

SOME ARGUMENTS ON THE NAGORNO-KARABAGH HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Disputes about history are often concerned with political issues, especially territory questions among newly independent countries. When a country becomes independent, it is difficult to settle its borders because both that nation and the neighboring nation usually live together on the frontier. Under these conditions, ethnic conflict is likely to break out, and when a new state manipulates this conflict by, for example, allowing historians to deal with territory issues in order to enforce the nation's unity or broaden its territory, the conflict will worsen significantly. The Nagorno-Karabagh question is such a combination of political and historical arguments. The "Mountainous Black Garden" is 4,800 km². Small as it is, this region is crucial to both Armenia and Azerbaijan today; the ethnic conflict between them over the region, which lasted from February 20, 1988 to May 17, 1994, greatly influenced not only the relationship between the two peoples, but also the historiography of each nation.¹

¹ About the progress of the conflict, see Levon Chorbajian, ed., *The Making of Nagorno-Karabakh: From Secession to Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Michael P. Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Causes and Implications* (West Port: Praeger, 1998); Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); V. G. Mitiaev, "Karabakhskii konflikt v kontekste mezhdnarnodnykh otnoshenii," E. M. Kozhokin, ed., *Armenia: problemy nezavisimogo razvitiia* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 487-554.

During the conflict, both of them insisted on their sovereignty of the land, showing historical facts and sources. In this chapter, I discuss some of the arguments among Armenian and Azeri researchers on the Nagorno-Karabagh history, that is, the legitimacy of ruling Karabagh and the Communist Party's decision to render the region to Azerbaijan SSR, and compare their viewpoints.

*WHO REIGNED OVER KARABAGH?
A DISPUTE OVER LEGITIMACY*

1965 saw arguments on the "historical territory" of ancient kingdoms between Armenian and Azerbaijani historians. In this year, the fiftieth anniversary demonstration of the Armenian massacres under Ottoman domination in 1915 gave birth to an Armenian political movement. During the demonstration, some attendants insisted that not only the eastern part of Turkey, where Armenians lived before World War I, but also Nagorno-Karabagh "conquered" by Azeri Turks, be rendered to them.²

In ancient times, the Karabagh region belonged to the (Caucasian) Albanian Kingdom, which lasted from the fourth to the eighth century: Zia Buniatov's 1965 monograph entitled "Azerbaijan in the Seventh-Ninth Centuries" says that modern Azeris are descendants of the Caucasian Albanians. According to him, in antiquity, the Albanians were one of the three major peoples of Caucasus with a state extending from Lake Sevan eastwards to the Caspian Sea, and from the Caucasian Mountains southwards to the Arax River. Initially, adherents of Christianity, the majority of the Albanian population, converted to Islam in the seventh century and were linguistically turkified four hundred years later. In 1967, Asatur Mnatsakanyan, a historian, and Paruyr Sevak, a famous writer, criticized Buniatov's idea, saying that most of the rulers of the region were Armenians preserving Armenian culture.³

When it comes to Karabagh history, Armenian researchers often point out the long-lasting Armenian autonomy in the region. In the most authoritative Armenian history textbook in Yerevan State University, the author explains the political situation in the early eighteenth century as follows:

² Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 228.

³ Seiichi Kitagawa, "Zakafukasuni okeru rekishigakuto seiji – Arubania mondai wo megutte," *Soren kenkyuu*, ["Historiography and Politics in Transcaucasus: Around the Albanian Question," *Soviet Studies*], No.11, 1990, pp. 110-113.

“There were Armenian semiautonomous *meliktyuns*, principalities in the Karabagh and Syunik region under Safavid Persian rule, and during the 1720s, an Armenian, Davit Bek, rose in rebellion against the Ottoman army invading the Karabagh and Zangezur region, which is estimated to be the awakening of modern Armenian nationality.

After Nadir Shah (reign: 1736-1747) forced to the Ottoman army to withdraw from the former Safavid territory, he proclaimed his enthronement of the shah. He understood that in whole Transcaucasia, the Armenians were the only power with the skill to resist the Turks. Armenians driven to fight with Turkey acted as Nadir’s allies. He undertook to unify the principalities in Karabagh into a political army unit. By his special edict, five principalities in Karabagh were united into a province. The control of the khan of Gandzak (Gyanja in Azeri Turkish) was removed from the newly founded province, and it became an independent administrative unit. The five principalities, like neighboring Gandzak, Shirvan, Yerevan, and some other khanates, would be directly subject to the Azerbaijani viceroy, Ibrahim Afshar Khan, who was Nadir Shah’s elder brother. As a matter of fact, in Transcaucasia, new administrative autonomous unification was founded from the principalities of Karabagh.

Essentially, Nadir Shah certified what Karabagh Armenians had gained through the fifteen-month-long struggle.”⁴

Needles to say, Azerbaijani historians are completely against this Armenian viewpoint. For example, Igrar Aliev said that it had no grounds and discussed the Armenian population in this area as follows:

“Karabagh was annexed to Russia not as an Armenian land but the very ‘Muslim’ territory. This is proved with official documents at that time. In the 1820-30s during the Russo-Iranian and Russo-Turkish war years, the Karabagh army composed of Azerbaijanis gained courage.

The outstanding growth of the Armenian population, that is, Armenianization of Nagorno-Karabagh to some extent, took place much later. Even at the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Armenians in Karabagh were in the minority. According to the data in ‘A Record on Karabagh Province in 1823 collected by a civil servant, Mogilevsky, and a colonel, Ermolov (Tiflis, 1866),’ there were 90,000 inhabitants in the Karabagh khanate, and there was a city and 600 villages, just 150 of which were Armenian villages. On the other hand, about 1,048 Azerbaijani families and 474 Armenian families lived in Shusha,⁵ and about 12,902 Azerbaijani families and 4,331 Armenian families lived in the villages.

⁴ Hr. R. Simonyan, ed., *Hayoc patmut’yun [Armenian History]* (Yerevan, 2000), pp. 123-125.

⁵ Shusha is the old center of Karabagh, which is located near the new center, Stepanakert or Khankendi.

Only in those years did more than 130,000 Armenians, a low estimate, immigrate to Transcaucasia, especially to Karabagh. According to other data, the number of the immigrants outstandingly surpassed 200,000 people.”⁶

It is interesting that while Armenian researchers mention Nadir Shah’s privileging Armenian princes in Karabagh, Azerbaijani researchers discuss the Azeris’ overwhelming majority over the Armenians in the region concerning population. This historical reign of the land is one aspect, and the population ratio is another; each standpoint is valid.

*WHY DID KARABAGH
BECOME PART OF AZERBAIJAN?
A CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT*

The second controversy between them is the decision made by the Communist Party in 1921 that Karabagh belongs to Azerbaijan SSR. This led to the dispute at the end of Soviet era. In the mid-nineteenth century, national movements appeared in Transcaucasia, and the Armenians and Azeris claimed their political rights. These movements did not, however, include the division of the territory at first. It is true that during the Armeno-Tatar (Azeri) war, Armenian military corps fought with Azeri corps in the area, but it was not just over Karabagh.

In 1919 and 1920, the Dashnak Party (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) ruling independent Armenia and the Musavat Azerbaijani government fought over mountainous Karabagh. This was because the deportation and massacre of Armenians by the Ottoman government during World War I and the Ottoman army’s invasion of Transcaucasia worsened relations between the Armenians and Azeris. In addition, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia had already gained independence in 1918, and these countries had to divide the territories. The Armenian uprising in Nagorno-Karabagh in late March 1920 made Azerbaijan shift the bulk of its army to the mountainous region, where it fought numerous engagements, eventually laying waste to the Armenian stronghold of Shusha. Seeing a virtually undefended border before them, the Bolsheviks took the opportunity to gain a foothold in Azerbaijan. The Eleventh Red

⁶ I. Aliev, *Nagornyi Karabakh* (Baku, 1989), pp. 75-77. Aliev is quoting from N. I. Shavrov, *Novaia ugroza russkomu delu v Zakavkaze: predstoiashchaia rasprodazha Mughani inorodtsam* (St. Petersburg, 1911), p. 59.

Army entered Baku unopposed on April 27, and Azerbaijan became a Soviet Socialist Republic.⁷

At the end of May 1920, the Red Army seized Karabagh, and on August 10, an agreement was signed between Armenia and Moscow providing for the Soviet occupation of Karabagh and the surrounding territories until an equitable and final solution could be reached on their status. The Red Army conquered Armenia in December 1920, and the Nagorno-Karabagh question was transformed overnight from an interstate dispute into an internal matter of the Soviet regime. Then, Azerbaijani communists withdrew claims to this region, and they sent the following telegram to the government of Armenia: "As of today, the border disputes between Armenian and Azerbaijan are declared resolved. Mountainous Karabagh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan are considered part of Soviet Republic Armenia."

Nariman Narimanov, the Azerbaijani communist leader, however, repudiated and reasserted his republic's claim to Nagorno-Karabagh. The Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party took up the question of Karabagh on June 12, 1921 and proclaimed: "Based on the declaration of the Revolutionary Committee of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan and the agreement between the Socialist Soviet Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is hereby declared that Mountainous Karabagh is henceforth an integral part of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Armenia." Narimanov, present at the meeting, was outraged and warned that the loss of Karabagh could foment anti-Soviet activity in Azerbaijan. Then, the fate of the Karabagh was determined at two bizarre meetings. At first, it was decided that Karabagh would be transferred to Soviet Armenia at the Caucasian Bureau with Narimanov present on July 4, 1921, but the next day, this decision was overturned.⁸

When Armenians began to make a claim on Karabagh during the Perestroika era, they argued again regarding who changed the above-mentioned decision and why. In the pamphlet "Nagorno-Karabakh" issued in 1988, an academician of Armenia explains as follows:

"N. Narimanov protested and demanded that the final solution to the question be prolonged in the Central Committee of RCP(b). The Caucasian Bureau decided so. However, the Caucasian Bureau's decision was not carried out, and the next day, they called a meeting of the Caucasian Bureau. At this meeting, the above-mentioned decision was reconsidered and decision

⁷ For details, see R. G. Hovannisian, "Mountainous Karabagh in 1920: An Unresolved Contest," *Armenian Review* 46, no. 1-4, 1993.

⁸ Croissant, *op. cit.*, pp.18-19.

favorable to Narimanov was made without deliberation or a formal vote, and the Bureau released the following decision: Proceeding from the necessity for national peace among Muslims and Armenians, for economic ties between upper and lower Karabagh, and for permanent ties with Azerbaijan, mountainous Karabagh is to remain within the borders of Azerbaijan SSR, receiving wide regional autonomy with the administrative center at Shusha, becoming an autonomous region.

The Central Committee of Armenia, however, disagreed with this decision on the Nagorno-Karabagh question. In a meeting on June 16, 1921, the disagreement was determined with the conclusion of the Caucasian Bureau, which would be drawn on July 5, 1921.

The conclusion on July 5, 1921 was received under pressure from Stalin and Narimanov's statement threatening an ultimatum. Narimanov, staying in his position, not only made threats of possible 'catastrophe,' but also exercised 'resignation tactics.' He proclaimed that if Karabagh was transferred to Armenia, 'Azerbaijani Sovnarkom would resign from the charge.' In fact, discussions never took place at the meeting. This is Aleksandr Myasnikyan's explanation of this meeting.⁹ At the first meeting of the Armenian Communist Party held from January 26 to 29, 1922, Myasnikyan, answering the question of why Karabagh was not annexed to Armenia, said, 'If you characterize the last meeting of the Caucasian Bureau, it seemed as if Aharonyan, Topchibashev, and Chkhenkeli¹⁰ were seated there. Azerbaijan says that if Armenia claims Karabagh, they will not send oil.'¹¹

Whether or not Narimanov succeeded in changing the decision of the Caucasian Bureau regarding the status of Karabagh under pressure from Stalin is so far unknown because of the lack of sources. It seems, however, that Armenian communists were forced to abandon their claim to Karabagh for economic reasons; Armenia was worn out owing to the seven-year-long war since World War I.

As far as the Armenian population of Karabagh is concerned, Armenian historians discuss the population not in the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century. They give the following explanation:

"As a whole, with the loss during the Great Fatherland War, that is, World War II (more than 20,000 Armenians), about 2,000 a year Armenians on average emigrated from Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast every year from 1926 to 1979, while the number of Azeris increased, excluding their emigrants whose great mass grew essentially in 1959 to 1979 (just slightly fewer than 1,000 people a year). In Nagorno-Karabagh, the Azeri population in 1959-1979 more than doubled, while the number of Armenians increased only by 12%. During the period between the census in 1970 and 1979, the

⁹ Myasnikyan was the chairperson of Armenian Sovnarkom.

¹⁰ They were respectively members of the Dashnak Party, Musavat, and Georgian Menshevik.

¹¹ Akademiia nauk Armianskoi SSR, *Nagorny Karabakh* (Erevan, 1988), pp. 32-33.

absolute Armenian population growing in the region clearly diminished, and there were only 2,000 people. In those years, just a tenth of the Armenians born in Karabagh stayed there, and the rest emigrated from NKAO. As a result, the Armenian population in Karabagh grew from 111,700 in 1926 to 123,100 in 1979, while that of the Azeris grew from 12,600 to 37,200.”¹²

After the distribution of this pamphlet, both Armenians and Azerbaijani historians published documents and materials about Karabagh history,¹³ and disputes among them grew more intense. Azerbaijani historians rarely discuss the Caucasian Bureau’s decision on the Karabagh question at that time. It must have been difficult for them to criticize the Communist Party, which had preserved their rights and interests during the meeting on the territorial question. Rather, they tended to concentrate on the above-mentioned ancient Albanians and the population in the region in the nineteenth century.

Kh. Khalilov, an Azerbaijani historian, points out that 29,350 Azeri families out of 54,841 lived in Karabagh according to the census of the Russian Empire (1897).¹⁴ He explains the reason for the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabagh augmenting since the end of the nineteenth century by the tsarist government’s policy to immigrate Armenians to Karabagh for the purpose of making it a fortress against Iran. In fact, as Khalilov noticed, most Armenians lived in the cities. For example, the census in 1897 shows that in Shusha, 14,483 out of 25,881 people were Armenians.¹⁵ It is difficult to decide which people was the ethnic majority in Karabagh at the end of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

In investigating arguments on the Karabagh question, even the topics that Armenian historians take up differ from those of Azerbaijani historians. It seems, however, that both of them regard the other party as latecomers to the land in insisting on their own legitimacy. In political

¹² Ibid., p. 45. See the table of the annex.

¹³ See *Karabakhskii vopros: istoki i sushchnost' v dokumentakh i fakty* (Stepanakert, 1989); *Akademiia nauk Azebaidjanskoi SSR, Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiami* (Baku, 1990).

¹⁴ Kh. D. Khalilov, *Iz etnicheskoi istorii Karabakha, Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiami* (Baku, 1990), p. 40.

¹⁵ *Pervoia vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiskoi Imperii 1897g.*, Vol.63 “Elisavetpol'skaia guberniia” (St. Petersburg, 1905).

arguments, some historical facts are easily confused with the idea, "first come, first served."

This sort of phenomenon can be observed in other areas. Victor Shnirelman, for example, points out that in the Northern Caucasus some arguments on ethnic names took place between Chechens and Ingush, Karachays and Balkars owing to their passion for "neo-traditionalism" that embraced all the post-Soviet states in the late 1980s and 1990s under the slogan of the "people's revival." In 1960s-1980s an ethnic name "Vainakh," which symbolized the united identity between Chechens and Ingush was intentionally imposed upon the two peoples by the Soviet authority and local intellectuals, and increasingly grew popularity in the Checheno-Ingushkaia ASSR. Yet, at the turn of the 1990s some Chechen politicians, who were struggling for their independence, dreamed of a new unification within the Republic of "Vainakhia" during the 1990s while Ingush would not accept this idea. On the contrary, some nationalists of Balkars and Karachais, who had found themselves in different administrative units during the Soviet Union, searched for a new Turkic alliance in the 1990s. In search of the deep historical roots of that alliance, they propagated the idea that Alans had been Turkic-speakers, and represented the Alans as the direct ancestors of both Karachais and Balkars. As a result, today one can observe not only a belief in the ethnic unity of the both ethnic groups, but also their attempts to identify themselves with the Alans.

Shnirelman also mentions that an ethnic name reveals people's values and their expectations in respect to their place in the world in general and among neighboring peoples in particular, signifies their political ambitions and alliances, defines their cultural and territorial claims, points to their origins, recalls their historical achievements and failures, enables one to distinguish between allies and enemies, and determines directions of ethnic gravitation and antagonisms¹⁶.

In building a state, not only the politicians, but also the historians of an ethnic group tend to be influenced by the political circumstances. As a lesson of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, however, one should, at least, bear in mind that both Armenians and Azeris lived together for a long time before the ethnic conflict broke out, and every inhabitant of Karabagh had a family, a life, and a history of which no one could deprive them.

¹⁶ V. Shnirelman, "The Politics of a Name: Between Consolidation and Separation in the Northern Caucasus," *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 23, pp. 68-73.

	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979
Total population	123.3	150.8	130.4	150.3	162.2
Armenians ratio (%)	111.7 89.1	132.8 88.1	110.1 84.4	121.1 80.6	123.1 75.9
Azeris (%)	12.3 10.1	14.1 9.3	18.0 13.8	27.2 18.1	37.3 22.9
Russians (%)	0.6 0.5	3.2 2.1	1.8 1.4	1.3 0.9	1.3 0.8

Appendix. Ethnic Composition of the NKAO (1,000 persons) according to the USSR Censuses