Ter-Petrosyan’s administration also began to publically advocate on behalf of their positions. On January 14, Kocharyan told journalists that he objected to what he referred to as “placing the ideals of freedom and independence on the sacrificial altar” and told them that, “It is no longer a secret that there is no unity in Armenia’s administration on the issue of approaches for the resolution of NK's conflict.”⁶³² Kocharyan and

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 270.

⁶²⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 239.

⁶²⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 240.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 239.

⁶³¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 271.

⁶³² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 245-246.

his allies also argued that Ter-Petrosyan “was exaggerating the impact of the blockades; that the main reasons why the economy was not moving to the next phase were administrative inefficiency, corruption, Ter-Petrosian’s style of government, as well as his relations with the Diaspora.”⁶³³ In contrast to Ter-Petrosyan’s more pessimistic views, Kocharyan estimated that the Armenian Diaspora could provide \$400-500 million a year, equivalent to 25-30% of Armenia’s national GDP at the time.⁶³⁴ Kocharyan’s views proved to be more popular among the Armenian public, and he won the support of “the opposition, the intelligentsia, Diaspora organizations, and the Armenian media.”⁶³⁵ On February 3, 1998, Ter-Petrosyan—facing the possibility of a “palace coup”—was forced to resign, announcing to the Armenian people that, “A demand for my resignation has been presented to me by certain bodies of the administration known to you...I accept those demands and announce my resignation.”⁶³⁶

While Kocharyan was seen by many as the natural successor to Ter-Petrosyan, his candidacy “presented a problem. The [Armenian] Constitution requires that to be eligible for the presidency one would have to have a citizen and permanent resident of Armenia for at least ten years. Kocharian was not technically a citizen of Armenia and had been a resident of Karabakh during that period.”⁶³⁷ In addition, the constitution mandated that to be eligible for the presidency one had to have the right to vote, which had not been true for Artsakh’s Armenians in any of Armenia’s elections.⁶³⁸ However, “Despite protests from a variety of groups...the Central Election Commission registered Kocharian as a candidate. The Constitutional Court rejected a

⁶³³ Libaridian, 237.

⁶³⁴ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 243.

⁶³⁵ Mirzoyan, Alla. *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West: Between History and Geopolitics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 40.

⁶³⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 247.

⁶³⁷ Libaridian, 250.

⁶³⁸ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 249.

legal challenge in a short decision that found no grounds to review the case.”⁶³⁹ Having been cleared to run, Kocharyan faced Karen Demirchyan, the former leader of Soviet Armenia, whose “hastily organized People’s Party of Armenia (PPA) quickly became a force to reckon with.”⁶⁴⁰ Kocharyan, on the other hand, had the support of not only Sargsyan and the army, but also the ARF and its Armenian organization.⁶⁴¹ In the first round, held on March 16, Kocharyan won 38% of the vote while Demirchyan won 30%, forcing a runoff between the two men.⁶⁴² While the election officials declared Kocharyan the winner of the run-off election, “many local observers believed Demirjian had won the elections, as did Demirjian himself, whose candidacy was quietly supported by Moscow.”⁶⁴³ However, “Demirjian accepted the verdict, did not take to the streets, and bid his time.”⁶⁴⁴

International Relations and the Artsakh Conflict

Across the border, Aliyev, who won an election of his own in October 1998, now “had complete political control of the country, managing foreign relations and pursuing negotiations with oil companies” and his “YAP had control over the Milli Majlis [Parliament].”⁶⁴⁵ Aliyev’s dominance in Azerbaijan was made possible not only by his political skill, but also by his control over Azerbaijan’s growing oil industry.⁶⁴⁶ The breakup of the Soviet Union had impacted Azerbaijan—which had largely produced raw materials to be exported to other Soviet republics—particularly hard, wiping out almost 60% of its GDP.⁶⁴⁷ Without an industrial base to

⁶³⁹ Libaridian, 250.

⁶⁴⁰ Libaridian, 250.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 249.

⁶⁴³ Libaridian, 250-251.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 71.

⁶⁴⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 263.

⁶⁴⁷ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 100

rely on, “Oil was the great hope for Azerbaijan’s future—the resource that would make it Switzerland, and not Swaziland.”⁶⁴⁸ After taking office in 1993, Aliyev had continued to pursue negotiations with Western oil companies that his predecessor, Abulfaz Elchibey, had begun.⁶⁴⁹ By the fall of the following year, the Azeri government had signed a deal with a consortium of Western companies that “was estimated to be worth eight billion dollars and was dubbed the ‘contract of the century.’”⁶⁵⁰

Along with being “a public relations coup for Heydar Aliyev,” the deal and subsequent development of Azerbaijan’s oil resources enabled the country to undergo rapid economic growth and gave the government a much needed source of funding.⁶⁵¹ While British Petroleum “came to dominate the oil scene” with a 36% stake, Azerbaijan’s state oil company, SOCAR, received 12% of the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) that the deal created.⁶⁵² The deal also gave Azerbaijan’s wider economy a significant boost and “oil revenues grew from \$450 million in 1998 to \$2.5 billion in 2004, a fivefold increase. Not surprisingly, official data show that 1995 was the first year of an upward trend in Azerbaijan’s state income.”⁶⁵³ Over the same period of time, Azerbaijan’s GDP almost doubled, growing from \$4.46 billion to \$8.68 billion, with increasing in oil revenues accounting for nearly half of overall economic growth.⁶⁵⁴

The involvement of Western countries in developing Azerbaijan’s oil industry—combined with Azerbaijan’s lingering wariness towards Russia—led Azerbaijan to pursue closer

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 263.

⁶⁵⁰ Black Garden, 263.

⁶⁵¹ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 100.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 100-101.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ The World Bank. “GDP (current US\$) – Azerbaijan.”

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=AZ>

relations with the West. As Audrey Altstadt writes, “Elchibey certainly intended to join the West, and Heydar Aliyev stated his intention to bring Azerbaijan into Europe.”⁶⁵⁵ Continuing to the present day, the inclination toward the West has also partially been shaped by the personal interests of Azeri elites: “those close to the regime have huge investments in the West...The [Ilham] Aliyev family and the oligarchs in his inner circle prefer the alignment with the West because they both see and present themselves as Westerners, especially as Europeans.”⁶⁵⁶ In 1997, Azerbaijan along with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova founded GUAM—rechristened GUUAM when Uzbekistan joined two years later—an association “initially described as an economic cooperation effort but increasingly assigned defense and strategic significance. Assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, GUUAM is seen by Washington and the member states as a factor against Russian influence in the region.”⁶⁵⁷

While Azerbaijan began creating ties with the West, Azeri leaders also recognized the importance of maintaining friendly relations with Russia—which remained the dominant power in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan’s relations with Russia after independence have been strained not only by the memory of Soviet rule, particularly Black January, but also by Russian support for Armenia during the war. While Russia supplied—and has continued to supply—weapons to both sides, it was seen by Azeris as favoring Armenia and “much of the Armenian success in the NK conflict was attributed to Russian assistance.”⁶⁵⁸ However, despite the sometimes strained relationship between the two countries, since Aliyev took power, Azerbaijan has sought to “maintain a balance between the West and Russia.”⁶⁵⁹ While the anti-Russian Elchibey refused

⁶⁵⁵ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 28.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁶⁵⁷ Libaridian, 296.

⁶⁵⁸ Mirzoyan, 33.

⁶⁵⁹ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 226.

to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Aliyev, before even officially taking office, “traveled to Moscow to sign the accession documents for Azerbaijan to join the Russian-led club of post-Soviet nations.”⁶⁶⁰ Recognizing Russia’s importance, Aliyev—followed by his son and successor Ilham—would go on to forge “a ‘friendly’ relationship with Russia replete with trade including the sale of oil, gas, and weapons.”⁶⁶¹

Along with Russia and the West, the other major pole of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy since independence has been Turkey. Azerbaijan has enjoyed extremely close ties with Turkey, drawing on their ethnic ties as Turkic peoples as well as “their nineteenth century national identity formation and shared language.”⁶⁶² Along with this ethnic kinship and shared identity, Turkey and Azerbaijan were brought closer by their shared attempt to establish themselves as majority-Muslim secular nations, and “both Abulfaz Elchibey and Heydar Aliyev supported a Turkish presence on the basis of historical ties, as a tool in nation-building, and as a bulwark against Iranian Shi’ism.”⁶⁶³ Indeed, Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan’s independence in November 1991 and Turkish companies almost immediately began making “large-scale deals to revamp the long-neglected infrastructure.”⁶⁶⁴ During the war, Turkey had “supported Azerbaijan diplomatically, politically, technically, and, in a limited manner, militarily” and even after the ceasefire announced that it would delay normalizing relations with Armenia until the Artsakh conflict was resolved.⁶⁶⁵

While Armenian foreign policy has also attempted to balance between Russia and the West, not coincidentally its approach has been the opposite of Azerbaijan’s, heavily favoring the

⁶⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 238.

⁶⁶¹ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 226, 46.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 17.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 16-17

⁶⁶⁵ Libaridian, 295, 273.

former. Unlike Azerbaijan, Armenia immediately joined the Russian-led CIS and in September 1992 even reached an agreement to allow Russian border guards to patrol Armenia's border with Turkey.⁶⁶⁶ Many Armenians credited Russia and the CIS with helping to ensure that Turkey's participation in the war was limited to assisting Azerbaijan rather than direct involvement, which seemed possible in the war's early years.⁶⁶⁷ Armenia also became a founding member of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty—which became the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002—gaining “the putative guarantee of the CSTO Charter's Article 4 committing member-states to treat an attack on one as an attack on all.”⁶⁶⁸ In 1995, Armenia again signaled its commitment to its alliance with Russia, agreeing to allow the Russian army to continue using a Soviet-era military base in Gyumri—a city in northwestern Armenia on the border with Turkey—for the next twenty-five years.⁶⁶⁹ In 2010, Armenia agreed to extend Russia's lease for an additional 24 years, securing a Russian military presence in the country until at least 2044.⁶⁷⁰ Two years after the initial lease of the base, the two countries signed the 1997 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that served as the culmination of bilateral agreements between Russia and Armenia.⁶⁷¹ In addition, although “Yerevan opposed any attempt by the CIS to revive the logic of an imperial economy,” Russian companies nevertheless came to control significant portions of the Armenian economy—particularly the energy industry, giving Russia significant economic interests in Armenia.⁶⁷²

While Armenia's friendly relations with Russia can be partially explained by a real or

⁶⁶⁶ Mirzoyan, 31.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Anatomy of Conflict, 169.

⁶⁶⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 272.

⁶⁷⁰ Sindelar, Daisy. “Deal Signed On Extending Russian Military Presence In Armenia.” *RFE/RL*. August 20, 2010. https://www.rferl.org/a/Russia_Armenia_Sign_Extended_Defense_Pact_/2133043.html

⁶⁷¹ Libaridian, 244.

⁶⁷² Ibid.; Mirzoyan, 46.

imagined connection as fellow Orthodox Christian peoples, it has far more to do with Russia's perceived role as the "guarantor of physical survival of the nation."⁶⁷³ The idea that Armenia depends upon Russia for protection stretches back almost as far as the history of Russian involvement in the Caucasus, but became particularly pronounced during the First Republic of Armenia in the early 20th century. Emerging from the Armenian Genocide as a "small, poor, deprived and isolated country" with Turkic peoples to both the east and west that were seen as an existential threat to the very existence of the Armenian people, Armenia's leaders understood that becoming "truly independent and autonomous" was likely an unattainable goal and preferred Russian domination to Turkish.⁶⁷⁴ A similar challenge faced the leaders of Armenia in the 1990s who took control of a country on the verge of war with Azerbaijan and facing a still hostile Turkey to the west. While Armenia may have been able to fight against a disorganized Azerbaijan without Russian assistance, the "Turkish menace exacerbated the sense of overwhelming insecurity, and stressed the importance of forming a military partnership with Moscow."⁶⁷⁵ In exchange for underwriting Armenia's security, Russia gained its only military installation in the South Caucasus apart from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, "projecting Russian power into the region and 'loaning' it to Armenia."⁶⁷⁶ However, Russian assistance to Armenia only extends insofar as it is in Russia's own interests. Russia's policy toward Armenia and Azerbaijan has been "characteristically mixed and directed at keeping parity between the two sides," in order to maximize its influence over both countries.⁶⁷⁷

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Turkey has continued to be viewed as a significant

⁶⁷³ Mirzoyan, 22-23.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷⁶ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 203.

⁶⁷⁷ Mirzoyan, 32.

threat to Armenia, perhaps even rivalling Azerbaijan as Armenia's greatest perceived enemy. While this has much to do with the history of the Armenian Genocide and Turkey's continued campaign of denial, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, its refusal to normalize relations, and the not-unfounded fear that Turkey itself might invade Armenia all contributed to extremely poor relations between the two countries in the years after Armenia's independence.⁶⁷⁸ Turkey, on the other hand, feared that Armenia intended to challenge the legitimacy of the Turkish state both by pressing for recognition of the Genocide and potentially claiming the formerly-Armenian regions of eastern Turkey. Debates within Armenia and the Diaspora over the legitimacy of the Treaty of Kars, which had set the modern borders between Turkey and Armenia, contributed to Turkish suspicions that Armenia intended to lay claim to parts of eastern Turkey, an issue that has continued to percolate through Armenian civil society but has never been seriously pushed by the government.⁶⁷⁹

While Ter-Petrosyan pushed for the "establishment of diplomatic relations and normalization of relations at the earliest possible date, without any preconditions...Turkish diplomats insisted, in unofficial statements, that the establishment of diplomatic relations with Armenia would have to be preceded by a promise by Armenia that the Armenian state would not raise the issue of the Genocide and Genocide recognition and would take it upon itself to convince the Diaspora to also desist" a step that Ter-Petrosyan was unwilling to take.⁶⁸⁰ While Ter-Petrosyan nevertheless came close to establishing relations with Turkey, the war intervened and "Turkey set withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijan as a precondition for the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of its border with Armenia."⁶⁸¹ While

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 57, 67, 74.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁸⁰ Libaridian, 267-268.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 270.

Kocharyan also sought to normalize relations with Turkey, he began pushing more actively for recognition of the Genocide, both as a tactic to pressure Turkey to withdraw its objections over Artsakh and to gain support from the Diaspora which has long pushed for international recognition of the Armenian Genocide.⁶⁸²

While its security interests have led Armenia to definitively align with Russia, like Azerbaijan it has also attempted to foster good relations with the West. Although Armenia lacks Azerbaijan's oil, it has another resource that it has leveraged to advance its relations with Western countries: the Armenian Diaspora. Largely the result of refugees who survived the Genocide, the sizable Diaspora in the United States and Europe, "gave Armenia a comparative advantage over its adversaries in the region, both in terms of diplomatic clout and actual policy results."⁶⁸³ Unlike Azerbaijan and other former Soviet states that "had to hire experienced lobbying firms to ease them into Washington politics and conduct a PR campaign, the Armenian Assembly [one of the leading Armenian-American political organizations] performed these crucial functions for the Armenian embassy for free."⁶⁸⁴ In 1992, Armenian-American lobbying organizations secured the passage of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act which prohibited aid to Azerbaijan until it took "demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh."⁶⁸⁵ At the same time, the Armenian-American Diaspora pushed for increased foreign aid, making Armenia "the fourth-per-capita recipient of U.S. aid in the world."⁶⁸⁶

However, since the onset of the War on Terror in 2001, American foreign policy has

⁶⁸² Ibid., 274-275.

⁶⁸³ Mirzoyan, 19.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

shifted in the direction of Azerbaijan. Not only did Azerbaijan present itself as exactly the kind of secular majority-Muslim country that the United States wished to create in the Middle East, Aliyev also “promptly committed Azerbaijan’s full support to the United States. This support translated into landing rights for planes en route to Afghanistan and a small contingent of ground troops there, and later in Iraq.”⁶⁸⁷ Aliyev’s efforts were rewarded by an amendment to Section 907 that granted the president the power to “waive restriction on assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan if it is in the national interest of the United States of America.”⁶⁸⁸ That waiver has been exercised every year since, with Azerbaijan’s perceived strategic importance outweighing efforts by Armenian-Americans to halt the flow of aid.⁶⁸⁹ In Europe, the Armenian Diaspora has been similarly important, “at times [injecting] the Armenian diplomacy with confidence and important ‘connecting’ material lacking among Georgians and Azerbaijanis.”⁶⁹⁰ Of particular importance to the question of Artsakh is the large Armenian community in France, giving Armenia greater influence over one of the three Minsk Group co-chairs.⁶⁹¹ While Armenia, largely through its Diaspora, has attempted to cultivate close relations with Western countries, it also recognizes that “the ‘West’ is not ready to provide to Armenia with the security guarantees” that it can receive from Russia.⁶⁹² As a result, while it has sought to join European institutions like the Council of Europe or to secure aid from the United States, it remains fundamentally dependent upon Russia.⁶⁹³

⁶⁸⁷ Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 75.

⁶⁸⁸ U.S. Government Printing Office *Review of Legislative Activity During the 105th Congress*. April 13, 1999, 23. https://www.google.com/books/edition/United_States_Congressional_Serial_Set/9qk9AQAAAMAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=907

⁶⁸⁹ Kelly, Laura. “Biden waiving restriction blocking aid to Azerbaijan over Armenia conflict.” *The Hill*. May 3, 2021. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/551577-biden-waiving-restriction-blocking-aid-to-azerbaijan-over-armenia>

⁶⁹⁰ Mirzoyan, 162.

⁶⁹¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 269.

⁶⁹² Mirzoyan, 19.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, 163.

The final regional player that must be considered is Iran, which has tended to favor Armenia over the predominantly-Shi'a Azerbaijan. With both Azerbaijan and Turkey blockading Armenia and Georgia "in permanent crisis" throughout the early 1990s, Iran "became Armenia's friendliest neighbor...without Iranian trade, Armenia might not have survived the two miserable winters of 1991-1992 and 1992-1993."⁶⁹⁴ Likewise, the internationally isolated Iran benefits from trade with Armenia and "Both countries see each other as one of the paths leading them away from regional marginalization and isolation."⁶⁹⁵ The two countries also enjoy cultural and historical ties, looking past the frequent conflict between Armenia and Persia to "the historically benevolent treatment of the Armenian community by the Iranian shahs and the distinguished position that the Armenian community enjoys in Iran."⁶⁹⁶ The Armenian-Iranian relationship is also strengthened by Iran's fears that ethnic Azeris in northern Iran—the largest minority ethnic group in Iran—might attempt to secede and join Azerbaijan.⁶⁹⁷ The result has been an uneasy relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran, neither antagonistic nor friendly that has pushed Iran in the direction of Armenia. However, while maintaining friendly relations with Iran, Armenia has also been careful not to alienate itself from the United States and "imports from Turkey have exceeded those from Iran in many recent years."⁶⁹⁸

Renewed Negotiations

With the domestic political situations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan stabilized, the two sides once again began to engage in diplomacy. At a November 1998 meeting of the Minsk

⁶⁹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 218.

⁶⁹⁵ Mirzoyan, 107.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁹⁷ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 232.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 233.

Group, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Yevgeny Primakov proposed a ‘common state’ solution under which Artsakh would be recognized as “a state-territorial unit in the form of a Republic [that] constitutes a common state with Azerbaijan in the latter’s internationally recognized borders.”⁶⁹⁹ Primakov’s plan also called for troops from Armenia proper to withdraw entirely while those from Artsakh would be “withdrawn to the 1988 boundaries of the NKAO, with the exception of the Lachin corridor,” the status of which would be determined at a later date.⁷⁰⁰ While deal nominally upheld Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over Artsakh, “the powers accruing to Nagorny Karabakh were significantly wider, including direct foreign relations and participation with a vague veto power on some issues in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy.”⁷⁰¹ Both Armenian and Artsakh accepted the proposal as the basis for continued negotiations, but Aliyev firmly rejected it, insisting that he would not accept the creation of a what amounted to an essentially independent state within the borders of Azerbaijan.⁷⁰²

While this first round of negotiations under Kocharyan and Aliyev resulted in little progress, a promising new format emerged the following year. On April 1, Aliyev and Kocharyan met in Moscow for a CIS summit and held a two and half hour long meeting.⁷⁰³ Three weeks later, both men traveled to Washington D.C. to celebrate NATO’s fiftieth anniversary where they “had an informal meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright in her office. Albright left Kocharian and Aliev together to talk one-on-one. Thus, almost by accident, a new kind of dialogue began.”⁷⁰⁴ Surprisingly, the two men formed a rather warm relationship, resting on “a common base of understanding between them. Both were hard, lonely

⁶⁹⁹ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 250.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 287.

⁷⁰² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 250.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., 256.

⁷⁰⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 274.

leaders who were more comfortable with the format of confidential top-level talks...Over the next two years they met fifteen times or so.”⁷⁰⁵ The resulting negotiations were likely the closest that the two sides ever came to achieving a mutually acceptable solution.

The relative success of the direct negotiations between Aliyev and Kocharyan came despite the fact that Kocharyan—at least rhetorically—represented the more hardline elements of Armenian society. In contrast to Ter-Petrosyan, who very publically argued that Armenia must be willing to accept significant compromises, “The position of the Kocharyan administration was that NK has never been and will never be a part of independent Azerbaijan, and that NK's right of self-determination must be written down in all of the proposals presented by the mediators.”⁷⁰⁶ While even Ter-Petrosyan held that “Yerevan will never sign any document, which does not include Stepanakert's signature,” Kocharyan went further, emphasizing that Artsakh’s de facto independence was a non-negotiable issue. Kocharyan argued his predecessor’s stance counterproductively shifted blame to Artsakhi officials and instead held that “we [Armenia] have our own position and are ready to insist on that.”⁷⁰⁷ In arguing that Armenia would represent its own position rather than deferring to Artsakh, Kocharyan was not implying that Yerevan would pressure Stepanakert into accepting a deal, but instead that Armenia should be willing to deploy its “entire potential - diplomatic, economic and defense - for the settlement of this conflict.”⁷⁰⁸

One of the factors that contributed to the relative success of the Kocharyan-Aliyev talks was Kocharyan’s status as both an Artsakhi and the president of Armenia. Azerbaijan had long refused to directly negotiate with the officials from Artsakh, fearing that allowing their

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 252.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 253.

participation in international mediation efforts would lend legitimacy to Artsakh's statehood. While Armenians had succeeded in convincing the OSCE to "clearly and definitely" recognize Artsakh as a party to the conflict in March 1995, Azerbaijan still held that the conflict was a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan rather than an issue of Artsakh's self-determination.⁷⁰⁹ Kocharyan's ability to represent both Armenia and Artsakh helped make negotiations possible, but later he "was frequently criticized that during his tenure in office the format of the NK settlement was distorted, Stepanakert was left out of the negotiations" allowing Azerbaijan to present "the conflict to the international community as a territorial dispute between Baku and Yerevan."⁷¹⁰

After reviewing the various proposals put forward by mediation efforts over the previous decade, the negotiations between Kocharyan and Aliyev settled on a plan first put forward in 1992 by a U.S. State Department Caucasus specialist named Paul Goble.⁷¹¹ Under the 'Goble plan,' "Azerbaijan would concede Nagorno Karabakh," as well as the Lachin corridor, "which would become an integral part of the Republic [of Armenia] and Armenia would relinquish the Meghri district in the south of Armenia. Armenia would have the best possible solution to the status problem, but would lose its border with Iran, while Azerbaijan would establish a land connection with Nakhichevan as well as allow direct access for its oil pipeline to Turkey."⁷¹² Establishing this link between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan had long been a goal of Aliyev, himself a native of the exclave, and he seemed personally supportive of the plan.⁷¹³ While the proposal entailed significant concessions for both sides, both presidents appeared

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 228.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., 252.

⁷¹¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 274.

⁷¹² Libaridian, 262.

⁷¹³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 258-259.

willing to make the sacrifice and they agreed to the plan “in principle.”⁷¹⁴

However, news of the deal, which has been crafted behind closed doors, “created an immediate negative reaction within the small circle of presidential advisers in both countries who learned about it.”⁷¹⁵ In Azerbaijan, many among the elite viewed “the plan on offer in 1999 as meaning a surrender of Karabakh. In October 1999, three of Aliev’s top aides all resigned, apparently over this issue.”⁷¹⁶ Likewise, Kocharyan met with resistance from his advisors who saw Armenia’s southern border with Iran as a vital “not only for the future development of trade, but in particular, as a door to the non-Turkish part of the world.”⁷¹⁷ As objections mounted, the deal “underwent a number of changes, mainly in the exact amount of Meghri territory involved and the degree to which Armenia would relinquish sovereignty over said territory. As the simple idea evolved into a complex formula, Azerbaijan liked it less and less.”⁷¹⁸ In addition, while the Goble plan had “the energetic support of Washington and Ankara...for most officials in Moscow the formula was unacceptable” and Iran “made its objections clear to Yerevan.”⁷¹⁹

While Aliyev maintained a vice-like grip over Azerbaijan and could withstand opposition from his advisors, Kocharyan’s position was not so secure. After winning the 1998 elections with the support of Vazgen Sargsyan, relations between the two men “had soured very quickly. Vazgen Sargsian reorganized the Yerkrpahs by integrating them in the small Republican Party of Armenia...which then joined hands with Karen Demirjian’s PPA to present a united front against Kocharian for the parliamentary elections” of May 1999.⁷²⁰ While the details of the potential adoption of the Goble plan were still confidential at the time, many Armenians were

⁷¹⁴ Libaridian, 262.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid..

⁷¹⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 274-275.

⁷¹⁷ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 258.

⁷¹⁸ Libaridian, 262.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 251.

“suspicious of Kocharian’s tactics, personality, and ultimate concerns. In the parliamentary elections of mid 1999 the Sargsian-Demirjian coalition won a comfortable majority... Kocharian’s powers were severely curtailed” and relations between Kocharyan and Sargysan, now Prime Minister, and Demirchyan, the President of the National Assembly, continued to deteriorate.⁷²¹

Then, October 27, 1999, Armenia’s political landscape was thrust into chaos when five gunmen stormed the National Assembly building, killing Sargysan, Demirchyan, and six other high-level Armenian officials.⁷²² The leader of the assailants, “a former journalist named Nairi Hunanian, announced he was taking power from the ‘blood-suckers’ who were ruling Armenia” and they barricaded themselves in the parliamentary chambers.⁷²³ Following the personal intervention of Kocharyan, who offered the attackers the chance to speak on television and assured them they would receive a fair trial, the five men agreed to be taken into police custody on the morning of October 28.⁷²⁴ The attack left Armenia reeling, “half the top leadership of the country had been decimated, leaving major gaps in the constitutional succession order.”⁷²⁵ Speaking in 2007, Ter-Petrosyan compared the attack to the killing of the Armenian elite that marked the beginning of the Armenian Genocide and Stalin’s purges of the 1930s, except this time it “was carried out not by foreigners, but by Armenians themselves.”⁷²⁶

The motivation of the assassins and the potential that some other figure or group had been behind the attack quickly became the subject of intense speculation and remains one of the greatest unanswered questions of modern Armenian political history. Some theorized that the

⁷²¹ Ibid.

⁷²² Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 254.

⁷²³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 276.

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

⁷²⁵ Libaridian, 252.

⁷²⁶ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 255.

gunmen intended to derail the Artsakh peace process, a possibility that seems unlikely as “Sarkisian was not the obvious first target; it was not yet manifest that he had actually signed on to a peace agreement; [and] finally, Sarkisian was a close ally of the Russian security establishment, the most likely suspect for wanting to sabotage a United States-led peace deal.”⁷²⁷ Others pointed the finger at Kocharyan himself. While no evidence emerged to connect him to the gunmen, the attack did seem to play in his favor politically; “Demirjian and Sargsian did not only hold two of the highest offices in the Republic but they also were the leaders of two parties that opposed the president, parties that had become strong by the sheer strength of the personalities of their leaders.”⁷²⁸ The investigation into the attack had “an aggressive start,” but the prosecutor “brought charges against the five in a manner that placed full responsibility of the killings on them...the course of the judicial proceedings have left most Armenians with the impression that there has been a cover up.”⁷²⁹

While the attack did remove Kocharyan’s two most powerful opponents, in the short term it also undermined his authority. “Already widely considered as an outsider, Kocharyan lost [the] majority of his popular support after the assassinations. He remained alone, facing a very skeptical public [and] tensions with the army and Erkrpah.”⁷³⁰ He also “faced a parliament now determined to oppose him. Some members of the National Assembly initiated impeachment proceedings against the president” and he was compelled to appoint Sargsyan’s younger brother, Aram Sargsyan, the prime minister.⁷³¹ However, Aram, the director of a cement factory, lacked his brother’s political skill and by May 2000 Kocharyan “was able to dismiss Aram Sargsian

⁷²⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 276.

⁷²⁸ Libaridian, 253.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ Mirzoyan, 41.

⁷³¹ Libaridian, 253.

without any serious reaction.”⁷³²

While a planned summit between Armenian and Azeri officials, including both Kocharyan and Aliyev, still took place in November 1999, Armenia’s domestic turmoil had temporarily displaced the issue of Artsakh from the forefront of its politics.⁷³³ However, by 2001, Kocharyan had reasserted his control over Armenian politics and “for the first time, the three countries in the Minsk Group, France, Russia, and the United States, appeared to be working in close harmony. The peace process moved up a gear.”⁷³⁴ After two meetings between Aliyev and Kocharyan, “In what looked like a coordinated move, newspapers in both Armenia and Azerbaijan printed leaked copies of the three Minsk Group peace plans of 1997 and 1998. The leaks were intended to test public opinion on Karabakh and pave the way for a fourth, entirely different, plan.”⁷³⁵ While Kocharyan and Aliyev both seemed eager to make a deal, “the reaction to the three old plans, especially in Azerbaijan, was overwhelmingly hostile. Almost no one in Baku spoke up in public in support of compromise.”⁷³⁶

Despite the lack of support from their publics and advisors, the two presidents continued to press forward. The mediation efforts reached their culmination in April 2001, “when the U.S. State Department organized five days...of the most high-profile and intensive negotiations ever on the dispute.”⁷³⁷ At talks held in Key West, Florida, a “new format combined the confidential dialogue of the two presidents with the specialist advice of the Minsk Group negotiators. After the meeting, one of the mediators said they had reached agreement on ‘80 or 90 percent’ of issues.”⁷³⁸ For the most part, the Key West talks picked up where the previous negotiations had

⁷³² Ibid..

⁷³³ Hakobyan, *Green and Black*, 261.

⁷³⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 277.

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

left off, focusing on the status of Artsakh, the creation of corridors between Armenia and Artsakh and Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, and Azerbaijan's access to Shushi and the right of return for refugees, particularly those from Shushi.⁷³⁹ Alleviating Armenian concerns about the loss of its border with Iran, negotiators proposed building a 40-kilometer long elevated highway across Meghri that would be owned by Azerbaijan, an idea that seemingly achieved the objectives of both countries.⁷⁴⁰ Such an elaborate proposal was made possible by the willingness of the three co-chairs to provide funding, a condition that was partially dependent upon the absence of other international crises at the time.⁷⁴¹

At the conclusion of the Key West summit, a peaceful conclusion to the Artsakh conflict seemed within sight; "A follow-up meeting was planned for Switzerland in June and there was even talk of a peace agreement's being signed by the end of 2001."⁷⁴² Achieving peace was largely contingent on Azerbaijan's willingness to renounce its claim to Artsakh, a dramatic concession but not an unthinkable one. For Aliyev, Azerbaijan reasserting control over Artsakh represented a potential threat to his domination of Azeri politics, "a serpent in the Azerbaijani garden he had spent years tending; better not to have it at all and win concessions from the Armenians on other issues."⁷⁴³ However, to the rest of Azerbaijan, "Aliiev's attempt to cut the knot was too bold and too cynical...The gap between what Aliiev was saying in private and saying in public was too wide, and even his limitless guile could not bridge it."⁷⁴⁴ After returning to Azerbaijan, Aliyev withdrew the concessions that had been discussed at Key West and the

⁷³⁹ Hakobyan, Tatul. Մահվան Հովիտ 44-օրյա աղետ 27 սեպտեմբեր - 10 նոյեմբեր 2020 [Valley of Death: A 44-Day Catastrophe. September 27 – November 10 2020]. Yerevan: 2021, 219.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ "Nagorny Karabakh: Halting a Slide to Conflict." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. March 28, 2011. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/03/28/nagorny-karabakh-halting-slide-to-conflict-event-3218>

⁷⁴² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 277.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 278.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

subsequent meeting that “was expected to produce results...instead produced a crashing disappointment.”⁷⁴⁵

The talks at Key West represented the last realistic effort to solve the conflict through diplomatic means. The failure of the talks frustrated the American officials who had organized the summit and the world’s attention soon shifted away from the conflict following the September 11 attacks and the onset of the War on Terror.⁷⁴⁶ In addition, both Armenians and Azeris were largely content to continue with the status quo. For some in Armenia and Artsakh, the existence of a functionally independent Artsakh seemed to demonstrate that the conflict had already been decided in their favor. Supporters of Kocharyan began to adopt the view that “If Karabakh is a problem...it is a problem for Azerbaijan, not Armenia or Karabakh.”⁷⁴⁷ Across the border in Azerbaijan, the de facto independence of Artsakh was politically unacceptable, but Azeri leaders calculated that “the coming power asymmetry with Armenia made concessions on status unnecessary.”⁷⁴⁸ With the international community distracted and neither Armenian nor Azeri leaders pressing for renewed talks, the Artsakh conflict entered an uneasy hibernation.

Azerbaijan was also dissuaded from undertaking new mediation efforts by the declining health of Heydar Aliyev.⁷⁴⁹ In 2003, with presidential elections set to be held in October and a visibly unhealthy Aliyev turning 80, “all thoughts were on the succession.”⁷⁵⁰ In July, Aliyev was taken to Ankara for medical treatment, never to return to Azerbaijan: he died in Cleveland in December, although there were rumors that the announcement of his death had been delayed until after the election.⁷⁵¹ The absence and subsequent death of Aliyev, who had dominated

⁷⁴⁵ Hakobyan, *Valley of Death*, 219; Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 43.

⁷⁴⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 284-285.

⁷⁴⁷ Libaridian, 263.

⁷⁴⁸ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 292.

⁷⁴⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 284.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.

Azerbaijan's politics since 1993, left an immense vacuum in Azerbaijan's politics. Aliyev's anointed successor, his son Ilham, had a reputation as "a playboy and a gambler" and "One foreign diplomat commented privately that Ilham 'had the attention of a gnat.'"⁷⁵² However, despite Ilham's apparent weaknesses, "Ruling elites, all of whom were Heydar Aliyev's appointees, worked hard to secure Ilham's victory—which was also, of course, their own. Knowing of Ilham's 'image problem,' the state-controlled press proclaimed that he had the "right genetic code" to be president, a notion that the opposition openly ridiculed."⁷⁵³ On August 1, Ilham registered as a candidate for presidency. Three days later he was appointed prime minister and "Soon, Ilham had officially replaced his father as YAP's candidate."⁷⁵⁴

The opposition sensed an opportunity to challenge the Aliyevs, but were weakened by their inability to unite around a single candidate.⁷⁵⁵ In addition, officials loyal to the YAP openly committed election fraud to secure Ilham's victory. The OSCE election monitors "recorded all the usual violations...Counting violations were even worse, with 55 percent of counting stations observed having 'significant problems,' larger than any previous election. Unauthorized persons were present in more than a third of the counting stations. Some of these unauthorized individuals were directing the counting; others had brought additional ballots, sometimes hundreds of them."⁷⁵⁶ The official tally claimed the junior Aliyev had won a landslide victory with 76.8 percent of the vote, but "Musavat supporters believed that it was they who had won the election and the mood in Baku turned from jubilant to ugly...At least one opposition demonstrator was killed as the security forces cleared the streets. Over the next week, the

⁷⁵² Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy*, 76.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

authorities launched what the OSCE report called ‘a sweeping government crackdown on the opposition in which over 600 persons were detained around the country.’⁷⁵⁷

Despite this inauspicious start to Ilham Aliyev’s rule, there were some who hoped that Azerbaijan’s new leadership would jumpstart new progress on the issue of Artsakh. In April 2004, a new flurry of negotiations began between Elmar Mammadyarov, “Azerbaijan’s first truly autonomous” foreign minister, and Vartan Oskanian, a Syrian-Armenian who served as Kocharyan’s foreign minister for the entirety of his presidency.⁷⁵⁸ The ‘Prague Process’ had started two years earlier but had been limited to the two countries deputy foreign ministers and had not seemed promising.⁷⁵⁹ While the involvement of Mammadyarov and Oskanian raised the profile of the talks, the two sides were still extremely “polarized on the fundamental question of the status of Nagorny Karabakh itself.”⁷⁶⁰ Inspired by the impending referendum on secession in Montenegro, the U.S. mediator proposed a similar solution for Artsakh, although “the actual details of the referendum would be shrouded in ‘constructive ambiguity’... This would enable the Armenian side to state that the principle of allowing Karabakh to separate from Azerbaijan was established... For its part, the Azerbaijani side would be able to argue that the modalities of the vote ruled out full secession.”⁷⁶¹

As might be expected of a deal designed to allow both sides to announce mutually exclusive victories to their populations, the Prague Process resulted in little actual progress. While the prospect seemed promising enough for Kocharyan and Ilham Aliyev to begin personally negotiating and a seemingly warm relationship developed between the two presidents,

⁷⁵⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 285-286.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid..

⁷⁵⁹ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 292.

⁷⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 286.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 286-287.

“there was suspicion that they trusted each other enough only to collude in saying no to a final agreement. As one official involved in talks put it, ‘there is a school of thought that when the co-chairs close the door and leave the two presidents together, the two of them agree not to make a deal.’”⁷⁶² This round of negotiations culminated in 2007, when the Minsk Group co-chairs presented the Basic Principles, more commonly referred to as the Madrid Principles, which consist of six key elements: the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the surrounding territories, an ‘interim status’ for Artsakh, the creation of a corridor between Artsakh and Armenia, the right of return for all refugees, an international peacekeeping force, and—most crucially—the “future designation of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will.”⁷⁶³ However, while the Madrid Principles have served as the basis of negotiations for all subsequent talks, the two sides have not agreed to accept the principles, with particular disagreement over the final point.⁷⁶⁴ Azeri officials objected to the fact that the agreement would stipulate “the boundaries, electorate and unlimited nature of status options to be offered in the future plebiscite” making a vote for independence a “foregone conclusion.”⁷⁶⁵ Addressing these concerns, second draft of the Madrid Principles was circulated in 2009, that instead proposed a “mutually agreed and legally binding expression of will” to determine Artsakh’s status.⁷⁶⁶ This time, it was the Armenians who objected to the wording, calling for another new draft.⁷⁶⁷

In April 2008, Kocharyan’s second term as president had come to an end and Armenia’s constitutional term limit prevented him from seeking reelection. Facing his departure from office, “Kocharian began preparing the ground for his old friend, colleague, and fellow

⁷⁶² Ibid., 287-288.

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 300-301.

⁷⁶⁴ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 293-294.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., 294.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid.,

⁷⁶⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 301.

Karabakhi, Serzh Sarkisian, to succeed him...Sarkisian had served twice as Armenia's defense minister and more recently as prime minister, and arguably was already as powerful as Kocharian himself."⁷⁶⁸ As Kocharyan's handpicked successor, Sargsyan was widely expected to win the February 2008 elections. However, "The election contest came alive with the surprise entry into the race of Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosian."⁷⁶⁹ Ter-Petrosyan united the opposition around himself, accusing Kocharyan and Sargysan corruption and promising to "clean out the Augean stables."⁷⁷⁰ While Ter-Petrosyan ran a competitive campaign, due in part to the fact that he still commanded the loyalty of many among Armenia's political elite, "After the first round of voting on 19 February 2008, Serzh Sarkisian was declared the outright winner...There were loud allegations of fraud."⁷⁷¹

Rather than accept defeat, Ter-Petrosyan and his supporters took to the streets to contest the results of the election. Such post-election protests were common in Armenia, but "in almost all cases after 1996, the incumbent government was able to consolidate its resources and wait out the protests...The exception to this rule was 2008, when the protest dynamic was apparently so strong that it could be stopped only by a major violent crackdown."⁷⁷² Following ten days of protests that showed little sign of stopping, "The confrontation turned violent in the early morning of 1 March, when police began to forcibly remove protestors from Freedom Square."⁷⁷³ The protestors regrouped and "Clashes broke out in which ten opposition supporters died and hundreds were injured. Opposition supporters said they saw snipers firing directly at the crowd. At 10 p.m., President Kocharian declared an official state of emergency...Ter-Petrosian was put

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid., 290.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ Broers, Laurence and Ohanyan, Anna. *Armenia's Velvet Revolution: Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2021, 57.

⁷⁷¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 290.

⁷⁷² Armenia's Velvet Revolution, 57.

⁷⁷³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 290.

under de facto house arrest.”⁷⁷⁴ While this secured Sargysan’s victory, it meant that he “assumed the presidency amidst national turmoil” that would taint his presidency for the rest of his term.⁷⁷⁵

While periodic attempts to renew mediation efforts continued throughout the 2010s, most notably a 2011 attempt by Dmitri Medvedev, they achieved little to no progress. The two sides were simply too far apart on the question of Artsakh’s status and neither was willing to compromise their preferred vision to make an agreement possible. Armenians had grown used to Artsakh’s de facto independence and saw little benefit in sacrificing that reality for an agreement that did not guarantee Armenian control of the region, a condition that Azerbaijan was unwilling to agree to. By the early 2000s, Artsakh was for all intents and purposes fully independent from Azerbaijan, with all the structures and functions of any other country. As Laurence Broers explained,

the NKR [Nagorno-Karabakh Republic] fields a complete state bureaucracy composed of executive, legislative and judicial branches, including seven standing parliamentary committees, eleven ministries and an ombudsman for a population of fewer than 150,000 – a generous estimate (see below). The dominant political parties are local parties that do not operate in Armenia; only one party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, or Dashnaktsutyun), operates in both spaces. The republic has its own Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has a representative office in Yerevan, as well as representations in Moscow, Washington, Paris, Berlin, Beirut and Sydney.⁷⁷⁶

In a move symbolic of its separation from Azerbaijan, the country adopted a new constitution in 2017 that formally changed its name from the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to the Republic of

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., 291.

⁷⁷⁶ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 253.

Artsakh.⁷⁷⁷ The name change not only placed emphasis on the country's specifically Armenian identity and heritage, it also symbolized a movement away from its Soviet-era history as part of Azerbaijan.

However, even as Artsakh moved toward greater independence and autonomy, it remained heavily dependent on Armenia. While Artsakh formally claimed complete independence, it was in some ways akin to a province of Armenia. As Thomas de Waal writes, "When it came to army service or foreign passports there was no telling a citizen of Karabakh from one of Armenia. By the estimates of its own government, of the 2005 budget of a little more than \$50 million dollars, less than 30 per cent came from the revenue collected in Karabakh itself, the rest coming in transfers from Armenia and donations from the Diaspora. For many Armenians the distinction between the two territories began to blur."⁷⁷⁸ A similar ambiguity appeared in Armenians' opinions on the what the ultimate status of Artsakh should be. As Artak Beglaryan, currently the chief of staff to Artsakh's president, put it, "Independence is the intermediate goal but unification is the vision. But this does not mean that we couldn't be independent ... Armenia is not seeking our unification, it seeks only our self-determination, then we can decide what we want."⁷⁷⁹

While concerns for the safety of Armenians under Azeri rule predominated, Armenian opposition to Azeri control of Artsakh was also partially attributable to a sense of national pride. To many Armenians, Artsakh represented the one part of their historic homeland they had successfully defended and their victory in the 1990s was seen as a matter of historical justice.⁷⁸⁰ However, over time, this sense of national pride became somewhat of a barrier to a negotiated

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 269

⁷⁷⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 289.

⁷⁷⁹ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 253.

⁷⁸⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 3.

settlement. While Armenian officials maintained their willingness to return the surrounding territories as part of a negotiated settlement, many Armenians began to see the territories around Artsakh “not as ‘occupied’ but as ‘liberated.’”⁷⁸¹ However, while national pride played a part in preventing an agreement, the fundamental cause of Armenians’ ardent opposition to Azeri control over Artsakh was a deep-seated fear that such an outcome would mean the end of Artsakh’s Armenian population. Fed by memories of pogroms and Azerbaijan’s attacks on Armenian civilians during the war, this fear dated back to the Soviet era, when the Armenians of Artsakh pointed to Nakhichevan—which had a significant Armenian minority well into the 20th century but was subject to a process of “de-Armenianization” under Soviet-Azeri rule—as an example of what they feared might also happen in Artsakh.⁷⁸²

The Armenians’ fear of ethnic cleansing—whether violent or gradual—only increased in the years after the end of the first war as the two sides grew more divided and memories of coexistence under Soviet rule faded. The Azeri government did little to assuage these fears, rather taking several action that seemed to confirm the belief that life as an Armenian in Azerbaijan would be near impossible. Beginning as early as 1997, Azeri authorities in Nakhichevan began a campaign of cultural erasure against the existing Armenian monuments in the region. Simon Maghakyan, one of the researchers who uncovered and documented the destruction of 89 medieval churches, 5,840 *khachkars* (cross-stones) and 22,000 tombstones, called it “the worst cultural genocide of the 21st century.”⁷⁸³ While outside observers tend to see the destruction “as a vengeful legacy of the bloody Nagorno-Karabakh war,” Armenians argue it

⁷⁸¹ Ibid., 290.

⁷⁸² Ibid., 147.

⁷⁸³ Womack, Catherine. “Historic Armenian monuments were obliterated. Some call it ‘cultural genocide.’” *Los Angeles Times*. November 7, 2011. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-11-07/armenian-monuments-azerbaijan>

was “an effort to neutralize Armenian “historical rights” or antiquity-derived political legitimacy in the region.”⁷⁸⁴ Similar efforts to erase Armenian cultural heritage or relabel it as “Caucasian Albanian” were widespread across the rest of Azerbaijan, and Armenians argued would also be visited upon Artsakh if it were to fall under Azerbaijan’s control.⁷⁸⁵

These efforts had a parallel across the border in Artsakh and Armenia, as many Azeri sites under the control of Armenians fell into disarray. In particular, lying close to the line of contact, the city of Aghdam was completely abandoned after Armenians took control of it in 1993 and over the following years, Armenians “slowly stripped every street and house” in search of building materials, leaving the city’s mosque the only remaining structure.⁷⁸⁶ However, while it is certainly true that Azeri towns and structures across Artsakh and the surrounding regions were left to decay or were scavenged for materials by the local Armenian population, there is no evidence of an organized campaign of cultural erasure akin to the one that took place in Azerbaijan. Indeed, in 2019, the government of Artsakh even repaired one of the mosques in Shushi, although this too was mired in controversy over the decision—reminiscent of Azerbaijan’s insistence that Armenian churches were actually built by Caucasian Albanians—to refer to it as ‘Persian’ rather than ‘Azeri.’⁷⁸⁷

Then, in 2012, the Azeri government took another step that could hardly have been designed to more effectively stoke Armenian fears, when it gave a “heroic reception... to a man whose only claim to fame was to have killed an Armenian in his sleep,” a move that even non-

⁷⁸⁴ Maghakyan, Simon and Pickman. Sarah. “A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture.” *Hyperallergic*. February 18, 2019.

<https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>

⁷⁸⁵ Ambartsumian, Yelena. “Why Armenian Cultural Heritage Threatens Azerbaijan’s Claims to Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Hyperallergic*. February 28, 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/614619/why-armenian-cultural-heritage-threatens-azerbaidjans-claims-to-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁷⁸⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 6.

⁷⁸⁷ Kucera, Joshua. “Karabakh’s contentious mosque restoration.” *Eurasianet*. December 4, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/karabakhs-contentious-mosque-restoration>

Armenians interpreted as “a pre-meditated act of provocation.”⁷⁸⁸ The man in question was Ramil Safarov, an Azeri army officer who, while participating in a 2004 NATO training program in Budapest, had “burst into the bedroom of Armenian lieutenant Gurgen Margarian and brutally killed him with an axe, almost severing the head from the body. He then tried to murder a second Armenian officer, whose door was fortunately locked.”⁷⁸⁹ Sentenced to life in prison by Hungarian authorities in 2006, Safarov was extradited to Azerbaijan “nominally on the condition that he would serve the remainder of his life-sentence.”⁷⁹⁰ However, upon his return to Baku, Safarov was immediately pardoned by Aliyev, “presented with a bouquet of flowers, a free apartment in Baku and promoted to the rank of major,” a move that was harshly condemned by both Armenian and non-Armenian commentators, including then-President Obama.⁷⁹¹ As Laurence Broers writes, “The tragic irony of the Safarov case is the convergence it signified with a much-quoted and criticised comment by Armenian President Robert Kocharian claiming a fundamental ‘ethnic incompatibility’ between the two nations. Since the late 2000s Azerbaijan has effectively implemented this axiom as policy through a near-total ban on entry into Azerbaijan by any ethnic Armenian – whatever their citizenship.”⁷⁹²

A Four-Day War

While negotiations had all but ended and the status quo of an unrecognized but independent Artsakh increasingly appeared stable, the Artsakh conflict was by no means settled. With around 10,000 soldiers positioned on each side, often only a few hundred meters apart,

⁷⁸⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 304.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., 303.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., 304.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

⁷⁹² Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 304.

escalation—inadvertent or planned—was an ever-present threat.⁷⁹³ As Thomas de Waal wrote in 2013, the “conflict over Nagorny Karabakh is often called ‘frozen.’ It is a misleading term, verging on the dangerous. The different elements of the conflict zone are in motion even as its underlying causes are not.”⁷⁹⁴ The 200 kilometer-long line of contact—as well as the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan—became one of the most militarized borders on earth, comparable to those between North and South Korea or India and Pakistan.⁷⁹⁵ Both Armenia and Azerbaijan had “fortified their defenses, turning the so-called Line of Contact into one of the most impregnable borders in the world...Several dozen soldiers a year continued to die on both sides, although they were as much the victim of mines or accidents as of enemy fire.”⁷⁹⁶ However, enemy fire was by no means a trivial threat. Even during periods of relative peace, cross-border sniping was a near-daily occurrence, with hundreds or even thousands of ceasefire violations recorded every month.⁷⁹⁷ While Armenians frequently pushed for more security measures along the border—which would protect their control over the territory, “Senior Azerbaijani policy-makers have repeatedly rejected confidence-building measures along the LoC [Line of Contact], such as the withdrawal of snipers or the introduction of an incident investigation mechanism, unless such measures are tied to territorial withdrawals by Armenian forces.”⁷⁹⁸

In April 2016, the tensions along the border boiled over into a serious clash later dubbed the ‘Four-Day War.’ Beginning in the early morning of April 2, “large-scale hostilities broke out in the northeast, east and southeast sectors...By the end of the day, Azerbaijani forces had

⁷⁹³ de Waal and von Twickel, 214-215

⁷⁹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 305.

⁷⁹⁵ Broers, *Anatomy of A Rivalry*, 2.

⁷⁹⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 264.

⁷⁹⁷ “A festering sore.” *The Economist*. October 3, 2013. <https://www.economist.com/eastern-approaches/2013/10/03/a-festering-sore>

⁷⁹⁸ Broers, “Defaulting to War,” 16.

captured numerous Armenian front posts” in the northeast and south.”⁷⁹⁹ While Azerbaijan accused Armenia of instigating the fighting, “The strategic context; the scale, operational coherence and geographical coordination of Azerbaijani forces on 2 April; the capture of several Armenian front posts on that day; Azerbaijani media reporting that an offensive was under way; and the heavy media coverage given to Minister of Defence Zakir Hasanov in the preceding week – all suggest a planned Azerbaijani operation.”⁸⁰⁰ The fighting was by far the most intense and widespread since the 1994 ceasefire, with a reported 80 Armenians and 37 Azeris killed—although unofficial reports suggest that “the Azerbaijani death toll may have reached three times the official figure.”⁸⁰¹ In one of the most shocking events of the war, “the respected Yerevan-based investigative journalism centre Hetq, identified three Armenian civilians as having been killed and mutilated post-mortem in an outlying house that had not been evacuated.”⁸⁰² By April 5, when a new Russian-backed ceasefire brought an end to the brief war, Azerbaijan had captured 800 hectares—roughly three square miles, although most of it had little strategic importance.⁸⁰³

While the Four-Day War ultimately had very little impact on territorial control, it did have significant political impacts. In Azerbaijan, the fighting uncovered the Azeri population’s widespread support for a war that could place Artsakh and the surrounding territories under Azeri control: “Thousands were reported to have volunteered to fight, only to be turned away by the Ministry of Defence on the grounds that they were not needed...Even critical voices expressed surprise at the suddenness and intensity of societal mobilization. Spontaneous

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁰² Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰³ Hakobyan, *Valley of Death*, 243.

demonstrations took place across the country. Youth rallies marched through Ganja and Baku and some smaller towns on 5 and 6 April with none of the usual hindering of demonstrators by police or security forces.”⁸⁰⁴ In contrast, the war was met with “a sombre reaction in Armenia and NK.”⁸⁰⁵ The difference in reaction was due not only to the fact that Armenia had nothing to gain from renewed fighting—indeed the resumption of the prior status quo was the best outcome Armenia could hope for—but also from the fact that the war had demonstrated the extent to which Azerbaijan’s military had outstripped that of Armenia and Artsakh. While most of the territory lost on April 2 was later recaptured, “a growing sense of public disappointment focused on corruption and complacency in the army. Outdated equipment and communication lines along front-line positions were held to have been responsible for many Armenian casualties in the first few hours of hostilities.”⁸⁰⁶ However, rather than impelling Armenians to make a more concerted push for peace, the war—perhaps by demonstrating the value of a security buffer—actually increased their resolve to maintain control over not only Artsakh, but also the surrounding territories that now were dotted with Armenian settlements. Writing in April 2017, Tatul Hakobyan reported that following the war “The number of Armenians who were in favor of achieving peace by returning the territories to Azerbaijan decreased.”⁸⁰⁷

This came despite the fact that Armenia’s military situation stood in rather stark contrast to Azerbaijan’s, which had been heavily strengthened in the years leading up to 2016. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Azerbaijan had undergone a second oil boom that enabled the Azeri military to dramatically outspend Armenia’s. In May 2006, Azerbaijan opened the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan

⁸⁰⁴ Broers, “Defaulting to War,” 13.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁷ Hakobyan, *Valley of Death*, 245.

(BTC) pipeline followed in September by the South Caucasus gas pipeline.⁸⁰⁸ Thanks largely to its oil resources, “Azerbaijan was the world’s fastest growing economy in the years 2005-2008 and in 2008 its GDP had risen to \$35 billion, having been just \$1.3 billion in 1991.”⁸⁰⁹ Azerbaijan channeled much of its newfound wealth into its military, with military expenditures topping \$1 billion for the first time in 2008 and rising to a peak of \$2.3 billion in 2012.⁸¹⁰ While both Armenia and Azerbaijan placed among the top 10 most militarized states—based on military spending as a percentage of GDP—since 2011, Armenia simply lacked the resources to compete with Azerbaijan’s spending as the latter’s defense spending routinely exceeded Armenia’s entire budget.⁸¹¹ However, as a member of the CSTO, Armenia was able to purchase weapons from Russia at discounted prices and also periodically received “substantial ad hoc deliveries negotiated with Russia.”⁸¹² Russia, which stood to gain leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan from a continued stalemate, provided these transfers in an attempt to “maintain strategic balance between the two sides.”⁸¹³

While Armenian forces had successfully repelled the Azeri incursions, the fighting had revealed the disparity between their military capabilities and hinted at the future of the conflict. As Broers writes, “The four-day duration of hostilities permitted wartime experimentation with new military and informational technologies. Azerbaijani forces reported the deployment of new weapons, including the Israeli-manufactured Harop ‘kamikaze’ or suicide drone.”⁸¹⁴ Along with displaying new technology, weapons that would feature prominently in the 2020 war, the Four-Day also cast new light on Russia’s position. While Russia had intervened to craft a ceasefire

⁸⁰⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 291-292.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., 292.

⁸¹⁰ Broers, “Defaulting to War,” 6.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 293.

⁸¹² Broers, “Defaulting to War,” 6.

⁸¹³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 293-294.

⁸¹⁴ Broers, “Defaulting to War,” 15.

relatively quickly, the willingness of Russia—and the CSTO more generally—to come to Armenia’s aid had been cast into doubt, a development that was seen as “likely to embolden Azerbaijan to test that commitment further.”⁸¹⁵

Velvet Revolution

In the spring of 2017, Sargsyan faced the same problem that Kocharyan had ten years earlier: his second term as president was coming to an end and he was prohibited from seeking a third. However, Sargsyan, foreseeing this problem, had orchestrated a constitutional referendum in 2015 that transferred the majority of the president’s powers to the prime minister.⁸¹⁶ While many in Armenia believed the referendum to merely be an attempt by Sargsyan to secure his own continued power, Sargsyan had promised not to seek reelection as either president or prime minister, telling the Armenian people, “I believe that one person must not aspire to the reins of power in Armenia for more than twice in a lifetime.”⁸¹⁷ However, three years later, “On 11 April [2018], President Sargsyan finally announced that he would, after all, seek the RPA’s nomination as prime minister, reneging on his earlier pledge.”⁸¹⁸ While opposition leaders protested the move, Sargsyan was formally sworn in as prime minister on April 17 and few expected that protests would have any impact.⁸¹⁹

However, a protest march from Gyumri to Yerevan organized by former newspaper editor Nikol Pashinyan and the small opposition party he had founded succeeded in gathering significant support from the Armenian people.⁸²⁰ Beginning with just a handful of supporters

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁸¹⁶ Broers and Ohanyan, 62.

⁸¹⁷ Danielyan, Emil. “Sarkisian Rules Out Another Presidential Term.” *RFE/RL*. April 10, 2014. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25328678.html>

⁸¹⁸ Broers and Ohanyan, 3.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

when he first arrived in Yerevan on April 13, the demonstrations “coalesced rapidly with local protest movements that had begun on 12 April...By 20 April, the numbers of people mobilizing daily were reaching hundreds of thousands, bringing Yerevan and other city centers to a standstill.”⁸²¹ On April 22, Sargsyan met with Pashinyan and “appeared to issue a threat by asking Pashinyan if he had not learned the lesson of 1 March 2008” and Pashinyan was arrested shortly after the meeting.⁸²² However, rather than dampening the protests, Pashinyan’s arrest and the apparent threat of violence only increased opposition to Sargsyan, with “massive, non-violent protest on the nation’s streets far exceeding the numbers gathering over the previous fortnight.”⁸²³ Even more shockingly, “members of the Armenian army’s prestigious peacekeeping battalion marched in uniform with the protestors, suggesting that Sargsyan did not enjoy the complete loyalty of the army.”⁸²⁴

By the following evening, perhaps anticipating even larger crowds on April 24, the date of the annual Armenian Genocide commemoration, Sargsyan “tendered his resignation, including an enigmatic mea culpa – ‘Nikol Pashinyan was right, I was wrong.’”⁸²⁵ While Sargsyan’s allies succeeded in blocking Pashinyan from being elected prime minister in the first vote held on May 1, renewed protests succeeded in placing enough pressure on members of the National Assembly to secure his victory in a second vote a week later.⁸²⁶ In December of 2018, when new parliamentary elections were held, Pashinyan’s “‘My Step’ alliance won the election, deemed free and fair by international observers, with 70.4 per cent of the vote...Neither the RPA nor their former coalition partner, the ARF, passed the threshold for representation. Armenia had

⁸²¹ Ibid.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

entered a new era.”⁸²⁷

Although the Velvet Revolution—as the protest movement came to be known—was driven almost entirely by domestic concerns about corruption—including revelations of corruption in the army that had emerged following the Four-Day War—and the economic power of Armenia’s oligarchs, the transition of power was not without international significance. Pashinyan attempted to distance himself from previous ‘color revolutions’ in the former Soviet Union, explicitly pledging not to alter Armenia’s foreign policy, a message intended to assure Russia that he was not leading a pro-Western revolution. However, the “emphasis on rooting out corruption set the Velvet Revolution on a path of inevitable collision with the heavily Russian-oriented oligarch space.”⁸²⁸ Indeed, within a year of coming to power, Pashinyan’s government arrested not only Kocharyan but also Yuri Khachaturov, the then-Secretary-General of the CSTO—both of whom were personally friendly with Putin—over allegations of their involvement in the March 2008 death of protestors.⁸²⁹ While Armenia and Russia maintained close institutional ties through organizations such as the CSTO, CIS, and Eurasian Economic Union, analysts noted that Pashinyan “changed the formula of Russian-Armenian relations [at their foundation]...because Armenia is now pursuing a sovereign foreign policy.”⁸³⁰ However, it appeared that Pashinyan had successfully placed Armenia on a path toward greater democratization without angering Russia.

Some observers also expressed hopes that Pashinyan—the first Armenian leader not from Artsakh in two decades—might present an opportunity for renewed negotiations. Tensions did

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁸²⁹ Baumgartner, Pete. “Moscow Watches Anxiously As Pashinian Realigns Armenia’s Foreign Policy.” *RFE/RL*. September 7, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-watches-anxiously-as-pashinian-realigns-armenia-s-foreign-policy/29477633.html>

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

slightly ease between Armenian and Azerbaijan, as Pashinyan and Aliyev agreed in 2019 to create a hotline between commanders on the front lines and de-escalate military activity on the border.⁸³¹ However, on the central issue of Artsakh's status, Pashinyan was "more outspoken...than his predecessors, perhaps because, as an Armenian from Yerevan, he feels the need to prove his credentials to the Armenians of Karabakh."⁸³² Furthermore, unlike Kocharyan and Sargsyan, Pashinyan "insisted that as the leader of the Republic of Armenia, he cannot speak on behalf of the Karabakh Armenians," raising the old issue of Artsakh's representation that once again increased tensions.⁸³³ After some initial hope that Pashinyan's election would open the door to substantial progress on the diplomatic front, it soon became clear that the two sides were as far as part as ever on the issues that have driven the conflict since the 1980s.

⁸³¹ de Waal and von Twickel, 210.

⁸³² Ibid., 224.

⁸³³ Ibid.

Chapter Four: Forty-Four Days of War

Prelude to War

With little progress in negotiations and ever more powerful Azerbaijan intent of gaining control over both Artsakh and the surrounding territories, the risk of renewed war was always a distinct possibility. This was a well-known fact to observers of the conflict and the foreign diplomats assigned to mediate between the two sides. As Thomas de Waal presciently wrote in March 2020, “Armenia and Azerbaijan are always one step from renewed war.”⁸³⁴ Just four months later, on July 12, such a fight erupted along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia proper. The two countries quickly released conflicting statements, with both sides accusing the other of initiating the fighting. A little after 4:00 in the afternoon, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defense released a short statement accusing Armenian forces of “grossly violating the ceasefire on the direction of the Tovuz region of the Azerbaijani-Armenian state border.”⁸³⁵ In a Facebook post made soon after Azerbaijan’s statement, Shushan Stepanyan, the spokeswoman for Armenia’s Minister of Defense, responded, claiming that Azeri soldiers had attempted to cross the border into Armenia’s Tavush province.⁸³⁶ According to Stepanyan’s post, the Azeri soldiers entered Armenian territory in a UAZ vehicle, but abandoned it and fled after being “warned” by Armenian troops, only to return an hour later, at which point they were fired upon and incurred casualties. Azeri officials later claimed that these soldiers were on a routine patrol when they were ambushed by Armenian forces who then shelled Azeri positions with artillery.⁸³⁷

⁸³⁴ de Waal and von Twickel, 48.

⁸³⁵ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. “The units of the armed forces of Armenia committed a provocation in the Tovuz direction of the front.” July 12, 2020. <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/the-units-of-the-armed-forces-of-armenia-committed-a-provocation-in-the-tovuz-direction-of-the-front-31441.html>

⁸³⁶ Stepanyan, Shushan. “Today, at 12:30 o'clock, Azerbaijani armed forces.” Facebook. July 12, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3045065262196280&id=100000785095088&ref=content_filter

⁸³⁷ “Preventing a Bloody Harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan State Border.” *International Crisis Group*. July 24, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/259-preventing-bloody-harvest-armenia-azerbaijan-state-border>

While the lack of external monitoring makes it difficult to say with certainty who or what sparked the fighting, there is little reason to believe that it was premeditated on either side. Instead, it appears to have been the result of inadvertent escalation and inadequate communication. The clashes followed the replacement of regular Azeri military units with members of Azerbaijan's border guard and "a sudden flurry of construction of new housing, roads, and other buildings, which caused 'a lot of confusion on both sides.'"⁸³⁸ Additionally, the presence of large civilian populations and crucial infrastructure on both sides of the border meant that both Armenia and Azerbaijan had incentives to avoid fighting in the area. When coupled with the lack of any readily apparent military objective either side could realistically hope to achieve, it appears as though the fighting was the result of confusion in an extremely tense situation rather than a deliberate attack. As Olesya Vartanyan, the Crisis Group's senior analyst for the South Caucasus, reported in the aftermath of the July clashes, "If anyone was preparing for this, they did a bad job."⁸³⁹

While the fighting may have begun accidentally, it quickly escalated into the most serious round of fighting since the Four-Day War in 2016. In a dangerous environment with trust between the two sides almost entirely lacking, the initial confrontation—whatever it may have been—became a flash point that coalesced into heavy clashes. Despite the recently created communication channels between Armenian and Azeri defense officials, neither side made a meaningful attempt to deescalate the situation.⁸⁴⁰ Instead, the fighting intensified and became a "rare instance in which [both] sides used heavy weapons."⁸⁴¹ By the time the fighting had mostly

⁸³⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/24/armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-at-war-again-and-not-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁸³⁹ Hauer, Neil. "Armenia and Azerbaijan Are at War Again—and Not in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Foreign Policy*. August 24, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/24/armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-at-war-again-and-not-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁴¹ "Preventing a Bloody Harvest." *International Crisis Group*

come to an end on July 16, a reported 17 soldiers, 12 Azeris and 5 Armenians, had been killed.⁸⁴²

Azerbaijan also reported that one Azeri civilian was killed during the clashes, although the announcement has since been removed from the Ministry of Defense's website⁸⁴³

Among the deaths was Major General Polad Hashimov, a popular figure in Azerbaijan who was credited with capturing a strategic post near Talish during the fighting in 2016.⁸⁴⁴ Armenian media reported that Hashimov and fellow Azeri officer Colonel Ilgar Mirzoev were killed in a drone strike, the first time that an Armenian-produced drone had been used in combat.⁸⁴⁵ Hashimov's death prompted outrage in Azerbaijan. On July 14, the day Hashimov's death was announced, a funeral held for another soldier killed in the fighting along the border devolved into a massive street protest demanding war against Armenia.⁸⁴⁶ Chanting slogans like "Karabakh or death," tens of thousands of Azeris marched through the streets of Baku demanding war. While the demonstration began as show of support for the military and a call for war, over the course of the night it gradually transformed into an anti-government protest.⁸⁴⁷ Some protestors even broke into the Azeri parliament building, clashing with police who attempted to force them back.⁸⁴⁸ Having long encouraged the Azeri population to see the conflict over Artsakh as an existential struggle and telling them the Azeri military could easily overwhelm Armenian defenses, Azeri president Ilham Aliyev now faced a population that

⁸⁴² Hauer, "Armenia and Azerbaijan Are at War Again."

⁸⁴³ Hovhannisyan, Nvard and Bagirova, Nailia. "Death toll rises in Azerbaijan-Armenia border clashes." *Reuters*. July 14, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict/death-toll-rises-in-azerbaijan-armenia-border-clashes-idUSKCN24F1C8>

⁸⁴⁴ "General-mayor Polad Həşimov kimdir?" [Who is Major General Polad Hashimov?]. *BBC News Azerbaijan*. July 14, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan-53409502>

⁸⁴⁵ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. "Armenian-made combat UAVs used in action for first time." *Public Radio of Armenia*. July 14, 2020. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/07/14/armenian-made-combat-uavs-used-in-action-for-first-time/>

⁸⁴⁶ "Pro-war Azerbaijani protesters break into parliament." *Eurasianet*. July 15, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/pro-war-azerbaijani-protesters-break-into-parliament>

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

seemed prepared to mount a challenge to his continued rule if he failed to make good on his rhetoric.

Already dealing with domestic opposition to his authoritarian style of rule, Aliyev seems to have taken the protesters' demand for war seriously.⁸⁴⁹ While Azerbaijan had been heavily investing in its military capabilities for years, preparations for war were significantly accelerated in the wake of the July clashes. Just weeks after the fighting had stopped, Azerbaijan held large-scale joint military exercises with Turkey involving a reported—though likely inflated—11,000 Turkish soldiers as well as a significant amount of both air and ground military equipment.⁸⁵⁰ With the benefit of hindsight, these exercises, the largest of their kind in recent years, now appear to have been explicit preparations for Azerbaijan's invasion. As the Jamestown Foundation reported at the time, the exercises were intended “to transfer to Azerbaijan the experience [Turkey] has accumulated in the use of attack drones, multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) and air-defense systems over the last several years.”⁸⁵¹ These same Turkish drones, possibly also operated by Turkish military personnel, would prove to be a decisive factor in Azerbaijan's favor when the two sides returned to the battlefield

Along with joint-exercises, Azerbaijan also dramatically increased their spending on military equipment between July and September. After spending \$9.78 million on Turkish weapons imports over the first seven months of 2020, Azerbaijan's imports of Turkish weapons

⁸⁴⁹ de Waal, Thomas. “Is Change Afoot in Azerbaijan?.” *Carnegie Europe*. November 5, 2019 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/80271>

⁸⁵⁰ Huseynov, Vasif. “Azerbaijan, Turkey Hold Large-Scale Military Drills Amidst Escalation of Tensions With Armenia.” *Jamestown Foundation*. August 14, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-turkey-hold-large-scale-military-drills-amidst-escalation-of-tensions-with-armenia/#:~:text=On%20July%2029%2C%20Azerbaijan%20and,air%20forces%20from%20both%20countries>

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

skyrocketed to \$36 million in August and \$77.1 million in September.⁸⁵² Azerbaijan also purchased large quantities of arms from Israel—which has replaced Russia as Azerbaijan’s leading weapons supplier, and now provides over 60% of Azerbaijan’s weapons—in the build up to the invasion.⁸⁵³ While exact quantities or numbers have not been made public, flight trackers revealed that two cargo planes likely carrying military equipment flew between Israel and Azerbaijan just weeks before fighting began, followed by two more flights during the early days of the war.⁸⁵⁴ Such a dramatic shift in spending strongly suggests that Azerbaijan’s preparations for war began following the July clashes.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan began to recruit and deploy Syrian mercenaries in the months following the July clashes. Lindsey Snell, one of the first journalists to break the story, reported that rumors of a Turkish-backed effort to deploy Syrians to Azerbaijan had been circulating since July.⁸⁵⁵ While these claims were initially dismissed by the majority of analysts following the Caucasus, Snell was eventually proven correct. Turkey and Azerbaijan both continue to vehemently deny the involvement of foreign mercenaries, but widespread evidence—including intelligence reports from Russia, France, and the United States—contradicts these claims.⁸⁵⁶ *The Guardian*, one of many newspapers to verify Azerbaijan’s use of Syrian mercenaries, reported that they had spoken with several such mercenaries and had confirmed their accounts through the

⁸⁵² Toksabai, Ece. “Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before Nagorno-Karabakh fighting.” *Reuters*. October 14, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-turkey-arms/turkish-arms-sales-to-azerbaijan-surged-before-nagorno-karabakh-fighting-idUSKBN26Z237>

⁸⁵³ Shaiel Ben-Ephraim, Shaiel. “Israel to maintain Azeri edge in Karabakh war.” *Asia Times*. October 14, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/israel-to-maintain-azeri-edge-in-karabakh-war/>

⁸⁵⁴ Melman, Yossi. “As Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Expands, Israel-Azerbaijan Arms Trade Thrives.” *Haaretz*. October 7, 2020. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-israel-azerbaijan-arms-trade-armenia-iran-1.9212986>

⁸⁵⁵ Khachatryan, Amalie. “Lindsey Snell: Rumors of Syrian mercenaries started in July.” *Mediamax*. October 23, 2020. <https://mediamax.am/en/news/special-report/40439/>

⁸⁵⁶ “Russia, France, and US report transfer of militants from Syria to Karabakh conflict zone” *Caucasian Knot*. October 2, 2020. <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/52322/>

use of publicly available flight trackers and geo-located pictures sent to the *Guardian*.⁸⁵⁷

Armenian forces also would later capture two such Syrian mercenaries, whose testimonies corroborated the fact that Azerbaijan had recruited mercenaries prior to the start of fighting.⁸⁵⁸

According to reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a total of around 2,000 Syrian fighters were recruited by the Turkish government and sent to Azerbaijan.⁸⁵⁹

Lastly, in the days prior to Azerbaijan's invasion, media outlets across the Caucasus began reporting on more immediate signs of military mobilization. On September 21, Meydan.tv, a Berlin-based online media platform dedicated to covering Azerbaijan, reported that police in Azerbaijan had begun confiscating pickup trucks, telling their owners they were needed by the military.⁸⁶⁰ The same report noted that reserve units in the Azeri military had been told to prepare for military exercises, with many Azeris speculating that preparations for mobilization were underway. On September 25, the US embassies in both Armenia and Azerbaijan issued travel advisories, warning American citizens to "exercise caution due to heightened tensions and recent violence along portions of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border."⁸⁶¹ As Vartanyan of the International Crises Group told NPR a few days later, "The attack was coming. There were numerous signals, all saw them and did nothing for weeks."⁸⁶²

⁸⁵⁷ McKernan, Bethan. "Syrian recruit describes role of foreign fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh." *The Guardian*. October 2, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/02/syrian-recruit-describes-role-of-foreign-fighters-in-nagorno-karabakh>

⁸⁵⁸ "Syrian Mercenary Captured in Karabakh." *Massis Post*. October 30, 2020. <https://massispost.com/2020/10/syrian-mercenary-captured-in-karabakh/>

⁸⁵⁹ "Nagorno-Karabakh battles | Over 2,000 mercenaries sent to Azerbaijan, nearly 135 killed so far." *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*. October 18, 2020. <https://www.syriahr.com/en/188669/>

⁸⁶⁰ "Səfərbərlik, yoxsa hərbi təlim?" [Mobilization or military training?]. *Meydan.tv*. September 21, 2020. <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/seferberlik-yoxsa-herbi-telim/?ref=list-news>

⁸⁶¹ "U.S. Embassies in Yerevan, Baku Issue Travel Warnings to Americans." *Asbarez*. September 26, 2020. <https://asbarez.com/197103/u-s-embassies-in-yerevan-baku-issue-travel-warnings-to-americans/>

⁸⁶² Kim, Lucian. "Fighting Between Armenia And Azerbaijan Threatens To Spiral Into Full-Blown War." *National Public Radio*. September 28, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/28/917829216/fighting-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-threatens-to-spiral-into-full-blown-war>

War Comes Again

The invasion arrived on the morning of September 27, with Armenian sources reporting that Azerbaijan had launched air and artillery strikes along the length of the line of contact. By the end of the first day of fighting, it was apparent that this escalation was very different from the skirmishes that frequently took place along the border. Shortly after news of the attack was announced, Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan all declared martial law and began military mobilizations.⁸⁶³ Even before the end of the first day, estimates of the casualties from fighting had already exceeded 100 dead for both sides.⁸⁶⁴ In what would become a reoccurring pattern of ‘mirror propaganda’ throughout the war, Azerbaijan attempted to shift the blame by accusing Armenia of firing first. President Aliyev announced that Azerbaijan’s army was undertaking a “counter-offensive in response to military provocation.”⁸⁶⁵ However, at the same time that he claimed Armenia was responsible for starting the fighting, Aliyev announced his intention to “end the occupation” of Artsakh. While Aliyev’s accusation created enough confusion to initially obscure the fact that Azerbaijan was the aggressor, as evidence of Azerbaijan’s preparations was made public it became clear that the attack had been carefully planned.

One of Azerbaijan’s first targets appears to have been Artsakh’s anti-air capabilities. By 9:10 AM on September 27—just a few hours into the war—Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defense announced that what it euphemistically called a “blitz counter-offensive” had succeeded in

⁸⁶³ “Armenia, Azerbaijan declare martial law amid heavy clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *DW*. September 28, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/armenia-azerbaijan-declare-martial-law-amid-heavy-clashes-in-nagorno-karabakh/a-55068321>

⁸⁶⁴ Sanamyan, Emil. @emil_sanamyan. “Conservative estimate for killed on both sides likely to be in excess of 100. In April 2016, 73 military and half a dozen civilians were killed on both sides on the first day of fighting. And fighting this time around is much more extensive.” September 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/emil_sanamyan/status/1310305227019636739?s=20

⁸⁶⁵ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. “President Ilham Aliyev chaired meeting of Security Council - VIDEO.” September 27, 2020. <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/president-ilham-aliyev-chaired-meeting-of-security-council-video-32343.html>

destroying 12 of Armenia's OSA anti-aircraft missile systems.⁸⁶⁶ While it is possible that Azerbaijan was exaggerating their success, drone videos released later in the day confirmed that at least 3 of these systems had been damaged or destroyed.⁸⁶⁷ These OSA systems, purchased by Armenia in 2019, were widely regarded to be ineffective against the Turkish-produced Bayraktar TB2 drones, which "flew too high for these systems to intercept even if they were able to detect these relatively small aircraft."⁸⁶⁸ While modern anti-air defenses can neutralize drones relatively easily, Armenia possessed relatively few of these modern systems and those they did have "were deployed late in the conflict, limited in number, and vulnerable to attack themselves."⁸⁶⁹ Furthermore, the Azeri army also deployed "old, remote-controlled post-WWII era air planes, which they used to lure out Armenian air defences. Once the latter activated their radars, an Azerbaijani drone flying behind the old airplanes locked on to the Armenian location, immediately destroying the air defences."⁸⁷⁰

As a result, Azerbaijan was able to make full use of their "game-changing" drones, that granted them "significant advantages in ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] as well as long-range strike capabilities."⁸⁷¹ Azerbaijan's arsenal of drones proved to be perhaps the single most decisive factor in their military successes. With the Armenian army lacking the

⁸⁶⁶ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. "Azerbaijan Army's Troops launched a counter-offensive operation along the entire front" September 27, 2020. <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/azerbaijan-army-s-troops-launched-a-counter-offensive-operation-along-the-entire-front-32318.html>

⁸⁶⁷ Lee, Rob. @RALee85. "They look like Osa air defense systems. Azerbaijan previously claimed that they destroyed 12 Armenian Osa AD systems today. It looks like 3 of them were damaged or destroyed here, possibly by MAM-L munitions. 155/" September 27, 2020. <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1310183008813670400?s=20>

⁸⁶⁸ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. "Armenian Army equipped with Osa-AK surface-to-air missile systems." *Public Radio of Armenia*. December 27, 2019. <https://en.armradio.am/2019/12/27/armenian-army-equipped-with-osa-ak-anti-aircraft-missile-systems/>

⁸⁶⁹ Shaikh, Shaan and Rumbaugh, Wes. "The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. December 8, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>

⁸⁷⁰ Zwijnenburg, Wim. "Battlefields in 2020 Were Testing Grounds for New Drone Warfare." *Vice News*. December 23, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5bdgy/battlefields-in-2020-were-testing-grounds-for-new-drone-warfare>

⁸⁷¹ Ibid.

equipment necessary to counter drones, Azerbaijan was able to use them to “stalk and destroy Armenia’s weapons systems in Nagorno-Karabakh, shattering its defenses and enabling a swift advance.”⁸⁷² Armenia’s recorded losses—most of which came from drone strikes able to take footage of their targets—included “185 T-72 tanks; 90 armored fighting vehicles; 182 artillery pieces; 73 multiple rocket launchers; 26 surface-to-air missile systems, including a Tor system and five S-300s; 14 radars or jammers; one SU-25 war plane; four drones and 451 military vehicles.”⁸⁷³ In contrast, Azerbaijan was recorded as losing just “22 tanks, 41 armored forced vehicles, one helicopter, 25 drones and 24 vehicles.”⁸⁷⁴ While this disparity can be partially explained by the fact that Armenian forces used more traditional weapons that do not record their strikes, there is little doubt that Azerbaijan’s drones inflicted significant losses of vital Armenian equipment.

Azerbaijan’s offensive was apparently intended to rapidly overpower Artsakh’s defenses, pushing them back and conquering the territory controlled by Armenian forces in three to five days.⁸⁷⁵ However, aided by their fortified positions and the region’s mountainous terrain, Artsakh’s defense forces offered much fiercer opposition than Azerbaijan had expected. After over a week of fighting, observers relying on geolocated videos and images posted by the two sides—the most accurate source of information given both governments’ tendency to overstate the amount of territory they controlled—estimated that Azerbaijan had only succeeded in capturing roughly 145 square kilometers of the territory controlled by Artsakh, just 1.3% of the

⁸⁷² Dixon, Robyn. “Azerbaijan’s drones owned the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh — and showed future of warfare.” *Washington Post*. November 11, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-drones-azerbaijan-aremenia/2020/11/11/441bcbd2-193d-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁵ Giragosian, Richard. “Azerbaijan’s ‘five day’ war turns uphill battle.” *Asia Times*. October 30, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/azerbajians-five-day-war-turns-uphill-battle/>

total area.⁸⁷⁶ As was also the case during the Four-Day War, these initial gains were concentrated in the northeast of Artsakh around and including the villages of Talish and Mataghis, with some additional land captured in the south near the Iranian border.⁸⁷⁷ However, after this initial success, the offensive in the more easily defended mountainous and heavily forested northern regions of Artsakh bogged down. By the time the war ended over a month later, Azerbaijan had made little to no additional progress in the north.

Instead, Azerbaijan shifted their attention to the southern front, where the flatlands along the Iranian border gave defending Armenian forces less of an advantage. Additionally, the southern front's relative lack of trees meant that Armenian positions were especially vulnerable to Azerbaijan's extensive use of drone strikes. While Armenian and Artsakhi soldiers had largely succeeded in defending against the initial round of attacks, by October 6, Azerbaijan had broken through the defenses along a roughly six-kilometer long portion of the line of contact.⁸⁷⁸ Having penetrated the defensive line Armenians had been fortifying for twenty-five years, the Azeri forces were able to advance much more rapidly, capturing significant portions of the Jabrayil and Fizuli regions within days. A few days later, in a speech on October 9, Aliyev claimed that Azeri forces had captured the town Hadrut, home to around 4,000 people and a strategic position controlling the road leading onwards to Shushi and Stepanakert.⁸⁷⁹ Armenian officials disputed Azerbaijan's claim, with Artsakh's President Arayik Harutyunyan reporting on October 10th that

⁸⁷⁶ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "Conservative estimate of #NagornoKarabakh territory seized by Azerbaijan since September 27, from footage geolocated by myself and others -Northern front: ~95 sq km -Southern front: ~50 sq km Likely that more territory is taken, but this much should be considered a minimum." October 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1313636390786260993?s=20>

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁹ Avaliani, Dimitri. "Karabakh: the battle for Hadrut and why it's important." *JAM News*. October 12, 2020. <https://jam-news.net/karabakh-war-hadrut-azerbaijan-armenia/>

he had personally visited Hadrut and confirmed it remained under Armenian control.⁸⁸⁰ *Russia Today* correspondent Igor Zhdanov visited Hadrut on October 12, Tweeting a video and saying “The city has not fallen to the Azeri forces - at least not completely” but that fighting for the town continued.⁸⁸¹

At the same time that Armenian and Azeri forces battled for control of Hadrut, diplomats from the two sides met in Moscow. Following calls with both Aliyev and Pashinyan, Putin called for a humanitarian ceasefire to allow for prisoner exchanges and the retrieval of dead bodies.⁸⁸² While Armenian officials signaled that they were ready to agree to a ceasefire, their Azeri counterparts “made a potential truce conditional on the Armenian forces’ withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh,” a request tantamount to a complete surrender.⁸⁸³ Despite this demand, the foreign ministers of both Armenia and Azerbaijan traveled to Moscow on October 9 to meet with Russia’s Sergei Lavrov. For over 10 hours, the three men met behind closed doors while Armenians and Azeris around the world anxiously waited to hear the outcome of their negotiations. At around 4:00 AM Moscow time, they emerged with a short statement declaring a ceasefire would take effect at noon local time and committing to participate in “substantive negotiations...as soon as possible.”⁸⁸⁴

For a while it seemed that an end to fighting was possible, but those hopes were quickly

⁸⁸⁰ Kocharyan, Stepan. “Hadrut remains under full control of Artsakh, announces President Harutyunyan.” *Armenpress*. October 10, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1031146.html>

⁸⁸¹ Zhdanov, Igor. @IgorZhdanovRT. “Exclusive: inside #Hadrut The city has not fallen to the Azeri forces - at least not completely. The part we visited is under the control of Armenian soldiers. No ceasefire there: both sides are shelling each other with artillery, combat jets are bombing too. #Karabakh” October 11, 2020. <https://twitter.com/IgorZhdanovRT/status/1315263915622838274?s=20>

⁸⁸² Harding, Luke. “Russia hosts talks proposing Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire.” *The Guardian*. October 9, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/09/russia-offers-to-host-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-talks>

⁸⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁴ “Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov following talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Dmitry A. Bayramov and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia Z. G. Mnatsakanyan, Moscow, October 10, 2020.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. October 10, 2020. https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4377041

cut short. Armenian officials reported that Azeri shelling near Kapan—the provincial capital of Syunik, a region of Armenia proper—had killed a civilian within minutes of the ceasefire taking effect.⁸⁸⁵ Shushan Stepanyan also reported that Azeri forces had resumed their offensive “in the southern, northern, northeastern and eastern directions.”⁸⁸⁶ Azerbaijan denied these claims and “in turn, accused Armenia of striking the Terter and Agdam regions of Azerbaijan with missiles and then attempting to launch offensives.”⁸⁸⁷ While Azerbaijan’s near-constant shelling of Stepanakert was halted for a few hours following the ceasefire, the agreement ultimately had almost no lasting impact on the course of the war.⁸⁸⁸

While it is once again difficult to pinpoint exactly what happened or which side was responsible for the ceasefire’s collapse, the evidence points toward Azerbaijan being the likely culprit. With Armenian forces still in control of almost the entirety of the former-NKAO and most of the surrounding regions they had held since the 1994 ceasefire but facing a clearly larger and better equipped military force, the Armenian leadership had little incentive to violate the ceasefire. Indeed, as early as October 2, Armenia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs had publicly announced that it was “ready to engage with the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries to re-establish a ceasefire regime.”⁸⁸⁹ Azerbaijan, for its part, had consistently rejected previous calls for a ceasefire, with Aliyev demanding that Armenia entirely withdraw its forces as a

⁸⁸⁵ Associated Press “Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to ceasefire.” *The Guardian*. October 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/10/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-and-azerbaijan-agree-to-ceasefire>

⁸⁸⁶ “Humanitarian crisis feared as Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire broken.” *France24*. October 14, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/20201014-humanitarian-crisis-feared-as-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-broken>

⁸⁸⁷ Associated Press, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to ceasefire.”

⁸⁸⁸ Ronzheimer, Paul. @ronzheimer. “Good morning (and today it is really a good morning) from #Stepanakert where for the first time since I m here didnt hear any bombing or Sirens for hours now. Lets hope it stays like this in #Karabakh and there will be a solution. @BILD.” October 10, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ronzheimer/status/1314795112958963712?s=20>

⁸⁸⁹ “Statement by the MFA of Armenia on the joint call of the leaders of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs countries.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*. October 2, 2020. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2020/10/02/fm_st/10481

precondition to any agreement.⁸⁹⁰

After the collapse of the ceasefire, fighting quickly resumed its former intensity, especially around Hadrut. Azeri forces continued to attack Armenian positions around the town, with Armenian sources confirming that they had lost control of the hills to south.⁸⁹¹ On October 10, Russian journalist Alexander Kots reported that a group of 200 Azeri special operation forces had attempted to infiltrate Hadrut overnight—the same time that the ceasefire was being negotiated and announced.⁸⁹² In what would become a consistent claim of direct Turkish involvement, Semen Pegov, another Russian journalist, noted that there were “grounds to suppose that the group of saboteurs... was comprised of Turkish special forces,” although there has been no confirmation of this claim.⁸⁹³ With the ceasefire unable to halt the fighting, these forces battled the Armenian defenders for control of the town. Fierce fighting over Hadrut continued for days with neither side able to establish clear control. However, a video released on October 15 showed Azeri forces driving through the town without meeting resistance, leading many to conclude that Armenian forces had been entirely pushed out.⁸⁹⁴

Not only was the loss of Hadrut and the surrounding heights a strategic defeat for Armenians, it was also a significant blow to their morale. As Dimitri Avaliani of JAM News

⁸⁹⁰ Hovhannisyan, Nvard, Bagirova, Nailia, and Nebelay. Stephanie. “Azeris and ethnic Armenians fight as Russia, U.S. and France seek ceasefire.” *Reuters*. October 8, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan/azeris-and-ethnic-armenians-fight-as-russia-u-s-and-france-seek-ceasefire-idUSKBN26T16H>

⁸⁹¹ O’Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. “New geolocations: -Daskesen footage -A bit more dubious on the Hadrut situation, but Armenian forces are saying that Azeri troops have been pushed to the hills south of the town, so that much is (probably) confirmed -Confirmation that Azerbaijan holds all of Horadiz.” October 11, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1315346019014660101?s=20>

⁸⁹² Lee, Rob. @RALee85. “Alexander Kots is also in Hadrut. He claims that a group of 200 Azerbaijani SOF tried to infiltrate the city last night and Armenian forces are now pushing them back. 886/.” October 10, 2020. <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1314951194452819970?s=20>

⁸⁹³ Sirekanyan, Tigran. “Russian war reporter supposes the saboteurs who invaded Hadrut were Turkish special forces.” *Armenpress*. October 10, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1031166.html>

⁸⁹⁴ O’Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. “Seems Azerbaijani troops entered at least parts of Hadrut, and are managing to get vehicles into the town. Doesn't sound like there's still heavy fighting going on either.” October 15, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1316832619552813067?s=20>

explained, “Hadrut is the first regional center with Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, within the former autonomous region, which the Azerbaijani side announced occupied/liberated” and its fall would become “the source of a new, relatively large, wave of refugees.”⁸⁹⁵ Despite frequent claims from Azeri officials that the Armenians of Artsakh would “be treated the same way as other citizens of various origins,” almost all of 4,000 of Hadrut’s residents fled, fearing for their lives if the town fell under Azeri control.⁸⁹⁶ The few Armenians who stayed behind demonstrated just how well-founded those fears were. On October 10, Artsakh’s Human Rights Ombudsman Artak Beglaryan announced that Azeri forces had killed two civilians—a mother and her disabled son who had been unable to flee—in their home.⁸⁹⁷ While that reporting on the incident was largely limited to Armenian sources, a second killing of civilians in Hadrut received far more international attention.⁸⁹⁸

On October 15, the same day that videos emerged showing Azeri control over Hadrut, two other videos appeared on Azeri Telegram channels. The first showed two men—who would later be identified as 73-year-old Benik Hakobian and 25-year-old Yuri Adamian—being taken captive by Azeri soldiers at a site located on the town’s northern edge.⁸⁹⁹ While the caption posted along with the videos claimed the men were Armenian soldiers, neither was armed and residents from Hadrut told *RFE/RL* that the two had been tasked with unloading supply trucks

⁸⁹⁵ Avaliani.

⁸⁹⁶ Hajiyeva, Gunay. “Foreign Ministry: Azerbaijan Will Treat Ethnic Armenians In Its Nagorno-Karabakh Region Just Like Other Citizens.” *Caspian News*. October 8, 2020. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/foreign-ministry-azerbaijan-will-treat-ethnic-armenians-in-its-nagorno-karabakh-region-just-like-other-citizens-2020-10-8-0/#:~:text=Azerbaijan%20will%20treat%20ethnic%20Armenians%20residing%20in%20its%20occupied%20Nagorno,living%20in%20the%20occupied%20territories>.

⁸⁹⁷ Beglaryan, Artak. Facebook. “Today the Staff of the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh got concrete information.” October 10, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/artak.beglaryan/posts/3617709728267238>

⁸⁹⁸ Synovitz, Ron and Mansuryan, Harutyun. “‘This Is A Different War’: Nagorno-Karabakh Refugee Shudders At Video Showing Neighbors’ Execution.” *RFE/RL*. October 30, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/nagorno-karabakh-refugee-execution-video/30921794.html>

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

rather than participating in the fighting. The second video, which appears to have been taken shortly after the first, shows the same two men sitting on a wall in a small park in the south of Hadrut with Armenian flags draped over their shoulders and their hands bound behind their backs. After a man behind the camera shouts to “aim at their heads” in Azerbaijani, a barrage of shots ring out and the two men fall to the ground.⁹⁰⁰

Azeri officials were quick to deny that the videos were real, denouncing them as a “provocation,” and Azerbaijan’s prosecutor general announced on October 16 that an investigation had determined the videos were fake.⁹⁰¹ However, in independent analyses conducted by the BBC and Bellingcat, an open-source investigative journalist website, concluded that the videos were real, with Bellingcat confirming that the soldiers’ uniforms and weapons match those used by the Azeri army and the BBC finding that the voice in the second video was likely a “native Azerbaijani speaker.”⁹⁰² While many Azeri commentators online raised objections that the video appeared staged, a British military intelligence officer told the BBC “These are real bullets, this is a real killing. This is genuine, and I don't see any reason to assume it’s staged.”⁹⁰³ The Council of Europe, Europe’s leading human rights organization, told reporters that it was investigating the video and would “take action when [it] deems appropriate,” but has yet to announce any further steps taken.⁹⁰⁴

The video from Hadrut was only the first example in a series of videos depicting horrific war crimes that would be posted online during and after the war. Other videos “show Azerbaijani soldiers taunting, torturing, and executing captured men, as well as mutilating and otherwise

⁹⁰⁰ Atanesian, Grigor and Strick, Benjamin. “Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: 'Execution' video prompts war crime probe.” *BBC News*. October 24, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54645254>

⁹⁰¹ Ibid.

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Synovitz and Mansuryan.

degrading human remains.”⁹⁰⁵ In one of the most gruesome examples, “men in uniforms consistent with those of the Azerbaijani military hold down and decapitate a man using a knife. One then places the severed head on a dead animal.”⁹⁰⁶ In another video of an Armenian civilian being decapitated by Azeri soldiers, an elderly man can be seen “begging for mercy, repeatedly saying: ‘For the sake of Allah, I beg you’” before “One of the men is heard to say, ‘Take this one’ and hands a knife over to the other man, who begins to brutally cut the older man’s throat before the video abruptly ends.”⁹⁰⁷ This type of violence directed at captured Armenian civilians and soldiers appears to have been widespread, with “numerous videos circulating on Telegram of Azerbaijani soldiers beating elderly civilians in central Karabakh. Witness testimonies collected by International Crisis Group from civilians who fled the region describe armed men executing villagers and burning homes.”⁹⁰⁸

While the Azerbaijan announced in December two soldiers had been charged with mutilating the dead bodies of Armenian soldiers, it is unclear what, if any, punishment they received.⁹⁰⁹ Nor does the Azeri government seem likely to investigate the numerous other videos of similar war crimes. The Prosecutor’s Office has dismissed most claims of war crimes, alleging that it has “determined that many of the videos were fake.”⁹¹⁰ Furthermore, there is evidence that the government itself might have encouraged some of these crimes. Describing the videos of war

⁹⁰⁵ “Videos appear to show more war crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *OC Media*. November 24, 2020. <https://oc-media.org/videos-appear-to-show-more-war-crimes-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁹⁰⁶ Roth, Andrew. “Two men beheaded in videos from Nagorno-Karabakh war identified.” *The Guardian*. December 15, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/15/two-men-beheaded-in-videos-from-nagorno-karabakh-war-identified>

⁹⁰⁷ “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Decapitation and war crimes in gruesome videos must be urgently investigated.” *Amnesty International*. December 10, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/armenia-azerbaijan-decapitation-and-war-crimes-in-gruesome-videos-must-be-urgently-investigated/>

⁹⁰⁸ Hauer, Neil. “Azerbaijan’s war crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *t-online*. December 3, 2020. https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/krisen/id_89055086/videos-show-azerbaijan-s-war-crimes-in-nagorno-karabakh.html

⁹⁰⁹ “Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Azeri soldiers charged with war crimes.” *BBC News*. December 14, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55308460>

⁹¹⁰ “Videos appear to show more war crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *OC Media*.

crimes, journalist Neil Hauer writes that “A state policy in Azerbaijan of ethnic hatred towards Armenians, often dubbed 'Armenophobia', has played a driving role in encouraging these crimes.”⁹¹¹ Along with such claims that the government’s encouragement of ethnic hatred leads Azeri soldiers to commit acts of violence against civilians and captive soldiers, a Syrian mercenary captured by Armenian forces alleged that he had been promised a \$100 bonus for beheading an Armenian.⁹¹² While it was eager to take control of Artsakh and the surrounding regions, the Azeri government likely does not want to have to manage a hostile Armenian population on its newly captured territory. President Aliyev seems to have expressed such a desire to ethnically cleanse the Armenians of Artsakh in a speech in mid-October in which he said that “if [the enemies] do not leave our lands of their own free will, we will chase them away like dogs and we are doing that.”⁹¹³ In this light, encouraging violence against civilians and captives—either tacitly or explicitly—not only removes the few Armenians who stayed behind, but also scares the rest into fleeing ahead of the Azeri army’s advance.

While the vast majority of the videos depicting violence against captives show Azeri soldiers and Armenian victims, there were also examples of Armenians committing similar crimes. One video analyzed by Amnesty International, “shows a man wearing an Azerbaijani border patrol uniform lying on the ground, whilst gagged and bound” who is then stabbed in the throat by an Armenian soldier.⁹¹⁴ However, these examples are relatively rare compared to the

⁹¹¹ Hauer, “Azerbaijan’s war crimes in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

⁹¹² Arakelian, Leeza and Getzoyan, Pauline. “Azerbaijan Continues to Prey on Civilian Populations, Syrian Mercenaries Interrogated” *The Armenian Weekly*. November 1, 2020. <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/11/01/azerbaijan-continues-to-prey-on-civilian-populations-syrian-mercenaries-interrogated/>

⁹¹³ “President Ilham Aliyev: ‘Where do so many weapons and hardware come from to poor Armenia?’” *APA*. October 17, 2020. https://apa.az/en/xeber/nagorno_garabagh/President-Ilham-Aliyev-Where-do-so-many-weapons-and-hardware-come-from-to-poor-Armenia-333173

⁹¹⁴ “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Decapitation and war crimes in gruesome videos must be urgently investigated.” *Amnesty International*.

videos of Azeri troops. As Andrew Roth of *The Guardian* wrote, “While both sides have been implicated, online channels are increasingly dominated by videos of Armenian soldiers and civilians being abused by advancing Azerbaijani troops.”⁹¹⁵

Destruction from Above

While the videos of a close-quarters executions and torture are deeply shocking, the intense shelling of residential areas had an even more devastating impact on civilians. Azeri shelling, which had been one of the first signs of renewed violence on September 27, killed a woman and child in Artsakh’s Martuni region and infrastructure in many towns was damaged.⁹¹⁶ The shelling of Armenian settlements, concentrated most heavily on Stepanakert but leaving few towns unaffected, would continue throughout the entire course of the war. The shelling of Stepanakert exacted a heavy toll on the civilian population. On October 3, a week after the start of the war, Azeri shells hit the city’s electricity network building, resulting in the first of what would be a long series of power outages.⁹¹⁷ While some of Artsakh’s residents chose to stay despite the shelling, taking refuge in bomb shelters built to endure similar shelling during the 1990s, roughly 90,000 people—around two-thirds of Artsakh’s entire population—was forced to flee the territory entirely, seeking refuge in Armenia.⁹¹⁸

While both Armenian and Azeri forces had used heavy artillery along the front lines, resulting in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, for the first week of the war only Azerbaijan targeted civilians by launching attacks on cities well behind the front lines,

⁹¹⁵ Roth.

⁹¹⁶ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. “Woman and child killed in Azerbaijani shelling.” *Public Radio of Armenia*. September 27, 2020. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/09/27/woman-and-child-killed-in-azerbaijani-shelling/>

⁹¹⁷ Harutyunyan, Sargis. “Karabakh Capital Again Shelled.” *Azatutyun*. October 4, 2020. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30874000.html>

⁹¹⁸ Kocharyan, Stepan. “Nearly 90,000 people displaced, lost homes and property in Nagorno Karabakh.” *Armenpress*. October 24, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1032601.html>

subjecting them to near-constant bombardment. That changed on October 4 when Harutyunyan announced via Twitter that Artsakh's defense army would begin targeting military objects in the "large cities of Azerbaijan" and called for the "Azerbaijani population to leave these cities to avoid inevitable loss."⁹¹⁹ At around the same time, three rockets hit a residential section of Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city.⁹²⁰ Azeri authorities reported that the attack killed one civilian and injured four more—the latter number later rising to 32.⁹²¹ Turning to Facebook, Harutyunyan announced that the missiles had been fired by Artsakh's forces, writing that

"At my orders, today the Defense Army delivered several rocket strikes with the purpose of neutralizing military facilities deployed in the city of Ganja. As of this moment, I have ordered to cease the fire, in order to avoid innocent victims among the civilian population. In the event of the adversary not drawing appropriate conclusions we will continue proportionate and powerful strikes."⁹²²

While Armenia denied involvement, contending that Artsakh had unilaterally carried out the attack, the close cooperation of the two armies suggests that Armenian officials were likely involved in—or at least aware of—the decision to fire the missiles.⁹²³

The same day as the attack on Ganja, Hikmet Hajiyev—presidential aide and Azerbaijan's Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department—accused Armenian forces of firing a

⁹¹⁹ Harutyunyan, Arayik. @Pres_Artsakh. "#Azerbaijan'i terrorist army targets civilians in #Stepanakert, using Polonez & Smerch MLRS. From now on mil objects in large cities of Azerbaijan are the target of the Defense Army of #Artsakh. Calling on Azerbaijani population to leave these cities to avoid inevitable loss." October 4, 2020. https://twitter.com/Pres_Artsakh/status/1312646377034395648?s=20

⁹²⁰ "Armenia: Unlawful Rocket, Missile Strikes on Azerbaijan." *Human Rights Watch*. December 11, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/11/armenia-unlawful-rocket-missile-strikes-azerbaijan>

⁹²¹ McKernan, Bethan. "Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan accuses Armenia of rocket attack." *The Guardian*. October 4, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/04/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan-accuses-armenia-of-rocket-attack>

⁹²² Kocharyan, Stepan. "Artsakh's president orders to stop firing at Ganja military bases to avoid possible innocent victims." *Armenpress*. October 4, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1030261.html>

⁹²³ "Azerbaijan says Armenian forces shell second city of Ganja." *Reuters*. October 4, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan/azerbaijan-says-armenian-forces-shell-second-city-of-ganja-idUSL8N2GV03I>

missile that “landed in close proximity of energy block in [the Mingachevir dam]. But did not explode.”⁹²⁴ However, the photos released by Hajiyeve were widely criticized on social media as being staged, with defense technologies specialist Mike Mihajlovic reporting that the pictures had likely been “staged for the photo ops” based on the lack of debris around the impact site or combustion marks on the rocket engine.⁹²⁵ Hajiyeve released a similar claim a few days later, writing on October 6, that Armenian forces had used cluster munitions in an attempt to disable the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.⁹²⁶ Once again, the photos of the alleged attack were widely accused of being staged, with Mihajlovic noting that the debris in the pictures were consistent with Israeli-produced M095 DPICM cluster sub-munitions, which only Azerbaijan had access to.⁹²⁷ Furthermore, cluster munitions—which are intended to destroy light vehicles or for anti-personnel use—would likely not be used in an attack targeting a buried pipeline.⁹²⁸ Finally, analyzing a video taken the following day of the same alleged attack, Rob Lee, a military expert from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, wrote that “the fact that the cluster munitions are so close together (and none apparently detonated) with no sign of the

⁹²⁴ Hajiyeve, Hikmet. @HikmetHajiyeve. “Proof of Armenia's deliberate and targeted attack against critical civilian infrastructure of Azerbaijan. #Missile landed in close proximity of energy block in #Mingachevir. But did not explode. Peace enforcement must continue to bring #Armenia to its senses and responsibility.” October 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/HikmetHajiyeve/status/1312849542111539201>

⁹²⁵ Mihajlovic, Mike. @MihajlovicMike. “Yes, I can: Fake impact. Staged for the photo ops: Facts: - no debris around impact; - asphalt drilled, not broken during the “high velocity” impact; - piece of wood to support the missile; rocket motor without combustion marks; - brand new looking sign above the door.” October 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/MihajlovicMike/status/1312872171769917444?s=20>

⁹²⁶ Hajiyeve, Hikmet. @HikmetHajiyeve. “Armenia fired cluster rocket to Baku-Tbilisi-Jeyhan pipeline. In vicinity of Yevlakh reg. rocket landed 10 meters away from BTC pipeline. 300+ Cluster bomblets eject around. No damage to pipeline. ANAMA is in operation. Desperate attempts of Armenia to attack energy infrastructure.” October 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/HikmetHajiyeve/status/1313564015877148677?s=20>

⁹²⁷ Mihajlovic, Mike. @MihajlovicMike. “A post about the attack on the AZR pipeline by ARM rocket. The darker photos are from the site and the light one is an Israeli M095 DPICM cluster submunition. This submunition looks identical. From my knowledge, ARM side does not use Israeli munition. /1.” October 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/MihajlovicMike/status/1313590840707739651?s=20>

⁹²⁸ Mihajlovic, Mike. @MihajlovicMike. “Attacking the pipeline with cluster warheads may have sense only if the pipeline is at the open space. Pump stations shall be attacked with HE warhead for the maximum damage and not only with one but saturated with the full charge of 12 if launched by only one Smerch MLRS. /2.” October 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/MihajlovicMike/status/1313590842347728897?s=20>

rocket is quite suspicious.”⁹²⁹

This latter claim by Hajiyev appears to have been an attempted response to reports that had emerged a few days earlier that Azeri forces had used cluster munitions in their shelling of Stepanakert. By accusing Armenian forces of using cluster munitions, Azerbaijan appears to have been attempting to limit the negative press concerning their own use of the widely-condemned weapons. On October 4, a video filmed in Stepanakert showed a rapid series of explosions consistent with the use of cluster bombs.⁹³⁰ The day after the video emerged, Amnesty International issued a short statement announcing they “were able to trace the location of the footage to residential areas of Stepanakert, and identified Israeli-made M095 DPICM cluster munitions that appear to have been fired by Azerbaijani forces.”⁹³¹ Cluster munitions, which cause indiscriminate damage and often leave behind unexploded remnants that can result in civilian injuries years after their initial use, are the subject of the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions which “comprehensively prohibits” their use.⁹³² However, neither Armenian nor Azerbaijan has ratified the convention, with both countries pointing to the unresolved conflict over Artsakh as a barrier to their accession. Despite this legal technicality, Amnesty declared that Azerbaijan’s use of cluster munitions against civilian populations to be “absolutely appalling and unacceptable” and the issue was reported by several international news outlets.⁹³³ However, the

⁹²⁹ Lee, Rob. @RALee85. “Video from where Azerbaijan says Armenia targeted the BTC pipeline with a Smerch rocket with cluster munitions. The fact that the cluster munitions are so close together (and none apparently detonated) with no sign of the rocket is quite suspicious. 751/.” October 8, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1314111887341215749>

⁹³⁰ Martirosyan, Sam. @mrtrsyns. “5his video clearly shows #Azerbaijan shells Stepanakert using cluster munitions. This is a violation of international customary law. #Armenia #Artsakh #KarabakhNow #NKpeace.” October 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/mrtrsyns/status/1312733180609400833?s=20>

⁹³¹ “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Civilians must be protected from use of banned cluster bombs.” *Amnesty International*. October 5, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/armenia-azerbaijan-civilians-must-be-protected-from-use-of-banned-cluster-bombs/>

⁹³² “Azerbaijan: Cluster Munitions Used in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Human Rights Watch*. October 23, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/23/azerbaijan-cluster-munitions-used-nagorno-karabakh#>

⁹³³ “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Civilians must be protected from use of banned cluster bombs.” *Amnesty International*.

increased international attention did not dissuade Azeri forces from continued use of cluster munitions. In late October, Human Rights Watch reported that “Azerbaijan has repeatedly used widely banned cluster munitions in residential areas in Nagorno-Karabakh” including four instances that were confirmed by an on-site investigation.⁹³⁴ Like other instances in which Azeri forces shelled residential areas, the target appears to have been the civilians themselves. As Human Rights Watch detailed in their report, they were “not able to identify any military equipment or bases in the three neighborhoods where the attacks took place.”⁹³⁵

As a Human Rights Watch report released after the end of the war detailed, there were “numerous incidents in which Azerbaijan’s forces used inherently indiscriminate cluster munitions and artillery rockets or other weapons that did not distinguish between military targets and civilian objects.”⁹³⁶ Videos and pictures taken by reporters and residents alike show the toll that the near-constant shelling had on the city, with craters taking the place of buildings and rubble covering the streets. On November 4, a few days before the end of the war, Stepanakert’s mayor Davit Sargsyan reported that 40% of the city had been destroyed by Azeri rocket attacks.⁹³⁷ Though likely inflated, with Hauer suggesting a more conservative 10%, there can be little doubt that Stepanakert and other Armenian cities and villages suffered massive damage during the war.⁹³⁸

Azerbaijan’s bombardment of Armenian towns and cities also focused on high-profile

⁹³⁴ “Azerbaijan: Cluster Munitions Used in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Human Rights Watch*.

⁹³⁵ Ibid.

⁹³⁶ “Azerbaijan: Unlawful Strikes in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Human Rights Watch*. December 11, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/11/azerbaijan-unlawful-strikes-nagorno-karabakh>

⁹³⁷ “Ստեփանակերտի 40 տոկոսն ավերվել է, բայց բնակչության զգալի մասը չի լքում հայրենի քաղաքը. Քաղաքապետ.” [Mayor: 40% of Stepanakert has been destroyed, but a significant part of the population has not left their hometown.] *Lragir*. November 4, 2020. <https://www.lragir.am/2020/11/04/596091/>

⁹³⁸ Hauer, Neil. @NeilPHauer. “Honestly I think that number is very inflated. When I was there three weeks ago, it was about 5% destroyed, and that was after days of the heaviest bombardment of the war. Stepanakert has been much quieter since then. I can't imagine it's more than 10% destroyed (max).” November 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/NeilPHauer/status/1323921210590330880>

targets, most notably Shushi's Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, a highly symbolic building for Artsakh's Armenians. On October 8, the cathedral was hit twice by Azeri missiles, with the second injuring three journalists who had gathered to report on the initial strike.⁹³⁹ As Human Rights Watch reported, the attacks were almost certainly deliberate, as remnants of the missiles used are "consistent with a munition capable of being accurately directed at a specific target."⁹⁴⁰ Nor was attack on Ghazanchetsots the only example of Azerbaijan hitting notable non-military targets. Along with widespread damage to residences and businesses, other structures hit by Azeri strikes included multiple schools and the newly built maternity ward of Artsakh's Republican Medical Center.⁹⁴¹

As the war continued, Azeri citizens were also subjected to sporadic bombardment. In the early hours of October 11th, Armenian forces once again shelled Ganja, using a SCUD-B missile that hit a residential neighborhood in the north of the city.⁹⁴² The attack, which damaged or destroyed over 20 buildings, resulted in 10 deaths and 34 injuries. Though it is unclear whether the missile was launched by forces from Armenia proper or Artsakh, the distinction is largely semantic given the close collaboration between the two. It is also unclear whether the missile was deliberately targeting residential buildings or if it missed its intended target. In their December report on Armenia's shelling of Azerbaijan, Human Rights Watch reported that analysis of satellite imagery "identified military weapons and equipment at sites 700 meters and one kilometer from the impact crater... [and] a third site, 200 meters from the October 11 attack, that contained transport vehicles" that may have been used for military purposes.⁹⁴³ As SCUD-B

⁹³⁹ "Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime." *Human Rights Watch*. December 16, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁴¹ "Azerbaijan: Unlawful Strikes in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Human Rights Watch*.

⁹⁴² "Armenia: Unlawful Rocket, Missile Strikes on Azerbaijan." *Human Rights Watch*.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

missiles are only accurate to within a range of 900 meters, it is possible that any of these three sites was the intended target. On October 17, Ganja was once again hit with a SCUD-B missile, killing 21 additional Azeri civilians.⁹⁴⁴ Whatever the intention, the use of a powerful and inaccurate weapon in a densely populated area amounts to indiscriminate shelling according to the Human Rights Watch report.⁹⁴⁵

Then, on October 28, Armenian forces launched an attack on the city of Barda—located approximately 30 kilometers from the initial line of contact—using cluster munitions for the first, and apparently only, time. The bombardment resulted in significant casualties, killing 21 people and injuring 70 more.⁹⁴⁶ While initial reports of the attack were met with some skepticism from Armenians given Azerbaijan’s previous false claims, Amnesty International reported the following day, their “experts verified pictures (taken by Vice News reporters in the city) of fragments of 9N235 cluster munitions from Russian-made 9M55 Smerch rockets.”⁹⁴⁷ While earlier Armenian attacks against Azeri cities were—at least purportedly—intended to hit military targets, the use of cluster munitions in the Barda attack seemed to signal that Armenia had decided it was willing to inflict civilian casualties on Azerbaijan to force a quicker settlement. However, no further such attacks were carried out by Armenian forces and the shelling of Barda seems to have had little effect on the willingness of Azeri leaders to continue the war.

However, even after they approved the attack on Barda, the Armenian leadership decided not to take a step that could have potentially had a larger impact on the war’s outcome: striking Azerbaijan’s oil and gas pipelines or refineries. Armenia had purchased Iskander missiles from

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁶ “Armenia/Azerbaijan: First confirmed use of cluster munitions by Armenia ‘cruel and reckless.’” *Amnesty International*. October 29, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/armenia-azerbaijan-first-confirmed-use-of-cluster-munitions-by-armenia-cruel-and-reckless/>

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Russia in 2016—unveiling them after the Four-Day War—that were widely perceived to have the capability to damage Azerbaijan’s oil infrastructure.⁹⁴⁸ However, the power of Armenia’s Iskanders lay mostly in their threat rather than the actual impact of an attack on Azerbaijan’s oil and gas infrastructure. While lasting damage to Azerbaijan’s pipelines could potentially cripple the Azeri economy, it likely would have little immediate impact on Azerbaijan’s ability to wage war. Instead, it would most likely have only alienated the United States and Europe at a time that Armenia was desperate for international support.

While it must be acknowledged that both Azeri and Armenian forces were guilty of indiscriminately shelling civilian population centers, just as is the case in the videos of violence against captives, it is clear that Azerbaijan was responsible for a far greater number of such attacks. In contrast to the Armenian attacks, which were mostly limited to the specific instances mentioned above, Azerbaijan’s shelling of civilians across Artsakh was a regular occurrence throughout the entire war. As CivilNet reported after the war ended, the “constant Azerbaijani shelling in civilian areas led to mass evacuations and destruction of public facilities.”⁹⁴⁹ However, while the frequency and intensity of Azerbaijan’s attacks was much greater, Azerbaijan reported 100 civilian deaths compared to 72 such Armenian deaths—of which 41 were the result of shelling and 31 occurred in captivity.⁹⁵⁰ While it is possible that Azerbaijan’s civilian death toll has been inflated—there has been little independent confirmation of the government’s claims, this apparent contradiction can also be explained by the fact that—largely

⁹⁴⁸ Shiriye, Zaur. “Azerbaijan’s Possible Reactions to Armenia’s Iskanders: Defense Versus Offense.” *Jamestown Foundation*. October 5, 2016. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijans-possible-reactions-armenias-iskanders-defense-versus-offense/>

⁹⁴⁹ “Stepanakert Schools Reopen as Students Slowly Return to Karabakh.” *Civilnet*. December 15, 2020. <https://www.civilnet.am/news/474667/stepanakert-schools-reopen-as-students-slowly-return-to-karabakh/?lang=en>

⁹⁵⁰ Lmahamad, Ayya. *Azernews*. “Civilian death toll in Armenian attacks reaches 100.” December 8, 2020. <https://www.azernews.az/aggression/173628.html>; “Artsakh Ombudsman’s Office updates interim report on killing of civilians by Azerbaijani forces.” *Armenpress*. January 29, 2021. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1041825.html>

as a result of Azeri shelling—many Armenians fled Artsakh entirely during the war and those that stayed behind spent the majority of the war hiding in bomb shelters built during the first war, which were not available in the Azeri cities which had not experienced shelling during the 1990s.

Controlling the Narrative

As fighting raged on the battlefield, a separate war between Armenians and Azeris played out in the news and online as supporters of both sides attempted to craft a narrative favorable to their side. From Los Angeles to Moscow to Valence, France, the conflict also spilled into the two countries' diasporas, with—occasionally violent—demonstrations and counter-demonstrations intended to bring attention to the war and push foreign countries to support their preferred side. This information war was led by government spokesmen on both sides, whose press briefings and posts on social media were an opportunity not only to assure their own populations that the war was going well, but also a chance to paint the other side in a negative light in the hope of gaining more international support.

Taking advantage of a lack of available information, the Azeri government released several statements that were seemingly entirely fabricated, beginning with their claim that Armenian forces had initiated the fighting. Azerbaijan appears to have gambled that—in the absence of hard proof—Western journalists would treat the claims of both governments as equally credible. While it quickly became apparent to observers of the region that Azerbaijan had planned the war in advance, the Azeri government's gamble paid off and reports of the war in Western media generally only reported that both sides blamed the other. Over a week after the start of the war, as even the Azeri officials had begun to stop circulating claims that Armenian forces had attacked first—although they still did not claim responsibility themselves, *The New*

York Times was still reporting that the cause of the war was “contested” and that “Azerbaijan says Armenia fired artillery across the border, while Armenia says it was victim of an unprovoked attack.”⁹⁵¹ Misleading claims of this sort were not limited to the first days of the war. As discussed previously, the Azeri government also appears to have staged fake missile attacks and attempted to blame Armenian forces for breaking ceasefire agreements. While the former claims went largely unreported in Western media outlets, the allegations that Armenians and not Azeris had violated the ceasefire once again created enough uncertainty that journalists treated it as an open question, even as the evidence pointed toward Azerbaijan.

This misinformation campaign was made possible by a lack of information caused in part by the strict control Azerbaijan exercised over journalists within its territory. While freedom of the press was not a new issue in Azerbaijan—which was ranked 168 out of 180 in Reporters Without Borders’ 2020 index of global press freedom, the government closely regulated what foreign journalists reported.⁹⁵² Catherine Norris-Trent, a reporter from *France24* who spent much of the war in Azerbaijan, explained, “we have a minder appointed by the Azeri government with us pretty much at all times...it’s quite difficult here to really work out what exactly is going on beyond this communications battle.”⁹⁵³ By limiting the flow of information and continually muddying the waters regarding which side was responsible for what, Azerbaijan succeeded in preventing international support from uniting against them while they carried out their attempt to conquer Artsakh and recapture the surrounding territories.

⁹⁵¹ Kramer, Andrew. “Fighting Between Armenia and Azerbaijan Risks Drawing in Bigger Powers.” *New York Times*. September 28, 2020, Updated October 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/world/asia/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh.html>

⁹⁵² “Covering Nagorno-Karabakh war is getting increasingly dangerous and complex for reporters.” *Reporters Without Borders*. November 6, 2020. <https://rsf.org/en/news/covering-nagorno-karabakh-war-getting-increasingly-dangerous-and-complex-reporters>

⁹⁵³ Norris-Trent, Catherine. “‘France is no longer an honest broker,’ say Azeri officials ahead of Nagorno-Karabakh talks.” *France24*. October 8, 2020. 2:06-2:33. <https://www.france24.com/en/20201008-france-is-no-longer-an-honest-broker-say-azeri-officials-ahead-of-nagorno-karabakh-talks>

Across the front lines in Artsakh, the Armenian authorities also were making a concerted effort to manage the flow of information. While Armenia has traditionally had a much freer press than Azerbaijan—ranking 61st on the Reporters Without Borders’ 2020 index—during the war the government took a more active approach to managing news coverage.⁹⁵⁴ Armenia was still much more open to foreign press than Azerbaijan, granting access to 390 reporters from 90 countries, but Armenian officials also sought to use information to their advantage.⁹⁵⁵ However, in contrast to Azerbaijan’s misinformation which was largely designed for foreign consumption, Armenian officials focused on crafting a narrative for their domestic audience. While they could not hide the fact that Armenian forces were losing control of territory, government spokesmen assiduously worked to bolster the morale of Armenians by assuring them of the success of the Armenian forces, which often meant misleading the public about the true situation on the front lines.

From the very first day of the war, the Armenian government aggressively promoted the slogan “*haghtelu enk*”—“we will win”—and it quickly caught on among the general public.⁹⁵⁶ Even as the war began to decisively shift in favor of Azerbaijan, the Armenian government continued to express intense optimism about the military situation. When Azeri forces started breaking through the line of contact, the defense ministry began framing the retreat as a strategic measure to lure the Azeri army into overextending themselves. For example, on October 5, around the same time that Azeri soldiers first captured significant amounts of territory, Shushan Stepanyan announced that Armenian troops had carried out a “tactical retreat” and then trapped

⁹⁵⁴ “Covering Nagorno-Karabakh war is getting increasingly dangerous and complex for reporters.” *Reporters Without Borders*.

⁹⁵⁵ “Media Coverage of the Karabakh War.” *Civilnet*. December 21, 2020.

<https://www.civilnet.am/news/474611/media-coverage-of-the-karabakh-war/?lang=en>

⁹⁵⁶ @armenia. “Then & now, our #soul is #unconquerable. #StopAzerbaijaniAggression #KarabakhNow #NKpeace #NKstrong #ՀԱՂՈՒՆԵԼՈՒԲԵՆՔ.” September 27, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/armenia/status/1310303641526579202?s=20>

the advancing Azeri soldiers, killing 200 of them.⁹⁵⁷ While it is possible that there was a germ of truth to this claim, Stepanyan's report and others from government officials throughout the war almost certainly heavily exaggerated the degree to which Armenian forces were in control of the situation.

Through a combination of coercion and appeals to patriotism, the Armenian government prevented journalists from reporting on the true extent of the losses. On October 8, the government amended the martial law that had been declared at the start of the war to prohibit "the publication of reports criticising the actions of the government" and giving police the power to request media sites to take down content.⁹⁵⁸ Later in October, Armenian authorities canceled the accreditation of a Russian journalist ostensibly because he failed to complete the necessary paperwork, but likely motivated by his reports from Artsakh that suggested Armenia was suffering heavier losses than the official account recognized.⁹⁵⁹ Armenian journalists also felt an obligation to support the war effort by focusing on the positive stories released by the Armenian ministry of defense. As Tatul Hakobyan explained, there were "times when I preferred to submit to propaganda rather than remain in my position as a journalist. And the law on martial law also prevented me from doing my job."⁹⁶⁰ Karen Harutyunyan, Hakobyan's colleague at *Civilnet*, expressed a similar sentiment, writing that not only was he "instructed by the state to report information only from official sources" but he also operated "under self-censorship, with the

⁹⁵⁷ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. "Artsakh forces use tactical trick, forcing the enemy to flee, leaving 200 dead." *Public Radio of Armenia*. October 5, 2020. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/10/05/artsakh-forces-use-tactical-trick-forcing-the-enemy-to-fee-leaving-200-dead/>

⁹⁵⁸ "Armenia: Martial law undermines press freedom." *International Federation of Journalists*. October 13, 2020. <https://ifex.org/armenia-martial-law-undermines-press-freedom/>

⁹⁵⁹ "Armenia Cancels Accreditation Of Russian Journalist After Report From Nagorno-Karabakh." *RFE/RL*. October 8, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-cancels-accreditation--russian-journalist-azar-nagorno-karabakh/30882581.html>

⁹⁶⁰ Mkrtchyan, Gayane. "Is a bulletproof vest enough? Journalists in the second Karabakh war." *JAM News*. January 9, 2021. <https://jam-news.net/safety-of-journalists-second-karabakh-war-bulletproof-vest-shelling-of-journalists-during-the-war/>

principle of ‘do not cause harm.’”⁹⁶¹

Both countries also made extensive use of combat footage to highlight their military successes, with both “defense ministries post[ing] gruesome footage on YouTube — complete with Wagnerian soundtracks — boasting of battlefield achievements.”⁹⁶² In this regard, Azerbaijan’s extensive use of drones proved to be not only a military advantage, but also a boost to morale. Able to take videos as they carried out strikes on Armenian equipment and soldiers, the drones provided Azeri authorities with an ample supply of such footage. As *Vice News* reported, “Another lesson learned in Nagorno-Karabakh was the sinister propaganda value of drones. Every day, social media accounts linked with Turkish armed forces and the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence pushed out long showreels of deadly strikes against a range of targets (which were also broadcast on large public billboards).”⁹⁶³

However, the release of videos from the battlefield was only one aspect of the governments’ broader efforts to use social media to their advantage. Pashinyan had long been active on social media, having made extensive use of it during the 2018 Velvet Revolution.⁹⁶⁴ Despite his usual social media savvy, “Pashinyan’s casual approach to social media may have led to muddled posts about the conflict. And there was a lack of coordination between Armenian authorities’ messaging that provided opportunities for misinformation to spread.”⁹⁶⁵ Across the front lines, Azeri officials blocked most social media platforms as part of their broader effort to

⁹⁶¹ Harutyunyan, Karen. “The Karabakh War, Media, Propaganda, and Immorality.” *Civilnet*. December 16, 2020. <https://www.civilnet.am/news/474655/the-karabakh-war-media-propaganda-and-immorality/?lang=en>

⁹⁶² Bulos, Nabih. “Around Nagorno-Karabakh, an all-out media war unfolds.” *Los Angeles Times*. November 10, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-11-10/nagorno-karabakh-propaganda-war-armenia-azerbaijan>

⁹⁶³ Wim.

⁹⁶⁴ Pearce, Katy. “While Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over Nagorno-Karabakh, their citizens battled on social media.” *Washington Post*. December 4, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/04/while-armenia-azerbaijan-fought-over-nagorno-karabakh-their-citizens-battled-social-media/>

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid.

control the flow of information, but “made a noticeable push to use Twitter — the only unblocked platform.”⁹⁶⁶ The Azeri government also operated a network of “589 Facebook accounts, 7,665 Pages and 437 accounts on Instagram that were involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior” according to a report released by Facebook in October.⁹⁶⁷ While the majority of content posted by the network focused on domestic issues, Facebook also reported that they “frequently touched on...tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan [and] Armenia’s actions during past escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh.”⁹⁶⁸ The Armenian government operated a much smaller network on Twitter, with the platform finding 35 accounts with ties to the government that “were created in order to advance narratives that were targeting Azerbaijan and were geostrategically favorable to the Armenian government.”⁹⁶⁹

However, it was not just government officials that attempted to use social media as a weapon in an information war, ordinary Armenians and Azeris sought to use social media “to shape public perception of what’s happening on the ground.”⁹⁷⁰ During the July clashes, the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab had reported that “Both Azerbaijanis and Armenians have launched hashtags campaigns focused on the current hostilities,” a strategy that was widely used during the war as well.⁹⁷¹ However, their analysis found a difference in the way in which Azeris and Armenians used social media. In contrast to the pro-Armenians hashtags, which

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁷ Gleicher, Nathaniel. “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior.” *Facebook*. October 8, 2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/10/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-september-report/>

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁹ “Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations.” *Twitter Safety*. February 23, 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/disclosing-networks-of-state-linked-information-operations-.html

⁹⁷⁰ O’Connor, Tom. “Armenia and Azerbaijan’s Supporters Are At War Around the World, Using Social Media to Fight.” *Newsweek*. October 9, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/armenia-azerbaijan-supporters-war-around-world-fight-social-media-1537654>

⁹⁷¹ Kharazian, Zarine. “Patriotic astroturfing in the Azerbaijan-Armenia Twitter war.” *Digital Forensics Lab*. July 21, 2020. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/patriotic-astroturfing-in-the-azerbaijan-armenia-twitter-war-9d234206cdd7>

“displayed an ebb and flow in mentions volume more characteristic of organic traffic...the pro-Azerbaijani hashtags demonstrated sharp peaks — mostly consisting of retweets — at 2 p.m. every day,” suggesting an attempt to artificially manipulate Twitter’s algorithm by a coordinated group.⁹⁷² However, the Digital Forensics Lab concluded that this group was likely “highly dedicated human users, many of them college students or belonging to pro-regime youth groups” rather than the result of automated ‘bots.’⁹⁷³

The clash between the supporters of the two sides played out in the real world as well as online. Armenians in the Diaspora rallied to Artsakh’s cause, and “pro-Armenian activists” around the world “marched, gathered assistance and organized volunteers for the defense of the separatist government in Nagorno-Karabakh.”⁹⁷⁴ While the larger size of Armenia’s Diaspora—especially in Europe and the United States—gave it an advantage, the effort to garner international support was by no means limited to Armenians.⁹⁷⁵ Often pro-Azeri protests took the form of counter-demonstrations to Armenian events, and the two groups clashed, sometimes violently. In France, Armenian protestors blocking a highway in a bid to raise awareness of the war were accosted by “three men armed with knives and hammers [who] attacked the peaceful Armenian protest. One of the protesters lost consciousness after being hit in the head. A scuffle began between the demonstrators and the assailants, who are said to be Turkish nationals.”⁹⁷⁶

Along with demonstrations designed to bring public awareness to the conflict, the Armenian Diaspora also attempted to provide more immediate assistance. The Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, an organization focused on supporting Armenia and Artsakh, received over

⁹⁷² Ibid.

⁹⁷³ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁴ O’Connor.

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁶ Demuryan, Lilit and Kocharyan, Stepan. “Peaceful Armenian demonstration in France attacked by knife, hammer-wielding Turkish nationals.” *Armenpress*. October 28, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1033007.html>

\$100 million in donations for its “We Are our Borders” campaign.⁹⁷⁷ In October, Azerbaijan launched a similar effort to collect donations for its Armed Forces Relief Fund, although was unclear how much money raised.⁹⁷⁸ Armenian activists also attempted to halt the flow of weapon to Azerbaijan. Thanks in part to the efforts of its Armenian community, Canada imposed restrictions on the export of technology used in drones to Turkey, which produced many of Azerbaijan’s drones.⁹⁷⁹ With some success, the Armenian Diaspora also lobbied private companies, particularly manufacturers of drone parts and lobbyists, to terminate their contracts with Turkey and Azerbaijan.⁹⁸⁰ However, while these efforts may constrict Turkey’s production of drones in the future, they came too late to impact the actual fighting.

The Missing Response

However, despite Armenians’ efforts to bring attention to the war that could pressure Azerbaijan into halting their offensive, the response from foreign governments was largely muted. Azerbaijan benefited not only from their successful attempts to confuse the situation, but also from other events that dominated the attention of foreign governments and the media. As Laurence Broers wrote, “concentrating sufficient international attention and commitment to renewing diplomacy will be challenging. The fighting coincides with a period of international distraction due to the global pandemic, the US elections and a traditional pattern where focus

⁹⁷⁷ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. “Funds raised by Hayastan Fund exceed \$100 million.” *Public Radio of Armenia*. October 12, 2020. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/10/12/funds-raised-by-hayastan-fund-exceed-100-million/>

⁹⁷⁸ Elchin, Saljug. “Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense addresses to persons collecting donations for Armed Forces.” *APA*. October 6, 2020. <https://apa.az/en/xeber/frontline-news/Azerbaijan%27s-Ministry-of-Defense-addresses-to-persons-collecting-donations-for-Armed-Forces-332239>

⁹⁷⁹ Bekdil, Burak Ege. “Canadian block on drone parts shows Turkey’s defense industry still not independent.” *Defense News*. October 13, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/10/13/canadian-block-on-drone-parts-shows-turkeys-defense-industry-still-not-independent/>

⁹⁸⁰ Ghazanchyan, Siranush. “Garmin company says will investigate use of its technology in Turkish drones.” November, 4, 2020. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/11/04/garmin-company-says-will-investigate-use-of-its-technology-in-turkish-drones/>

falls away once a ceasefire is agreed.”⁹⁸¹ Indeed, it seems likely that Azerbaijan intentionally launched their invasion of Artsakh during a period of time in which it knew that the world’s attention would be elsewhere, most notably on the coronavirus pandemic and the American elections. While international organizations like the OSCE along with world leaders released statements urging Armenians and Azeris to end the conflict, they were not accompanied by meaningful pressure that could induce Azerbaijan to forsake its goal of conquering Artsakh.⁹⁸²

However, while the West’s lukewarm response can be chalked up to distraction and lack of political will to become meaningfully involved in a seemingly intractable conflict, the same factors cannot fully explain the lack of a reaction from Russia. The South Caucasus are an important arena for Russia and war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was widely viewed as not serving their interests. Despite this, and in contrast to 2016, when Russia quickly intervened to stop the Four-Day War, Russia was seemingly content to largely stay out of the conflict as Azeri soldiers pushed further into Armenian-controlled territory. While Russia did negotiate the first ceasefire, it came after two weeks of intense fighting and did not deter Azerbaijan from continuing the war. Furthermore, in early October, Putin publicly announced that Russia’s security guarantees to Armenia did not cover Artsakh.⁹⁸³ In doing so, Putin effectively signaled to Azerbaijan that the Russian military would not intervene on behalf of Armenia unless they attacked Armenia proper. Although there were rumors that Russia was covertly providing more assistance to Armenia that it was willing to admit publicly, no evidence of such an arrangement

⁹⁸¹ Broers, Laurence. “Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict: Why Caucasus flare-up risks wider war.” *BBC News*. September 30, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54356336>

⁹⁸² “International Leaders Urge Cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Voice of America*. October 5, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/international-leaders-urge-cease-fire-nagorno-karabakh>

⁹⁸³ “Russia’s Security Guarantees for Armenia Don’t Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says.” *Moscow Times*. October 7, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/07/russias-security-guarantees-for-armenia-dont-extend-to-karabakh-putin-says-a71687>

has emerged and any assistance that Armenian forces may have received certainly was not enough to have a meaningful impact on the war.⁹⁸⁴ Aside from erecting a small base on Armenia's southern border to prevent Azeri soldiers from crossing into Armenia itself, Russia seems to have done little in the way of directly supporting Armenia until the last days of the war when they brokered the final ceasefire.⁹⁸⁵

Part of Russia's reaction can be explained by increasing support from Turkey, which decreased Russia's leverage over Azerbaijan. Not only did Turkey recruit mercenaries to fight on behalf of Azerbaijan, it also "supplies weapons and training to Azerbaijan, and there are signs that it [was] actively engaged in the fighting."⁹⁸⁶ The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported that military and diplomatic sources claimed that "the current serious aggravation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was deliberately planned and provoked by Turkey" and that 90 Turkish military advisors and 20 drone operators were in Azerbaijan.⁹⁸⁷ The Armenian government also claimed that a Turkish F-16 shot down one of its fighter jets over Armenian airspace.⁹⁸⁸ In response, Azerbaijan's presidential spokesman Hikmet Hajiyev categorically denied the claim, saying that "Azerbaijan doesn't have F-16s — there aren't any on our soil or in our airspace" and suggesting that the Armenian jet might have "hit a mountain."⁹⁸⁹ However, shortly afterward satellite imagery confirmed the presence of Turkish F-16s at Azerbaijan's airbase in Ganja,

⁹⁸⁴ Ostrovsky, Simon. "Armenia's Miscalculations in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Newlines Magazine*. October 25, 2020. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/armenias-miscalculations-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

⁹⁸⁵ Mejlumyan, Ani. "Small outpost is Russia's first visible aid to Armenia" *Eurasianet*. October 28, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/small-outpost-is-russias-first-visible-aid-to-armenia>

⁹⁸⁶ Gall, Carlotta. "Turkey Jumps Into Another Foreign Conflict, This Time in the Caucasus." *The New York Times*. October 1, 2020. Updated October 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/01/world/middleeast/turkey-azerbaijan-armenia-war.html>

⁹⁸⁷ Chernenko, Elena. "Принуждение к конфликту." [Forcing conflict]. *Kommersant*. October 16, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4537733#id1962787>

⁹⁸⁸ Trevithick, Joseph. "Satellite Images Confirm Turkish F-16 Fighters Secretly Deployed To Azerbaijan." *The Drive*. October 7, 2020. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/36955/satellite-images-confirm-turkish-f-16-fighters-secretly-deployed-to-azerbaijan>

⁹⁸⁹ Ogden, Tim and Tavberidze, Vazha. "Azerbaijan's view of the Armenian conflict." *The Spectator*. October 7, 2020. <https://spectator.us/topic/azerbaijan-view-armenian-conflict-hikmet-hajiev/>

forcing the Azerbaijani government to admit to their presence.⁹⁹⁰ Given Turkey's strong support for Azerbaijan, it is possible that Russia lacked the leverage necessary to force a ceasefire as it had done in 2016.

Another possible explanation for Russia's apparent indifference is the change that occurred in Armenia between 2016 and 2020: the 2018 Velvet Revolution. While commentators in 2018 had hailed Pashinyan for effecting a democratic transition without drawing Russia's opposition, there is little doubt that Pashinyan's relations with Russia were not as friendly as Sargsyan's or Kocharyan's. Although he did not fundamentally re-order Armenia's foreign policy, Pashinyan focused more on forging relations with Europe than his predecessors. As the European Policy Centre noted in May 2020, there had been an "increased intensity in EU-Armenian relations since Pashinyan became prime minister... The European Union (EU) has played a crucial role in supporting Pashinyan's ambitious reform agenda."⁹⁹¹ In 2019, Armenia broke with Russia on a UN resolution affirming the right of Georgians from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to return to their homes.⁹⁹² While Armenia abstained from the vote rather than directly crossing Russia and supporting the resolution, the move likely was not well-received in Moscow. With Armenia seeming to drift away from its close alignment with Russia, it is possible that Russia no longer felt the same urgency to support its ally.

Furthermore, Pashinyan also did not have the same personal relationship with Putin that Sargsyan did. While Putin was personally close to both Sargsyan and Kocharyan, he does not

⁹⁹⁰ Iddon, Paul. "What Is Turkey Up To At These Azeri And Libyan Airfields?" *Forber*. October 11, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2020/10/11/what-is-turkey-doing-in-these-azeri-and-libyan-airfields/?sh=1a1434242294>

⁹⁹¹ Sammut, Dennis. "Two years after the Velvet Revolution, Armenia needs the EU more than ever." *European Policy Centre*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Two-years-after-the-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-needs-the-EU-more-than-33e910>

⁹⁹² Mejlumyan, Ani. "In nod to Georgia, Armenia changes UN vote." *Eurasianet*. June 5, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/in-nod-to-georgia-armenia-changes-un-vote>

seem to have the same friendly attitude toward Pashinyan.⁹⁹³ Pashinyan's crackdown on corruption implicated many pro-Russian oligarchs—most importantly CSTO head Khachaturov and Kocharyan.⁹⁹⁴ In addition, while Pashinyan's revolution was not anti-Russian, Putin “tends to take this issue [of revolution] personally, still feeling the old profound shock from watching helplessly as angry crowds marched by the Dresden KGB headquarters.”⁹⁹⁵ At best, Pashinyan lacked the relationship and political skill that would have helped secure Russian support and at worst, Russia intentionally allowed Armenia to suffer a military defeat to increase the latter's dependence on Moscow and weaken Pashinyan.

While Russia certainly did not provide the level of assistance to Armenia that it had in 2016, it does appear that Russia presented a ceasefire deal to Armenia that was rejected by Pashinyan. Speaking after the end of the war, Putin claimed that “Armenia had the chance to stop the war in mid-October and maintain control of the key city of Shusha” if they agreed to allow Azeri refugees to return, including to Shushi.⁹⁹⁶ While it is unclear what the exact terms of the deal were and Pashinyan has stated that he never was presented with an opportunity to end the war that did not include surrendering Shushi, it does appear that Armenia would have been able to secure a more favorable ceasefire deal if Pashinyan had been willing to make concessions earlier in the war.⁹⁹⁷ In a more general sense, Putin's claim—if it is indeed true—indicates that Russia may have been working behind closed doors to broker a ceasefire well before the end of

⁹⁹³ Saradzhyan, Simon. “Armenia: Why Has Vladimir Putin Not Intervened So Far and Will He?” *Russia Matters*. April 24, 2018. <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/armenia-why-has-vladimir-putin-not-intervened-so-far-and-will-he>

⁹⁹⁴ Baumgartner, Pete. “Moscow Watches Anxiously As Pashinian Realigns Armenia's Foreign Policy.” *RFE/RL*. September 7, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-watches-anxiously-as-pashinian-realigns-armenia-s-foreign-policy/29477633.html>

⁹⁹⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/07/what-explains-russias-uncharacteristic-indifference-to-the-revolution-in-armenia/>

⁹⁹⁶ Mejlumyan, Ani “Putin says Armenia could have stopped the war and kept Shusha.” *Eurasianet*. November 18, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/putin-says-armenia-could-have-stopped-the-war-and-kept-shusha>

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid.

the war.

A Triumph and a Defeat

While the Azeri army's territorial gains had been relatively slow for the first two and a half weeks of the war, by mid-October it began advancing much more rapidly. Having spent two weeks bombarding Armenian positions and destroying immense quantities of military equipment in drone strikes, the Azeri forces were able to push back the Armenian defenders. On October 17, Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to a second ceasefire agreement—this time negotiated by France.⁹⁹⁸ However, once again, the ceasefire was broken within minutes, again likely by Azerbaijan, although Baku also accused Armenia of restarting the violence.⁹⁹⁹ By October 18, Azeri forces had seemingly captured almost the entirety of the Fizuli and Jabrayil regions in the south along the Aras River that marks the Iranian border.¹⁰⁰⁰ Three days later, on October 21, Azeri forces had advanced to roughly seven kilometers from the border with Armenia proper and had taken control of an estimated 9.9% of the territory originally under Armenian control.¹⁰⁰¹ Azerbaijan's rapid advances across the southern regions were likely aided by the fact that Armenians had begun retreating toward the forested mountains further north rather than being forced to defend against Azerbaijan's better equipped army on terrain that gave them no easily

⁹⁹⁸ "Lavorv Says Moscow 'Keeps Trying' to Stop War." *Asbarez*. October 19, 2020.

<https://asbarez.com/197720/lavorv-says-moscow-keeps-trying-to-stop-war/>

⁹⁹⁹ "Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan accuse each other of breaking fresh truce." *The Guardian*. October 18, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/17/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-and-azerbaijan-announce-new-truce-plan>

¹⁰⁰⁰ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "Drone footage of skirmishes between Armenian troops and Azerbaijani armored units confirms a major westward push; I suspect that the purple area has also been taken, but can't confirm https://twitter.com/ghost_watcher1/status/1317784671862796289 Azerbaijan has seized at least 7.9% of #NagornoKarabakh" October 18, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1318015006072578050?s=20>

¹⁰⁰¹ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "Just kidding Fighting is ~7km from the Armenian border <https://twitter.com/obretix/status/1319052002152808453> Azerbaijan has taken at least 9.9% of #NagornoKarabakh." October 21, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1319058907176685568?s=20>

defensible positions.¹⁰⁰²

However, the advances of the Azeri army were not entirely limited to the south. By October 21, they had also begun advancing up the Hakari river valley, reaching positions that placed them within 10 kilometers of the crucial Lachin corridor.¹⁰⁰³ The site of the only major highway connecting Artsakh to Armenia, the Lachin corridor was of vital strategic importance for the Armenian forces. From the start of the war, Azerbaijan had demonstrated its intent to stop the flow of reinforcements and supplies from entering Artsakh. On September 29, an Azeri drone strike blew up a bus in Vardenis—within Armenia proper—in an apparent attempt to stop Armenian reinforcements.¹⁰⁰⁴ A few days later, on October 2, Azerbaijan attempted to sever the connection by striking a bridge with an Israeli-produced Long Range Attack (LORA) missile.¹⁰⁰⁵ While little footage emerged to document a continued Azeri advance up the valley, on October 26, a reporter from *France24* interviewed the mayor of a village in Hakari valley who said that the Azeri forces “are near. They are trying to advance but they have not been able to do so because we are counter-attacking.”¹⁰⁰⁶ While *France24* did not reveal the name of the village at the mayor’s request, the description of “50 small, one-storey houses [that] have recently been built there, all identical with tiled roofs and a garden” strongly suggests that the location in

¹⁰⁰² O’Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. “I think we’re seeing such rapid Azerbaijani advances because the Armenians have largely retreated to forested mountains that offer cover from drones; not a coincidence that Azerbaijan has take relatively open, flag, treeless terrain.” October 22, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1319389916384710656?s=20>

¹⁰⁰³ O’Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. “Footage from last night (can tell from the sunset) confirms that the Azerbaijani advance was *much* further up the Hakari river valley, within 10km of the Lachin highway, which is Stepanakert’s last road to Armenia.” October 22, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1319312471048552450>

¹⁰⁰⁴ Kocharyan, Stepan. “URGENT: Azerbaijani military bombs civilian passenger bus in Armenian town of Vardenis.” *Armenpress*. September 29, 2020.

<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1029388/>

¹⁰⁰⁵ Keyser, Zachary. “Azerbaijan uses Israeli LORA missile in conflict with Armenia – WATCH.” *The Jerusalem Post*. October 3, 2020. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/video-shows-azerbaijan-using-israeli-lora-missile-in-conflict-with-armenia-644327>

¹⁰⁰⁶ “Armed villagers guard strategic gateway to Nagorno-Karabakh.” *France24*. October 26, 2020.

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201026-armed-villagers-guard-strategic-gateway-to-nagorno-karabakh>

question is Ariavan—also known as Aghavno after the Armenian name for the river—a village of 50 identical houses built in 2016.¹⁰⁰⁷ With Ariavan located just under six kilometers away from the town of Lachin and almost directly next to the main highway, the *France24* report indicates that Azeri forces were on the verge of cutting off Artsakh’s connection to the outside world. However, it appears that the villagers of Ariavan—likely aided by more regular Armenian forces—succeeded in holding off the Azeri army. By the time the war ended a little over two weeks later, Armenians were still in control of the village, with the Armenian newspaper *Aravot* reporting in March 2021 that “most of the families in the village were forced to leave their homes, but nine defiant families chose to stay, determined to defend their land and property against the enemy’s advances.”¹⁰⁰⁸

A third ceasefire—negotiated by the United States—on October 25 once again failed to prevent the continuation of fighting, quite literally falling apart before it even started.¹⁰⁰⁹ Like the previous two ceasefires backed by the other two Minsk Group co-chairs, this penultimate ceasefire had almost no effect on the fighting and both sides once again accused the other of violating the agreement.¹⁰¹⁰ However, in an apparent attempt to preempt any Armenian accusations that Azerbaijan was responsible for violating the ceasefire, at exactly 8:00 AM—the very minute that the ceasefire was scheduled to take effect—the Azeri ministry of defense released a message via Telegram alleging that Armenian forces had violated the ceasefire.¹⁰¹¹

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid.; “Ariavan Emerges as a New Community of Hope in Artsakh.” *Asbarez*. September 7, 2016.

<https://asbarez.com/154783/ariavan-emerges-as-a-new-community-of-hope-in-artsakh/>

¹⁰⁰⁸ Getzoyan, Pauline. “ACAA Artsakh Fund: Committed to Ariavan’s resilient villagers.” *Aravot*. March 12, 2020.

<https://www.aravot-en.am/2021/03/12/278301/>

¹⁰⁰⁹ “Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: US-brokered ceasefire frays soon after starting.” *BBC News*. October 26, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54686284>

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹¹ @KarabakhRecords. “At exactly 8 am when the ceasefire was to take effect, Azerbaijani MoD posted about an alleged violation by Armenian side. They deleted the msg shortly after, released a msg that AZ maintains ceasefire and posted the deleted “Armenian violation” msg afterwards. #NKPeace.” October 26, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/KarabakhRecords/status/1320579828605722628?s=20>

Evidently realizing their mistake, the message was soon deleted and reposted 10 minutes later, but Azerbaijan's lack of intention to uphold the ceasefire had already been revealed.¹⁰¹²

Apparently the result of changing strategic priorities, the Azeri offensive following the ceasefire shifted away from the Lachin corridor, instead focusing on capturing territory further to the east. The new Azeri offensive led north from Hadrut and east from the Hakari valley toward the symbolic city of Shushi.¹⁰¹³ As Richard Giragosian wrote on October 26, Baku faced a choice between "following military logic and sound strategy or opting instead for a decision with greater political and diplomatic dividends."¹⁰¹⁴ While the "Military logic suggests a choice of focusing on targeting the Lachin corridor, the critical lifeline between Karabakh and Armenia... The capture of the historic cultural center of Shushi, known to Azerbaijanis as Shusha, would offer significant political rewards for the government of President Ilham Aliyev."¹⁰¹⁵ Aliyev seems to have chosen the latter option, and Azeri forces began driving toward Shushi.

However, the routes toward Shushi took the Azeri army through mountainous and heavily forested terrain that gave the Armenian defenders an increased advantage and mitigated the effectiveness of Azerbaijan's drones. As a result, beginning on October 30, Azerbaijan began dropping white phosphorus munitions on the forests around Shushi to eliminate tree cover.¹⁰¹⁶ This campaign appears to have achieved its intended goal, with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) reporting in November that "large areas of forest in

¹⁰¹² @KarabakhRecords. "Here we go. Azerbaijani MoD states that "Armenia violated the ceasefire at 08:05". Reminding again, the 1st msg was released at 8 am and at 8:06 they announced that they will maintain the ceasefire. #NKpeace." October 26, 2020. <https://twitter.com/KarabakhRecords/status/1320580716732841984?s=20>

¹⁰¹³ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "And new claims from Aliyev, again some marginal and some in territory seized days or even weeks ago." October 28, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1321599201986465794?s=20>

¹⁰¹⁴ Giragosian, Richard. "Azerbaijan's next move will make or break Karabakh war." *Asia Times*. October 26, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/azerbaijans-next-move-will-make-or-break-karabakh-war/>

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁶ "Azerbaijan Uses White Phosphorus Munitions in Karabakh." *Civilnet*. October 31, 2020. <https://www.civilnet.am/news/380039/azerbaijan-uses-white-phosphorus-munitions-in-karabakh/?lang=en>

Armenian-controlled territory showed extensive fire damage at the same time as the videos alleging Azerbaijan's phosphorous munitions use appeared."¹⁰¹⁷ While Azerbaijan predictably denied these reports, instead accusing Armenian forces of using white phosphorus munitions, the DFR Lab concluded that "open-source evidence suggests that Azerbaijan used extreme and indiscriminate tactics against Armenian forces, causing high-collateral damage to the environment."¹⁰¹⁸ This conclusion was strengthened by later reports from Armenian doctors who were treating soldiers with injuries consistent to the effects of exposure to white phosphorus.¹⁰¹⁹

While the deforestation efforts likely aided in Azerbaijan's drive toward Shushi, they still faced an uphill—literally and figuratively—battle. In late October, Armenia reportedly began using the Russian "*Krasukha*" or "Belladonna" electronic jamming system, with the Russian press claiming it had downed nine Bayraktar TB2 drones.¹⁰²⁰ Although the use of the *Krasukha* system remained limited to near the Russian military base in Gyumri, they disrupted surveillance efforts, which had been ongoing above the Turkish-Armenian border, and the possibility that Russia would allow Armenia to deploy them closer to the front lines likely served an implicit threat to Azerbaijan.¹⁰²¹ The final barrier the Azeri offensive faced was the terrain. Along with Shushi's reputation as a "unassailable city," perched on a plateau above steep cliffs to the south, Azeri troops would have to approach the city without the benefit of the main highway, which

¹⁰¹⁷ Andriukaitis, Lukas. "Satellite imagery shows environmental damage of reported white phosphorus use in Nagorno Karabakh." *DFR Lab*. November 12, 2020. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/satellite-imagery-shows-environmental-damage-of-reported-white-phosphorus-use-in-nagorno-karabakh-9826391a295>

¹⁰¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁹ Langlois, Romeo. "Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia accuses Azerbaijan of using phosphorus bombs." *France24*. November 19, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20201119-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-armenia-accuses-azerbaijan-of-using-phosphorus-bombs>

¹⁰²⁰ Bryen, Stephen. "Russia knocking Turkish drones from Armenian skies." *Asia Times*. October 26, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/russia-knocking-turkish-drones-from-armenian-skies/>

¹⁰²¹ Ibid.

Armenian troops still controlled.¹⁰²²

The Azeri army appeared to take significant losses in its push to Shushi. Armenian defense officials released a video that “purportedly shows a column of destroyed Azeri armored vehicles including a T-72 main battle tank, two BMP-2s and several Israeli-manufactured SandCat MRAPs surrounded by scattered bodies of Azerbaijani soldiers. The video was geo-located to the gorge south of Berdzor, which Armenian MoD spokeswoman Shushan Stepanyan has nicknamed ‘Death Valley.’”¹⁰²³ However, even as Armenian officials maintained a confident tone and assured the public that Azerbaijan’s attacks were being repelled, it was becoming clear that the Azeri army was advancing toward Shushi. On October 29, Harutyunyan had announced that Azeri forces were just five kilometers away from the city and urged “each and every one of you [Armenians] to unite and defend our Shushi, our Artsakh, our national dignity.”¹⁰²⁴ By November 4, Azeri troops had reached the outskirts of the city, but had approached from the south, leaving them at the bottom of Shushi’s cliffs.¹⁰²⁵ From the base of the cliffs, Azeri troops concentrated on capturing the road leading into the city from Lachin—part of road that led not only into Shushi but also onward to Stepanakert.¹⁰²⁶ Armenian journalist Tatul Hakobyan would later write that as of November 6, fierce fighting was taking place on the outskirts of Shushi, with the Azeri forces already above the cliffs.¹⁰²⁷ In footage from the outskirts of Shushi apparently taken on November 7, Armenian forces could be seen firing in the direction of the

¹⁰²² Synovitz, Ron. “Azerbaijani Forces Close In On Nagorno-Karabakh's 'Unassailable' Mountain Fortress City.” *RFE/RL*. November 5, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-forces-close-in-on-nagorno-karabakh-s-unassailable-mountain-fortress-city-shushi-susa-/30932210.html>

¹⁰²³ Elliott, Raffi. “Armenians defending Shushi, neutralizing Azeri assaults.” *Armenian Weekly*. November 6, 2020. <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/11/06/shushi-out-of-reach-as-armenian-defenders-neutralize-azeri-assaults/>

¹⁰²⁴ “‘Enemy is 5 Kilometers from Shushi,’ Warns Artsakh President.” *Asbarez*. October 29, 2020. <https://asbarez.com/198115/enemy-is-5-kilometers-from-shushi-warns-artsakh-president/>

¹⁰²⁵ Synovitz.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁷ Hakobyan, *Valley of Death*, 66.

city, suggesting that Azeri troops had entered the city or were at least in control of parts of the highway.¹⁰²⁸ By the following day, Aliyev announced that Azerbaijan was in control of Shushi, a claim that was denied by Armenia.¹⁰²⁹ As late as November 9, Pashinyan and other Armenian officials remained outwardly optimistic about the Armenian force's positions, with Pashinyan announcing on his Facebook page that the "Battles for Shushi continue."¹⁰³⁰ However, as Harutyunyan would admit after the end of the war, "We argued whether we had Shushi or not, but we lost the main control from November 5, and from November 7 completely."¹⁰³¹

The loss of Shushi was a death knell for the Armenian forces both psychologically and strategically. In terms of strategic importance, Azerbaijan's control over Shushi gave it the ability to isolate Stepanakert and prevent supplies or troops from reaching the city. It also meant that Azeri forces were under 10 kilometers away from Stepanakert, with a modern highway directly connecting them to Artsakh's capital. Indeed, Harutyunyan would later allege that Azeri troops were just 2-3 kilometers away from Stepanakert when the ceasefire was signed.¹⁰³² The loss of Shushi, which has long been regarded by both Armenians and Azeris as the spiritual and cultural center of Artsakh, was also a significant blow to the morale of Armenian forces. The immense importance of Shushi—in both a strategic and physiological sense—is encapsulated in a centuries old Armenian expression known to Armenians and Azeris alike: Whoever controls

¹⁰²⁸ O'Farrell, Ryan. @ryanmofarrell. "Nov 7 footage showed Armenian troops on the other side of the city firing towards the city, meaning Azerbaijani troops had taken the highway on the northern side of the town or were inside at least parts of the town itself; Aliyev claimed it this morning." November 8, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1325528360169181184?s=20>

¹⁰²⁹ "Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan 'takes key town' in Armenia conflict." *BBC News*. November 8, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54862180>

¹⁰³⁰ "Battle for Shushi Continues." *Civilnet*. November 9, 2020. <https://www.civilnet.am/news/475088/battle-for-shushi-continues/?lang=en>

¹⁰³¹ "Artsakh President Calls Truce Necessary Step to Save Republic." *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. November 10, 2020. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/11/10/36108/>

¹⁰³² Ibid.

Shushi, controls Artsakh.¹⁰³³

With Azerbaijan in control of Shushi and threatening to take Stepanakert and the rest of Artsakh, Armenia's leaders were forced to seek peace at almost any cost. However, on November 9, while the final peace deal was likely being negotiated, a Russian military helicopter was shot down by Azeri soldiers near the border between Armenia and Nakhichevan.¹⁰³⁴ Later the same day, Azerbaijan took responsibility for the apparent mistake that had killed two Russian soldiers, apologizing and offering to pay Russia compensation.¹⁰³⁵ While it is unclear how far—if at all—negotiations had progressed by that point, the incident likely provided some pressure on Azerbaijan to accept a peace deal, as it threatened to bring Russia more directly into the conflict. Finally, after 44 days of war, approximately 7,000 deaths—4,000 Armenians and 3,000 Azeris, and three failed ceasefires, Pashinyan announced on his Facebook page that he had made a “difficult, incredibly difficult decision for myself and for all of us.”¹⁰³⁶ A few hours later, the text of the joint statement was released, bringing an end to the war.

¹⁰³³ Synovitz.

¹⁰³⁴ Roth, Andrew. “Two dead as Russian military helicopter shot down in Armenia.” *The Guardian*. November 9, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/09/two-dead-as-russian-military-helicopter-shot-down-in-armenia>

¹⁰³⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁶ Pashinyan says about 4,000 Armenian troops killed in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *TASS*. April 14, 2021. <https://tass.com/world/1277921>; RFE/RL Staff. “Azerbaijan Says Nearly 3,000 Troops Killed in Nagorno-Karabakh Fighting.” *Voice of America*. December 3, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/azerbaijan-says-nearly-3000-troops-killed-nagorno-karabakh-fighting>; Pashinyan, Nikol. Facebook. “Միմեկի հայրենակիցներ, քույրեր եւ եղբայրներ” [Dear compatriots, sisters and brothers]. November 9, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/nikol.pashinyan/posts/2807204759599901>

Conclusion

Peace Breaks Out

In order to secure a ceasefire, Pashinyan was forced to accept extremely harsh terms that amounted to a surrender. Not only did Armenia ratify Azerbaijan's control of the territory captured during the war—most notably Shushi, they also had to agree to return all the territory outside the borders of the NKAO that was still under Armenian control.¹⁰³⁷ Dates were set for the return of each region, with the last, Lachin, set to be evacuated by December 1.¹⁰³⁸ In addition, the ceasefire proclaimed that “All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic.”¹⁰³⁹ While the agreement provided no clarification regarding the form that such transportation should take, Azeri officials were quick to claim the right to establish a corridor across southern Armenia.¹⁰⁴⁰ In exchange for these drastic concessions, Armenians would maintain control over the parts of the NKAO still under their control and be allowed to use the Lachin corridor, both of which would be protected by approximately 2,000 Russian peacekeepers.¹⁰⁴¹

Armenians, who had largely believed their government's optimistic reports about the situation on the front lines, were taken by surprise by the terms of the deal. Angry protestors

¹⁰³⁷ Ward, Alex. “The surprising Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal over Nagorno-Karabakh, explained.” *Vox*. November 10, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/11/10/21558428/armenia-azerbaijan-war-nagorno-karabakh-russia-turkey>

¹⁰³⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁹ “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation.” *Kremlin.ru*. November 10, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ward. “The surprising Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal.”

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid.

“spilled into the streets of the Armenian capital of Yerevan in the wee hours of the morning, storming both Pashinyan’s official residence and the parliament, while an angry mob beat parliamentary Speaker Ararat Mirzoyan so badly he required minor surgery.”¹⁰⁴² For days after the ceasefire, thousands of Armenians remained in the streets of Yerevan, demanding that Pashinyan—who they argued had betrayed Armenia by giving up Artsakh—resign.¹⁰⁴³ Pashinyan responded by arresting several opposition leaders and posted a video on Facebook directed at soldiers in which he said he was “waiting for you in Yerevan.”¹⁰⁴⁴ The opposition accused Pashinyan of attempting to incite a civil war and several members of his own My Step coalition resigned or left the party.¹⁰⁴⁵

While opposition to a peace agreement—which almost certainly would have to include significant Armenian concessions—was likely inevitable, Pashinyan made two mistakes that contributed to the explosive reaction to his announcement of the ceasefire. First, his government had misled the public about the true nature of the war, hiding the severity of Armenian losses until he was forced to suddenly reveal the full severity of the situation to justify the peace deal. As Artsakh’s president Arayik Harutyunyan—who also faced calls to resign—explained, “If the fighting continued at a similar pace, then within days we would have lost all of Artsakh and would have had more casualties...If we lost Stepanakert, what would become of the soldiers on the front line in the Askeran and Martuni area?”¹⁰⁴⁶ While the terms ceasefire were likely a necessary sacrifice to ensure that Artsakh was not entirely conquered by the Azeris, to the

¹⁰⁴² Cookman, Liz. “Armenians Rage Against Last-Minute Peace Deal.” *Foreign Policy*. November 10, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/10/armenians-oppose-last-minute-peace-deal-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh/>

¹⁰⁴³ Mejlumyan, Ani. “Armenian PM under increased pressure after “civil war” threat.” *Eurasianet*. November 16, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-pm-under-increased-pressure-after-civil-war-threat>

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁶ “Artsakh President Calls Truce Necessary Step to Save Republic.” *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. November 10, 2020. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/11/10/36108/>

Armenian public that was not yet fully aware of how dire the situation on the frontline had become it seemed like a sudden act of capitulation.

On a more strategic level, Pashinyan waited too long to make the decision that Armenia needed to be willing to make drastic concessions to secure a lasting ceasefire. Azerbaijan's clear military advantage had become apparent early in the war, making an Armenian victory unlikely. Although Armenians sources have yet to confirm it and the details remain vague, Putin's claim that Russia brokered a ceasefire deal in mid-October that Armenia rejected suggests that Pashinyan was not willing to make concessions until it was too late.¹⁰⁴⁷ While it is likely that Pashinyan would also have faced opposition if he had made significant concessions to secure peace before the defeat of Armenian forces had become assured, he would have been able to explain the necessity of doing so by revealing the situation on the front lines.

While Pashinyan resisted the calls for his resignation, periodic protests continued over the next several months. A movement calling itself the Homeland Salvation Movement was formed to pressure Pashinyan to resign, and influential figures in Armenia including "the Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces, top military brass, the country's president, the Catholicos and others continued to demand that he step down."¹⁰⁴⁸ In December, the extent of the opposition to Pashinyan was made strikingly clear when, "he attempted to travel to southern Armenia to meet with residents of villages newly abutting Azerbaijani forces, but was forced to turn back when angry residents – including local officials – blocked the way."¹⁰⁴⁹ However, while opposition to Pashinyan had certainly increased, he had not completely lost his

¹⁰⁴⁷ Mejlumyan, Ani. "Putin says Armenia could have stopped the war and kept Shusha." *Eurasianet*. November 18, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/putin-says-armenia-could-have-stopped-the-war-and-kept-shusha>

¹⁰⁴⁸ "PM Nikol Pashinyan Resigns, Formally Triggering Election Process." *EVN Report*. April 25, 2021. <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/pm-nikol-pashinyan-resigns-formally-triggering-election-process>

¹⁰⁴⁹ Mejlumyan, Ani. "Armenian ruling party backtracks on early vote." *Eurasianet*. February 8, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-ruling-party-backtracks-on-early-vote>

supporters. In December, Pashinyan offered to discuss the possibility of early elections with the opposition, although he seemed reluctant to resign—a necessary step to trigger snap elections under Armenia’s constitution.¹⁰⁵⁰ Then, in late January, former president-Robert Kocharyan announced his intention to participate in any upcoming elections, and Pashinyan seemed to backtrack on the possibility of early elections.¹⁰⁵¹ However, Pashinyan soon reasserted his willingness to face elections and in March he announced that he would resign in order to trigger elections, a step he took on April 25, 2021.¹⁰⁵²

With elections scheduled to be held on June 20, Armenia appears poised for a showdown between Pashinyan and Kocharyan, both of whom are deeply divisive figures. Furthermore, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, another former president, announced in mid-May that he also intends to participate in the election as the representative of the Armenian National Congress, although he likely has a smaller base of support than either Kocharyan or Pashinyan.¹⁰⁵³ A poll held in February asking Armenians about their view of the Prime Minister’s office, which was then still occupied by Pashinyan, revealed a divided population with 29 percent of respondents reporting a “very favorable” view and 28 percent reporting a “very unfavorable” view.¹⁰⁵⁴ While the results of the election are far from certain, Pashinyan’s Civil Contract appears to still be the most popular political party, with 33 percent reporting that they would vote for the party in upcoming elections.¹⁰⁵⁵ In contrast, only 2 percent said they would vote for Kocharyan and a further 1 percent expressed support for the Republican Party.¹⁰⁵⁶ Rather, the most significant conclusion

¹⁰⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵² “PM Nikol Pashinyan Resigns, Formally Triggering Election Process.” *EVN Report*.

¹⁰⁵³ Muradyan, Tirayr. “Levon Ter-Petrosyan to Head ANC Election List If Party Decides to Participate in June Election.” *Hetq*. May 16, 2021. <https://hetq.am/en/article/130940>

¹⁰⁵⁴ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia.” *Center for Insights in Survey Research*. February 2021. 17. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_for_publication_armenia_electoral_reform_march_8_2021.pdf

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ibid.

of the poll is the extent of political disillusionment in Armenia. 42 percent of respondents—by far the leading answer—said that they would not vote for any candidate with a further 14 percent uncertain or refusing to answer.¹⁰⁵⁷

An Unlikely Victor

Just as Armenia was clearly the loser of the war, Azerbaijan emerged as a clear winner, having successfully regained control of the seven surrounding regions as well as the psychologically important city of Shushi. Artsakh, which had been a “smoldering symbol of national shame and humiliation in Azerbaijan” for the past twenty-five years, now has been transformed into a source of national pride as the country “erupted in wild celebrations.”¹⁰⁵⁸ While the war has been seen as a victory by the overwhelming majority of Azeris, perhaps more than anything, it was a victory for President Ilham Aliyev. The war “transformed President Ilham Aliyev’s political stature,” dramatically increasing his popularity among the Azeri people.¹⁰⁵⁹ According to Azeri political commentator Bahruz Samadov, “Aliyev’s domestic political goal before Baku’s battlefield victories had been to maintain ‘the hegemony of the ruling party’-- cracking down on his political opponents... ‘Now he actually enjoys popular support.’”¹⁰⁶⁰

However, while Azerbaijan is currently gripped with jubilation at their military victory, it is possible that with time this triumph will be tempered. Azerbaijan captured the majority of the territory previously under Armenian control—taking more than 8,000 square kilometers of territory during the war and as a result of the peace agreement.¹⁰⁶¹ However, that still leaves just

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Editorial Board. “A Quick End to a Dangerous War.” *The New York Times*. November 20, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/opinion/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal.html>

¹⁰⁵⁹ Synovitz, Ron. “Analysis: Nagorno-Karabakh War Transforms The Legacy Of Azerbaijani President Aliyev.” *RFE/RL*. December 17, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/nagorno-karabakh-legacy-azerbaijani-president-aliyev/31006302.html>

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶¹ Martirosyan, Sona. “Op-ed: myths that replaced reality led to Armenia's defeat in Karabakh war.” *JAM News*. January 25, 2020. <https://jam-news.net/tatul-hakobyan-causes-of-myths-in-the-karabakh-war-in-armenian-society/>

under 4,000 square kilometers under the control of Artsakh's government—territory that is now protected by Russian peacekeepers.¹⁰⁶² Azerbaijan had long resisted the deployment of peacekeepers—especially Russian peacekeepers, believing that their presence would fortify the Armenians' positions. Already, there have been reports that Azeris are dissatisfied with what pro-Azeri sources have called “The one-sided and partial attitude of Russian military elements.”¹⁰⁶³ While the current deal only provides for the peacekeepers to stay for five years, their deployment can be extended and it is unlikely that Russia will easily give up the influence that having their soldiers in the region provides.¹⁰⁶⁴ While the war certainly was a victory for Azerbaijan, it was not the complete victory that Aliyev was pressing for during the first weeks of fighting.

Indeed, it is perhaps Russia that stands to benefit the most from the war's aftermath. As Simon Ostrovsky explains, Turkey—for all its efforts to support Azerbaijan—gained little additional influence in the Caucasus, but, “One country did, however, increase its footprint: Russia, the power that most recently ruled both Armenia and Azerbaijan and, incidentally, was the only major arms supplier to have sold copious amounts of weaponry to both sides.”¹⁰⁶⁵ While Armenia may have been gradually shifting away from Russia before the war, with a weakened military and a border with Azerbaijan that has increased by hundreds of kilometers, the country is more dependent than ever on Russia's support. Furthermore, the presence of Russian peacekeepers, who can exercise significant influence over which side controls a given stretch of

¹⁰⁶² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 328.

¹⁰⁶³ “Azerbaijan dissatisfied with Russian peacekeepers' pro-Armenia attitude.” *Daily Sabah*. January 7, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/azerbaijan-dissatisfied-with-russian-peacekeepers-pro-armenia-attitude>

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ward.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ostrovsky, Simon. “How Azerbaijan Won the Karabakh War.” *Pulitzer Center*. January 6, 2021. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-azerbaijan-won-karabakh-war>

territory, gives Russia leverage over Azerbaijan as well.¹⁰⁶⁶ Finally, the failure of Western countries to make meaningful contributions to the peace process once again demonstrated Russia's geopolitical dominance in the Caucasus. In an evaluation of the political situation of Artsakh written after the peace deal, *The New York Times* concluded that "the fact is that Russia was the only power capable of putting an end to what could have become a dangerous regional clash."¹⁰⁶⁷ Just as was the case after the Russian-brokered Bishkek Protocol, "the Minsk Group is now facing – like no other actor engaged in this conflict – a crisis of relevance" after failing to have a significant impact on the war's outcome.¹⁰⁶⁸ As Laurence Broers writes, after six weeks of relative restraint, "Moscow added Azerbaijan to the list of states where it has boots on the ground in the South Caucasus, shut out the West, put Turkey in its place and made plain that it remains the dominant power in the South Caucasus."¹⁰⁶⁹

Russia's victory seems to have been largely the result of a successfully taking advantage of a dynamic situation rather than a scripted approach. As it had for the past twenty-five years of the conflict, Moscow avoided decisively taking either side throughout the war until "the prospect of a complete Azerbaijani military victory forced Russia's hand."¹⁰⁷⁰ Russia's intervention "saves a future for Moscow's relationship with Yerevan" by protecting the remaining portion of Artsakh while also not alienating Azerbaijan "by preserving a truncated Nagorno-Karabakh to which former residents may not feel incentives to return, and mandating a five-yearly veto power

¹⁰⁶⁶ "Russian peacekeepers extend control following skirmish near Hadrut." *OC Media*. December 14, 2020. <https://oc-media.org/russian-peacekeepers-extend-control-following-skirmish-near-hadrut/>

¹⁰⁶⁷ Editorial Board. "A Quick End to a Dangerous War."

¹⁰⁶⁸ Broers, Laurence. "Perspectives | The OSCE's Minsk Group: A unipolar artifact in a multipolar world." *Eurasianet*. May 11, 2020. https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-did-russia-win-the-karabakh-war?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

¹⁰⁶⁹ Broers, Laurence. "Perspectives | Did Russia win the Karabakh war?" *Eurasianet*. November 17, 2020. https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-did-russia-win-the-karabakh-war?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid.

for both Baku and Yerevan on the renewal of the peacekeeping mandate.”¹⁰⁷¹

The Conflict Continues

The aftermath of the war has also witnessed the rise of new issues that have further increased tensions between Armenians and Azeris. While the November 10 agreement called upon both sides to release any prisoners of war, Azerbaijan continues to hold nearly 200 Armenians in captivity, including 57 that they captured after the war had already ended.¹⁰⁷² Extremely troubling reports have emerged that Azerbaijan has subjected these prisoners of war to torture. Human Rights Watch interviewed four Armenians who had been held captive by Azerbaijan, who “all described prolonged and repeated beatings. One described being prodded with a sharp metal rod, and another said he was subjected to electric shocks, and one was repeatedly burned with a cigarette lighter.”¹⁰⁷³ Most shockingly, in May it was revealed that 19 Armenian prisoners of war—twelve civilians and seven soldiers—had been killed while in Azeri custody.¹⁰⁷⁴ Azerbaijan appears to be attempting to use the remaining prisoners of war to gain leverage over Armenia.

A second new source of tension has been Azerbaijan’s destruction of Armenian religious and historical sites in its newly-won territories. Vandalism or complete destruction of Armenian *khachkars* or other monuments appears to have been widespread both during the war and

¹⁰⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷² Kucera, Joshua. “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Post-War Report.” *Eurasianet*. April 23, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/prisoners-of-the-caucasus-post-war-report>

¹⁰⁷³ “Azerbaijan: Armenian POWs Abused in Custody.” *Human Rights Watch*. March 19, 2021. [https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/19/azerbaijan-armenian-pows-abused-custody#:~:text=\(Berlin\)%20%E2%80%93%20Azerbaijani%20forces%20abused,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/19/azerbaijan-armenian-pows-abused-custody#:~:text=(Berlin)%20%E2%80%93%20Azerbaijani%20forces%20abused,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.)

¹⁰⁷⁴ Avetisyan, Ani. “Nineteen Armenians ‘killed in Azerbaijani captivity.’” *OC Media*. May 4, 2021. <https://oc-media.org/nineteen-armenians-killed-in-azerbaijani-captivity/>

afterwards.¹⁰⁷⁵ Azeri soldiers also completely leveled an Armenian church in Jabrayil after taking control of the city.¹⁰⁷⁶ Similarly, two Armenian churches in Shushi, Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and the smaller Kanach Zham, have both had their distinctively-Armenian pointed domes removed, apparently in an attempt to erase the Armenian elements of the city's history.¹⁰⁷⁷ Lastly, analysis of satellite imagery conducted by Caucasus Heritage Watch—an organization created to monitor cultural heritage sites in the wake of the war—has revealed that Azerbaijan destroyed two Armenian cemeteries in the village of Mets Tagher and in Shushi.¹⁰⁷⁸ This continuation of Azerbaijan's lengthy history of cultural erasure targeting Armenian sites has angered many Armenians, making peace a more remote prospect.

However, by far the most concerning new source of tension has been the process of delineating the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan along the formerly Armenian-controlled territories that border southern Armenia. The process is complicated by the fact that the border was drawn by the Soviet Union and—because Armenian forces took control of the Azeri territories in the 1990s—has never functioned as a truly international border. Not only do the two countries dispute the location of the border in many places, but they have also had to confront the fact that the border was drawn in “a different period in history, when the boundaries between

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ambartsumian, Yelena. “Why Armenian Cultural Heritage Threatens Azerbaijan's Claims to Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Hyperallergic*. February 28, 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/614619/why-armenian-cultural-heritage-threatens-azerbajians-claims-to-nagorno-karabakh/>

¹⁰⁷⁶ Abdurasulov, Abdujalil. “Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church.” *BBC News*. March 25, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-56517835>

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ambartsumian; Kucera, Joshua. “Azerbaijan begins controversial renovation of Armenian church.” *Eurasianet*. May 7, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-begins-controversial-renovation-of-armenian-church>

¹⁰⁷⁸ Caucasus Heritage Watch. @CaucasusHW. “ALERT: An Armenian cemetery in the village of Mets Tagher/Böyük Tağlar was recently destroyed. The cemetery was founded in the early 19th c. and was in use when Armenians evacuated the village in 2020. Satellite imagery shows its complete destruction. Signs of bulldozer scars. 1/3.” May 4, 2021. <https://twitter.com/CaucasusHW/status/1389639754602491904>; Caucasus Heritage Watch. @CaucasusHW. “CHW has made a high-confidence assessment that a centuries-old Armenian cemetery north of Shusha/Shushi has been partially destroyed. A portion of the grounds on the west side of a road leading into the city was leveled in the construction of a building complex. 1/4.” May 17, 2021. <https://twitter.com/CaucasusHW/status/1394329613757734919>

union republics were less important and were unproblematically tangled with infrastructure like roads and irrigation canals, or grazing land.”¹⁰⁷⁹ Critically, “The most important road in southern Armenia—the highway between Syunik’s two largest cities of Goris and Kapan—repeatedly crosses the official border.”¹⁰⁸⁰ While the Armenian government has signaled that it plans to construct a new highway that bypasses the border, the current necessity of frequent border crossings has caused tensions between the two sides.¹⁰⁸¹ Further increasing tensions at the border, Azeri leaders, including President Aliyev, have even begun referring to southern Armenia as “‘historical Azerbaijani territory’ and hinting at irredentist ambitions there.”¹⁰⁸²

The danger of these uncertain border was perhaps best revealed on May 12, when Azeri forces “advanced up to 3.5 kilometers toward Armenia from their previous positions and crossed Armenia’s border.”¹⁰⁸³ A hostile confrontation that has yet to be resolved ensued. Although the conflict has not turned violent, it is not difficult to envision a scenario in which a dispute between soldiers on an unmarked border escalates into a conflict that puts Armenia and Azerbaijan on the path to another war. As the situation currently stands, Armenia has invoked the CSTO’s collective defense measures, although Pashinyan has sought aid under Article 2 of the treaty, which commits the organization to undertake “joint consultations” in the face of a threat to a member, rather than the more severe Article 4.¹⁰⁸⁴ Whether the CSTO will come to

¹⁰⁷⁹ McGlynn, Evangeline. “Perspectives | On the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the map is not the territory.” *Eurasianet*. March 15, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-on-the-armenia-azerbaijan-border-the-map-is-not-the-territory>

¹⁰⁸⁰ Hauer, Neil. “The New Old Frontier: Demarcation Sparks Tensions As Azerbaijani Control Returns Along Southern Armenian Border.” *RFE/RL*. January 13, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-border-tensions-nagorno-karabakh/31043084.html>

¹⁰⁸¹ Badaliam, Susan. “Armenian Government Vows Bypass Roads In Border Region.” *Azatutyun*. February 11, 2021. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31097928.html>

¹⁰⁸² Kucera, Joshua. “Armenia and Azerbaijan in new border crisis.” *Eurasianet*. May 14, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-in-new-border-crisis>

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁴ RFE/RL Armenia Service. “Armenia Turns To Russian-Led CSTO Amid Border Standoff With Azerbaijan.” *RFE/RL*. May 14, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-putin-troops-border-withdrawal/31254474.html>

Armenia's aid—and the ultimate conclusion of the incident—remains to be seen.

While the presence of Russian peacekeepers does provide a significant deterrent to a return to war in the short term, in the longer term the November 10 peace deal has done little to resolve the underlying conflict. In fact, tensions between Armenians and Azeris are higher than ever as a host of new issues have emerged in the months following the war. Furthermore, the fundamental issue that has driven conflict since its inception—which side will control Artsakh—remains an open question. Azerbaijan may have conquered Shushi and other parts of the region, but a 4,000 square kilometer territory with almost 100,000 Armenian residents remains.¹⁰⁸⁵ The current term of the Russian peacekeepers' deployment only lasts for five years and while Moscow and Armenia are likely to push for it to be renewed, Azerbaijan has the option to exercise its veto. Without a negotiated solution that both Armenians and Azeris are satisfied with, something that is extremely unlikely without substantial international involvement, the threat of violence will continue to hang over Artsakh and war will almost certainly return to the region.

¹⁰⁸⁵ “More than 93,000 Artsakh Residents Took Refuge in Armenia, Official Says.” *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. January 21, 2021. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/01/21/more-than-93000-artsakh-residents-took-refuge-in-armenia-official-says/#:~:text=To%20date%2C%2049%2C%20827%20refugees,assistance%20and%20restore%20civilian%20infrastructure>.