

REGIONAL POST

2020/2021 winter special

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44 DAYS OF WAR
IN 44 ACTS

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ARTSAKH HISTORY:
From Ancient Times
to the First Republic
of 1918

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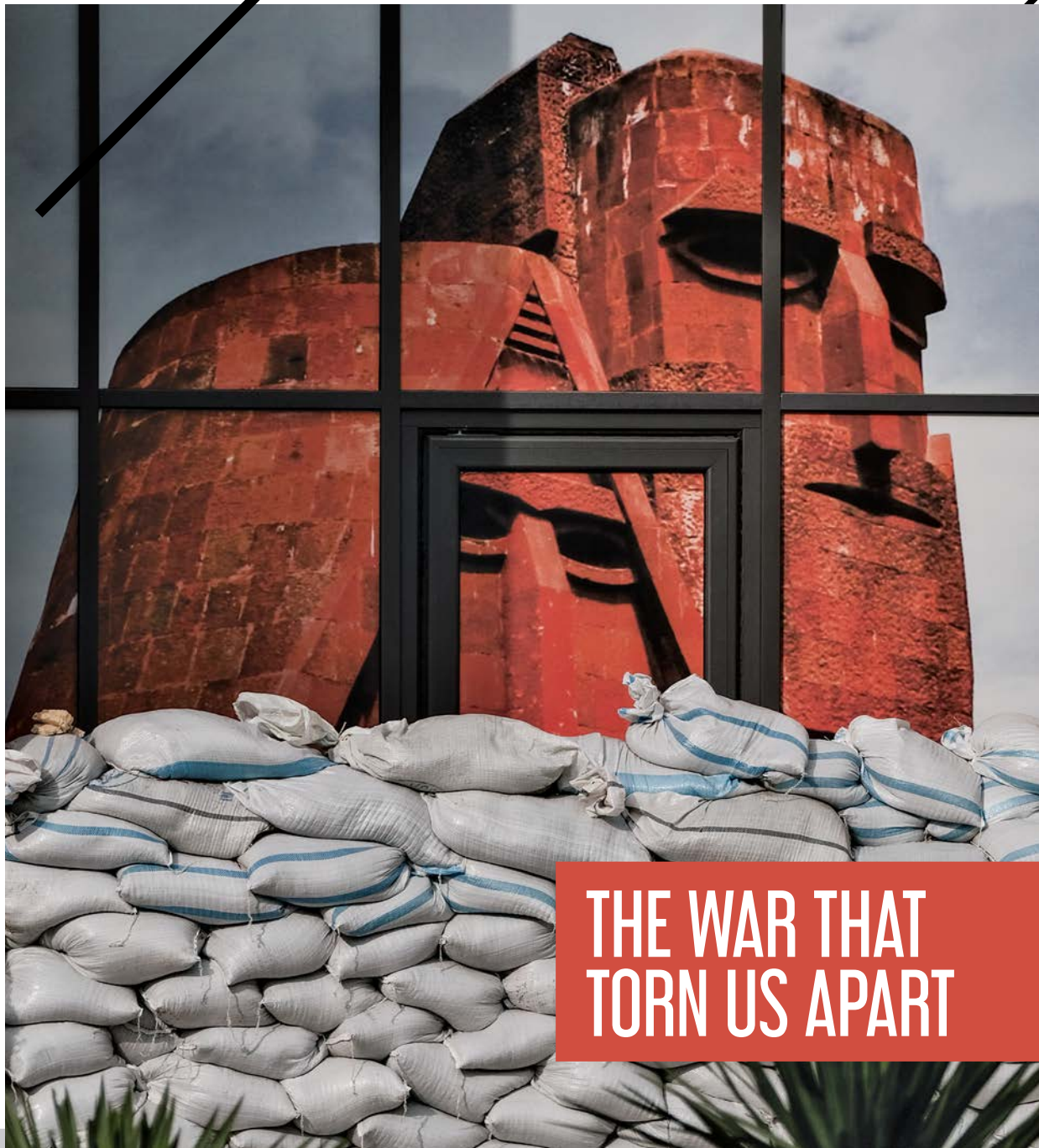
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THE WAR THAT
TORN US APART



MUSCARI
Caring for Land, People & Culture

Gyumri Ceramics

Revival of Armenian ceramics in the 21st century

The Family Care Foundation and the Muscari Association are working together to improve the life conditions in Armenia. Their activities are concentrated especially in Gyumri, which has an invaluable historical, patrimonial and cultural wealth.

After the earthquake of 1988, which caused the death of tens of thousands of inhabitants, this city tries to get up and regain its once undeniable radiance.

Following this tragic event, the Family Care Foundation was created by the will of implementing projects for the economic and cultural development of Armenia in the fields of tourism, art, handicraft and restoration of traditional values with a strong ethical requirement.

Regarding Muscari, created in 2016, its purpose is to valorise Armenian culture and French-Armenian exchanges. It works for education in France and Armenia and it promotes a better knowledge of peoples, cultures and languages.

This complementarity gives life to projects such as the ceramics workshop in Gyumri, which allows currently many families to live with dignity, thanks to arts and crafts inspired by among others Armenian potters from Kütahya in the former Ottoman Empire, the golden age of their activity being in the 18th century. Always having the desire of revitalizing and valorisation of Armenian material and immaterial heritage, special energy is devoted to the architectural restoration of the city's historic buildings.

The ceramics of Gyumri's workshop are on sale in the following addresses in Armenia:

- o Villa Delenda : 22 Yeznik Koghbatsi Str., Yerevan*
- o Villa Kars : 182 Abovyan Str., Guymri*

www.familycarearmenia.org / www.muscari.fr

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Համարը լույս է տեսել
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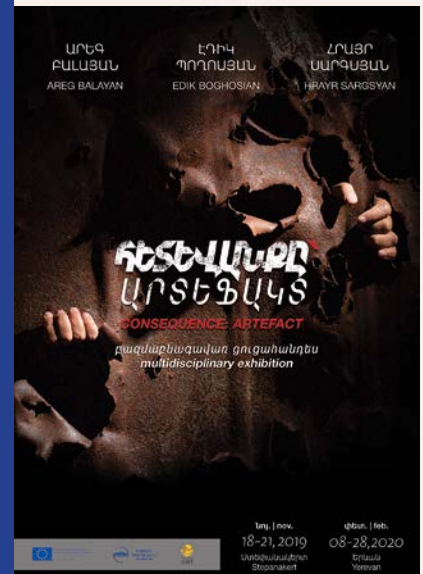
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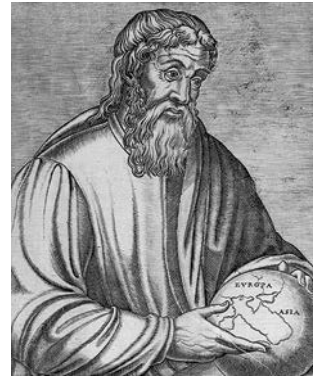
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Facts about Artsakh History (till 1918)

A quick retrospect to the history of Artsakh, a.k.a. Nagorno-Karabakh, from ancient times to the creation of the Armenian First Republic in 1918.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN



◀ Strabo



◀ Flag of the Transcaucasian Federation



◀ Artsakh on a map of the 17th century among Armenian provinces

The original Armenian name for Karabakh, Artsakh was first mentioned in Urartian cuneiforms (8-7th centuries BCE) and the works of Greco-Roman classical authors, like Strabo (1st century BCE – 1st century CE).

Armenian authors mentioned it as one of the 15 provinces of Greater Armenia. It was mentioned as such in Ashkharhatsuyts, a complete Armenian geography of early medieval times arguably attributed to Anania Shirakatsi (7th century). In the 5th century AD under Sassanid Iran Armenia became a province with a special military governor (marzban) while losing some of its bordering provinces to neighboring vassal kingdoms of Georgia and Caucasian Albania (Aghvank). Thus Artsakh became part of the Albanian kingdom of the Aranshahiks (which in Middle Persian literally means “kings of Aran/Albania”). Medieval sources strongly support the idea that not only Artsakh was part and parcel of the Armenian medieval cultural and religious union but Albania/Aghvank itself was under a strong Armenian cultural and

religious influence before partially blending with Muslim nomads, who were of chiefly Turkic ethnic background.

Under the Arab domination Artsakh, along with Utik and Albania were merged into a separate entity – the emirate of Partav – which, in turn, was one of the four provinces of the governorate called “Armina” since the early 8th century. Artsakh was an important part of the anti-Arab revolts of the early 9th century, following which the province was finally integrated into the independent Bagratuni kingdom of Armenia (late 9th century – mid 11th century). Artsakh was divided between two vassal principalities in the north and south of the province, both of which survived the downfall of the Bagratuni kingdom of Ani. Artsakh managed to preserve its semi-independent status and resist efforts at conquest by the Byzantines and the Seljuk-Turks, yet the region lacked unity and was divided between various principalities, all of which considered themselves direct descendants of the Aranshahiks.



Map of the Russian Caucasus in late 19th century



In the 13th century the Georgian kingdom with the general support of the local nobility in the north and east of Armenia made successful wars of conquest against the neighboring Muslim lords bringing new territories under its rule. Artsakh principality under Hasan Jalal (Dola), a descendant of Aranshahiks, also was included into the Georgian kingdom's sphere of influence. Styling himself as a king, Hasan Jalal started a new princely dynasty, called after him Hasan-Jalalians, offsprings of which were ruling in different localities across the province up until its incorporation into the Russian empire in the early 19th century. Hasan-Jalal was a skillful diplomat as he managed to keep his realm out of disastrous Mongolian invasions. He personally travelled to the capital of the vast Mongol empire, Karakorum, where his rule over the province was re-confirmed and guaranteed.

Over the course of several centuries the semi-independent status of Artsakh principality/ies was confirmed by different rulers. Thus Jahanshah the Karakoynulu, the ruler of Armenia, Azerbaijan (the region to the south of the Arax river, and not the territory of the modern state) and adjacent regions recognized the autonomous status of the Armenian meliks (princes) in Karabakh (this is how Artsakh came to be known to the Turkic-speaking Muslims of the region).

The tradition of periodically recognizing the princely rights of the Armenian meliks continued under the Safavid dynasty in Iran (16-18th centuries).

In 1603 Shah Abbas of Iran granted the Khamsa ("five" in Arabic) melikdoms rights and privileges of a Shah's vassal by a special charter. Later in 1736 the same legal status was reconfirmed by Nadir Shah, who used Armenian support during his victorious war against the Ottomans. This was no coincidence as during an internal turmoil in Iran local principalities became less controllable and prone to foreign influence, while the northwest of the country was subject to an Ottoman invasion.



Russo-Persian war of 1826-28, battle of Elisabethpol (Gandzak)



Hovsep Emin (1726-1809)

Over the period of 1724-1735 the Armenian meliks fought a desperate, yet successful fight against the Ottomans and Nadir appreciated the military power and prowess of the local Armenian lords in Karabakh.

Yet instability and infighting against bordering Muslim lordships were endemic in the weakening Iran and the Armenian meliks had no choice as to think about embracing a stronger suzerain who could protect them from encroachments from the neighbors.

Such projects, aiming at protecting local Armenian nobility's rights and privileges at a certain juncture in the mid-17th century found acceptance and were further developed by the emerging Armenian bourgeoisie a bulk of which, oddly enough, had settled down in a considerably remote area – India, on its way of becoming a European colony. One of such outstanding educated middle-class men was Hovsep (Joseph) Emin, who visited Artsakh several times, devising a plan of an Armenian-Georgian coordinated insurrection which could eventually bring about an independent joint Christian state with the local nobility playing a pivotal role in them. Yet the situation in Artsakh turned to be less favorable, as beginning from 1740's Turkic tribes had been settling in the region, taking into their possession the overlordship over the meliks, with the Armenian noblemen increasingly diminishing in power and prestige. >



^
Nader Shah Afshar



^
Map of Ani

The end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century saw a surge of internal turmoil in Iran which resulted in a growing number of Turkic influx into Karabakh and an outward movement of Armenians into neighboring areas, including Georgia.

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of this instability in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, increasingly powerful Russia seized the opportunity of extending its southern borders beyond the Caucasus range. The Treaty of Georgievsk concluded as early as 1783 put the Eastern Georgian kingdom (Kartli-Kakheti) under the tutelage of Russia, yet Iran did not concede to this easily, undertaking a devastating military campaign against Georgia via Karabakh in 1795. Nevertheless this could hardly disrupt Russian plans and indeed St. Petersburg soon annexed Georgia and in a new war against Iran took hold of Karabakh in 1805. Tehran had to concede to the Russian tutelage over the khanate of Karabakh in the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan between the two powers. However, just like the Russian authorities did in Georgia, St. Petersburg very soon abolished the khanate of Karabakh, making it a simple Russian province in 1822.

After a brief, but intense Russo-Persian war (1826-1828), Iran abandoned all hopes of returning Karabakh under its sovereignty and recognized it as Russian along with other parts of Eastern Armenia in the Turkmenchay peace treaty of 1828. The treaty, among others, included a clause on the possibility for the Armenians living under the rule of Shah of Iran to resettle within the confines of the Russian empire. Thanks to this many Armenians whose ancestors or themselves were living in Karabakh returned to their homes, reinvigorating the Armenian presence in the province and contributing to the improvement of the social and economic life there.

As a Russian province Karabakh, especially its almost exclusively Armenian mountainous part had only a limited social and economic progress.

The region's capital city was Shushi, which throughout the latter part of the 19th century had been a remarkable center of Armenians in the South Caucasus region, with a large Armenian population with schools, churches, printing houses and industry. In fact the city's population was mixed with a considerable number of Turkic speakers and the relations between the two main ethnic groups of the city were peaceful enough until the advent of the age of revolution and nationalism into the region in the early 1900's.

Sparked during the 1905-1907 First Russian revolution the interethnic violence between the "Tatars" (this is how the Turkic-speaking chiefly shi'i Muslims were called, who by that time had not assumed the present ethnonym "Azerbaijani" until 1930's in the Soviet Union) and the Armenians did not spare the region and in August 1905 Shushi became a scene of some fierce clashes, which left hundreds killed and wounded, with houses burnt and the population of the city dwindled. The situation remained relatively stable in the following years, however the simmering tensions sparked once again after the war-weary Russian Empire was about to fall apart entangled in the internal turmoil of the 1917 revolutions and growing anarchy.

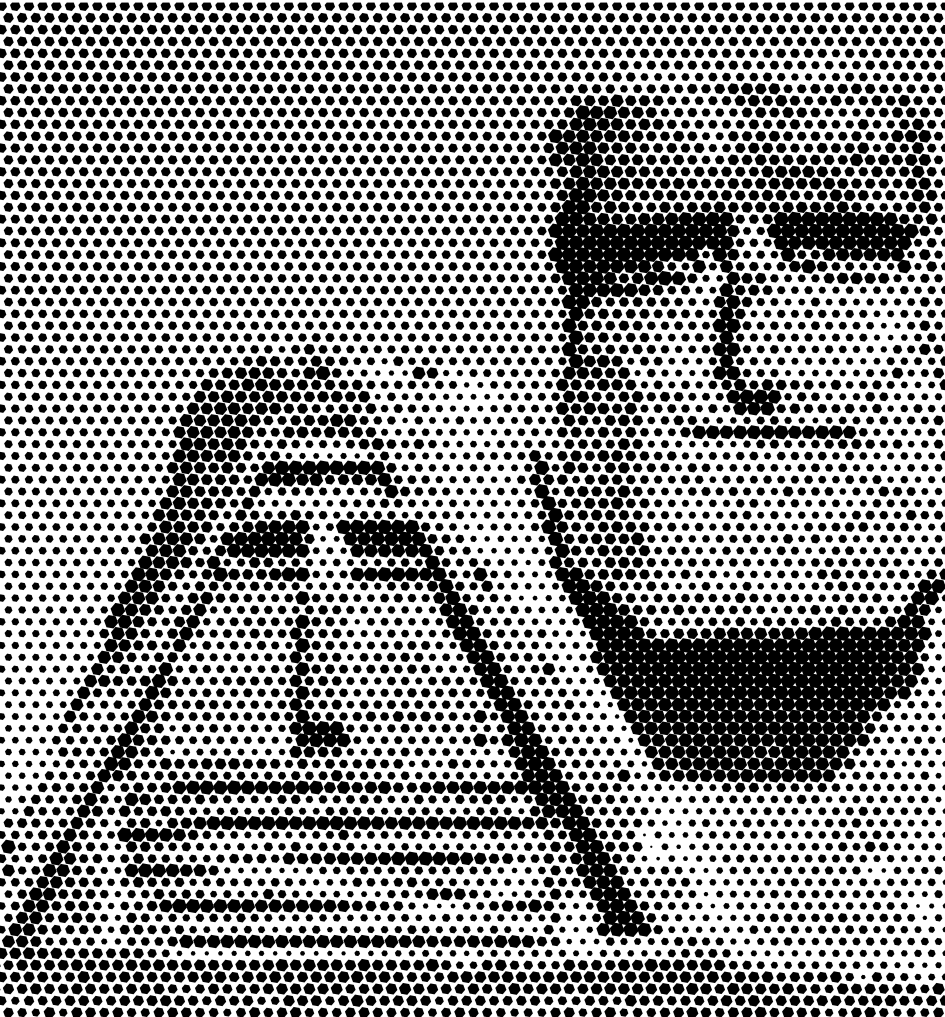
In 1918 when the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation broke into three independent entities, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latter, backed by Turkey, immediately laid claim to vast territories in historic Armenia, including Karabakh.

This was the beginning of a new pattern of relations between the two neighboring ethno-religious groups, Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis (or "Turko-Tatars" as they were more often referred to before 1930). This pattern is still valid in many respects up until now and does not bode well either for both nations or the region in general. ♦

**REGIONAL
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C A U C A S U S

**EASTERN
DIALOGUE**


NAGORNO KARABAKH WAR MINISERIES



**LISTEN ON PODCASTS.AM
AND REGIONALPOST.ORG/PODCASTS**

The Karabakh War of 1918-1920

and the “resolution” of the conflict under the Soviet authorities

Though 2020's 44-day conflict is now called the Second Karabakh War, while the 1990's liberation is considered the First, the fight for Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan started much earlier: in 1918, when two countries declared independence.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN / PHOTO : WIKIPEDIA.ORG



> Armenian army in Holly Echmiadzin, 1918

◀
A comic about Andranik Ozanyan published in the New York Journal-American, 1920

▶
Armenian troops in Baku, 1918

└
Andranik's squad in Zangezur, 1918



Armenia and Azerbaijan both declared their independence on the same day of 28 May 1918. Yet these two entities had very much overlapping territorial claims with sporadic inter-ethnic violence on the ground, supported and manipulated by Turkey, whose troops were moving to Baku from different directions. In the beginning of 1918, before the independence, the situation in Karabakh was relatively stable with local Armenian and Muslim communities having established a modus vivendi and a joint committee with a Georgian Isif Kobiev as the head in charge of local provincial administration.

Yet the situation changed with the proclamation of Azerbaijan's independence, which laid claim on Karabakh as well as Nakhijevan and Zangezur (modern Syunik in Armenia). On the other hand the advancing Turkish troops invaded several villages in the east of Mountainous Karabakh and massacred the population of a strategically located village in the west on the road leading from Goris to Shushi. The newly created Azerbaijani government's aim was to establish firm control over the whole governorate of Elisabethpol (which included Karabakh, Zangezur and northeast of the present Republic of Armenia) with the help of the Turkish troops. Meanwhile a conference of the Karabakh Armenians held on 22-24 July in Shushi proclaimed the region as part of Armenia and elected a provisional government under Yeghishe Ishkhanyan from the ARF.

While the Turkish army along with the Azerbaijani nascent armed forces was busy attacking and invading Baku from the local Armenians who proclaimed soviet power – in hope for an eventual support of Red Russia – Karabakh was spared major violence. Turkish troop commanders stationed in Aghdam repeatedly sent ultimatums to the local Armenian authorities demanding submission to the Azerbaijani government, which was declined in yet another congress of the Karabakh Armenians on 6 September. However, in merely a few days the situation in the Caucasus changed with the fall of Baku to the Turk-Azerbaijani forces, followed by a bloody massacre of the Armenians in the city.

The Karabakh Armenians had to convene another congress on 17-22 September, which in view of the desperate situation for the local Armenians decided to agree to the passage and stationing of the Turkish troops in Shushi. The invading



THE SITUATION CHANGED WITH THE PROCLAMATION OF AZERBAIJAN'S INDEPENDENCE, WHICH LAID CLAIM ON KARABAKH AS WELL AS NAKHIJEVAN AND ZANGEZUR (MODERN SYUNIK IN ARMENIA)

Turkish and Azerbaijani troops were systematically looting Armenian villages on their way, while disarming and killing local inhabitants. Turkish military authorities upon entering Shushi detained around 60 local Armenians notables and set to completely disarm the local population. Meanwhile the Armenian population outside Shushi, beyond which the Turkish power hardly extended, vehemently declined submission to Azerbaijan, took up arms engaging with the invader in lower-scale skirmishes. One of them, an ambush set near the village of Msmna in the south of Karabakh on 18 October 1918 was particularly deadly for the invaders, who leaving dozens of killed and a substantial quantity of ammunition, artillery and machine guns in the field, found refuge in Shushi. In less than two weeks after that incident the exhausted Ottoman Empire recognized its defeat in the Great War and had to withdraw all its troops from the Caucasus, including Karabakh. British forces instead were deployed in Baku with an aim of playing an important part in the British Empire's policies in the region. ▶

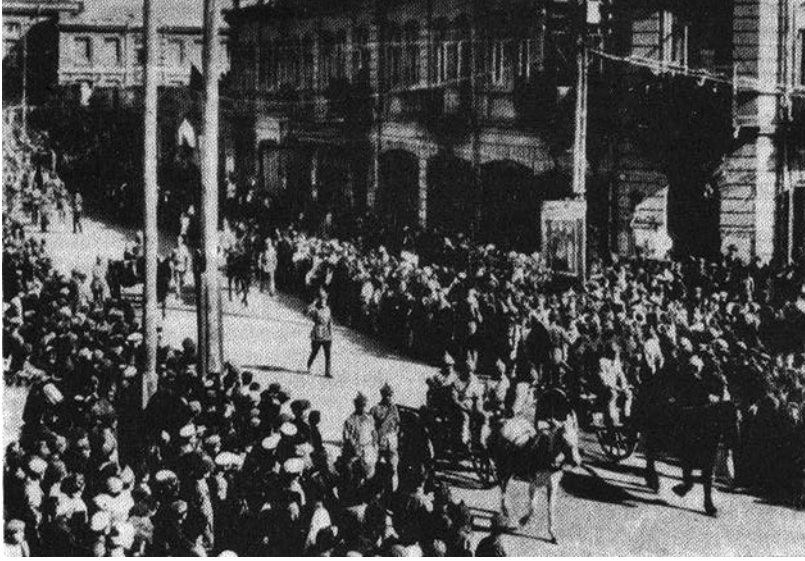
Meanwhile Armenian general Andranik (Ozanyan) whose small army nominally was not a part of the Armenian armed forces, made an attempt to invade Karabakh. He managed to suppress the local Tatars and Muslim bands, who, reinforced with weapons and instructors left behind by the retreating Ottoman army, offered fierce resistance. By 1 December 1918 Andranik had overcome all the obstacles and Shushi was within arm's reach, however by that time was received a message from the Azerbaijani government and the British commander in Azerbaijan and North Persia William Montgomery Thompson, urging to withdraw and delegate the issue of the territorial arrangement to the remit of the Paris Peace Conference. In fact the British wanted to maintain stability in the Caucasus which might serve as a bulwark against Bolshevik Russia, while expecting that Armenians could find satisfaction in having territories to the west of the Caucasus (Western Armenia) included into the Armenian state. Britain substantiated its pro-Azerbaijani policy with ominous warnings to Yerevan that ignoring British requests could lead to withdrawing from a "pro-Armenian" stance in the peace negotiations. Great Britain, indeed supported Armenian government's efforts in establishing its control westwards towards the 1914 border of the Russian Empire, however on the other hand in Karabakh and Zangezur it was pro-Azerbaijani. At some point the British even backed the idea of the transfer of the Armenian population from Karabakh to the east.

With British blessing Azerbaijan in January 1919 appointed Khosrov-bek Sultanov, a clear armenophobe, Pan-Turkist as the governor Karabakh and Zangezur, the latter being by then under the control of Andranik's Armenian forces. To this the government in Yerevan responded with a vehement protest and declaring both districts as "inalienable parts of Armenia". Once again representatives of the Armenians in Karabakh convened in February 1919 in Shushi to decline this appointment and urging for annexation to Armenia. They also tried to send a delegation to Baku where the British troops' headquarters in the Caucasus was stationed with an aim of suggesting peaceful ways of the resolution of the conflict. In fact incorporation into Armenia was not the delegation's sole proposal, but they had also several compromise deal projects, including a return to the self-governance that existed before the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan, or alternatively, establishing a British governorate either in the Armenian part of Karabakh or both parts of it, under two separate entities. The Armenian government seemed to agree to compromise resolutions, finding it best under the circumstances. However in the talks of February-March 1919 it became evident (and the British command made no secret of it) that "governor" Sultanov enjoyed the support of the British and Yerevan's official protest on that matter was ignored. Meanwhile the British, despite their earlier assurances that the territorial disputes between Yerevan and Baku were to



be settled at the Paris Peace conference, put a lot of effort trying to persuade the leaders in Armenia and Karabakh to accept Azerbaijani rule over the region. They held talks with the officials in Yerevan and Shushi, however these did not bring about the desired outcome.

Meanwhile Azerbaijan made an attempt at bringing Karabakh into submission by force. In June 1919 a large band of Tatar and Kudrish cavalry under the command of Khosrov-bek Sultanov's brother attacked the Armenian village of Ghaybalishen near Shushi massacring hundreds of innocents, and continuing their murderous way into other surrounding Armenian villages. These actions sparked an immense Armenian indignation which forced the Azerbaijani leaders and their British patrons to have Sultanov recalled from Shushi. It was expected that he would be arrested and put to trial for his actions, yet in an unfathomable twist of fate he was released and dispatched back to Karabakh, returning to his business with redoubled energy. In the meantime it was announced that Great Britain is soon withdrawing its troops from Azerbaijan and the whole of the Caucasus, which, of course immediately gave room to the government in Baku to pursue its anti-Armenian policies with new vigor. The Armenian population of Karabakh felt the looming danger of physical extermination. While some – chiefly the urban



◀
Red Army entering
Yerevan, 1920



◀
Khosrov bek
Sultanov



▶
Shushi after mas-
sacre of 1920

population concentrated in Shushi – were for some kind of a compromise, which might include a recognition of Azerbaijani sovereignty over the region, others in the villages as well as members of the ARF and the local Armenian National Council were of the opposite opinion. Both sides launched negotiations with a preliminary agreement reached in Baku between the representatives of Karabakh Armenians and the Azerbaijani authorities. Despite initial promises Azerbaijani authorities in Shushi were becoming growingly impatient and new instances of violence occurred throughout the province ending up with an ultimatum by Sultanov issued in mid-August which required a submission to the Azerbaijani authorities with certain provisions.

The 7th congress of the Karabakh Armenians, discussing their predicament, made a most reluctant decision agreeing to recognize Azerbaijani sovereignty over the region temporarily until the Paris Peace Conference would decide upon the future fate of the region. The agreement was signed by the Karabakh Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives on 22 August. The agreement seemed to be consolidated by a meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Khatisyan and his Azerbaijani counterpart Usupbekov in Tiflis in November of the same year, during which they agreed to resolve all territorial disputes through

WITH BRITISH BLESSING AZERBAIJAN IN JANUARY 1919 APPOINTED KHOSROV-BEK SULTANOV, A CLEAR ARMENOPHOBE, PAN-TURKIST AS THE GOVERNOR KARABAKH AND ZANGEZUR

peaceful means. Yet it was easier said than done. Days following the statement by the heads of both states the violence once again erupted in Zangezur, where the local Armenian forces under Nzhdeh repelled attacks by local Muslim bands and in a counteroffensive invaded several villages to the southeast of the province.

Meanwhile the situation in Karabakh itself could hardly be called calm, as Armenians were being continuously disarmed against the backdrop of steadily growing insecurity and instances of attacks on their lives and property. A new strain of violence started with the Azerbaijani governor Sultanov's new ultimatum issued in mid-February 1920, in which he demanded an unconditional annexation of the province to Azerbaijan. In the meantime pressure and violence against local Armenians, including politically active elements surged again. The Karabakh Armenian representatives gathered once again in an 8th conference, which failed to assume a joint position

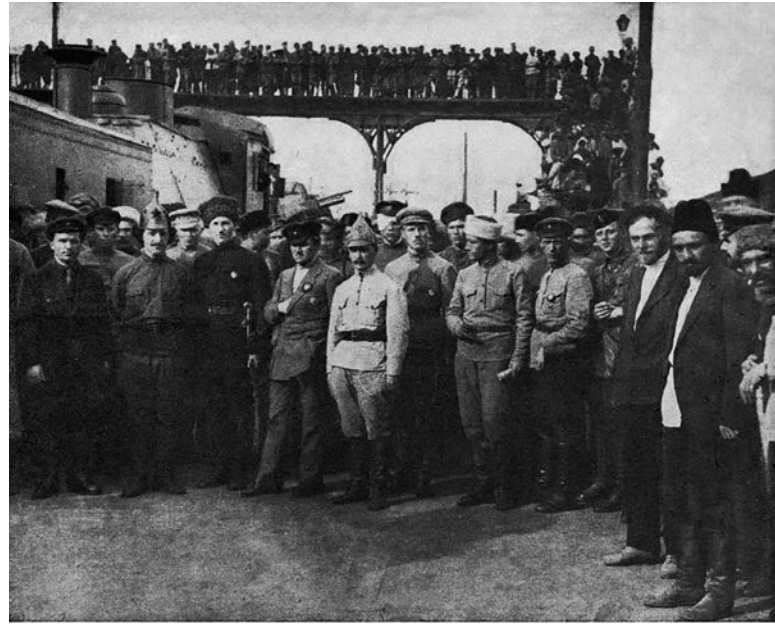
FOLLOWING THE DISASTROUS WAR WITH KEMALIST TURKEY AND THE LOSS OF A CONSIDERABLE PART OF TERRITORY, THE GOVERNMENT OF ARMENIA AGREED TO **TRANSFER THE POWER TO THE SOVIETS**

on the matter. While part of them, gathered in Shushi under the direct control of Sultanov and being subject to pressures by him, conceded to his demands, a majority of the representatives gathered in a nearby village of Shosh, rejected those demands urging for a unification with Armenia.

Once again, the answer was violence. In March 1920 Azerbaijan concentrated most part of its troops – trained and partially commanded by former Ottoman officers and reinforced with irregulars – in Karabakh. Local Armenians hoped for support from Armenia, however the authorities in Yerevan were not prepared or able to provide quick assistance to Karabakh Armenians. While armed bands of Karabakh Armenians managed to keep the enemy away from most parts of the Armenian villages, the city of Shushi was in a most vulnerable position. This is where on 22-26 March occurred a violent massacre, which claimed the lives of some 10,000 or even more Armenians, changing the ethnic composition of the city's population for good.

Meanwhile the support, which the Karabakh Armenians were hoping for, even though belated, came in April 1920. Gen. Drastamat Kanayan (Dro) the appointed governor of Syunik and Karabakh, moved his troops into Karabakh, establishing control over the most part of the province and forcing Sultanov and his troops to find refuge in the besieged city of Shushi. A new conference of the Karabakh Armenians in the village of Taghavard was held, which proclaimed the province's unification with Armenia and established a local government.

Yet this state of affairs continued for only a brief period as the situation in the Caucasus region was rapidly changing. Making use of the fact that the bulk of Azerbaijan's military forces was concentrated in Karabakh, Soviet Russian troops with virtually no resistance on their way entered into Baku and proclaimed Azerbaijan a soviet republic on 28 April. The newly established Moscow-backed soviet Azerbaijani government issued ultimatums demanding a withdrawal of Armenian troops from the province, while units of the Soviet Russian army moved into Karabakh entering Shushi on 12 May 1920. Days after that Dro had to evacuate the province, leaving his provisions and military supplies to the local defense forces. Meanwhile the local Armenians decided to proclaim soviet power in the province as well. In retrospect one might argue why the local Armenians ultimately

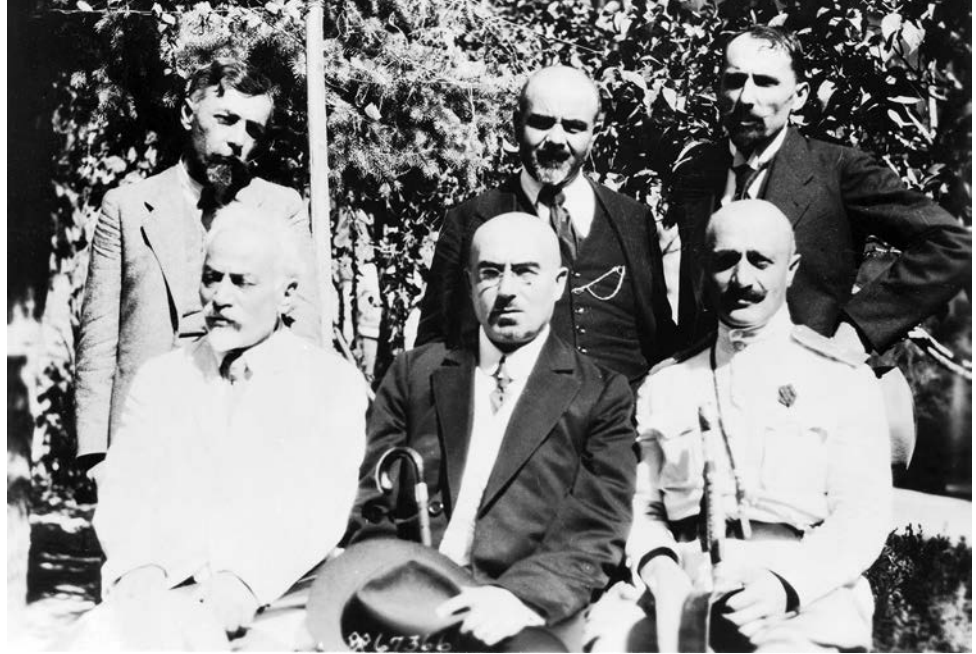


gave up the idea of joining the province with the Republic of Armenia, yet it is worth to remember that a Bolshevik insurrection was underway in Armenia proper in those days and the sovietization of the country was a highly possible scenario, in case of which Karabakh could be a province of the future Soviet Armenia.

In any case the soviet coup in Armenia failed while Soviet Russia and Armenia in a special agreement on 10 August recognized Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhijevan as disputed territory and agreed on the deployment of the Red Army units in those provinces. Following the disastrous war with Kemalists Turkey and the loss of a considerable part of territory, the government of Armenia agreed to transfer the power to the Soviets on 2 December 1920.

In fact the Red Army had been invading Armenia since 29 November, when a group of Armenian Bolsheviks who came along with those army units declared Soviet power in Armenia.

◀ Kirov, Mikoyan and Orjonikidze with Red army in Baku, 1920



Ⓛ Singing of the Treaty of Moscow, 1921



^ The Cabinet of the Armenian Republic

◀ Tevan Stepanyan's squad, 1921

Although initially the Azerbaijani authorities immediately declared on the “settlement of territorial disputes” with the newly soviet Armenia, this could be understood as nothing short of a trick by Moscow to win over the large masses in Armenia. Those assurances would soon be forgotten, as Moscow’s grand strategy in the Caucasus was to firmly establish itself in the region, while trying to possibly use the Turkish and Muslim factors against the British and other allies who could threaten the Soviet power in Russia. The treaties of Moscow and Kars signed in 1921, which were essentially two identical Russian-Turkish treaties, established the current border of Armenia and Georgia with Turkey, which sealed huge Armenian territorial concessions to Ankara.

Meanwhile the anti-Bolshevik insurrection in Armenia of February 1921, which for a brief period expanded to the south of Karabakh as well – under the local guerilla commander Tevan Stepanyan – was crushed with an effect of establishing a firm Soviet Armenian control over Zangezur which was a part of previous Azerbaijani claims.

The decision on Karabakh came in July 1921 in Tiflis where the Caucasus Bureau of the Communist Party of Russia convened. Quite oddly, the territorial dispute between the two nominally sovereign countries (at least Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey recognized both Soviet Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan as independent nations) was settled by a local committee of a political party, headquartered in a third country. Moreover the decision was made through gross procedural violations. While on 4 July 1921 the Committee’s decision was in favor of Armenia, a day later, under the personal pressure of Stalin, then People’s Commissar of Nationality Issues, the Bureau revised its own decision of the day before and handed over the province to Azerbaijan at the whim of the future “father of the peoples”.

The Karabakh issue over the period of 1918-21 became a victim of geopolitics, while great powers – whether the British or Soviet Russians – invariably backed Baku’s claim over the province for the sake of their own regional and global interests. ♦

Счастливого пути!



IMPOSED PEACE AND UNLEASHED WAR:

The prehistory and history of the First Karabakh War (1992-1994)

An essential source of the might of empires throughout history has been their capacity to establish peace – no matter at what cost – between yesterday's foes. This pattern was active in ancient Rome and is still practiced by regional and global powers. The Soviet Union came into being as a new power with a promise of an eternal peace between different ethnic groups and nations and vanished from the stage of history with a failure to live up to its promise.

The case of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) was a flagrant illustration of how an arbitrarily enforced peace failed to contain internal tensions and collapsed as soon as the imperial power waned giving way to local nationalist agendas.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN / PHOTO : ARMENPRESS



PAX SOVIETICA?

The peace in Karabakh was established by the Soviets through an arbitrary decision of transferring the almost exclusively Armenian district to Azerbaijani SSR in 1921. The decision adopted by the Caucasian bureau of the Russian Communist party however did not specify the ultimate status and borders of the region. It took two years until on 7 July 1923, after two years of lingering, an ultimate decision was passed by the Azerbaijani authorities to create the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast/District (NKAO) in the mountainous part of the province. It looked like a compromising decision as autonomy was granted to the local Armenians, yet there a cunning twist in this: Nagorno-Karabakh had no common border with Armenia. Moreover, in an attempt to legitimize this arbitrary decision, the Azerbaijani authorities simultaneously created the so-called Red Kurdistan – a sparsely populated mountainous district between Armenian SSR and Nagorno-Karabakh with no known Kurdish national aspirations in stark contrast to Armenians in Karabakh. The sole purpose of this move was definitely to delegitimize any attempt at having a common border between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, making any future attempt at reunification with Armenia territorially unfeasible. The fictitiousness of Red Kurdistan was more than obvious from the fact that by 1926 but only a tiny fraction of the 41,000 Kurds in Azerbaijan – a bare 17 per cent – considered the Kurdish as their mother tongue, the rest, along with other ethnic groups, like Tats, Talysh, Lezgins, Udins, Tsakhurs and others, engaged a process of accelerated and sometimes forced Azerbaijanization. Very soon in 1929 Red Kurdistan was abolished with its main

THE PEACE IN KARABAKH WAS ESTABLISHED BY
THE SOVIETS THROUGH AN ARBITRARY DECISION
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ARMENIAN DISTRICT TO AZERBAIJANI SSR IN 1921

mission accomplished and the number of Kurds residing in the region dropping dramatically. While Azerbaijani authorities very quickly conducted a successful campaign of Azerbaijaniizing the Muslim minorities of the republic, who had small to none tradition of own literature and statehood, things were quite different in Karabakh. Here Baku had to try hard to eliminate or at least restrict the spread of education, literature, and press in Armenian language. Instead of forcing Azerbaijani language and education, considered as “less developed” even by the urban Azerbaijani population, the education in Russian language was promoted with virtually no opposition.

The soviet years of Nagorno-Karabakh were marked with steady de-Armenization of the province and relative increase of the presence of Azerbaijani population in the province. The low level of investment in the local infrastructure, education, health care and other areas contributed to a steady migration of Armenians from the NKAO.

In the meantime Azerbaijani soviet authorities conducted a policy of cultural de-Armenization (no possibility of accessing Armenian TV, newspapers, literature while having very limited and underfinanced local production), appropriation and vandalizing of local Armenian cultural heritage (the latter point was ascribing Armenian monuments to the vaguely defined Caucasian Albanian culture, which was quite ahistorically considered as the direct predecessor of the modern Azerbaijani one).



> Armenian refugees fled from Baku massacres



From the current perspective it seems that everything national was suppressed in Soviet Union and that even a mere mentioning of nationality under the soviet authorities could entangle disastrous consequences for the person who raised the issue. Yet this was not uniformly true for all the periods and we can even assume that at times the Kremlin encouraged some limited forms of nationalisms for its pragmatic interests.

As it is known from archival documents that in November 1945, months after the Second World War was over, the Soviet Armenian leader Grigor Harutyunyan sent a letter to the All-Union Communist (Bolsheviks) Party's Central Committee suggesting to include Nagorno-Karabakh into Soviet Armenia. It is hardly imaginable that it was a merely bold move by an Armenian communist leader, rather than a move approved by Stalin as part of his postwar aims of reclaiming the 1914 border with Turkey, under which the Kars district would have been annexed to Armenia.

There were other attempts throughout the 1960's to 1980's at petitioning Moscow to review the decision of 1921.

Among them stands out the joint letter by the Armenian Communist Party's First Secretary Anton Kochinyan and the head of the Council of Ministers (an equivalent of the prime minister) Badal Muradyan in September 1966 addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and suggesting to annex Karabakh and Nakhijevan autonomies to the Armenian SSR.

However, the soviet authorities were not inclined to make room for territorial changes as this could open way to free expression of long simmering territorial and national grievances with a potential of seriously destabilizing the soviet regime.

Meanwhile the pax sovietica – the relative peace which enjoyed the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh – came at a rather high price, which was the effacement of the Armenian character of the region.

THE FIRST BLOOD

The Soviet model of peace was a shaky one and it showed its weakness at every occasion. There were instances in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's in Karabakh of Azerbaijanis seemingly committing hate crimes against Armenians with justice being presumably too mild towards them. Such cases stirred indignation of the local Armenian population, with some individuals attempting to take justice into their own hands.

A case of anti-Armenian vandalism by the Azerbaijani authorities was the 1969 demolition of a monument to the World War 2 soldiers in the Armenian village of Banants to the north of Karabakh, because of the monument's architecture was inspired by the Armenian traditional style.

While many mention 1988 as the starting point of the Armenian-Azerbaijani hostile relations, with pogroms and mass exodus of population on both sides, it turns out that the



IN NOVEMBER 1945 THE SOVIET ARMENIAN LEADER GRIGOR HARUTYUNYAN SENT A LETTER TO THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE SUGGESTING TO INCLUDE NAGORNO-KARABAKH INTO SOVIET ARMENIA

first acts of violence on a sizable scale were carried out in Azerbaijan as early as 1987. Namely it was the pogrom in the historic Armenian village of Chardakhlu (Khachisar) in Azerbaijan – famed for having among its natives Soviet marshals Hovhannes Baghrmryan and Hamazasp Babajanyan. The local district head, M. Asadov who had a conflict with a local Armenian person backed by the village community, organized a police raid, beating, terrorizing and having arrested a number of locals with the purpose of crushing their protest and forcing the local Armenian population out of the village. This was in fact an attempted ethnic cleansing, albeit on a limited scale, and what was revolting, its organizer got away with this kind of crime, and even got a promotion in the Communist Party of Azerbaijan.

The violence in Chardakhlu was no coincidence, as the local Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and other places in 1987 were signing a widely circulated petition demanding that Nagorno-Karabakh joined the Armenian SSR. It can hardly be believed that the officials in Moscow remained unaware of such a crime and arbitrariness, so there is a reasonable ground to believe that the “punishment” was tacitly approved by the Kremlin.

A more ominous and bloody warning came after the popular demands for unification grew into mass street protests in Yerevan and Stepanakert as the local parliament of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast passed a decision on 20 February 1988 on unification with Armenia. >

The ethnic tensions immediately surged in Armenia and Azerbaijan as a mass brawl and clash occurred between Armenians and Azerbaijanis near the town of Askeran in Nagorno-Karabakh and some Azerbaijanis temporarily left their homes in Armenia's southern city of Kapan. The hell broke loose several days later when in the Azerbaijani industrial city of Sumgait, a massacre and pogroms occurred against its sizeable Armenian population. There is all evidence that the city's administration not only did nothing to prevent mass violence, but on the contrary, incited, orchestrated and guided the angry mob to the neighborhoods and individual apartments of Armenians. As a result of anarchy in the city on 27-29 February scores of Armenians were killed and hundreds wounded, mutilated with the survivors chased out of their homes.

Moscow was surprisingly very slow to react, which gives room to some researchers to suppose that at least some in the higher ranks of the security services or the army accepted the idea of "punishing" Armenians who took the ideas of perestroika or glasnost too literally. It is also worth to note that the Kremlin's propaganda machine from the very first days of the popular movement showed its hostility towards it, calling the protesters in Yerevan "a group of extremists" while the phrase coined as "perestroika is not perekroika (in Russian in this context: "redrawing of borders") went viral in the "central" press published in Russian.



KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDA MACHINE FROM THE VERY FIRST DAYS OF THE POPULAR MOVEMENT SHOWED ITS HOSTILITY TOWARDS IT, CALLING THE PROTESTERS IN YEREVAN "A GROUP OF EXTREMISTS"



EMPIRE CRUMBING

By mid-1988 the central Soviet authorities seemed to have lost part of the previous total control they exercised on the vast territory of the empire of the USSR, including Azerbaijan and Armenia. People in both soviet republics raised contradicting, overlapping demands and Moscow, clearly unable to undertake anything close to Stalin-style repressions or mass arrests, found itself in a predicament, taking the path of least resistance, that is preserving the status quo while trying to silence the Armenian side through a combination of repression and reward.

The Soviet leadership in an attempt to take the control of the developments unfolding in Nagorno-Karabakh, introduced an “emergency governance regime” there appointing a special emissary Arkadi Volski as its head. It was planned to make substantial financial and other investments into the region to address the economic and social grievances of the local Armenians, which according to the officials in Moscow were the main reason for the sweeping dissatisfaction with the state of affairs then. This “emergency” regime suppressed the local parliament and administration, the allocated funds were partially pocketed by Baku officials or used for the ethnic Azerbaijani community in the region and all this understandably brought about the total failure of the Volski administration in its main mission – persuade the Karabakh Armenians to drop their demands.

Such interventions by Moscow became even more inefficient as a result of the unleashed spiral of violence, a most remarkable instance in the long row of such acts being the almost one-month-long siege of the Armenian quarter in Kirovabad (Gandzak). There the local Armenians managed to organize a coordinated resistance since 21 November 1988 until the soviet troops arrived in the city almost a month later to ensure the safe passage of Armenians from the city and neighboring villages to Armenia.



In December 1988 to January 1989 Moscow also attempted to take firmly under its control the situation in Armenia by detaining the leading members of Karabakh Committee coordinating the protest movement, however under the popular pressure and possible pressure from without they had to set them free after a few months. The Armenian society by that time became even more radical in its demands of more freedom from Moscow eyeing the possibility of an independent national statehood.

In August 1989 the Karabakh Armenians elected their own representative body, which in its turn, selected the National Council, an executive body in a move that challenged the Moscow-backed administration in the region.

Meanwhile the soviet authorities had to confront with the quickly growing national sentiment in different constituent entities, in some cases adopting repressive attitude and Karabakh was one of those focal points of repression by that time.

In late November 1989 the Supreme Council of the USSR discussed the issue of the NKAO adopting a resolution which declined the demand of incorporating the autonomy into the Armenian SSR and instead established a direct Azerbaijani rule (called “Organizational Committee” under Viktor Polyanchko, the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan) over the province.

The situation became one of confrontation between the authorities in Yerevan and Moscow, as the legislative bodies of Soviet Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in a joint session on 1 December 1988 adopted a resolution confirming NKAO’s unification with Armenia. Moscow was quick to react by sending troops to Yerevan and establishing a curfew regime to avert street protests.

A much more violent response came from Azerbaijan. Since 13 January 1990 angry mobs under the guidance of the Popular Front and others sympathizing them killed, raped, beat and mutilated hundreds of Armenians in the capital city of Baku, while tens of thousands of others, who lived in the city for many generations had to flee for their lives, in most

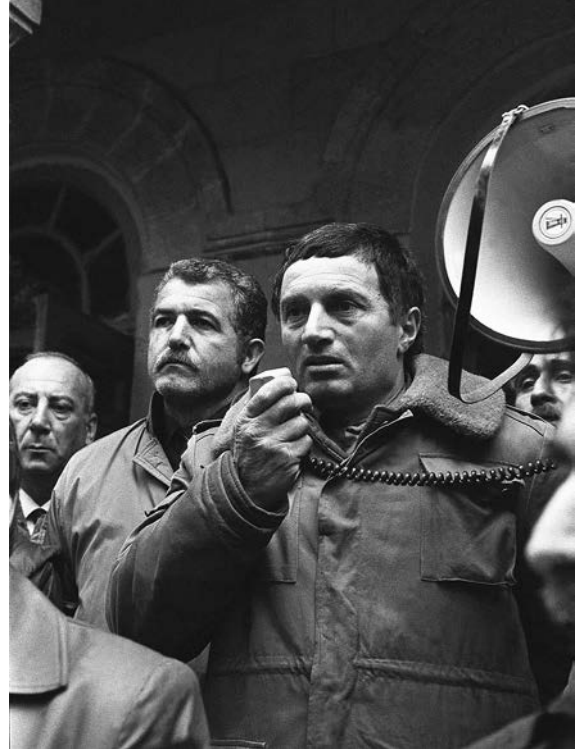


> Arkadi Ter-Tadevosyan, a military leader of the Armenian forces during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War

cases with no penny in the pocket leaving behind all their valuables and homes. The Soviet troops intervened almost a week later only when the Soviet power in the city and Azerbaijan on the whole all but collapsed.

Yet the mission of ensuring peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis failed completely. In January 1990 just after the massacres and pogrom in Baku and the exodus of Armenians from the big cities of Azerbaijan, small-scale armed clashes started between barely organized bands on the border between the two republics as Azerbaijan imposed a transportation blockade on Armenia.

While the Armenian parliament on 23 August 1990 renamed the Armenian SSR into the Republic of Armenia and proclaimed on starting a process of independence from the USSR, the central authorities in Moscow became increasingly supportive of the loyal Azerbaijani authorities in their efforts at conducting ethnic cleansing of Armenians inside and around Nagorno-Karabakh.



In the so-called operation “Koltso” (in Russian “Ring”) in the spring and summer months of 1991 the Soviet troops along with Azerbaijani paramilitary forces committed numerous crimes against humanity in the Armenian villages in the north of Karabakh and inside it. As a result of those – by the way left unpunished by Soviet and other authorities – hundreds of Armenians were illegally detained, abducted, wounded or killed while the population of dozens of historic Armenian villages were forcibly removed from their homes for good. Fortunately enough the Soviet Union did not survive long to continue this perilous course however with the removal of the last barriers on the way of an all-out war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis the conflict evolved into a true war with thousands of people killed and cities and villages destroyed and burnt.



< Refugees from the Getashen village



◀ Armenian soldiers during the First Karabakh War

WAR UNLEASHED

The process of the demise of the Soviet Union became irreversible and gained momentum with the failed August coup in 1991. The union republics, one after another declared independence. Armenia announced its independence after a referendum on 21 September, while Nagorno-Karabakh proclaimed itself independent on 3 September 1991, days after Azerbaijan announced its own independence. The legal bases for the latter was the Soviet law, which entitled autonomous entities to secede from former Soviet republics, in case they choose to leave the Soviet Union.

Despite the peace-brokering mission in September 1991 by the Russian and Kazakh leaders Boris Yeltsin and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the fighting intensified in which initially the better equipped and numerically superior Azerbaijani paramilitary and nascent regular forces had the upper hand.

Yet the Armenian defense forces in Nagorno-Karabakh beefed up with the volunteers from Armenia managed quickly to organize into a real armed force who scored its first defensive victories in the north and south of Karabakh as early as the end of 1991.

In January 1992 fighting intensified in Nagorno-Karabakh as the Azerbaijani forces kept the region in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. While the capital of Stepanakert, including its residential area was constantly shelled from the Azerbaijani-held city of Shushi, the Armenian forces managed to take under their control some of the surrounding villages and towns serving as bases for Azerbaijani offensives. In the major operation in February 1992 in Khojalu scores of local residents – mostly Meskhetian Turks, who had been recently transferred there by the Azerbaijani authorities with an aim of changing the demographic balance of the region in their favor) were

DESPITE THE PEACE-BROKERING MISSION IN SEPTEMBER 1991 BY THE RUSSIAN AND KAZAKH LEADERS **BORIS YELTSIN AND NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV**, THE FIGHTING INTENSIFIED

killed in what appeared to be crossfire between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. Although Azerbaijani leader Ayaz Mutalibov shortly thereafter blamed the opposition Popular Front for the tragedy, later Baku's foreign policy decision makers chose to turn this tragedy into a justification of their anti-Armenian rhetoric and actions.

Meanwhile a new tragedy, a massacre occurred in the village of Maragha in April 1992, as the village was unexpectedly invaded by Azerbaijani forces, who wrought their vengeance on the peaceful population, including elderly people, women and children.

In the meantime the defense forces of Nagorno-Karabakh scored several decisive victories aimed at breaking Baku's mortal grip on the region, and on 8/9 May 1992 took control over the historic city of Shushi, the main Azerbaijani stronghold in the region. Several days later the town of Lachin was taken and a land corridor with Armenia was established. Military setbacks in Nagorno-Karabakh prompted a political turmoil in Azerbaijan as a result of which former soviet leader Mutalibov was forced to resign and leave the country. Abulfaz Elchibey, the next Azerbaijani president was a convinced pan-Turkist who believed that Russia and Iran were Azerbaijan's main security threats. Immediately after assuming his office in June 1992, Elchibey undertook an attempt to resolve the Karabakh issue through a large army mustered with the help of Turkish and other foreign military councilors



and bolstered by mercenaries from disparate areas (like Chechnya, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia) and putting into use the freshly acquired military equipment.

The offensive launched in June-July 1992 and continuing until the end of the summer initially was successful for the Azerbaijani side particularly in the north and at some point the Armenian forces held merely 60 per cent of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. However the offensive soon ground to a halt with the Azerbaijani forces and their mercenaries sustaining disproportionate losses in manpower and military hardware.

Moreover, Elchibey's open anti-Russian policies and anti-Iranian rhetoric with the stabilization of the frontline in Karabakh placed Azerbaijan's foreign policy in a deadlock. All this paved the way for turning the tide of war.

It came in the beginning of 1993 as the Armenian side took the strategic initiative, eliminating the threatening gap of Kelbajar district between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in end of March beginning of April of that year. This was an impressive success of the Armenian side, which continued the counteroffensive restoring control over the northern Martakert district of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the meantime, in view of those successive military failures, the internal political situation in Azerbaijan grew tense once more. President Elchibey was ousted from his position in June and after a somewhat protracted period of uncertainty the former communist leader Heydar Aliyev emerged victorious in

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Protests de-
manding union of
Nagorno-Karabakh
with Soviet Armenia



the squabble for presidency scoring a sweeping victory in the election on 3 October 1993.

By that time the Azerbaijani armed forces had suffered major defeats and had to retreat not only from almost the entire territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, but also from its neighboring regions to the south and east. The Nagorno-Karabakh defense army established control over the southern border with Iran as well as the city of Aghdam, a major base for operations against Askeran and Stepanakert during the previous several years.

Although military setbacks did not come to an end with Aliyev's assumption of power, the new president of Azerbaijan took vigorous efforts to restore the fighting potential of his army. Yet he succeeded only partially in his endeavor, meeting stiff resistance on the Armenian side. The Azerbaijani counteroffensive mounted in Kelbajar in January 1994 after an initial success was totally crushed and the former frontline was restored in less than a month's period. The months of April and May 1994 witnessed bloody warfare along the whole frontline, as it became clear that neither side could hope for a major breakthrough.

CEASEFIRE

By the spring of 1994 the military forces of both sides had reached at a point of a balance with no clear advantage over the adversary. Moreover, the regional and

THIS DOCUMENT SIGNED IN BISHKEK WAS THE MAIN LEGAL DOCUMENT WHICH ENSURED **RELATIVE PEACE** IN THE REGION FOR THE COMING TWO AND MORE DECADES

global players, including Russia, Iran, EU and the USA were expressing their interest in some sort of peace in the region on one hand fearing a further escalation and expansion of the conflict and on the other hand having economic and strategic interest in the peace. Azerbaijan, which already had agreements or was negotiating them with major oil companies on the research and extraction of oil and gas from its rich Caspian reserves, was also interested in peace. The frontline for the Armenian side looked as most beneficial and peace was in the interest of all sides.

The ceasefire, brokered by Russia, the traditional player in the region, was signed on 4/5 May in Bishkek by the representatives of Russia, Kyrgyzstan as well as the conflicting parties – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. This document signed in Bishkek was the main legal document which ensured relative peace in the region for the coming two and more decades. ◆

The (Unlikely) Last War in Karabakh of 2020: Empires Return

What led to the Second Karabakh War, how was it different from the previous ones, and what to expect next. Regional Post's expert Tigran Zakaryan tries to explain.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN
PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN



THE WAR THAT DIDN'T END WAR

Just a few months after humanity plunged into the devastating World War 1, in October of 1914 the renowned British novelist Herbert George Wells published a book representing a series of articles printed in the first weeks of the war in London newspapers. The title of the book that argued that bringing imperial Germany to its knees would ensure global peace and stability immediately went viral and it read as follows: "The War That Will End War".

The course of history showed that this was a naïve concept, yet ensuring a long-term peace through inflicting a crushing military defeat to the enemy remains a valid theory in political practice today. The situation in the aftermath of the First Karabakh war and the ceasefire in 1994 looked very much similar to that of the aftermath of World War 1. Most part of the Armenian society, in Armenia proper, in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as in the Diaspora, with few notable exceptions, considered the war effectively over, arguing that Azerbaijan would not dare to launch an attack against Armenians for the fear of further territorial losses. Azerbaijan indeed looked for the ceasefire as a much needed respite in order to bring into order its own economy, which looked promising thanks to its rich hydrocarbon deposits in the Caspian shelf.

In the first years immediately following the ceasefire in both Armenia and Azerbaijan influential politicians and social figures were urging to reach a final peace which would also curb Russian growing influence in the region and stimulate economic development. While then Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan failed to find supporters of



Armenian defence ministry handout/FEA

MOST PART OF THE ARMENIAN SOCIETY, IN ARMENIA PROPER, IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH AS WELL AS IN THE DIASPORA, WITH FEW NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS, CONSIDERED THE WAR EFFECTIVELY OVER

^ An Armenian soldier during clashes with the Azerbaijani army

his peace plan (which, as he argued, was better to be signed sooner, as Armenia militarily still held the upper hand, than later, when this superiority could be undermined) and had to resign in 1998, Azerbaijani leadership, especially under Ilham Aliyev (since 2003) became increasingly aggressive and intransigent with an aim of using the profits from the oil and gas sale on the procurement of modern arms and military equipment. Actually Baku made no secret of its military buildup. Azerbaijan's efforts were concentrating at keeping the issue topical both for the local and international public through a combination of different steps. For the internal public it was picked up the strategy of rewriting and re-editing of historical facts coupled with an aggressive propaganda of racial hatred against Armenians as a part and parcel of the Azerbaijani identity in the making. On international stages Baku used every opportunity, including bribing foreign officials or public figures, to promote its own story of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. On the other hand provoking small-scale skirmishes along the contact line in Karabakh and the Armenian-Azerbaijani border served this purpose as well. Armenia, with rampant corruption and promised extensive investment projects by the Diaspora and other interested parties failing, had much difficulty especially after the 2008 crisis to keep



up militarily with Azerbaijan. In terms of foreign policy the Georgian crisis of 2008 had also an important lesson to teach to Armenia: leaving the Russian sphere of interests is not safe, especially when you are a small nation.

Under those conditions the political leadership of Armenia and Artsakh which was reluctant of changing anything radically in the state, society and economy, that could undermine their own rule, had to rely on external forces, mainly Russia, negotiating with it from increasingly weakened positions.

Meanwhile Kremlin's growing ambitions in the region did not permit the empire, a peacemaker by its own definition, to play on one field alone. Growing Russian-Azerbaijani military, economic and political partnership, so irritating to Yerevan (which however, apparently lacked any leverage to influence them), came to be detrimental to Armenian positions in the Karabakh issue. This came to a point when Russia, started to use Armenian interests as its bargaining chip in its talks with Azerbaijan.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk group co-chairs (represented by Russia, USA and France), Armenia was being pressured to cede some territory, the so-called security zone around the former NKAO in exchange for vague promises. Yerevan initially was inclined for some kind of a tradeoff – in exchange for the recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh sovereignty – such a scenario became increasingly impossible in view of Baku's growing assertiveness (even more bolstered after launching the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline in 2006) as well as Armenian political and



GROWING RUSSIAN-AZERBAIJANI MILITARY, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP, SO IRRITATING TO YEREVAN, CAME TO BE DETRIMENTAL TO ARMENIAN POSITIONS IN THE KARABAKH ISSUE

Sign with the name of the fallen Armenian soldier

social discourse which strongly discouraged any discussion on possible territorial concessions. Armenia could only hope that international players – Russia first of all – would disagree to a change in the status quo in Karabakh and in case of an attempted military invasion by Azerbaijan, a steadfast frontline defense that could thwart Baku's plans of a quick victory would be enough for winning time for the external players to react and intervene. This seemed to have worked more or less accurately in 2016, during the so-called Four-Day War that did not bring any substantial success to Azerbaijan in military terms and ended with a Russian diplomatic intervention. However, as many argue, albeit it clearly was the greatest military action in Karabakh following the 1994 armistice, it was not a full-fledged war, but a major show of force and a serious and last warning.

CANNONS TALK, DIPLOMACY FAILS

In the early hours of 27 September 2020 full-fledged hostilities erupted along the whole contact line in Artsakh. It became immediately clear that this time it was a real war with an unprecedented scope in terms of equipment, hardware and the military potential involved. The events in the war unfolded at a lightning speed. From the first day of the war the Artsakh officials stated that peaceful settlements, including



Stepanakert had been shelled. There were casualties among peaceful population.

Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh immediately announced on the state of war and mobilization, while Azerbaijan next day declared a partial mobilization.

This war was unusual in many aspects. First of all, it was Turkey's unprecedented involvement in the war and could only be compared to the Turkish-Armenian war of 1920. Ankara's open involvement in all stages of the war, starting from planning, logistical organization, commanding units (and some even say that the overall command of the operation), sending jihadist mercenaries from Syria and other areas up to direct participation of the Turkish military in certain operations and the crucial air support could indeed be considered as a game-changer in this war. Turkish involvement was not missed upon some international players, such as France, Russia or the USA, Iran who on different levels and through different diplomatic language criticized Ankara particularly over the involvement of the Syrian mercenaries.



▼
A graffiti of Armenian-Artsakh united map

▲
Football pitch in Stepanakert bombed



This war also underlined the importance of controlling information flows during a war. Azerbaijan immediately shut down most of social media on its territory while this was not the case in Armenia, which failed to establish firm control over the information security of its society. Another side of the information war was the “hunt for journalists” in the war zone by Azerbaijan. On 1 October two journalists from the French Le Monde magazine were injured in shelling of the Martuni town of Artsakh, while on 8 October while visiting the St. Savior's Cathedral in Shushi two Russian journalists and their Armenian guide were wounded in a missile attack on the church. Many international journalists later stated that Azerbaijani UAVs were shadowing and in some cases deliberately targeting them and this seems no exaggeration in view of Baku's attempt of imposing an information blackout on news that could undermine its positions.

Throughout the war the international community repeatedly attempted to mediate at least a brief humanitarian ceasefire in order to collect the dead and injured and that objective seemingly was reached several times. However all of them – mediated by the Russian (10 October), French (18 October) and US (26 October) diplomats and top officials invariably failed to be implemented. >

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet at the beginning of the hostilities expressed alarm over the suffering of civilians and just a few days before the end of the war warned against possible war crimes, urging to refrain from targeting civilians, without making specific reference to either side.

A 21ST CENTURY WAR

Not only local but also international military experts were both puzzled and alarmed at the implications of the war in this seemingly secondary region of the world. The extensive use of UAVs, modern technologies, which at times turned the war into sheer carnage, exposing the vulnerability of the armor and conventional air defense systems makes many to believe that this war was a precursor of a new generation of wars.

➤
"Welcome"



▼
Russian flag in
wthe Dadivank
monastery after
the ceasefire



There was little that even resolute or well-trained troops with high morale could do when they were practically exposed defenselessly to precise air attacks inflicted or guided by UAVs and superior air force.

Nevertheless the Armenian and Artsakh troops fought hard, against heavy odds succeeding in defending the frontline in the east and north but not the crucially important lowlands of the Arax valley. In the initial several days, after heavy fighting the Armenian and Artsakh troops were forced back from their first line of defense in the southeast and northern section of the frontline. In the meantime they inflicted significant losses on Azerbaijani armored formations with anti-tank guided missiles and artillery, destroying dozens of vehicles. However Azerbaijan's heavy use of drones in strikes against Armenian air defenses, gradually gave them air superiority, which proved to become critical. In the second week of the war while Yerevan announced on "partial retreat" as Baku claimed having success in the southwest in the directions of Cabrayil and Fizuli, which according to Azerbaijani sources were taken on 9 and 19 October respectively.

Azerbaijani troops quickly advanced along the Arax river, taking control over the Khodafarin bridge and the nearby dam and the authorities announced that since 22 October of the border area with Iran was fully secured.

Taking control over more mountainous area to the north was harder for the Azerbaijani troops and their offensives towards the cities of Shushi and Lachin from south and southeast were halted with different levels of success.

In the last days of October the Artsakh authorities stated that the Azerbaijani units were just a few kilometers away from Shushi, but fighting continued in the forests and mountains to the south and southeast of it.

The first days of November, as Artsakh's southern city of Hadrut was lost the Armenian troops



were engaged in heavy fighting along the Goris-Lachin-Shushi-Martuni line, with ultimately losing control over Shushi.

YET ANOTHER PAX RUSSICA?

The war came to somewhat abrupt and to many an unexpected end with an agreement signed on 9 November by the Russian, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders. It was clear that the text of the agreement was drawn by Russia and was pre-negotiated with Turkey, which throughout the war showed its potential to subvert any peace initiative in the region that did not take into account its own interest.

The so far shaky peace has come at a high cost – Azerbaijani control over the city of Shushi, the very symbol of the Armenian victory in the first Karabakh war, as well as other territories in the south, and evacuation of the Kelbajar, Lachin and Aghdam territories, which were still under the Artsakh control by the time the agreement was signed.

THE SO FAR SHAKY PEACE HAS COME AT A HIGH COST – AZERBAIJANI CONTROL OVER THE CITY OF SHUSHI, THE VERY SYMBOL OF THE ARMENIAN VICTORY IN THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR, AS WELL AS OTHER TERRITORIES IN THE SOUTH

Around 40,000 people from Artsakh are now displaced from their homes, while the Armenian presence there is seriously compromised.

Russian peacekeepers are the only force that holds back Azerbaijan from launching another war, while Moscow hopes to eternalize its presence in Karabakh, as an important tool of maintaining its influence over Baku.

Time will show as to what part of the imperial ambitions of the two regional powers – Russia and Turkey – will come true, yet even now there are voices of discontent in Azerbaijan claiming that the war brought about a loss of Azerbaijan's own independence to Turkey and to some degree to Russia.

It is beyond doubt that regional and global empires will continue playing on the differences of minor nations, in this case Armenia and Azerbaijan, in order to establish their versions of peace and the only real alternative for those who want to keep their independence is to establish their own, real peace, based on the notions of good neighborhood, respect of the rights and freedoms of each nation and individual. ♦

▼
Burnt shop in
Stepanakert



44 DAYS OF WAR IN 44 ACTS

The time in Armenia stopped on an early morning at the end of September. For 44 days straight Armenia and Artsakh were in a de facto state of war. Here're the definitive moments of the second Artsakh war.



Azerbaijan attacks Artsakh targeting not only military but also civil areas, including Stepanakert. All sides of the conflict establish a martial law, Azerbaijan also announces a curfew.

A 9 years old child and an elderly woman killed as a result of the missile bombardment in Martuni city, Artsakh.

France, Russia, US, NATO, CSTO, EU call upon the parties to put an end to the hostilities.

September 27

September 28



Armenia informs about an Azerbaijani airplane F-16 of Turkish production downed.

Yerevan indicates that Armenia has no plans to apply to CCSTO in connection with the aggravation of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh yet.



Armenia informs that Azerbaijan shelled Vardenis and that Armenian SU-25 was shot by Azerbaijan.

September 29

October 1

Armenian MoD states that Azerbaijani forces were shelling the territory of Armenia. Azerbaijani UAV is downed in Kotayk Province of Armenia later that night.



Ilham Aliyev informs about the capture of Mataghis, as well as Talish, Tartar, and several settlements at Jabrayil.

Stepanakert is again under heavy shelling, Israeli-made cluster bombs, banned under international law. (Confirmed by Amnesty International)

October 3

October 4

Artsakh informs that the Defense Army forces had targeted and destroyed the Ganja military airbase, however Azerbaijan denies.

Ilham Aliyev informs about taking the control of Jabrayil city and several other settlements next to it.

Armenian MoD releases footage apparently showing Azerbaijani soldiers leaving Mataghis.

Azerbaijani MoD states that Armenian forces bombarded Mingechar water reservoir. Both Armenia and Artsakh issued denials.



Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi came under repeated bombardment and is seriously damaged.

Ilham Aliyev states that Azerbaijani forces had taken the control over Hadrut.

October 8

October 10



Russia- brokered ceasefire

After 10 hours of talks in Moscow the sides of the conflict agree to temporarily stop the military operations however, the ceasefire was violated almost immediately, each side accusing the other.

Turkey and Azerbaijan insist on four-way negotiations that would involve Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey

October 14

October 18

October France-brokered ceasefire

The Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan have agreed to a humanitarian truce as of October 18th, 00h00 local time. In the early morning, both sides accuse each other of immediately violating the newly agreed ceasefire.

Azerbaijan claims that they captured Khudaferin bridge and later Fizuli.



Azerbaijani president states that Azerbaijani forces gained control over Kovsakan (Zangelan).

October 20

October 24



Azerbaijan claims that Lachin district is under their control however, Armenian forces continuously shell the area. Armenia denies the claims and insists that Lachin is under the control of Artsakh.



United States-brokered ceasefire

According to the US State Department, official Yerevan and Baku have agreed to establish a humanitarian ceasefire, which will take effect on October 26 at 8 am local time.

Aliiev states that Azerbaijani forces had seized control of Kubatlu.

October 25

October 26



Artsakh Defense Minister Jalal Harutyunyan is wounded. Although, unofficial Azerbaijani military sources alleged that he was killed and released footage of the assassination from drone camera.

October 27

October 29

The President of Artsakh, Arayik Harutyunyan states that the Azerbaijani forces were already 5 kilometres (3.1 mi) from Shushi city and calls for unification.

A Syrian mercenary fighter is captured by the Artsakh Defense Army.

US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien confirms the involvement of mercenaries by Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh. He also says they are discussing possible involvement of Scandinavian (Denmark, Sweden, Norway) armed observers (peacekeepers) in Nagorno-Karabakh.

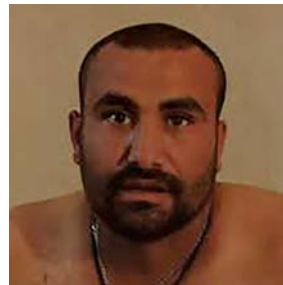


Armenia states Azerbaijan was using prohibited phosphorus munitions over Nagorno-Karabakh, setting fires to the forests in the vicinity of settlements.

The Armenian Davit Bek settlement is also being shelled by Azerbaijan, according to Armenia.

October 31

November 1



Second Syrian mercenary is captured by the Artsakh Defense Army.

November 2

November 3

The UN finally speaks up calling the events in Artsakh a war crime and urges both parties to step back.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei refers to war, noting the necessity of "the return of the territories occupied by Armenia" and the guarantee by Azerbaijan of the security of the Armenians living there.



In the morning, the ceasefire again collapses.

Armenian authorities confirm the loss of Kubatlu and that the Azerbaijani forces had reached the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in the south.





Armenia closes the Shushi-Berdzor road for civilians.

November 4

November 6

November 5

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova states that according to the information received, members of international terrorist groups are currently being transferred from the Middle East to the conflict zone.

November 8



Ilham Aliev announces the capture of Shushi, which is later consolidated by Turkish officials and the president of Turkey Erdogan himself.

Armenia denies this information, claiming that the battle near Shushi is still ongoing.



November 9

The spokesperson of Artsakh President confirms that the city of Shushi is no longer under the control of the Defense army.

Russia reports about a MI-24 aircraft downed by Azerbaijan on the territory of Armenia, near Yeraskh, killing two crew members. Azerbaijan calls it an accident and offers its apologies.

Late at night, Nikol Pashinyan informs that Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan signed a statement on ending the war. Protests begin in Yerevan, heading to the Governmental headquarters.

PARADISE LOST

Two days after the fall of Shushi – the pearl of Artsakh and the cultural center of the republic, images surfaced on the internet showcasing the acts of vandalism of Azerbaijani soldiers inside the city. These photos vividly illustrate the offensive writings on the walls of the Ghazanchetsots cathedral and the damaged dome of Saint Hovhannes church. After the infamous ceasefire announcement which was followed by Aghdam, Lachin and Karvajar being handed over to Azerbaijan along with the areas that the enemy had occupied during the war, a number of cultural-spiritual monuments fell under the control of Azerbaijan, with their future endangered. Here are the most important ones, currently under Azerbaijan.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE, CULTURE AND SPORT, ARNOS MARTIROSYAN



TIGRANAKERT FORTRESS AND THE ANCIENT CITY OF MARTAKERT

Throughout the history, there were four Tigranakert cities. The remnants of one of them can still be found in the Martakert region of Artsakh, near the Khachen river. King Tigran the Great built the city and named it after himself in the first century BC. During the Soviet period, Tigranakert was in the territory of the Aghdam region and was liberated during the Artsakh war.

The ancient city was discovered back in 2005 and since then excavation works had been carried out. As a result, the scientists unearthed and examined the walls, the citadel, and the central part of the city, as well as an early medieval basilica. Among the most important findings in the area were the records written in Armenian.

In 2010, a museum was established in the fortress of a later period located in the area of the former city exhibiting all the findings of the previous 5 years. The excavations didn't stop, and visiting Tigranakert you could always see specialists at the site immersed in the working process. The Azerbaijani side received the part of the antique city discovered by Armenian scientists along with the fortress. Fortunately, it was possible to evacuate most of the exhibits in the museum.



GHAZANCHETSOTS CATHEDRAL (HOLY SAVIOR), SHUSHI

Have you seen the video from the records of the Artsakh war where the soldiers of the Armenian army are celebrating the liberation of Shushi? The soldiers are dancing with the locals inside the half-destroyed Armenian church – no longer under the control of Azerbaijan, which the latter had turned into an arsenal knowing well that the Armenian army would never damage a church.

The white beauty of the city, the Ghazanchetsots church, was shelled twice during the war by Azerbaijan, exactly a hundred years after it was destroyed during the Massacre of Armenians carried out by the same enemy. Today, damaged and vandalized it carries also the scars of the latest war. The cathedral is one of the symbols of Artsakh and its liberation.

Built in 1868-1887, Ghazanchetsots was the center of the Artsakh Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church. It was closed during the Soviet period but was restored and active later. The cathedral was extensively restored in the aftermath of the first war and reconsecrated in 1998. Almost all brides and grooms of Artsakh wed in Ghazanchetsots cathedral.



THE GREEN CHAPEL (SAINT HOVHANNES CHURCH), SHUSHI

One could see the green dome of the Saint Hovhannes church from all parts of the city. People called it the Green chapel for its color. After the chapel fell under the control of Azerbaijan, the formerly green dome and the bell tower were damaged.

During the Soviet era, being surrounded by sanatoriums and holiday homes, Green Chapel was turned into a mineral water drinking hall by the Azerbaijanis. As a result, the monument was severely damaged. The church was built in 1818 in the place of the former Karabakhtsots wooden church. Some of the wall inscriptions of the previous church were preserved on the new construction which was by the way but recently restored.

TSITSERNAKAVANK (SAINT GEVORG CHURCH), KASHATAGH

Tsitsernavank monastery has over 15 other names and is located in the Kashatagh region of Artsakh, the former Aghahejq settlement of the Syunik state of Mets Hayq. It's one of the most important monuments of medieval Armenian architecture.

The current Tsitsernavank carries the influence of several construction stages. There's a theory that Tsitsernavank was originally a pagan temple turned into a church in the 4th century. Later, in the 5-7th centuries, the upper part of the walls, the apses, and the tabernacle with its columned roof were added, as well as arches were constructed in the place of the wooden columns. ➤



SURB ASTVATSATSIN CHURCH, ASKERAN

Located at the center of Avetaranots village, the tall and spacious Surb Astvatsatsin monastery with its four magnificent columns can't be seen from afar. The monastery was built in 1651, and was house to various manuscripts, gospels, crosses, and other precious relics. Interestingly enough, the name of the village itself translates into Place of Gospel referring to the fact that many gospel manuscripts were written there.

The village also has another phenomenal monument called Kusanots Anapat which translates from Armenian as "Desert of Nuns". It's located on a hill, south of the village. On the western side, the complex was protected with a wall; however, only the tower of the wall lived up to our days. According to the writing at the entrance of the church it was built in 1616, earlier than the Surb Astvatsatsin church. There used to be a spiritual and cultural center here, which is evidenced by both written sources and the remains of an old monastery. A desert called Gayane Monastery was established upon these ruins. It was built by Gayane and Hripsime sisters.



GTCHAVANK, HADRUT

In between the mountains of Hadrut, at the outline of the north-western slope of Toghasar or Tchgnavor mountain, rests the Gtchavank monastery complex only two kilometers away from the famous Togh village. The name of the Church is first encountered in the early medieval sources – in the manuscripts of Movses Kagankatvatsi mentioning that a representative of Gtchavanq was present at the Partavi Church Assembly. There are also writings on the walls of the church dating back to 13-14 centuries. During this period the monastery was expanded, and additional buildings were added turning it into a complex. Gtchavanq has outstanding architecture with numerous khachkars in the area. It's a classic example of medieval Armenian architecture which is significant not only as a historical but also as a cultural monument. During the rule of Melik Avan, also known as Yegan, Gtchavanq reached the peak of its development, becoming one of the famous monastic complexes of that period.



SAINT STEPHEN'S CHURCH, HADRUT

St. Stephen's Church has existed for a long time. In the Middle Ages, Melik Egan and his son repaired just the roof of the church. The structure of the building proves that it was built on the foundation of an older structure, presumably a pagan temple. Most probably the building was demolished, and the stones were partially used during the construction of the new church. This is a common approach that can be seen in the medieval monuments of Artsakh. There are over 50 khachkars integrated into the walls of the church.



YEGHISHE APOSTLE MONASTERY, MARTAKERT

Yeghishe Apostle Monastery (also known as Jrvshtik) located at the forested slopes of Mrav mount was built in the 5th century. In the area of the Armenian apostolic monastery complex in the Martakert region of the Artsakh Republic, north of the village of Mataghis operated a pagan sanctuary named Mihr Nersehia or Nersmeha. The monastery was established by the famous Armenian king Vachagan and the complex is said to have received its name when the relics of Saint Yeghishe were transferred there from the Horeca monastery. The monastery is also known under the name of Jrvsh-tik gotten from the namesake waterfall located in the deep gorge south of the complex. The monastery complex consists of the actual church, a vestibule, seven chapels, a cemetery, and other auxiliary buildings.



The destiny of several other monuments and sites still requires clarifications. For example, Dadivank monastery in Qarvajar is de facto within the territory that was handed over to Azerbaijan; however, Russian peacekeepers currently protect the complex. The Amaras monastery in the Martuni region is also kept by the Russian peacekeepers along with the Defense Army soldiers; however, the troops of Azerbaijani armed forces are not far from the walls of the monument and no one knows if it will be possible for the locals to visit the site. Even though the Kataro monastery located at the top of Dizapayt mountain in the Hadrut region remained impregnable, its faith is still unclear as the borders are not yet finalized.

The inconsistency and lack of proper management on a global level led not only to a great loss of human lives and territories but also endangered the cultural heritage of Armenia and Artsakh. Next time, before proudly speaking of Armenia as being the first country having adopted Christianity as a state religion, and of our cultural monuments being an integral part of our identity, we should consider also protecting them with the same pride and importunity. ♦

ANGELS AT THE ENTRANCE TO HELL

PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN





Someone asked what I'd like to have photographed during the war that I didn't have a chance to. The first thing that came to my mind were the doctors – those working for 24 hours for more than 40 days. From the very first glance, they were exhausted, their hearts frozen. But deep inside, they were wounded with every wounded soldier and died with every dying soldier. The hospital of Stepanakert was like an entrance to hell, where the workers were angels. It was both the most dark and light-filled place. I regret I didn't photograph more. It wasn't allowed, an order that came from "above". I had a chance to take a few shots during those endless 40 something days. So we have documented only a small part of the war. A small and allowed part. Tomorrow, some written text will trump visible proof and make us invisible. As always.



^ Stepanakert's hospital after shelling



^ Reanimobile takes another wounded soldier to the hospital

▼
"I noticed that some of the wounded had numbers on their hands, each of them had following numbers on their hands. I asked the staff members what was the point of the numbers. It appeared they were unknown soldiers, they were unconscious, didn't have any identification documents or any friend that could tell their names. The doctors kept bringing them and treating. If the guys were lucky, they came to consciousness and were able to tell their names. In reality, this was extremely tragic and painful. Some of the guys were apparently the soldiers of the enemy's forces: after the surgeries they started talking on their language."





^
"That day was the birthday of a wounded soldier. The girls had tried to make a small celebration for him. 2 hours after taking this photo we were all evacuated."



▼
A volunteer doctor naps





◀ A nurse comforts distressed colleague



^ Another surgery at the hospital

◀ Hospital's nurses and doctors at the shelter

THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA AND LOBBYING DURING WARTIME

We have sat down with Mr Eric Hacopian, a political consultant and strategist with over 25 years of experience in American politics. Eric has lived in California and moved to Yerevan around 3 years ago and is currently actively working with Civilnet as a host and commentator. In 1997 Eric started his own political consulting firm EDH & Associates specialising in general consulting, direct mail and television aspects of political campaigns.

INTERVIEW : VIKTORIYA MURADYAN



We are all aware of the huge potential that the Armenian Diaspora represents. But often we forget that their genuine motivation cannot replace the professional work of lobbyists. Is there any functioning Armenian lobby abroad, especially in the US and if so, is it coordinated by the Armenian Diaspora or by the Armenian Government?

— There's advocacy and there's lobby and they are different. In the case of advocacy, it's more community organisations and grassroots type of efforts led by ordinary people that are being involved. On that front, specifically in the US, Armenia has been active for many years and those organisations have had different levels of success. Unfortunately, where we have entirely lacked is in lobbying which is far more based on money and access, and not just the grassroots aspect of it. As the American body politic itself has become more corrupt and less responsive to the demands of ordinary people, the grassroots aspect of lobbying has become less relevant. Up until recently, the Armenian government hasn't really been serious about lobbying while Azerbaijan has been exceptionally serious about it. Since they don't have any grassroots influence, they have been actively working with different lobbyists and are spending a lot of money. We see that in Europe as well. It was only a couple of weeks before the Second Artsakh war that the Armenian side officially hired a lobby



firm, and that firm was tied to the former Senator 97-years-old Bob Dole's presidential campaign. This choice tells about the seriousness of the Armenian side.

Although the organizations which are lobbying for different Armenian causes have varying levels of success and do the best they can with resources they have, the money-requiring professional lobbying is a different thing and it should more be the responsibility of the Armenian Government. The fact that we are not using professional lobbyists and not raising money to go that route shows that we are behind the times in our effectiveness.

What are the principles that the Armenian lobbying abroad should follow to be successful and able to compete with a very well-funded and omnipresent Azerbaijani lobbying and caviar diplomacy?

— Any kind of lobbying campaign is about telling an effective and targeted story. You can parcel up the Armenian narrative into different aspects of American or European politics. For example, one of the primary driving forces of the Republican party in the US at the grassroots level is the religious right and Armenian organisations have done absolutely nothing to use these very strong Christian right organizations in their favour. Armenians have also been very active among the American Evangelical ranks, but failed to effectively use their potential too. President Trump was responsive to the religious right and if we had that card to play, we would have had better results in getting US engagement during this war.



On the more progressive front, we have the human rights and self-determination angle, which is a great story to tell as well.

Lastly, we have to understand that it's always easier to hate an individual than it is to get into the middle of some complicated conflict. Aliyev plays this tolerance guy to the West and then plays a neofascist in his own circles. We just have to take his words and make him pay for it. It is a lot easier to vilify him than to vilify the whole Azerbaijan. Aliyev can be very quickly made into a cardboard villain because of the racist, almost neo-fascist nature of the statements that he routinely makes and openly translates into English. But we have not done that. Our narrative has to be much simpler. You can't fight people's biases but you can play along with them. It is very easy to convince Westerners of an Oriental despot, because that's what they expect.

There is a huge ideological gap between the Armenians from the Diaspora and Armenians from the Republic of Armenia, and it has become more visible right after the signature of the deal ending the second Nagorno-Karabakh war and particularly now when we have a very tense domestic political environment. Where do you think that detachment from the local reality comes from?

— We can't exaggerate this detachment, because almost everyone is upset about the outcome of the war both in Armenia and in the Diaspora, it's just a question of how you respond to it. The impression of the Diaspora (especially the American one) of what is going here is far more drastic than it is, partially because the TV networks and channels that broadcast from here are all controlled by the opposition so they'll turn every 500-person demonstration like the country's falling apart. There is a tremendous level of misinformation, some of it intentionally pushed by certain Armenian political actors here and abroad for the wrong reasons. So the main difference and dichotomy is in there.

People here are far more grounded in reality, even though that reality is not a favourable one and they are not happy about it. Without generalizing, the Diaspora and the American Diaspora specifically is most detached from reality about what is really going on. Negative news always spreads out faster than positive news and there is not much room for nuance, that's the



◀ Humanitarian aid before being sent to Armenia, Sweden

key. At the end of the day, you have to ground yourself in reality, you have to look at it with non-romantic eyes, be resolute, strong, not blink, you should be as radical as the reality itself. Small countries like ours can't afford romantic politics.

Over the decades, the Armenian Diaspora and particularly the one in the US has always had its own agenda separate from the official Armenian foreign policy objectives. It has been extensively focusing their efforts on the Armenian Genocide awareness. Do you think that if those efforts have been coordinated with the Armenian Government and diversified years ago, Armenia would have a different political standing abroad?

— I am exceptionally critical of the Armenian foreign policy establishment because frankly on some level it does not even exist. What we've found in this war is that we have unimaginative diplomats that don't know the basics of the region we're living in, they don't have the basic relationships. Our country was isolated. We have had diplomatic fails and visionless approaches for many years. So I don't know what advice they would give to Diaspora organizations that could be of any use.

It is true that there can be a fair case made with Diaspora institutions' obsession with the Genocide issue. But if that's what a significant number of



Diasporans care about, those organizations are going to be responsive to that. Genocide issue is very complicated because in the Diaspora it has this function of preserving identity and I don't want to be too critical of it. But it's true that we would have been better off if we paid more attention to the Artsakh issue than to the Genocide because that involves the lives of people today.

Can you name any considerably important accomplishments (besides some American companies cutting ties with Turkish Bayraktar drone producer) that the Armenian Diaspora has achieved during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war?

— No. It brings me no joy to say it but as a political collective we entirely failed. All of our institutions both in Armenia and in the Diaspora have proved to be mediocre, unimaginative and visionless. That is why we failed. Most of those companies were easy

to pressure because they are situated in California or the West Coast. A lot of good people came here and did a lot of good things, they pushed boundaries with their activism, which was great to see. But this is not about questioning the motivation or the willingness of people to engage and do things, it's a question of effectiveness. And as far as the effectiveness goes, we failed on that front.

You've referred to the West's indifference during the Nagorno-Karabakh war as a "harsh education". It is undeniable that the narrative "The West won't let Azerbaijan to escalate the conflict further" has been prevailing for many years in the Armenian politics. And that myth has been busted quite quickly during this war. Have we been overestimating our importance to the West or this kind of aloof Western response has been truly a surprise to everyone?

— Yes, I think we have exaggerated our importance overall and we have certainly exaggerated our importance to the West. We just need to understand where we are in the pecking order of the world and that we don't count, because we haven't done anything to make us count. What they told us was "Your lives don't matter", but why would we think our lives mattered? The world sees a much worse scenario in Yemen but hardly anything is being done about it. So you either toughen up and strengthen yourself, or you're going to be in the same situation, because they don't care if we live or die. We need to understand that, embrace it and act upon that.



◀ Armenian community in Luzern, Switzerland

The coverage of the protests organized by the Armenian Diaspora abroad has been mostly about the violence & provocations between Armenian and Azeri communities, or local residents' dissatisfaction with the Armenians blocking the roads, rather than about the cause of the protests or about Nagorno-Karabakh. Do you think it is just laziness of the American media or a deliberate avoidance of putting the topic under the spotlight?

— There's a phrase in American media which says "If it bleeds it leads". You can have a 150,000-person anti-war peaceful demonstration and if three people get into a fight, that will be the lead story. Additionally, there's this inherent bias in the Western Media against people who look like us. We don't fit into the victim narrative: we are not Muslims, we look white, we are Christians so obviously we have to be the oppressor, we are not Kosovars, Uighurs etc. We there's an obvious racist attitude that the Western media demonstrates, especially in the English language press. They question why "these little brown people" are fighting each other, why they can't be civilised like Finns and Swedes? What is wrong with Karabakh being under Azeri control? After all there are Hungarians living in Romania, like it's the same. They have no context of what that would mean. So part of it is just basic racism of Western press corps and part of it is very inherent bias against the Christians of the East..

The Armenian Diaspora often feels upset thinking that the Armenians in the Republic consider them only as cash cows but never really give them a chance to participate in the decision-making locally or engage in other initiatives. Is there any truth behind this reasoning? Has there been a lack of support of the Armenian Government to actually engage constructively and more long-term with the Diasporans or the lack of willingness of the Diasporans to visit Armenia other than for touristic purposes?

— Is there anything that the Armenian Government has done in the last 30 years based on long term planning or



approaching it in some sophisticated fashion? Hardly anything. So why would the relationships with the Diaspora be any different? We're expecting too much from our mediocre failed institutions. On the other hand, the Diaspora itself has underperformed. This is a two-way street. There are a lot of individuals who do great work and I don't want to take away from that or to downgrade what they do. However, these are exceptions and not systematic efforts, especially when you compare it with the potential of the Diaspora or to other similar institutions of other nations. Diaspora institutions need to understand that Armenia is an independent state and building a state is expensive. It requires far greater commitment and far more serious people to create networks. We have some of the finest doctors, academics in the world, but we don't have a single world-class hospital or university in Armenia. So the Diaspora and Armenia have failed each other, but the amount of Diaspora's commitment and role is exaggerated and marginal. We need to move from charity to development.

How do you see the future development of the Armenian Diaspora grassroots activism in the post-war space?

— The one good thing that this war has done is that it has activated a lot more people, a whole generation of young people who weren't even aware or didn't even care about anything Armenian. So the base of activists who want to do something has grown dramatically.

In a short-run, outside of engaging in specific things in Armenia like job-creation or charity initiatives, the Diaspora should use Azerbaijan's words and actions and prosecute them in the eyes of the world. We should have a campaign that is focused on remedial cessation and the removal of Artsakh from the control of territory of Azerbaijan.

What advice would you give to the young Diasporans?

— It is always better to come here. Firstly, because it's where it really matters. Secondly, the nature of "Hayastan" and the fact that it's very small allows you to have a tremendous impact here. It's one of the cases, where a small number of dedicated individuals can actually make a huge difference. In today's world, it is very easy to be active in a thousand places. So move here, or come here part of the time or at least be engaged in something very specific. However, everything that you're engaged with has to be focused on one thing alone which is excellence. One thing that needs to be driven out of the system is mediocrity, because we can't afford that.

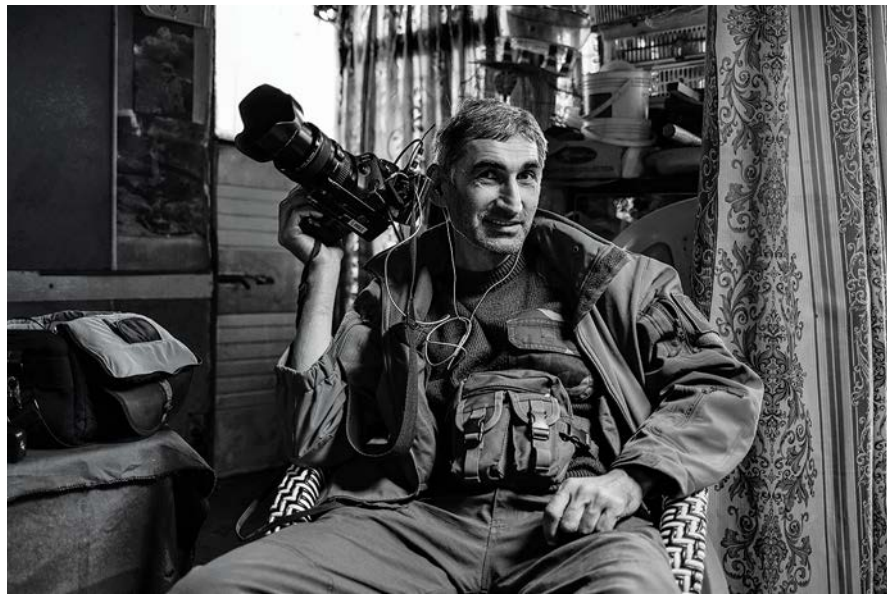
We need to get better at everything, we need to be humble and understand what our failures are. But we should not be despairing whatsoever as there's so much going on for this country. Imposing our will on our problems can be achieved by not tolerating mediocrity. ♦



THE CENSORSHIP OF WAR

The editor-in-chief of Media Initiatives Center Gegham Vardanyan talked with Regional Post about the role of media during the recent war and how the censorship and restrictions shaped the overall image and our perception of the Second Artsakh War.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN



Artur Gharayan, DOP

Was Armenian media ready to work in this extreme situation?

— On the first day of the war, at 12 o'clock in the morning, there were neither helmets nor bulletproof vests left. I can't say if the local journalists were ready for it, but the desire was certainly there.

What similar experience did we have before the September 27th? I guess, the April War in 2016. On a practical



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Aram Kirakosyan,
photographer



<
Group of Armenian journalists in Areg Balayan's instant photo

level, we had learnt that there'd be a need for vests and helmets, as well as for minimal security and first aid training. Also, after 2016, we started talking about censorship: what should or shouldn't be covered. We started initiating various public discussions and trainings, but every international journalist can tell you that these kinds of events should be initiated at least every two years and not just once or twice in a time.

The Media Initiatives Center had purchased a certain number of vests and helmets to be provided to the journalists. Fortunately, they weren't needed in the recent years. I guess, the first

time they were used was in July, during the escalation in Tavush region. During the revolution of 2018, some of the journalists were also wearing those vests while covering the street clashes. Even though uncomfortable for such cases, those military press vests were what we had.

So, did Armenian journalists manage to provide high level coverage from the perspective of capabilities?

— It was October 1st I guess when I first traveled to Stepanakert. I saw a lot of journalists there who were mostly from the local agencies. We

can say that our news outlets succeeded in cooperating, transforming their graphics and ensuring the newsflow, but we need to understand that it differed from the actual war journalism and I guess some of the journalists weren't prepared for that part. Of course, there were opposite situations as well.

I witnessed a huge desire from their part to cover these stories and have their share in them and for that purpose some of the journalists would go to the most dangerous spots even without protective clothes which, even though appreciable, was extremely risky. >

But how many of these stories got actually publicized?

— That’s the question. We dealt with the martial law and restrictions and of course with a highly dangerous situation. A journalist working in Artsakh faced travel limitations and due to the restrictions the stories started to repeat themselves. In the beginning, there were three main directions: Martakert, Martuni, and Hadrut. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually organized visits for the journalists, but obviously at some point the situation



▲ Samra restaurant's Hovik Asmarian, photographer Areg Balayan, head of Artsakh state radio Ani Minasyan, with David Sayadyan

◀ Documentary filmmaker Angela Frangyan

▶ Ani Minasyan

▼ Rubina Markosyan and members of Evnreport.com



changed. Journalists tried to adjust, in some cases they would mutiny but we were at war and at the end of the day they had to follow the rules. For example, journalists couldn't illustrate the hospitals and funerals in their photos and videos, etc. Here we had both official censorship and self-censorship. It was also hard for the local journalists to stay neutral and keep their emotions down.

At the end of the day, did censorship help or vice versa?

— I think, if in a martial law the government imposes official censorship, the journalists are to follow these rules

as they are, but the rules must be very distinct. If the government declares a martial law, it must be done properly and must be all-inclusive. If its purpose is to manage the information flow, then it implies the way it was done in Azerbaijan when they shot down social media. Well, people there used VPN but still, it's the approach I'm talking about. Besides the filming and traveling limitations, the journalists didn't really face the martial law drastically. They had their own censorship; not to cause any harm. In 2016, we had a controlled media field, but this year it was different. This time we had politicized media and politicized media conflicts. Even though these media outlets tried to work with the government, despite the martial law the gossip and misinformation still slipped through. Some journalists and media outlets got fined, but there was no total control over information.

Were we lied to all the way?

— Obviously, in a situation of war, both sides can exaggerate the news and lie about the scale of the situation.

▼
A local with PanArmenian
Photo's Karapet Sahakyan

►
Journalist Karevn
Avetisyan from
Sputnik Armenia



It is both right and helpful as long as it isn't a complete lie. I always called the official information a propaganda and every time I presented Artsrun Hovhannisyan [representative of the Ministry of Defense, the main figure to present the news from the front – ed.] to someone from abroad I would call him the “propaganda guy”. Official propaganda is helpful as long as you realize that it is propaganda. Here arises the question of media literacy. Had the majority of people installed that filter and every time listening to Artsrun Hovhannisyan at 10 pm had they realized he's just doing his work, at least this huge disappointment we are witnessing today would be less. ►

But was it right to concentrate the information flow on one or two people?

— People feel cheated but I don't think the faces of propaganda should be blamed the most. They were the ones to convey the messages that were defined long before. They were trying not to spread panic, but at the same time there were too many exaggerations. All these hashtags and slogans! I understand, those people were doing their jobs and I cannot say that their actions harmed the frontline or the people in Armenia during the war, but they definitely disappointed them immensely. They tried to keep the spirit high, which was the right thing to do, however there were too many exaggerations and even though they weren't obvious lies, at some point it was too much. Currently, we are facing the consequences of it all: a crisis of trust towards authorities and a crisis of facts. The fall was too harsh for the people, which makes it much harder to convey messages in real time. The communication is disturbed.

Is it possible to stay an objective journalist and not to become a tool of propaganda when one covers a war in his own country?

— Yes, it's possible and it is the right thing to do. A journalist should be able

➤ Photographer Karen Mirzoyan and filmmaker Andranik Babayan

▼ Shelled car of filmmakers Aram Shahbazyan and Artur Gharayan



◀ Angela Frangyan

to do the right assessment based on the topic and context. For example, one of our fellow journalists had footage of a huge number of dead bodies of Armenian soldiers but he chose not to publish them. I think it was the right decision at that time. But, at the same time, I believe that one of the reasons for our failure is the fact that for many years we hadn't criticized our army. Army was always a taboo topic in Armenia, hence the consequences. During this war as well, the army was one of the key self-censorship topics for our journalists.

If we compare the war of 2016 and the recent war, how did the Armenian media field evolve during this time?

— In 2016, there were no restrictions, there wasn't enough time for that, but propaganda was still active. You might remember the myths about the hunter shooting a UAV with a gun and other such stories. The social media processes have developed since then and the political groups have become more organized. In 2016, Serzh Sargsyan had an opposition, but in 2020 the opposition was more active and decisive. But



> Angela Frangyan



^ Photographers Erik Grigoryan (center) and Narek Aleksanyan (right)

we have to admit that in 2016, the opposition didn't have this amount of media resources: TV channels, websites, social media influencers, etc. During the autumn war, we had several major topics, such as the terrorist and mercenaries, recognition of Artsakh, and so on. In this situation, Armenia desperately needed international coverage. In the beginning, they even let the journalists to Artsakh without a proper visa and created all the possible conditions for them. We needed that coverage much more than Azerbaijan did.

Can the current government eventually recover the trust in terms of information transparency?

— We need time and exact moves from the government. The officials need to reaffirm their reputation. At this moment, if some unknown person writes on Facebook that we've lost 5 villages in Tavush and 27 news outlets share it, the refutation of the head of the region or the Ministry of the Defense won't make any difference for the people. This is the result of our euphoria. When we heard someone talking on TV, we didn't think that it was propaganda. Usually, in extreme situations, the media literacy is aggravated, but this situation was directly connected to our emotions and it was hard to stay unbiased. ♦



COVERING THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND WAR AS A FOREIGN JOURNALIST



Neil Hauer is a Canadian freelance journalist, analyst and researcher writing on the North and South Caucasus. His stories were published on CNN, Guardian, Foreign Policy and AlJazeera. He has years of experience living and reporting on the ground from all over the region. He has covered the conflicts in Syria and Chechnya. More recently, Neil has been reporting live from the frontlines in Nagorno-Karabakh. Neil was one of the few foreign journalists, who has been covering the war and its aftermath while being on the ground almost all the time.

INTERVIEW : VIKTORIA MURADYAN / PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN



▼
Alexander Melnikov
from WarGonzo.

You've been covering the South Caucasus for a long time. What is the most fascinating thing about our region?

— I got into the region many years ago, in the middle of my undergraduate degree, because I was always interested in the former Soviet Union and the South Caucasus was the most interesting corner of the Soviet Union. It's just this intersection of so much history, culture, diversity, different languages going back thousands of years and the amount of diversity and richness in a fairly geographically small area that captivated me. Even after living here for 3.5 years for now, I am not nearly anywhere close to having seen everything I want to see. It's just a region that keeps on giving and I find it intellectually stimulating in a lot of ways.

How well do you know the region and have you covered many conflicts and wars since you've moved here?

— This is actually my first war covering on the ground because I have never had the idea of being a war correspondent. I am just a Caucasus-focused journalist and researcher. I travelled to Chechnya about once a year in the North Caucasus but that's largely during a post-war era. I have not been to Syria, I am just covering the events, especially the Russian foreign policy there analytically. But when this conflict



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happened of course I had to come here, because this is the biggest event in the South Caucasus since at least 2008 Russia-Georgia war. There was no way I thought I could do it without covering from Karabakh and Armenia.

The new Ad Hoc report of the Armenian Ombudsman says that there were 390 journalists from 90 different countries who covered the fighting from the Armenian side. Yet still, there's a feeling and maybe even more than a feeling that the conflict and the war have been overlooked by many international media outlets. Do you have any explanation for this?



◀
Czech war photographer and filmmaker Jana Andert.

— I think in European media the conflict was fairly well covered and widespread although I don't follow many local or national media outlets. I met for example one Dutch journalist who came here only in mid-November after the ceasefire agreement was signed. She was the first Dutch journalist to come here so I guess the coverage was not the same everywhere anyways. However, American media outlets were largely disinterested. I tried to pitch pieces to a large number of big American outlets that I had

worked with before and they all just passed. The reasons are a few. Firstly, the pandemic and the US elections did not allow much to get into the US coverage. Even major US outlets like CNN and Washington Post didn't send anyone here and didn't commission any reporter on the ground. Secondly, journalism is being considered as a "dying industry". Major outlets have shed staff and funding and they are limited with the number of employees they have and the topics they can cover. Finally, although this was a destructive war happening on the borders of the European continent, it didn't have that big selling point, the sexy angle of the Russian involvement for example. We know that everyone loves the Russian evil mastermind story. Someone did an analysis of New York Times coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. They found out that there was literally 20 times more coverage of the former despite the latter lasting much longer and being more destructive. I was shocked to see that there was that much disparity.

Do you think that as a foreign journalist you have received necessary support and guidance from the authorities in Armenia and Artsakh?



^ A Basque journalist
Pablo Gonzales



^ Semen Pegov
from WarGonzo
telegram channel
in a shelter



^ Armenian-American
filmmaker Emily
Mkrtichian.



— Broadly speaking there weren't any restrictions that were beyond the pale. Every day the regulations were changing, a lot of things were being done on the fly and there was a lot of confusion. The 1st time I tried to get into Artsakh we were unable to because that day the bridge near Lachin had been hit by an Azerbaijani missile. The next day Stepanakert was being shelled so heavily that I don't think it was really unjustifiable that the authorities didn't want people going in there. Even while being in Karabakh, we didn't have much access frankly: we could go around in Stepanakert, go to Shushi, or sometimes to Martakert and Martuni. Some journalists with clever fixers managed to get to the South, where the real action took place. At the same time, during this war, for the entire time Azeris had full control of the sky. Military and military-looking vehicles were being struck all across Karabakh. It was a very big risk to send people anywhere close to the actual frontlines of fighting so I have a hard time faulting the authorities for that, although it would be nicer to have a little bit more freedom to move around. Some Armenian journalists had privileged access. Now there is a privileged treatment only for Russian journalists, which is a different story.

How would you rate or characterize foreign reporting of this war, considering the fact that you have been here and saw the events flow with your own eyes.

— I think it definitely got better during the last four weeks of the war, but early on there was a lot of simplicity or false equivalency in the coverage. The thing that was most glaring to me in the first two weeks was the fact that the strike on Ganja suddenly made headlines everywhere. Meanwhile, two weeks of concerted constant indiscriminate shelling of Stepanakert and every other town in Karabakh was mentioned either in passing or wasn't brought up and

that was justified by the fact that Ganja was a city outside the conflict zone, as if Stepanakert was not well behind the frontlines.

Even with bigger news outlets I saw a lot of either failure to get certain facts and figures right or failure to contextualise properly. There was also a lot of reporting that failed to differentiate the Karabakh proper (NKAO) from the 7 surrounding regions. If you get that wrong, then you've missed the fundamental basis of the conflict. Unfortunately, that was pretty widespread.

THERE WAS A LOT OF REPORTING THAT FAILED TO DIFFERENTIATE THE KARABAKH PROPER FROM THE 7 SURROUNDING REGIONS. IF YOU GET THAT WRONG, THEN YOU'VE MISSED THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF THE CONFLICT

There were many videos appearing showing the mistreatment, torture, mutilation and execution of the Armenian soldiers and POWs by the Azerbaijani Army and in occasional cases, vice versa. As a journalist, you have to watch all of those videos to report on them. How do you manage the emotional side of it?

— That's a great question. I would love to know the answer to that, because I found it quite difficult. I analytically covered Syria for years and I've seen videos like that before. But it is one thing to see ISIS and an extremist radical Islamist terrorist militia doing those things, and it is another thing to see the Armed forces of a state actor doing it. It hurt to watch the two different videos of Azerbaijani soldiers beheading live civilian captives. I don't know how to really deal with it. I decided to stop watching and to other people I wanna say just be prepared

and know what you're getting into if you want to do that. I don't recommend it.

Do you think it is possible to understand the ideology behind the horrible crimes, understand whether they are results of a systemic hatred or just individually perpetrated war crimes?

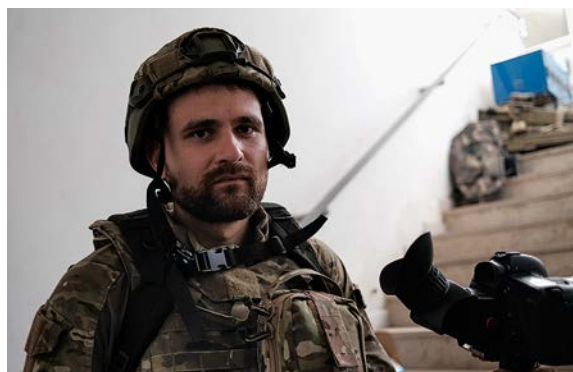
— I think there is a much larger basis for this in Azerbaijan and the Ramil Safarov case is one proof of that. The example is there that if you brutally murder a defenceless Armenian, not only it will be accepted, but also rewarded. I simply don't see the equivalent of that anywhere on the Armenian side. The equivalency examples that Azeris like to bring up are ASALA, or Soghomon Tehleryan who assassinated Enver Pasha, which is a bit different I think. Obviously in Armenia people by and large do not like Azeris and Turks, but it's on a different level. The state ideology of anti-arminianism and the image of the external enemy is the classic model used by authoritarian dictatorships to justify their rule. Azerbaijani civil society and opposition were completely in support of Aliyev and what he was doing. This narrative of hatred and dehumanization towards Armenians were at an incredible level.

You wrote about the July's clashes for Foreign Policy. Do you think those skirmishes were a signal of a full-scale war missed by the Armenian Government?

— The July clashes were not particularly different from any other skirmishes except for where they took place. The weeks that followed, Turkey announced and held military exercises with Azerbaijan. As we know, they left behind quite a bit of military equipment and officers that helped to coordinate the campaigns during the last few months. I don't think that those clashes per se were planned or intended as a starting point for this war, but they did end up serving as a starting point for a buildup. >

There has been an unprecedented amount of proof of the presence of Syrian mercenaries, Turkish backing, international humanitarian law violations, use of banned cluster munitions. Why do you think the international community has been so silent?

— I frankly think that most of it was because especially in the first month of the conflict the actions were taking place not only in de jure recognised territory of Azerbaijan, but in the seven regions surrounding it. A lot of international actors did not understand the nuances of the conflict, mainly the fact that those de jure borders are Soviet-era borders and that Karabakh itself was never under independent Azerbaijan's control.



◀ Alexander Kharchenko from Abkhazian Anna News Agency

▲ Armenian and international journalists in a shelter of Textile Ֆաբրիկա in Stepanakert

▶ A Brazilian photographer and visual story teller Gabriel Chaim



Most of the combat happened in Jabrail, Fizuli and mostly deserted wastelands. There was never any justification for Armenia holding them and I don't think there was much sympathy for that. Armenians took those regions with the force of their arms, they didn't return them and it is understandable that no actor, including Russia would help Armenians to keep those territories. The EU has received much criticism, but the EU is institutionally incapable to do much in this type of conflict and no one should have expected that. The US got its own problems.

This is also a part of a broader issue in the Armenian side. There was always an understanding that those seven regions were going to be returned to Azerbaijan in exchange for a deal. But that changed over time and Karabakh itself was contextualized. The narrative of the buffer zone morphed into “not once inch back”. There was certainly a lack of willingness to engage, especially in terms the one actor that mattered the most. The Russians were never going to fight for Armenia’s right to keep those seven regions and they made the Armenian leadership aware of that. That’s reflective of other people’s attitude towards this as well. I think that there should be some form of punishment toward Azerbaijan later on, especially for the horrific war crimes they committed in the ethnic Armenian areas.

Do you see any role for the OSCE in the further regulation of the conflict and in the post-war space?

— Maybe in the future eventually, but now, frankly, not really. Now the only actor that really matters is Russia. There have not been any concerted efforts by a lot of sides to negotiations for a long time. Many foreign sides spent a lot of political time on this at various points. Some serious efforts were made in the 90s and early 2000s to get things done. The US did it with Key West Peace Talks, which was a big investment of political attention and capital on behalf of the American leadership on a small region far away. Russia obviously had no interest to change the status quo. Other Minsk Group members had other priorities and had already put in a bunch of time.

Not only Aliyev was clear that the OSCE Co-chairs were uninvited when they visited Baku after the signature of the agreement, but Arayik Harutyunyan refused to meet them too when they visited Armenia after. The Minsk Group is a nominal body that I am sure will attach its name to whatever

comes next, if and when it does. But it has been a marginal player for years and now it’s essentially done.

Human rights organizations have published reports, which have been called as unfair, incomplete and biased. Do you think the Armenian side has been overreacting to these reports, or the false equivalency and obvious bias in favour of Azerbaijan was noticed by third parties too?

— I don’t particularly think Amnesty or Human Rights Watch are biased organisations. But the reports they made left a lot to be desired: they were pretty tone-deaf, oblivious and fairly poorly planned out. One of the

THE REPORT BY AMNESTY DID NOT SAY THAT ARMENIANS HAVE COMMITTED MORE WAR CRIMES, BUT IT IMPLIED IT WITH THE CHOICE OF THE VERIFIED CRIMES, VISUALS AND WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE THEM

researchers at Amnesty went on Twitter and explained that the report was not definitive and it came out specifically because those videos of executions by the Azerbaijani army came out. It was a good explainer, but it did not change the fact that the report itself did not mention it. The report by Amnesty did not say that Armenians have committed more war crimes, but it implied it with the choice of the verified crimes, visuals and words used to describe them. And we all know that picture created was not true even though more videos needed to be verified. It’s not surprising that the report has been waved around by a lot of Azerbaijani officials. I don’t think those reports have much value to the author and I don’t understand what was the point of putting it out there

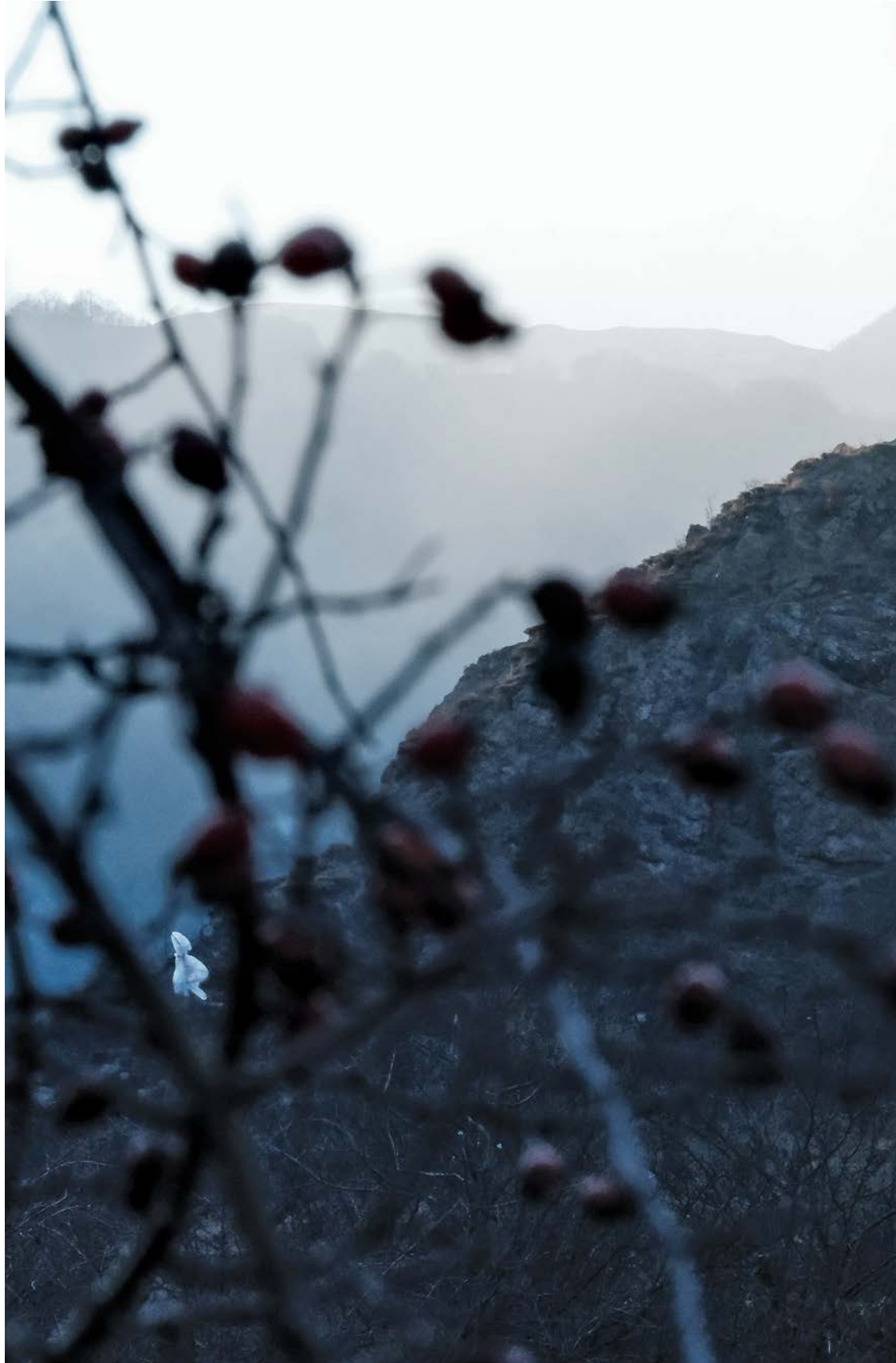
when it was incomplete and when the conclusions that it came to made it sound to people who were not closely following the conflict and the war that the Armenian side was much worse in the context of war crimes.

What are the three key actors and developments that you will keep your eye on in the near future?

— First one is how well the ceasefire will hold. There’s been a lot of violations after the signature of the deal. I am curious to see whether Russian peacekeepers will manage to put a real end to this or sniping skirmishes across the frontline despite the Russian presence will be the new normal. The second point to keep an eye on is the political scene in Armenia, more specifically if and when Nikol Pashinyan will hold snap elections and what exactly the outcome of that will be. Finally, we are all waiting to see what happens in Azerbaijan. This conflict was always the issue that held everything together. The government used it as a carte blanche to do whatever they wanted. Now when the wartime is over, solidarity is going to start to fade and it already has. Azerbaijani social media was not happy with the announced compensations of the families of deceased soldiers which is 170 USD. Other reports state that soldiers are not getting adequate treatment, food and payment. Additionally, the reconstruction in those seven regions is going to cost a lot of money on the Azerbaijani state budget that has shrunk massively in the last few years and is not going to go back up because it is an oil based economy. A huge slice of this decreased pie is going to go towards these prestigious projects of building highways, settlements and infrastructure. And frankly, I don’t think many people are going to move back to these areas. People have been living on the outskirts of Baku for 25 years, some are born there and I doubt they will move to a largely rural area 400 km away and become farmers. ♦

BURN AND LEAVE

PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN





Evacuation was a mess. People had few days, some only few hours to take everything and leave. Some were just leaving, still having a hope to return. Others left without hope. Both were painful, but it was unbearable to see people burning down the homes they built themselves and lived there for decades.



A house left burning in the evacuated Nor Maragha village





^ The last day of New Maragha. Graffiti on the gates says "We". Pentagram "See my pear" is a popular term in Karabakh, which can be translated as "F* off".

< "Vagif and his son Saro took out all the animals, emptied the house and burnt it. Vagif couldn't do it, but Saro said he could not leave it for the Turks. They will probably never come back again."



> This family moved to their house in Nor Maragha only a few months ago. Now they have to take anything they can, and leave.



> Another house burn, somewhere near the Dadivank monastery.



▼ Nor Maragha, evacuation.



THE CYBER HEADSHOT

During the events, now known as the Second Artsakh war, the information field was the second frontline.

Regional Post discussed with cybersecurity specialist Samvel Martirosyan whether it was all quiet on the cyber front.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



During the war, the phrase “cyber army” was in active circulation. Did these groups succeed?

— There were many such groups. Some of them included over one hundred thousand members. At first, these groups emerged and operated spontaneously and involuntarily but then SMM specialists and people who had the experience of working with a large group of people, such as the Sevan Startup summit team, started managing these flows. All the leaders started organizing their own teams.

At some point, these teams started cooperating and the overall process became more organized. I won't discuss everything they did, because part of their activities was confidential, but I can say the effectiveness of what they did varied. There were cases when the actions caused the opposite reaction. For example, someone would write about this or that journalist speaking up against Armenia and the cyber army would attack his/her Facebook comments. This person would then post approximate content for the comments and everyone would copy-paste this information. As a result, all the comments would be the same text a thousand times. Quite logically, these journalists would screenshot these comments saying, “See a troll fabric is working against me”. This type of strategy can be effective, though, for example, when there is a need to spread exact information.

Where did these groups work most effectively?

— The work of our “cyber army” was most effective on Twitter. It's an open platform with a lot of foreign journalists interested in the situation. The groups working on these platforms triggered an awareness effect on the one hand, and caused a certain pressure on the other hand, which in some cases made media outlets provide more balanced news and stay unbiased or make some political and public figures raise their voices. So, the overall process had a positive effect, especially when it was well coordinated around a certain idea and was not chaotic. Of course, people were active on other platforms too; Instagram, Youtube, etc. But overall, Twitter was the main getaway to the international community abroad as it is more open and a person searching for information about the conflict would look it up there first.

What about Azerbaijan, how did they manage their information field during the war?

— Azerbaijan has had these types of cyber army groups for several years, long before the recent war. It was already visible in the times of the April war. During the Tavush escalation, foreign research companies discovered targeted operations on Twitter against Armenia. In September, Facebook informed that it had deactivated thousands of fake Facebook and Instagram accounts and pages connecting them to the ruling party of Azerbaijan. They claimed that these accounts and pages were used to post comments that attacked opposition figures and independent media boosting the country's ruling party. Azerbaijan used various methods and approaches. For example, their hackers would break Armenian Facebook accounts and give them to the social media specialists who would then continue the propaganda through these accounts. Or they would again attack Armenian pages and activate paid promotion for certain information targeting Armenian accounts. Influencing the Azerbaijani society was always a hard task for us because they were gradually blocking all the channels through which we could affect them. There was no freedom of the press and during this war they shut down social media.

What about the level of consciousness of Armenians towards these kinds of attacks as well as fake news?

— The level of consciousness was much higher than before, but unfortunately, the level of our media literacy increases only in extreme situations, and right now, in the post-war phase, it's catastrophic; any lie is disseminated momentarily. Of course, state propaganda had a huge negative role in the situation, it factually misguided people.

What can we do now to make the situation better?

— It's hard to say as there are several aspects to it. People are in an extremely disoriented state. Their whole world changed within hours. Additionally, a quite challenging internal political

battle is on the rise at this moment and all possible information methods are being used for it. Actually, right now our problem is not the Azerbaijanis but the Armenians against Armenians. Another issue is the defeatist moods and complexes among the people. They masochistically watch and follow the Azerbaijani military and political propaganda and spread it around, cry and spread it around again. Unfortunately, this is not only a matter of media literacy, it's more of a psychological issue, some kind of post-traumatic syndrome. For some people, this will pass, but for others, it may get deeper. Otherwise, it's impossible to understand why someone would spread Azerbaijani videos and photos from Hadrut or Shushi. You might think people feel some kind of painful pleasure from watching and sharing this information. There should be informational strategies and tactics affecting all media channels and not only. For example, the billboards with the soldiers saying "we shall win" ought to be removed much sooner. People have been looking at them in the city for two weeks and suffering. This is just one example.

I've noticed that previously we read Azerbaijani news and thought they lived in a parallel world, now it's vice versa...

— Unfortunately, our propaganda took us to a point where people think that Azerbaijanis might have been right. We shot ourselves in the head by pursuing wrong information policies and approaches. But in a situation like this the information field is not the primary cycle, it serves the governmental and military fields and is not an independent body. It's impossible to do wonders just with information. It doesn't work that way.

After some time passes and we decide to move forward, it's extremely important that we learn from our mistakes. What happened was really bad but there's one positive aspect to it; all our mistakes came to the surface. There are no longer any taboos. We can



^ Web site of the Azerbaijani embassy, hacked by Monte Melkonian Cyber Army

talk freely and say that our army was managed on a school level and there was no coordination between the state and the army, nor between Artsakh and Armenia, etc. If we escape this depression, it will be possible to create a new system. When everything falls apart, it's easier to build something new, than put bandages on what is left. Defeat is beneficial in the sense that you get rid of the deceptions and there are no semi-literate people who tell you what to think or do. This is what unfortunately happened after the first Artsakh war and we became the hostages of that war.

During this war, there were a lot of limitations, at least on paper. How did it affect the sphere?

— Well, this was the first time when martial law was announced in Armenia. Even during the first Artsakh war, there was no such thing. If you have a distinct information policy and strategy, there may be a need for some censorship at some point. But the experience showed that there was a lack of clarity. There was inconsistency in the actions of the government; for example, when they shot down Tik-Tok, some people could still access it, even if others couldn't. Tik-Tok wouldn't open on one

of my phones but I could easily access it on the other one. At some point, they also shot down all Turkish websites. What was the point? Some of these websites wouldn't discuss the situation at all. In addition, there aren't many people who follow Turkish websites. The only readers might be the specialists who might need this information. However, even if there was logic in closing down the Azerbaijani websites, I'm not sure if it was effective as all this information they were trying to block was accessible on Telegram.

What problems did our information sphere have in the previous years? Did the taboos you've mentioned above really wreck the situation?

— You cannot avoid taboos. What you avoid creates new ones. In the sphere of information there's always been the problem of coordination and strategic approach. To be honest, every sphere in Armenia lacks strategic approach. But in the case of the information sphere, there should be precise theses, delegation of directions, and long-term work. We always acted reflectively, based on the situation, putting out fires here and there. In many situations, we were never the attacking side. We were always the defensive. ♦

FIVE FALSEHOODS OF WAR

and why it was difficult to fact-check them

During the war the public in Armenia remained misinformed, while false information was spread actively by propaganda both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Journalists used open-source data to verify or debunk key official announcements.

TEXT : KARINE GHAZARYAN



The Second Karabakh War was a harsh time for Armenian journalists. On one hand, information flow was huge, on the other hand restrictions imposed on journalists' work affected accurate reporting. As a result, on November 9, the completely misinformed public was shocked by a sudden and painful transition from "We will win!" to "We have lost". The press in Armenia was subject to three levels of censorship: the government was censoring journalists, the public was censoring journalists and journalists were censoring

themselves. The state announced martial law on the first day of the war. This meant that reporting anything but official information was prohibited. Breaking this rule could result in fines, and for some newsrooms it did: 9 news outlets were fined ₴700,000 (about \$1,400), while one of them refused to delete the publication and received an additional fine of ₴1,500,000 (about \$3,000).

International journalists did not face fines, but many experienced difficulties with accreditation. Russian Novaya gazeta

reporter Ilya Azar's accreditation was canceled after Armenian public burst with anger on social media, refusing to read grim accounts of events from a local man interviewed by Azar. Similarly, Eurasianet's editor Joshua Kucera was denied accreditation. Both Azar and Kucera were banned from reporting in Azerbaijan too.

In the meanwhile, Russian propaganda blogger Semyon Pegov was given access to the frontline, from where he broadcast emotional but completely misleading reports. Second level of censorship came from the public. Torn between personal tragedies and the need to be resilient, people often refused to believe alarming news and silenced journalists who had raised concerns. Journalist Tatul Hakobyan complained on his Facebook page about attacks in comments every time he tried to speak about the desperate situation. Finally, the press was cautious about what it published. Journalist Roubina Margossian noted in an interview to Media.am that there was no need for government restrictions: "our self-censorship is more than enough".

In the midst of this three-level censorship and propaganda bombardment, fact-checkers and investigative journalists used open-source data to find and report reliable information about the war.



Artsrun Hovhannisyan



SATELLITE IMAGERY HELPED TO DEBUNK CLAIMS ON DESTRUCTION OF GANJA AIRPORT

Analysts used satellite images combined with geolocation techniques to create alternative maps of the situation on ground: available images and videos were geolocated and mapped to verify or debunk the territorial claims of the two governments.

Another example is the claim of the Armenian side about the destruction of Ganja airport in Azerbaijan. Right after this announcement was made, "before and after" photos of the airport circulated widely on social media. However, the building in the photos had a sign "Lankaran". That is, it showed the airport of Lankaran city, not Ganja. Debunking of the claim itself came weeks later: journalists studied satellite images of Ganja airport and proved it was standing still. >

Satellite photos of Ganja airport



SNA MERCENARIES WERE DEPLOYED TO AZERBAIJAN

Open source data was also used to prove the usage of mercenaries by Azerbaijan. Ilham Aliyev called these accusations “fake news”. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan similarly dismissed the claims as fake. However journalists and researchers across the world used social media posts by the mercenaries themselves to prove both presidents wrong. Of course, the first publication on the topic, which appeared back in summer, were based on testimonies of Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters. SNA is a Turkey-backed union of many rebel groups operating in Northern Syria. Starting from September 27, videos and photos of SNA militants in Azerbaijan’s State Border Service uniforms emerged on social media. The images were geolocated in Syrian military base under Turkish control, in Southern Azerbaijan, and finally, in the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh. While Azerbaijan, a signatory of the UN Mercenary Convention, denied the presence of SNA fighters, Armenia called these people “jihadists” and “terrorists”. These terms were misleading: analysts agree that SNA fighters mostly subscribed to be deployed in Azerbaijan for financial and not ideological reasons. Furthermore, they have not committed terror attacks.

As Turkey-backed SNA presence in Azerbaijan became harder to deny, the allies accused Armenia of using Kurdish and Yazidi mercenaries. No proof was provided. Photos of fighters with the Yazidi flag circulated in Azerbaijani media did not take into consideration the fact that Armenia has a sizable Yazidi minority which are citizens of Armenia.

BANNED WEAPONS

Azerbaijan actively bombed peaceful settlements with cluster munition from the very first days of war. Armenia responded similarly at the end of October. Cluster munitions are banned by respective UN convention because many bombs do not explode right after hitting the ground and may harm civilians afterwards. Neither Azerbaijan, nor Armenia signed the convention.

Before Armenia eventually used cluster bombs in late October, President Aliyev’s assistant Hikmet Hajiyev published a photo of a pile of Israeli-made M095 DPICM, claiming Armenia tried to hit Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline. Analysts, however, expressed doubts: cluster bombs do not fall in piles, and it would be difficult to pick up and arrange the unexploded bombs for a photo.



White phosphorus, used in the forests of Artsakh



> Backstage of the Azerbaijani propaganda video clip



> Azerbaijani TV journalist claimed to be part of possibly staged video clips



NO EVIDENCE, YET NO TRUST

Azerbaijan is notorious for restricting free speech at peaceful times, let alone during a war. Armenian public refused to believe any claim made by Azerbaijani officials, even when there was not enough evidence to debunk those claims. For example, the public mocked the video of Armenian prisoner of war Azniv Baghdasaryan who was welcoming Azerbaijani soldiers. The woman was declared an invented character. Days later, however, Azniv Baghdasaryan was proven to be a real person: a story about her was published by Hetq.am back in 2004.



OMNIPRESENT SOROS

Conspiracy theories have become an integral part of political life in Armenia since the Velvet Revolution. Conspiriological narrative about George Soros is used frequently to attack post-revolutionary government both by well-established political parties, and by activist groups. During the war, Ilham Aliyev made an appearance on Russian state TV and called Pashinyan "henchman of Soros." He repeated the claim in the domestic media as well. His choice of audiences is hardly a coincidence: authoritarian regimes of both Azerbaijan and Russia villainized and banned Soros-funded Open Society Foundation years ago. In Armenia itself the theory about the government being secretly led by Soros did not fade out after Aliyev's announcements. In his speeches opposition leader Vazgen Manukyan was eager to use the conspiracy theory to accuse the post-revolutionary government of serving evil interests.

Many of the most widespread false claims during the war were not very original. Total denial of one's wrongdoing and mirroring accusations are characteristic of war-time propaganda. Journalists managed to debunk or verify some of the most important information during the war. But when it comes to convincing the audience, it is unclear whether the fact-checked information was as successful as propaganda. ♦



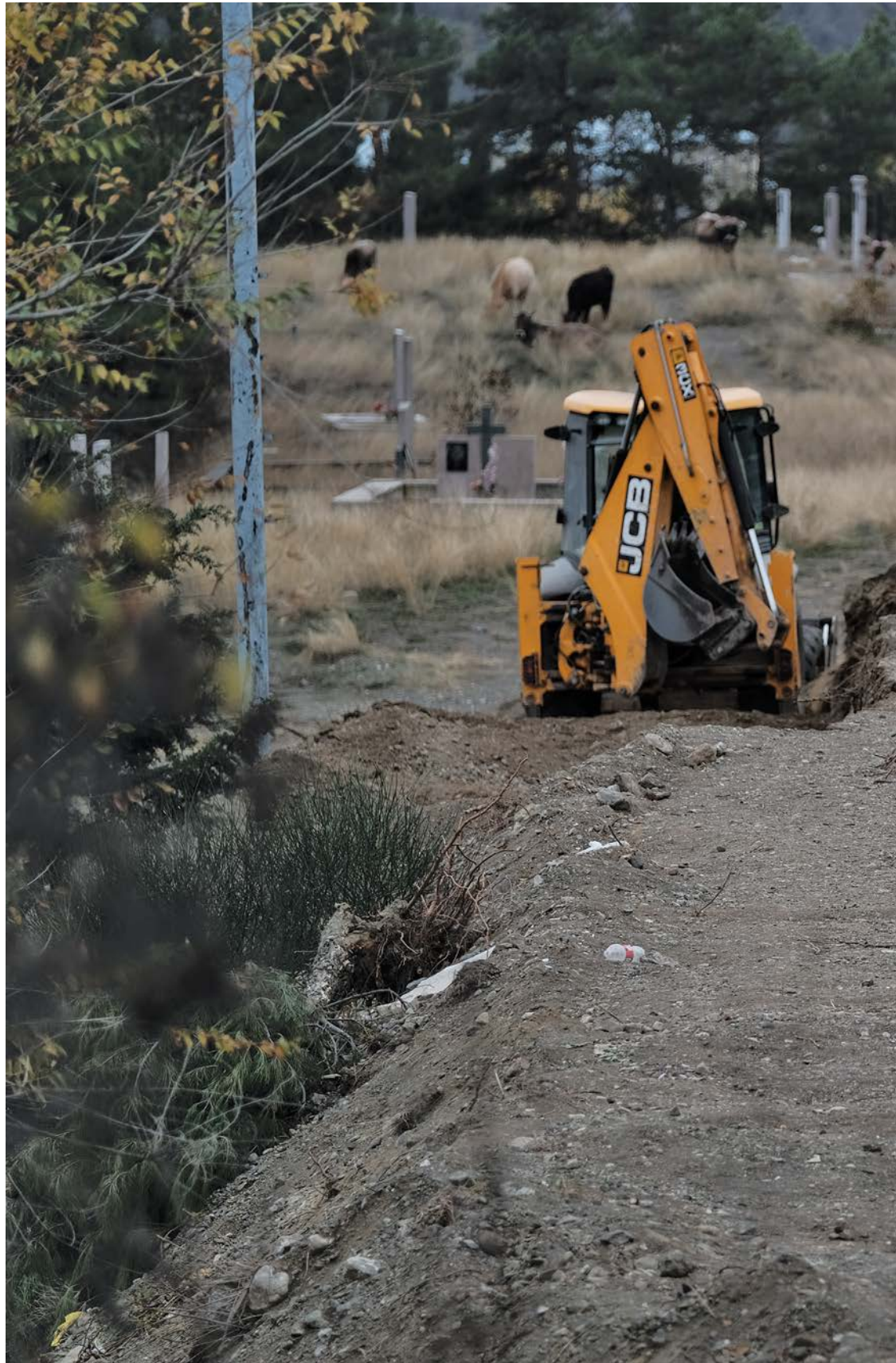
^ Nikol Pashinyan photoshopped in the photo of George Soros and Macedonia's PM Zoran Zaev



^ George Soros and Ilham Aliyev

ASRI'S JOB

PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN





I met a grave digger Asri. It's not his job, but he's a excavator driver, one of the bests. And he was needed. He said he couldn't work no more, but he had to. His son was serving when the war started. Asri wanted to take a weapon and join him, but he had to stay and dig graves. We talked and the shelling and explosions could be heard not far.

▼
"Here I accidentally saw a grave of my dear friend Aram. He was one of the people who are born once in 300 years. He was a true Gharabaghtsi guy. Those kind of men are Karabakh's honor and responsibility. There are fewer of them now."



◀
Asri looking at the graves



^
New graves near the grave
from the 1990's war: another
generation, another war.

v
"While looking at the graves, I thought an awful thought:
does Asri expect that every next grave might be for his
son while digging? The war makes us think awful things..."





A COUNTRY'S IMAGE DURING WAR

DEEMMag Special Edition

Hjortur Smarason is an expert on communication strategies, brand positioning and crisis management. He has advised companies, tourism boards and governments on their branding and crisis communication strategies, such as Iceland after the economic collapse of 2008 and the volcanic eruptions of 2010 and 2011, Nepal after the earthquakes of 2015, as well as countries in Africa and Middle East following political turmoil and economic difficulties. Hjortur is the founder and principal of S.A.L.T., the School of Astronaut Leadership Training where he offers leadership training together with astronauts and specialists from NASA. Hjortur visited Armenia in 2017 when he worked with DEEM Communications on the branding of Gyumri.

PHOTO : ARNOS MARTIROSYAN

The interview was conducted during the active phase of the Artsakh war in November, 2020, by DEEM's Creative Director Raffi Niziblian

Raffi: As you know, Armenia is in an all out war with two of its neighbors waging war on Artsakh. Before the war started, Armenia was on a path of glory. Following the 2018 first free and fair elections after the Velvet Revolution, a concept that captured the world's attention and was a welcome breath of fresh air for the Caucasus region's new path for success, the country was on many top ten lists of must-visit destinations. New hotels were popping up; wineries, cafés and restaurants were lining themselves up for what was to be the busiest summer of all times. Then the world was hit with Covid-19 and everything turned on its head. As if that was not enough, last July, Azerbaijan attacks Armenia on its north-east borders, killing civilians and devastating the country. Before it could recover, on 27 September, drone bombs shelled the densest city of Artsakh, and for over a month, armed activities have caused havoc, terror and a total economic halt.

Raffi: This awful year is ending and we all hope to find peace very soon. As such, we now seek your expert opinion and advice on how to reposition or re-brand the country after such a calamity?

Hjortur: I think the keyword here is after. Branding is a long term, ongoing project and not something you can really do in the midst of a crisis. Nagorno-Karabakh has no connection in people's minds other than being the disputed area of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the nineties. That is how I remember it from Iceland where I was a teenager at the time. In those thirty years the reputation of the area should have been built up through tourism and popular media. Reality is that at this moment the conflict is getting close to zero attention, despite being in Europe, and the reason is simple. It is not just





because of Covid and the US presidential elections, although those two are excellent to drown out the little information that actually does make it to the news. The bigger reason is that people don't relate. They do not know the history, the region, the people, their personal stories nor any of the places. Stephanakert? Rings no bells for anyone. This is actually where tourism can become an incredibly powerful tool. Building relationships even in places that are not politically recognised. They still exist and so does their people. Here we have news of a conflict between countries and a about a re-

STEPHANAKERT? RINGS NO BELLS FOR ANYONE. THIS IS ACTUALLY WHERE TOURISM CAN BECOME AN INCREDIBLY POWERFUL TOOL. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS EVEN IN PLACES THAT ARE NOT POLITICALLY RECOGNISED. THEY STILL EXIST AND SO DOES THEIR PEOPLE

gion called A... Confusing when you have no relationship with the area and why it is so easy to steal the messages and twist them like Azerbaijan has been doing by turning everything on its head.

Raffi: How does a country redefine itself to become attractive to the world as both a tourist destination and as a livable place?

Hjortur: Consistency is king when it comes to branding. This is particularly important when you are going through a crisis and why rule number one is having a "one-stop-shop" with accurate

WHILE PEOPLE MAY FIND IT HARD TO RELATE TO ARMENIA EVERYONE CAN RELATE TO THE FEELINGS OF HEARTBREAK, UNFAIRNESS AND DEFEAT AND THE FEAR FOR THEIR LOVED ONES BECAUSE THAT IS LIFE AND THAT CREATES COMPASSION

information free from all emotions. Just facts, preferably delivered or verified by a third party. As soon as emotions taint it too much it becomes propaganda and loses credibility. In Iceland we had an economic collapse in 2008 where all the banks in the country went bankrupt. We had just gone through a branding strategy planning the year before where the focus was on Iceland as a financial center which obviously had now crashed.

If we look at Iceland through history, different strengths and cultural traits to me it was clear what stood out. Creativity. Whether it was in nature constantly reshaping the landscape of the island, our music industry, literature, films, innovative tech companies – or even banking and accounting. This is where hope becomes stronger than ever, where stories of rescue, finding lost loved ones or getting a new opportunity at life is so inspiring. A dismal reality creates a lot of stories like that. Of heartbreak, of unfairness, of defeat. And while people may find it hard to relate to Armenia everyone can relate to the feelings of heartbreak, unfairness and defeat and the fear for their loved ones because that is life and that creates compassion. Compassion not for Artsakh which is just a concept, but for the people of Armenia (including Artsakh) and your centuries of struggle for survival squashed between enemy nations. Compassion that opens up support from unexpected directions and opportunities that might otherwise never have come. When that happens, you need to be ready to grab them and make the most of those opportunities. Allow people to help you and join forces with you in the rebuilding of the country.

Raffi: If you were to consult the image-makers of Armenia on how to re-brand the country, what are the 5 things you would advise them on doing right after the war is over?

Hjortur: 1. Truth. This is of essence. Call for neutral, international investigation of the war crimes committed. Admit to your own failures because they are inevitable in a war. Show the world that you are a democratic, just country and you fought that war to protect your right to existence and self determination against foreign tyranny. Call on OSCE, the UN, the ICC and even NATO to do investigations on use of illegal weapons, illegal civilian targets and war crimes committed. Fight for





the truth, face it where it hurts and your story will be heard and believed. The armed conflict is just one, short, (and very painful) part of the war. It continues in the international community and the history books where you fight for the truth to come out.

2. Network. Call on the diaspora to call on their networks to help with the rebuilding. Do matchmaking between the resources you have on the ground and the resources you need to recruit from abroad to rebuild. If every person of the diaspora can reach ten people, you have a pool of 80 million people. That is not everybody, but you don't need everybody to rebuild a country of 3 million people. You just need the right people who can relate and find the compassion to help.

3. Being. Remember, storytelling is not just about what you say. It is about what you do and what you are. And how you allow others to experience that with you and share the sto-

ry further. So focus on showing what you are fighting for and what you want to become through your work and actions. Reflect your identity in your architecture, political system and initiatives, show your strengths in your startups, innovation and arts, and celebrate milestones through events of all sorts.

4. Invitation. Instead of telling your stories yourself, invite others to experience what Armenia and Armenians really are like, what it is the country has to offer with fantastic mountainous nature, magnificent vineyards and rich culture of both ancient and modern art. Invite journalists, bloggers, vloggers and influencers to experience first hand what you have to offer. When they get to know you and the truth they will become your strongest advocates to their home audiences and will have much more credibility in their dissemination of the country than a local ever would. The rebranding will not happen through advertising

but through partnerships with content creators, artists, innovators, bloggers and journalists.

5. Resilience. Branding a country is not a one off. It is a constant process that is repeated through new initiatives, events and happenings year after year, constantly building on top of the image you want to create and furthering your narrative, recognition and empathy around the world. And this can only be achieved if you have your ground work in order. A clear idea of what your message is and what the new Armenia of the 21st century is going to stand for on the World stage. You need to claim your spot on that stage and hold it.

The stronger your brand is the stronger your voice will be, the more valuable your export will be with your strong currency and economy. But more importantly, the stronger the support will be for your claims and the stronger the opposition will be to your wrong doers. ♦

SYSTEM OF A DOWN'S NEW SINGLE

On November 6, System of a Down heavy metal band from the USA released its first new original material in 15 years. The band consisting of four ethnic Armenians and which has a cult status in Armenia for its involvement in political and social topics in the country, didn't have a new song since the release of the Hypnotize album in 2005. Since then band members had their own side projects, while still performing together.



"Protect the Land" was written by the band's guitarist and second singer Daron Malakian in 2018 along with another song about tensions involving the unrecognised Artsakh, called "Lives", for his second solo album, "Dictator." When a new war broke out, the band members started using their platforms to raise awareness of the issue.

Within a few days of deciding to record, each musician started arranging his own part. Tankian developed his harmonies for "Protect the Land" while still in New Zealand, where he lives part-time, and he later flew to Los Angeles on October 11 to join everyone in the studio. They finished tracking the cuts that week. On November 6, 2020, "Pro-

tect the Land" was released along with "Genocidal Humanoidz" digitally as a double A-side single.

The artwork of the track features the flag of the Republic of Artsakh and the We Are Our Mountains monument in its capital Stepanakert. In the band's official store fans can buy limited edition shirts with the Artsakh design and a vinyl version of the single, with all the proceeds from the sales donated to Armenia Fund.

In an official statement released on their website after the singles' premiere, the band said they hoped their fans would listen to the songs and "be inspired to speak out about the horrific injustices and human rights violations occurring there now".



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