

NAGORNO-KARABAKH: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF CONFLICT



[Vladimir Pachkov, SJ](#) / [People](#) / Published Date:23 November 2020

The armed conflict in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which broke out again this year, is only the latest in a dispute with a centuries-long history. I want to examine the genesis of this conflict and its historical background, without going into the current situation, which is constantly changing and well reported by the media.

Since it is all too obvious that any statement about the conflict can be considered biased, I am trying to rely on sources that are considered academic (for example, university research, although this can bring to light tragic events whose reporting will please no one), or to present the point of view of both sides. In my attempt to describe events as objectively as possible, I try to report the facts as they emerge from today's research.

Karabakh in history

The area of present-day Nagorno-Karabakh was an Armenian homeland as early as the 6th century B.C., when the first independent Armenian dynasty established its rule there after the collapse of the kingdom of Urartu.^[1] A very eventful history has seen this area being ruled by independent Armenian dynasties and foreign powers, such as Persia and Byzantium.^[2] Since the 15th century, under the aegis of the Persian Empire, Armenian rulers were able to maintain a certain autonomy. In the 18th century they organized a national movement that, with the help of Russia, would lead to the liberation of the Armenians from the Persians and Turks.^[3]

In the middle of the 18th century Turkish nomads managed to invade the Karabakh area – it had been known by that name since the 16th century – and established the so-called Karabakh Khanate, which existed for 40 years before coming under the control of the Russian Empire. The time of peace in this region ended with the first Revolution in Russia, when the population was involved in the so-called Armenian-Tartar War.^[4]

The roots of the current conflict

The modern phase of the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh area dates from 1918. After a peace treaty was signed between the Bolshevik government and the German Empire in Brest-Litovsk, the South Caucasus area was occupied by German and Turkish troops. In a region of the South Caucasus province, which had been part of the faltering Russian Empire, the state called “Azerbaijan” was founded. Its name was borrowed from that of a province in northern Persia). The plan was to unite the former Russian territories with this Persian province into a single state. The occupation of the Germans and Turks in the South Caucasus did not last long because these two empires soon dissolved.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Karabakh was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Federation, which soon split into Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The territory of Nagorno-Karabakh was claimed by both the Armenians (who made up 98 percent of the population at the time) and the Azeris. After the Bolshevik conquest in 1920, the territory (as well as that of Nakhchivan) was assigned to Azerbaijan by Stalin.

In 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh was established as an autonomous administration, but without including wider territories that were historically part of the region inhabited by Armenians, which instead were under the direct control of Azerbaijan. A small village called “Khankendi” (from Turkish: “the settlement of the khan”), renamed shortly afterward “Stepanakert” (in memory of a communist, Stepan Shaumyan) became the administrative center.

When the autonomous region was established – according to the reports of the meeting of the South Caucasus Office of the Communist Party on June 23, 1923 – 158,000 Armenians, 11,000 Turks (Azeris) and 6,000 Kurds lived there. Moreover, in 1923 Armenians made up almost 90 percent of the population not only in the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also in neighboring areas..

The incorporation of Armenian territories into the Republic of Azerbaijan, albeit as an autonomous entity, did not satisfy either Armenians or Azeris.^[5] At a meeting with writers in November 1999, Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s first president, said that the self-government of Nagorno-Karabakh had become a tragedy for the country. In fact, at the time, people wanted to give that area to Armenia, but Azerbaijan’s leadership prevented it, so Nagorno-Karabakh remained assigned to Azerbaijan, but it should not have become an autonomous region.^[6]

The Armenians were even less satisfied. The incorporation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region into the Republic of Azerbaijan led to mass protests on the Armenian side, and at the same time led to armed resistance in Nagorno-Karabakh against both the government of Azerbaijan and the Bolsheviks. This movement was subsequently suppressed.^[7]

In the 1920s the South Caucasus Republic played an important role in local politics and administration, as an administrative structure above the Republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Its existence diminished the authority of the government of Azerbaijan over the Armenian territories. The Armenians continued to hope that Nagorno-Karabakh would be given to Armenia. In 1930-32 and 1936-37, representations were made at state and party authority meetings for this to happen. But these demands were never met.

An interesting event took place in 1945, after the end of the war, when the first secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia wrote to Stalin, asking for Nagorno-Karabakh to be given to Armenia, on the grounds that this was the will of the people, and also for economic and socio-cultural reasons. The request was not rejected, but Moscow first wanted to know the opinion of the first secretary of the Communist Party in Azerbaijan. He replied that there was nothing against it, provided that Georgia, Armenia and Dagestan gave Azerbaijan their historical territories (a total of 330,000 square kilometers) in exchange.^[8] The central government in Moscow did not agree with this, so nothing was concluded.

During this period, Azeri settlement took place in areas that were mostly inhabited by Armenians and now belonged to the Republic of Azerbaijan: the best land was taken from the Armenians to establish Azerbaijani settlements. At the same time there was also a process of deportation of members of the Azeri ethnic group from the Armenian Republic.

The deportation was decided at a meeting of the USSR central government on December 23, 1947, not by the Armenians. At that time, more than 170,000 Azeris were living in the territory of the Republic of Armenia. In 1947, the 60 settlements that had Turkish names at the time were given Armenian names. It is still unclear how many of the Azeri people were forcibly displaced: according to Armenian sources, they numbered 58,500, while the Azeris claim more than 100,000.^[9]

Heydar Aliyev was president of the Republic of Azerbaijan from 1993 to 2003. He devoted special attention to the development of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region. The government built roads, schools and other economic and social infrastructure. In the Pedagogical Institute of the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, education was taught in three languages, Armenian, Russian and Azerbaijani. All this made it possible for more and more ethnic Azeris to live in that territory. If in 1970 the Azeris were 18 percent of the total population of Nagorno-Karabakh, in 1979 their numbers increased to 23 percent, and in 1989 to 30 percent.^[10]

The Armenian language had been designated as the official language when the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was established. It was the language of the majority of the population, but was not even mentioned in the Nagorno-Karabakh territory order adopted in Azerbaijan at the time of Aliyev (June 22, 1981).^[11]

The Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region suffered not only from nationalism, but also because of atheism. If in 1931 there were 112 churches and 18 monasteries in the region, with 276 priests and monks, after 1932 everything was closed. Until 1989, there were no longer any churches in that region in which liturgies were celebrated. The situation for Armenian Christians did not change even after Stalin mitigated the persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church during the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis. After the collapse of the Russian Empire and until the time of Perestroika, Armenians were prevented from developing their national and spiritual identity.

The time of change

The situation changed suddenly in 1988. On February 20 of that year, an extraordinary session of the Nagorno-Karabakh Parliament invited the Parliaments of the Republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as the USSR, to hand over the region to Armenia.^[12] On September 2, 1991, the Declaration of Foundation of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Appeal to the Azerbaijani People and the People of Nagorno-Karabakh were adopted.^[13] On December 10 of the same year the referendum on the independence of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh took place.^[14]

Unfortunately this was only the beginning of a new phase that would lead to war. Conflicts and voices suppressed (or kept under control) by the USSR exploded during Perestroika and immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Azerbaijani government reacted harshly to the decision of the Nagorno-Karabakh Parliament to establish itself as an independent republic. And what is worse, fighting immediately broke out between Armenians and Azeris. The first violent conflict took place on February 22, 1988. According to eyewitness accounts, several hundred Azeris arrived in the city of Askeran to demonstrate, followed by a shootout in which two Azeris were killed. But what happened next – the events in Sumgait, which shook the whole of Russia – can be considered as an Armenian pogrom. On February 27 and 28, 1988, 26 Armenians and two Azeris were killed, and 18,000 Armenians had to flee.

In June, the parliaments of Azerbaijan and Armenia took two opposing decisions: Azerbaijan rejected Nagorno-Karabakh's request to join Armenia, while the Armenian Parliament granted it. As a result, there were further Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan (the bloodiest in the capital, Baku). On July 12 the Parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh decided that the region was no longer part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. As the situation was worsening and violent

clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis continued, on January 15, 1990, by decision of the Supreme Council of the USSR, the right of derogation was granted to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In Baku this right was introduced only on January 19, when the pogroms were practically finished. Tens of thousands of Armenians had fled the capital and other areas of Azerbaijan, while the exodus of Azerbaijanis from Armenia had begun.^[15] This “population exchange” ended practically between 1988 and 1991.^[16]

When on March 17, 1991, in a referendum that took place on the entire USSR territory, the majority of Armenians voted against the preservation of the USSR while the majority of Azerbaijanis voted in favor, the central government in Moscow chose to repress the Armenian population and, in the framework of the so-called “identity card control,” other Armenians were expelled by force, as reported by an officer of the USSR Interior Ministry.^[17] After this operation – known as “Operation Ring” – the Armenian armed resistance began. It was then that the first self-defense groups were organized, which later became the core of the Armenian army and the Nagorno-Karabakh army.

After the failure of an attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991, a referendum was held in Armenia on independence from the USSR: 90 percent of the population voted in favor. On August 30, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted the “Declaration on the Restoration of State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan as it existed between 1918 and 1920,” and on September 2 the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh was founded, which included the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and an area inhabited mainly by Armenians outside that region.

Although during the period of the Independent Republic of Azerbaijan the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh was a disputed area and not yet legally part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Government in Baku did not want to give it up, and so, on November 26, it dissolved the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. On December 10 a referendum was held in which 99 percent of the population voted for the self-determination of this small sub-Caucasian Republic.

As a consequence of these conflicting decisions, a war broke out. It lasted from January 1992 to May 1994. Armenia was not officially involved in this conflict, although the country was in fact on the side of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. This war did not end with a peace treaty or agreement, but only with a ceasefire. The armistice was signed by the respective defense ministers. In practice, the Armenians acquired control of the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh and some surrounding, predominantly Armenian, territories, which the Azerbaijani side did not recognize. Since then, this ceasefire held – again with some incidents – until the events of this year, when the Azerbaijani leadership tried, with Turkish support, to gain control of the region.

On the night between November 9 and 10, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration that sanctions the end of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. An agreement reached, therefore, with the mediation of Moscow: it was Putin himself who announced the agreement. This, however, was followed by the furious reaction of hundreds of Armenians, who invaded the Parliamentary building, attacking the government in Yerevan, trashing its offices and accusing Prime Minister Pashinyan of treason.

Conclusions

We conclude with a personal episode. In Russia there are large diasporas of Armenians and Azeris. Not far from the house where I was born, an Armenian bought a piece of land, built a store and rented it to a greengrocer from Azerbaijan. When this Azerbaijani was asked: “Now there is war in Karabakh between Armenians and Azeris. What is your relationship with your Armenian business partner?” He replied: “The war is between tycoons and politicians. We have nothing to do with it.”

If simple people – both Armenian and Azerbaijani – manage to stay at peace and live in friendship with each other, it is to be hoped that these peoples too, although in the context of a territory torn apart by many clashes and open wounds, may succeed in establishing peace and living in friendship in the future.

DOI: La Civiltà Cattolica, En. Ed. Vol. 4, no. 12 art. 2, 1020: 10.32009/22072446.1220.2

[1]. See R. H. Hewsen, “The Kingdom of Artsakh”, in T. Samuelian – M. E. Stone (eds.), *Medieval Armenian Culture*, Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1984

[2]. *Ibid.*

[3]. Cf. A. B. Суворов и русско-армянские отношения в 1770-1780-х годах (A.V Suvorov and Russian-Armenian Relations between 1770 and 1780), Yerevan, Hayastan, 1981.

[4]. It was called the “Armenian-Tartar war” because the term “Azerbaijanis” was not used until the 1930s. See N. A. Troitskiy (ed.), *The First Russian Imperial Census of 1897*, St. Petersburg, Publication of the Central Statistical Committee of the Ministry of the Interior, 1899-1905.

[5]. See <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/sotsialno-politicheskie-prichiny-vozniknoveniya-mezhetnicheskogo-konflikta-v-nagornom-karabahe-i-vokrug-nego-v-kontse-1980-h-nachale-1990>

[6]. See Aliyeva’s speech at the meeting with the writers of Azerbaijan, in Бакинский рабочий (“The Baku worker”), December 11, 1999.

[7]. See <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/sotsialno-politicheskie-prichiny-vozniknoveniya-mezhetnicheskogo-konflikta-v-nagornom-karabahe-i-vokrug-nego-v-kontse-1980-h-nachale-1990>

[8]. See <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/deportatsiya-azerbaydzhantsev-iz-armyanskoy-ssr-1947-1953-gody>

[9]. *Ibid.*

[10]. See R. Usubov, “Nagorno-Karabakh: la missione di salvataggio iniziò negli anni 70”, in *Panorama*, May 12, 1999. Usubov writes: “It can be said without exaggeration that after the arrival of Heydar Aliyev at the helm of Azerbaijan, the Azeris of Karabakh felt that they were the masters of the region. A lot of work was done in the seventies. All this caused an influx of Azerbaijanis into Nagorno-Karabakh from the surrounding regions: Lachin, Agdam, Jabrail, Fizuli, Agjabedi and others. All these measures, implemented thanks to the farsightedness of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, favored the influx of Azerbaijanis. While in 1970 the percentage of Azeris in the NKAO population was 18 percent, in 1979 it was 23 percent and in 1989 it exceeded 30 percent.” [This sentence simply repeats what is in the text above.]

[11]. “Law of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan ‘On the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region’ adopted by the Supreme Council of the AzSSR on June 16, 1981, introduced on July 22, 1982”, Baku, Azerneshr, 1985, 51.

[12]. See “Materials of the extraordinary session of the Council of People’s Deputies of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region”, 20th convocation, Soviet Karabakh, February 21, 1988.

[13]. See State Archives of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, F. 1. Op. 2. D. 309. St. 42.

[14]. See Protocol of the Central Electoral Commission on the results of the vote in the referendum of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, State Archives, F.1 Op. 2. D. 332. St. 28. L. 6-8.

[15]. See <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/k-30-letiyu-nagorno-karabahskogo-konflikta-klyuchevye-sobytiya-do-i-posle-raspada-sssr>

[16]. See S. M. Markedonov, Де-факто образование постсоветского пространства: двадцать лет государственного строительства (Formation of *de facto* States in the post-soviet area: 20 years of state building), Yerevan, Istituto del Caucaso, 2012, 208.

[17]. See V. Krivoruskov, Мятежные Карабах. Из дневника офицера МВД СССР (Rebel Karabakh. From the diary of an officer of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR), Moscow, Golos Press, 2007, 200f.