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The role of Nagorno-Karabakh in the shaping of Armenian and Azeri identity

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Abstract

The paper discusses the effect of the 19th century rebirth of Armenian nationalism in the Ottoman or Western Armenia and Russian or Eastern Armenia and of Azeri nationalism in Russian Azerbaijan with its ramifications in Iran and Ottoman Turkey on the formation of Armenian and Azeri identity from the late 1800s to the present and the key role of Nagorno-Karabakh –called Artsakh by the Armenians– from the beginning of the 20th century, using the theories of Anthony D. Smith. At the time of the disintegration of the USSR, the reinforcement of Armenian and Azeri identity over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian victory in the first war and the armed peace generated by the 1994 ceasefire made it inevitable that a second war would take place unless a political compromise –that never happened– was reached.

Keywords: Nationalism; Identity; Nagorno-Karabakh.

Resumen

El trabajo analiza el efecto del renacimiento del nacionalismo armenio en el siglo XIX en la Armenia otomana u occidental y la Armenia rusa u oriental y del nacionalismo azerí en el Azerbaiyán ruso con sus ramificaciones en Irán y la Turquía otomana en la formación de la identidad armenia y azerí desde finales del 1800 hasta el presente y el papel clave de Nagorno-Karabagh –llamado Artsaj por los armenios– desde principios del siglo XX, usando las teorías de Anthony D. Smith. En el momento de la desintegración de la URSS, el refuerzo de la

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identidad armenia y azerí sobre Nagorno-Karabagh y la victoria armenia en la primera guerra y la paz armada generada por el alto el fuego de 1994 hicieron inevitable que ocurriera una segunda guerra a menos que se llegara a un compromiso político, lo que no sucedió.

Palabras-clave: Nacionalismo; Identidad; Nagorno-Karabagh.

Introduction

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, in the South Caucasus, is an ethnic-territorial conflict which emerged after the crumbling of an imperial order, ie: the USSR (Cordell and Wolff, 2010) in the late 1980s, even though earlier conflicts have taken place between Armenians and Azeris in 1905 and after the collapse of imperial Russia and the brief independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1918-1920 (Donabedian, 1994). Both countries have developed their own historical myths to justify their claims over Nagorno-Karabakh, thus impacting on their own national identity (Geukjian 2012, p. 5-6 and 35-6).

The objective of the paper is to analyze the competing claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh and its role in each people's identity since the beginning of the 20th century. The basic problem is that both peoples have linked their identity to the control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The issue is particularly more poignant on the Armenian case, as Armenians suffered the genocide when 1.5 million of their own died and lost their historical presence in their ancestral lands of Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia) in 1915-1923.

For this study, we follow Smith who considers that nations and nationalism can only be understood through the analysis of the collective cultural identities in the long run, but the connections between the past and the present are not a one-way road but a series of links which depend on the circumstances and the resources of the community, differentiating three continuous relationships: culture, recurrence and reinterpretation (Smith, 1999, 2009a and 2009b).

Smith uses several categories which we will refer to throughout the paper. He defines an *ethnie* as “a named and self defined human community whose members possess a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of common culture, including a link with a territory, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the upper strata” (Smith, 2009a, p. 27).

For Smith, a nation is “a named and self defined human community whose members cultivate shared

memories, symbols, myths, traditions and values, inhabit and are attached to historic territories or homelands, create and disseminate a distinctive culture and observe shared customs and standardized laws” (Smith, 2009a, p. 29).

Smith defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation” (Smith, 1991, p. 73).

Therefore, for Smith, a national state is “a state legitimated by the principles of nationalism, whose members possess a measure of national unity and integration (but not of cultural homogeneity)”. And national identity is “the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements” (Smith, 2010, p. 17-20).

The methodological strategy is qualitative, with primary sources –interviews– and secondary sources – books and academic papers– being used.

The paper addresses the history of the competing claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, to deal with the origins of Armenian nationalism and the birth of Azeri nationalism. Finally, the search for identity in the fight over Nagorno-Karabakh is being analyzed to conclude.

The history of the competing claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh

The Caucasus occupies the region between the Black and Caspian Seas, and is occupied by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in its southern part and Russia in its northern part. Home to the Caucasus Mountains, a barrier between Europe and Western Asia, the region is known for its linguistic diversity: Indo-European and Turkic languages and language groups indigenous to the area: Kartvelian, Northwest Caucasian and Northeast Caucasian.

The Armenian –an Indo-European people– presence in the Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia can be dated historically for the first time to the Behistun inscription of the Achaemenian Persian king Darius I in 518 BC, but scholars link the earliest Armenians with the Phrygians who together invaded the Anatolian Peninsula from Thrace in the 13th century BC conquering the Hittite Empire. The Urartians –indigenous

to the Armenian plateau– united several independent kingdoms from the 13th century BC until the 6th century BC when their state disappeared. By the time of the Achaemenian conquest in the 6th century BC, the plateau was inhabited by a mixture of peoples with a predominance of Urartians and Armenians (Russell, 2004, p. 19-35).

The Armenians got their first state with the Orontids in the 4th century BC being succeeded by the Artashesids (Artaxiads) and the Arsacids until 428 AD when Classical Armenia lost its independence. Successive occupations of different part of the territory by Byzantines, Sassanians, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Turkomen, Ottomans, Safavids and Russians followed. Armenian statehood was restored by the Bagratids from the late 9th century to 1045 in the plateau and later the principality/ kingdom of Cilicia in the coastal Cilicia region outside historical Armenia from 1080 to 1375. Iranian Armenia would fall to the Russians in the early 19th century. Armenia disappeared as a sovereign state until the independence of Russian Armenia and the creation of a modern national state in 1918 which would be occupied by the Soviets in 1920. The current Armenian national state regained its independence in 1991. Throughout history Armenians have had a presence throughout the plateau, only lost in Western Armenia during the genocide but continuing to this day in Armenia (Eastern) and Nagorno-Karabakh (Payaslian, 2007).

Meanwhile non-Azeri scholars consider Azerbaijan as a recent creation and the Azeri Turks a recent arrival to the Caucasus, the Azeris give great importance to two states that appeared in present day Azerbaijan in ancient times: Caucasian Albania and Shirvanshah. Caucasian Albania was a Christian state, sometimes called Aghvan (in Armenian) or Aran or Arran that embraced Christianity in the 4th century AD. Caucasian Albania existed from the 2nd century BC until the 8th or 9th century AD accepting Sassanian tutelage in the 2nd century AD. Shirvanshah was a Muslim state created by the Sassanians to defend their northern frontier against the Khazars with four dynasties reaching the peak of their power in the 10th century and continuing to exist until 1539 when they were annexed by Safavid Iran. The arrival of the Turks in the Southern Caucasus is a controversial topic with some Azeri sources putting their presence at the beginning of our era, with an increased presence in the 5th to 7th centuries and in the 9th to 11th centuries. A related subject is the degree of autonomy of the Albanian Church, whether it was a separate church or part of the Armenian Church, even though Petrushevskii suggested that what remained of the Albanian church was fully Armenized by the 8th century AD. Azeri scholars have argued to this day for a direct ethnic link between the modern day Azeris of the Caucasus and the

Albanians, Shirvans and Turks. Except for the Muslim Turkish khanates established in the Caucasus in the 18th century, no independent state of Azerbaijan existed until 1918, falling to the Soviets in 1920. Azerbaijan restored its independence in 1991 at the fall of the Soviet Union (Altstadt, 1953, p. 2-9; Swietochowski, 1995).

During the Soviet period, Nagorno-Karabakh was given to Azerbaijan in 1921 and made an Autonomous *Oblast* in 1923 in spite of having a 95 % of Armenian population. Throughout the Soviet period, the Armenian authorities and intellectuals consistently requested the union of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. The petitions were always rejected (Donabedian, 1994).

On the other hand, Azeri historiography has tried to reduce the role of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, by stating that Artsakh and neighboring Utik which also joined Albania in 428 and even Nakhichevan and Syunik (Zangezur) were linked to Albania and had no relation to Armenia, even saying that Artsakh and Utik were part of Albania before 428. Azeri historians have always minimized the role of the Armenian church and the Church of Albania and paid attention to the role of the islamized Albanians of the lowlands. For Azerbaijan, Shushi (Shusha) is an important cultural center in the Azeri cultural revival of the 19th century and where most of the Azeri population in Nagorno-Karabakh was concentrated prior to the first war (Geukjian, 2012, p. 33-34).

The origins of Armenian nationalism

Most historians consider the congress of Berlin as the incentive for Armenians to start organizing themselves against the Ottoman government. The Armenakan created in Van in 1885 was the first Armenian political party. Armenakan did not seek Armenia's independence from the Ottoman Empire but sought changes to the situation of the Armenians through pacific means. The Hnchakian party founded in Geneva in 1887 was the first party with a national and international base. Inspired in Russian Marxism and populism, it sought the independence of Western Armenia from Ottoman rule through self-defense, education and revolutionary activity. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation or Dashnaksutun was founded in Tiflis in 1890. Like the Hnchakian party, the Dashnaks copied the terrorist methods of the Russian *Narodna Volia*, but they did not seek Western Armenia's independence from the Ottoman Empire but only its autonomy. Only after Nicholas II's anti Armenian measures in

1903, the Dashnaks adopted a more radical socialist posture and in 1919 changed their program to accept the reality of an independent Armenia (Hovannisian, 2004, p. 212-216).

It is not possible to determine how prevalent were the nationalist ideas among the Armenians in general, but it could be asserted that national identity and nationalism had a great deal of support in the last decade of the 19th century and that a Pan Armenian national identity was also prevalent in spite of linguistic and cultural differences between Western and Eastern Armenians (Panossian, 2006, p. 176-200).

The revolutionary activities of the Armenians increased the repressive measures of the government of Sultan Abdul Hamid II who organized the Kurdish and Turkish tribes in an irregular cavalry force in 1891 to control the Armenians in the eastern provinces. The Hamidian massacres left 300,000 Armenians dead until 1896 (Payaslian, 2007, p. 120).

The Armenian first republic was run by the Dashnaksutun in 1918-20. During the Soviet period Armenian nationalism was suppressed¹ (Payaslian, 2007).

As a consequence of the demonstrations in Yerevan and Stepanakert which began in February 1988, the Karabakh Committee formed mostly by intellectuals was created. It led the fight for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. In 1989, it was transformed into the Armenian National Movement and led by Ter-Petrosyan, it won the 1990 Armenian Supreme Soviet elections. In 1991, Ter-Petrosyan became the first president of the third republic –historians consider the Soviet Socialist republic as the second republic (Hakobyan, 2010).

The birth of Azeri nationalism

Azeri nationalism in Russian Azerbaijan started in the mid-19th century, later than Russian nationalism that had an influence on it with Mirza Fath 'Alí Akhundzadä (Akhundov), a translator at the office of Russia's viceroy in the Caucasus who distinguished himself for being the author of the first European style theatre plays in Azeri and for being a strong supporter of the Arabic script then used by the Azeri language. Even though a new Turkish identity started gradually to take hold, most of the intelligentsia still continued to look to Iran. A typical example was the French educated writer Ahmad bay Aghäyev who sponsored a Pan-Islamist ideology and described the Azeris as a *société persane*. Hasan bāy Zarbabi

founded in 1875 *Äkinchi*, the first organ in Baku which espoused a Turkic identity. At the same time, Pan-Turkism started to develop among the Muslims of Russia. Ismail Gasprinskii (Gaspirali), a Crimean Tartar writer, in 1883 in his newspaper *Tarjuman*, published in Bakhchisary, Crimea proposed the union of all Turkic peoples of Russia. Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism did not contradict each other as Islam was the common religions of all Turks (Swietochowski, 1995, 26-30)

The first republic of Azerbaijan was mostly run by the Musavat (Equality) party –founded in 1911 on a program of prosperity and unity of the Muslim peoples with a pan Islamic ideology, at least in theory, between 1918 and 1920. Like in Armenia and Georgia, Azeri nationalism was suppressed under the Soviets (Swietochowski, 1995).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azeri nationalism took a bit longer to develop and it was clearly influenced by the events on Nagorno-Karabakh. In September 1988, a group of intellectuals in Baku founded the Azerbaijan Popular Front, following the Estonian model. The founding congress took place in July 1989. Contrary to Armenia, Azerbaijan was one of the most conservative Union republics and party officials did not support the nationalist movement neither Gorbachev's policies. In late November 1988, demonstrations began in Baku's in favor of Azerbaijan's reluctance to relinquish control over Nagorno-Karabakh. These demonstrations were to continue throughout 1989. In January 1990, there was a violent anti-Armenian pogrom in Baku. Following the massacre of the Armenians, the Soviet intervened militarily in what has been described as Black January (Altstadt 1992). Elchibey, leader of the Popular Front, was elected president in Azerbaijan's first free elections in June 1992 (Hakobyan, 2010).

The search for identity in the fight over Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict began at the end of the Soviet period in 1988, when demonstrations for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia began in Yerevan and Stepanakert. There had been conflicts between Armenians and Azeris in 1905 and 1906 and during the brief independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1918-1920 but relations were generally cordial during the Soviet period. The Armenian requests of 1988, which had existed during the Soviet period, were met with pogroms in Sumgait, Azerbaijan, followed by more anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku and Kirovavad (Ganja)². In 1991, the Soviet Army participated in a military operation which forced the exodus of 150,000 to 200,000 Armenians from

northern Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev in August 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan proclaimed their independence from the USSR and Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. In 1992 a veritable war began with Armenian victories in Kojali, Shushi (Shusha) and Lachin³. This was followed in the summer of 1992 with an Azeri offensive following the election of Elchibey which occupied half of Nagorno-Karabakh. After the summer, the Armenians counterattacked and they took most of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven adjoining districts: five in full: Kelbajar, Lachin, Kubatly, Jebrail and Zangelan and 2 in part: Agdam (77 %) and Fizuli (33 %). At the end of the first war –ceasefire of May 1994– the Armenians claimed to control 92.5 % of the old *Oblast* and 13.4 % of Azerbaijan –the *Oblast* included– in total 11,722 km². The war left between 25,000 and 30,000 killed. When the war ended, no Azeris were left in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and no Armenians in Azerbaijan. Between 300,000 to 500,000 Armenians and over 700,000 Azeris left their homes (Chaliand, 1994, p. XIV and XV; Hakobyan, 2010; De Waal, 2013).

Since 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe called OSCE since 1995 through the Minsk Group has tried to steer the negotiations, currently under the co-chairmanship of France, the United States and Russia. The successive attempts of the Minsk Group to reach an agreement since 1994 have failed. In 2007, after a conference in Madrid agreed to the so called Madrid Principles which in their revised form agreed to: a) return of the surrounding territories to Azerbaijan, b) an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh, c) a corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, d) the determination of the future of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will, e) the right of the internally displaced persons to return and f) the deployment of a peacekeeping force, something absent since 1994 until 2020. At different points, the parties have rejected one or other of the points. Nagorno-Karabakh does not directly participate in the negotiations since 1997. The main sticking point seems to be the issue of the possibility of Nagorno-Karabakh gaining independence from Azerbaijan, which is supported by the Armenian population but rejected by Azerbaijan, effectively a fundamental difference between the self determination of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, besides other points. The Line of Contact separating Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan functioned from 1994 until 2020 in its 200 km as a WWI trench line, slightly monitored and heavily defended with incidents taking place on a regular basis (Chaliand, 1994, p. XIV and XV; Hakobyan, 2010; De Waal, 2013).

Smith gives a great importance to the sense of national identity and the ideas of individuality and authenticity expressed by it. Its definition which identifies two relationships between the individual and collective levels of analysis and the other between the continuity and the change of identity that sustains that identities and cultural communities are subject to processes of change and dissolution (Smith, 2010, 20-22) which in the Armenian case leads to a change in the components in the national identity of the Armenians taking into consideration the peculiarities of the Armenian *ethnie* and nation in each historical moment.

The Kremlin refusal to support Armenia in 1988 led the Armenians to question the Soviet System, particularly after the pogroms in 1988. Libaridian compares the situation to the “Armenian Question” of the XIX century. Belonging to the USSR was supposed to guarantee the security of the Armenians, something the Soviet authorities were refusing to do in view of the pogroms. “Karabakh became the trigger and the symbol of the protest movement against the system” (Libaridian, 2007, p. 232).

Nagorno-Karabakh and the independence of Armenia in 1991 led in fact to modify the idealization of the perfect homeland conceptualized in the Armenian Cause or “Hay Tad” (Libaridian, 1999, p. 82) by verifying the reality of a national liberation struggle in Karabakh and an independent Armenia that needed the support of the diaspora. It went from the temporalization of Soviet Armenia as a museum and a temporary homeland until the actual reunification with the historic lands of Western Armenia (Libaridian, 1999, p. 124) was achieved to being considered the true focus of diasporic thinking in reference to the national homeland of the Armenians. A new reality was thus recognized without abandoning the territorial claims on the lost territory of Western Armenia.

Or in the words of Dudwick: “Armenians had the experience of feeling themselves united as a people, of feeling the barriers of structure temporarily dissolved, of remembering their common humanity, history and destiny. Perhaps, we can consider the Karabakh Movement as a national *rite de passage*, which is transforming Karabakh from a symbol of past glories and past losses into the symbol of the Armenians’ ability to wage a sustained struggle for the reappropriation of their own past, present and future” (Dudwick, 1989, p. 4 cited by Chorbajian, 1994, p. 7-8).

For Hakobyan, “Nagorno-Karabakh was a nation uniting-issue. During the past centuries, Armenians had become full of complexes as they had lost territories and people. Nagorno-Karabakh was not just a territorial issue, to be more precise. It seemed as if were trying to receive absolution for our sins, defend

our compatriots and preserve the territory belonging to the Armenian nation, the last vestige that had remained. From a psychological point of view, the meaning of Nagorno-Karabakh was much bigger than that of any other issue and this is still the case, since if we lose Nagorno-Karabakh, we are going to have the same complexes. Nagorno-Karabakh liberated the Armenian nation from complexes. Nagorno-Karabakh's army and the people of Nagorno-Karabakh played a major role, but nothing could have been possible without Armenia" (Hakobyan, 2010, p. 115).

The case is far less clear in the case of Azerbaijan, which started to develop a sense of identity in the XIX century with all the implications of its past history. "In the opening years of the sixteenth century, imperial rivalry added a further degree of complexity to the self-identity of the early Azeris. After 1502, when the Eastern Trans Caucasus was made a part of the Shi'ite Safavid Empire of Iran, the majority of its Muslims inhabitants became adherents to the Shi'a faith. Thus, the Azeri's split with the mainstream Sunni Islamic sect clouded their sense of identification with the Sunni Turks and accentuated a dual sense of loyalty between the Persian and Turkic worlds; pulled toward Iran by religious and cultural affinity and toward Turkey by ethno-linguistic closeness, the development of a distinctly Azeri national consciousness was made difficult" (Croissant, 1998, p. 7).

Map of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic after the end of the First War (1994) showing the territories controlled by the Armenians until 2020



Map extracted from the Nationalities Papers of Cambridge University Press via Wikipedia (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/information/nagorno-karabakh-articles-from-nationalities-papers>) consulted on 3rd October 2021.

Tamara Dragadze suggested that the Azeris “have learned to think of their nationhood in territorial terms. It would have been seen by the Azerbaijanis as the ultimate insult if the Soviet authorities had ordered them to hand over territory which they had thought was their only inalienable resource at a time when they had been increasingly aware of the way they had been economically exploited by the center”. “They viewed the town of Shushi (Shusha) as a historical symbol of Azerbaijani statehood not only for its embodiment of the Azerbaijani ethnic past but also because of its reputation as one of Azerbaijan’s scientific and cultural centres” (Dragadze cited by Chorbajian, 1994, p. 12; Geukjian 2012, p. 34). Azeri

intellectual Rufat Novrozov summarized the role of territory for Azeris “Territory was all that we had left. They could not change our territory without our agreement. So a fight over territory became a fight for our work, our dignity as a people, as a nation” (Dudwick cited by Geukjian, 2012, p. 35).

There was significant military action in April 2016 and in July 2020. In the first case, the war lasted for four days and the Azeris claimed to have occupied 20 km² and the Armenians to have lost only 8 km². It took place exclusively in the Line of Contact between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. In the second case, the clashes only lasted for four days and took place only in the international frontier between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the second war –September to November 2020– which lasted for 44 days, Azerbaijan with Turkish military support recovered during the war all the southern districts of Nagorno-Karabakh including the border with Iran and a quarter of the old *Oblast* and by the ceasefire signed in November 2020 regained control of the rest of the territories lost in the First War in 1992-94. The war left around 7,000 dead. Russian peace keeping forces have been deployed to the area. The Armenian controlled territory was reduced to 3,170 km² from 11,722 km² (Crisis Group No 264 Europe and Central Asia, Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh, 9 June 2021).

Map of Nagorno-Karabakh after the Second War of 2020, showing the territories held by the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the territories taken by Azerbaijan or returned to Azerbaijan



Map prepared by Wikipedia ([https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Nagorno-Karabakh_war_map_\(2020\).svg](https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Nagorno-Karabakh_war_map_(2020).svg)) consulted on 3rd October 2021.

Conclusions

At the time the Soviet Union was gradually disappearing in 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh was the catalyst that mobilized the Armenians of Soviet Armenia and the diaspora who understood that a historical opportunity existed for the recovery of the territory lost to Azerbaijan in 1921, as a first step towards the recovery of their historical territories in Western Armenia –lost during the genocide of 1915-1923 since in 1988 only Karabakh offered a possibility of redress. It is as if after the genocide and territorial losses at the beginning of the 20th century, Nagorno-Karabakh was the key element that gave a new meaning to Armenian identity. Nagorno-Karabakh was and continues to be a clear indication of a historical path of territorial reunification and national repatriation that in the collective imagination of the Armenian

diaspora constituted the subsequent and logical next stage of the international recognition of the genocide.

Armenians continue to feel a particular attachment to Nagorno-Karabakh. Analyst and former minister David Shahnazaryan⁴ told me that from a geo-strategic point of view, Nagorno-Karabakh is very important for Armenia for several reasons. The first is security: a) the physical security of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, b) the impossibility of Armenians from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenians with foreign passports to visit Azerbaijan, c) Azerbaijan's anti Armenian sentiment (state sponsored Armenophobia) policy since 2011-12 and d) the Ramil Safarov case⁵. The second is related to the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Shakhnazaryan, Azerbaijan is not interested in an autonomous regime for the territory, only wants it back without Armenians. There is as well the issue of Azerbaijan's claims over the current territory of Armenia. Also, if Armenians were to lose Nagorno-Karabakh, the actual border between Armenia and Azerbaijan will double, putting Syunik at risk⁶.

Analyst Sergey Minasyan⁷ is of the opinion that Nagorno-Karabakh is very important for Armenia because a) Armenians think of Nagorno-Karabakh as the Armenian Jerusalem, b) Nagorno-Karabakh has been at the center of the Armenian political thinking since the 80s, c) the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh would be very destabilizing for Armenia and d) the victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992-94 allowed the Armenians to abandon the victimization of the genocide.

Former presidential candidate and foreign minister Raffi Hovannisian⁸ told me that Nagorno-Karabakh is important for Armenia because a) its loss would mean Armenia would be in greater danger of attack from Turkey and Azerbaijan, b) Armenian lives would be in danger and c) after the loss of Western Armenia during the genocide, Nagorno-Karabakh is the only territory where Armenians had been able to defend themselves.

Meanwhile, Maria Titizian⁹, an Armenian Canadian living in Armenia since 2000-2001 and a lecturer at the American University of Armenia thinks Nagorno-Karabakh is a mystical concept for the Armenian nation and it is very important that it continues in Armenian hands.

From an Azeri perspective, it is clear that Nagorno-Karabakh was and is important to Azerbaijan, not so much in terms of percentages of the territory occupied by the Armenians until 2020 (near 14 %, not the figure of 20 % given by Azeri authorities which is incorrect), neither in terms of population involved –

Azeris represented 25 % of the population of the *Oblast* in 1989 (approximately 48.000 of the 190.000 registered in the Soviet census of 1989) but in terms of the historical significance of Nagorno-Karabakh, and specially Shushi (Shusha) in the Azeri political ideology and national mindset. And the Azeris consider the territory theirs and do not want to give it up or accept an autonomous regime that is not controlled by Baku. Under Heydar Aliev, they nearly reached an agreement in Key West in 2001 as Aliev did not want to have Nagorno-Karabakh if he could not control it, but under his son the issue of the future of the territory and the possibility of independence has not been accepted by the Azeri authorities and all negotiations have floundered.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Nagorno-Karabakh was the all important determinant in the re formulation of the identity of both Armenians and Azeris. In the first case, by serving as a catalyst of something that the Armenians could regain from their past glories –a result of the first war, with all the negative implications that the defeat in 2020 have for the future, in the second case by serving as a unifying factor of the new Azeri nationalism and a principle in which the Azeri nation irrespective of the political regime was not willing to compromise, ie: territorial concessions in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

As both countries have made the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh a fundamental piece of their national identity, a resolution to the problem by military means is impossible. It failed until 2020, when the Armenians had the upper hand and it will fail now as the Azeris have the upper hand due to their victory in 2020.

References:

- (1) All along the Soviet period there were requests for the union of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. In 1965, on the 50th anniversary of the genocide of 1915, important demonstrations took place in Yerevan. Moscow allowed for the construction of a memorial in Yerevan but refused to consider any changes in the territorial boundaries (Mutafian, 1994 ,p. 145-6). The 1965 demonstrations had an impact in Armenia and the diaspora and increased the militancy in favour of the international recognition of the genocide (Dekmejian, 2004, p. 421).

- (2) In 1989, Armenians represented 76,9 % of the population and Azeris, 21,5%, mostly concentrated in Shushi (Shusha) (author's note).
- (3) The Azeri names (in their English version), normally used in the bibliography in English are used for the districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, as is standard practice. It is also important to notice that only Kelbajar and Lachin have proper Armenian names: Karvacharr and Berdzor. For other geographical names, the most common English name whether Azeri or Armenian is used. Only in important cases, such as Shushi (Shusha in Azeri), a city of particular importance for both Azeris and Armenians, both names are used. Azeris consider it one of the cradles of their civilization since the 1750s when it was founded and it was one of the most important Armenian cities in the Caucasus in the XIX century along with Tiflis (Tbilisi) and Baku. The city had important Azeri and Armenian communities from the XIX century until 1920 when the Armenian quarter was destroyed, was an entirely Azeri city from 1920 until 1992, an entirely Armenian city between 1992 and 2020 and it is Azeri again since 2020. Many historians say he who controls Shushi controls Nagorno-Karabakh. Also dual names are used in the case of Tbilisi and Ganja (author's note).
- (4) Interviewed by me in Yerevan on 22nd September 2017.
- (5) Safarov, an Azeri officer murdered Gurgun Margaryan, an Armenian officer, during a NATO sponsored training in Budapest in 2004 and was condemned and sent to prison in Hungary. He was later sent back to Azerbaijan to complete the rest of his prison term, but was pardoned by president Aliiev and treated as a national hero (author's note).
- (6) This is currently seen in Syunik, in the aftermath of last year's war with the issue of the setting up of the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan in what used to be the border between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (author's note).
- (7) Interviewed by me in Yerevan on 25th September 2017.
- (8) Interviewed by me in Yerevan on 25th September 2017.
- (9) Interviewed by me in Yerevan on 19th September 2017.

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