

## THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

After spending a week in Warsaw and Moscow, in March 1992 I arrived in the Armenian capital Yerevan. This was literally a few weeks after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and people at the time could not grasp what was happening to them. Armenia was technically an independent nation, but people failed to understand what that meant. They talked about "*angakhutyun*", which means "independence", when they referred to post-Soviet Armenia, an expression which at the time meant a combination of uncertainty, chaos, lack of reference, and loneliness for Armenia. When people used the expression "*bedutyun*", meaning "state", they referred to the Soviet Union, the state in which they were born and had lived all their lives, which had suddenly and inexplicably disappeared.

In April 1992 I spent a week in Mountainous Karabakh. At the time, Karabakh was cut off from Armenia proper, and the only way to go there was by air. With two other journalists—photographers from the French Armenian Diaspora—I was lucky to be in a Yakovlev-40, a 32 seated passenger plane from which all seats had been taken off, and which had instead been filled with sacks of flour. I was lucky because we were sitting on top of flour and not in a plane transporting diesel or ammunition. There were a dozen or so fighters and government officials flying with us, returning from Yerevan back to their land in Karabakh. The plane took off from Erebuni airport in Yerevan and took height, to avoid Azeri anti-aircraft fire. When it was above Khojali airport, it went down in circles until it landed. Outside the airport you could see burnt-down houses, the result of the February 1992 fighting during which the Karabakh Armenian forces took over the airport. There were hundreds of people walking in all directions: soldiers, peasants, children, and women. There was no fuel

in Karabakh, no public transport, no taxis. In the regional capital Stepanakert there were no shops, no restaurants, and more generally no economy. Money had no function in this war economy. We were given rooms in the Hotel Karabakh, which had neither electricity nor running water, and which was partially destroyed by Grad missiles fired from Shushi, the impressive town to the west of Stepanakert, visible from my hotel window. After a week and numerous interviews in the Stepanakert, Marduni, and Hadrut regions, and after the last days spending under fire, I travelled with two (different) journalists and five wounded civilians in the back of a truck to reach the capital and from there fly back to Yerevan.

In those days it was difficult to be an optimist. Armenia was landlocked, had no access to its traditional partner Russia, had no energy sources; its borders with Azerbaijan in the east and Turkey in the west were closed, and it was at war with its neighbour Azerbaijan over Mountainous Karabakh. Following the 1988 earthquake in which over 25,000 people perished, a third of Armenian industry was in ruins, and the collapse of the USSR had made the rest redundant. The situation in Karabakh seemed even more bleak. The region was completely encircled by Azerbaijani forces, and was facing an enemy force superior in arms, ammunition and numbers. In the year 1992 many in Armenia, but also in neighbouring Azerbaijan and Georgia, thought that the newly achieved independence of their countries was a temporary phenomenon. Many compared the situation with the three short years of 1917-20, when after the fall of the Tsarist Empire the Transcaucasus became independent from Russia and the republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia emerged, until the Bolsheviks eventually took over the former Tsarist provinces and integrated them in a new state to be known as Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Similarly, in 1992, many thought that the independence of Armenia would last as long as the political turmoil in Moscow, and would end once the Russians redefined their system and regained their power. In the meanwhile, the Caucasus had to go through chaos, wars, population exchanges and much suffering.

### *The making of the Karabakh conflict*

The conflict in Mountainous Karabakh casts a long shadow over the modern history of the Caucasus. The interplay between historic events

and their role in shaping contemporary ones is a delicate issue: what element of current political developments may be the reflection of historic ills left "uncorrected", and what is genuinely the result of more recent changes and events? Although many specialists writing about the Karabakh conflict have talked about deep rooted antagonism between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, clashes between the two groups in mountainous Karabakh first erupted during the upheavals of 1905-7, with the emergence of nationalist parties on both sides, during what was known as the "Armeno-Tatar Wars". Later, between 1918 and 1920, several wars, massacres and deportations pitted the two sides, as the Tsarist Empire collapsed and independent Armenia and Azerbaijan fought each other for the control of three disputed regions: Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Mountainous Karabakh. In the weeks following the entry of the Red Army to Armenia, Karabakh was recognized by the Communist leadership of Azerbaijan as part of Soviet Armenia. But in 1921 this decision was reversed by the Caucasian Bureau of the CP as a result of the intervention of Stalin himself, and it was decided to place Mountainous Karabakh within Soviet Azerbaijan, with the status of an autonomous region.

The conflict in mountainous Karabakh was the first major political mobilization in the late Soviet period, which was later transformed into inter-state war as the Soviet Union collapsed and Armenia and Azerbaijan fought an undeclared war over control of Karabakh. The territorial boundaries of the present Mountainous Karabakh go back to the formation of the USSR in the early 1920s. Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Oblast had an area of 4,400 sq. km. and a total population of 162,000 (1979) of whom 123,000 were Armenian.<sup>1</sup> Although the region does not have important geopolitical significance, nor important natural wealth other than forests and water resources, Karabakh has huge symbolic importance for both Armenian and Azerbaijani modern national identity.<sup>2</sup>

1 *Nagornii Karabakh, Istoricheskaya Spravka*, Yerevan: Akademiya Naouk Armi-anskoi SSR, 1988, p. 7 (in Russian).

2 For a historic background on Mountainous Karabakh conflict, see: Patrick Donabédian and Claude Mutafian, *Artsakh, Histoire du Karabagh*, Paris: Sevig Press, 1989; Christopher Walker (ed.), *Armenia and Karabagh, Struggle for Unity*, London: Minority Rights Publications, 1991; Levon Chorbajian, Patrick Donabedian and Claude Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot, The History*

*Armenian grievances*

Throughout the Soviet period Armenians remained dissatisfied with the 1921 arrangement that left Karabakh within Azerbaijan. Armenian activists, and several authors after them, mention economic and cultural grievances to explain or justify the Karabakh Movement: Karabakh Armenians did not receive the amount of public investment compared to other parts of Azerbaijan; Karabakh ethnic Armenians did not have enough educational material in Armenian, were not allowed to receive books from neighbouring Soviet Armenia, could not follow television programmes broadcast from Yerevan. In 1964 Armenians sent a petition to Moscow demanding a change in the administrative borders in the south Caucasus to include Karabakh within the Armenian SSR, as a solution to the continuous dissatisfaction in Karabakh. The Soviet authorities refused to contemplate any change of boundaries, while the situation of Karabakh Armenians did not witness any improvement. The coming of Heydar Aliiev, a former KGB officer, to power in Baku only accentuated this repressive policy.<sup>3</sup>

While reading or listening such arguments, it is easy to understand that the real issue is not the economic "backwardness" of Karabakh, nor the level of culture its citizens enjoyed regardless, whether this culture was "Armenian", "Azerbaijani" or "Soviet". Probably the economic level of Karabakh was not qualitatively different from other Azerbaijani mountainous regions—although Karabakh Armenians probably compared their lot with neighbouring Armenia, and not with provincial Azerbaijan. Essentially, Armenians were dissatisfied with Azerbaijani identity politics, which saw in ethnic Armenians an alien or even dangerous element and repressed any expression by them, whether in political or even cultural terms. We may add another argument that is often quoted to explain the Karabakh movement of 1988, the demographic shift within Karabakh: the percentage of ethnic Ar-

*and Geopolitics of Nagorno-Karabagh*, London: Zed Books, 1994; *Azerbaijan, Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994; Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 1998; Michael Croissant, *The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict, Causes and Implications*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

3 Anton Kochinian, "Gharapaghi Hartse 60-agan Tvaganner" [in Armenian: "The Question of Karabakh in the 60's"] *Karoun*, Yerevan, July 1989, pp. 92-4.

menians was constantly decreasing, while that of ethnic Azeris was on the rise (see Table 1). For Armenians, this represented a deliberate policy of Baku to impose an ethnic Azeri character over Karabakh. Armenians feared that the fate of Karabakh would follow that of Nakhichevan, where the percentage of ethnic Armenian inhabitants was reduced from a substantial 40 per cent of the total population at the time of the Sovietization of the region to a mere 2 per cent in 1988.<sup>4</sup>

The heart of the matter was not a struggle over resources, or the fight for the recognition of a specific culture. The source of the problem was that after seven decades of Soviet rule Armenians did not consider Azerbaijani rule over them as legitimate, and they feared its long-term consequences, which they imagined would be loss of their identity. Simultaneously, Karabakh Armenians were in a difficult position. Theoretically they were supposed to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, but practically, in the Soviet system of vertical command, even the most insignificant matter had to be referred to Baku. Boris Kevorkov, the ethnic Armenian ruler of Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region under Aliiev, was seen by the Armenian population as a puppet loyal to Baku, and not a legitimate leader.

Year:	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989
Total	125.3	150.8	130.4	150.3	162.2	189.1
Armenians	111.7	132.8	110.1	121.1	123.1	145.5
Percentage	89.1	88.1	84.4	80.6	75.9	76.9
Azeris	12.6	14.1	18	27.2	37.3	40.6
Percentage	10.1	9.3	13.8	18.1	22.9	21.5
Russians 0.6	3.2	1.8	1.3	1.9	1.9	
Percentage	0.5	2.1	1.4	0.9	0.8	1

Table 1: Ethnic composition of Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region, in thousands and in percentage of the total.

Armenian inhabitants of Karabakh, and the intelligentsia of Yerevan, did not stay indifferent towards the situation of Mountainous Karabakh and its political status subordinated to Baku. As early as the 1920s Armenians in Karabakh and the regions around formed an

4 Akam Ayyazian, *Nakhichevan*, Yerevan: Hushartsan, 1995, p. 7; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, London: Bantam Books, 1995. Chernyaev quotes Gorbachev saying that "the Armenian population there [Nakhichevan] dropped from 40 to 1.5 per cent." Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years With Gorbachev*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000, pp. 182-3.

underground organization aiming at the unification of Karabakh with neighbouring Soviet Armenia. Even under Stalin there were protests against keeping Karabakh—as well as Nakhichevan—under Azerbaijani rule. Aghasi Khanjian, the First Secretary of the Armenian CP, is reported to have worked towards the restoration of those two provinces to Armenia. His efforts led to clashes with Beria, who shot him dead in his Tbilisi office in 1936.<sup>5</sup> This did not restrain his successor at the head of the Armenian CP, Harutunian, from continuing efforts to call Moscow to revise the frontiers between Armenia and Azerbaijan and attach Karabakh to Armenia. In 1962, 2,500 signatures were collected by Karabakh Armenians and sent to Khrushchev denouncing Azerbaijan's discriminatory policies. This started a series of petitions from the region addressed to Moscow, and supported by thousands of signatures.<sup>6</sup> Another petition sent to Nikita Khrushchev in 1964 complained of the "repopulating the Armenian villages of Martuni and Mars with Azèrbaijanis" and added twelve points of specific grievances; it concluded: "We request a prompt decision so as to reincorporate Mountainous Karabagh and all adjacent Armenian regions into the Armenian SSR, or to make them part of RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic]."<sup>7</sup>

There was unanimity between Soviet Armenian officials and the political dissidents around the Karabakh question. With the formation of the Yerevan branch of the "Helsinki Group" to oversee the application of the Helsinki Final Act signed in 1975, the issue of the rights of Karabakh Armenians was one among others related to violations of human rights in Soviet Armenia.

5 Christopher Walker, "The Armenian Presence in Mountainous Karabagh", in John E.R. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg and Richard Schofield (eds), *Transcaucasus Boundaries*, London: UCL Press, 1996, p. 103.

6 Claire Mouradian, *Arménie, de Staline à Gorbatchev, histoire d'une république soviétique*, Paris: Ramsay, 1990, pp. 254-5.

7 This letter was written on 19 May 1964, and first published in the Diaspora publication *The Armenian Review*, Boston, Autumn 1968. See Gerard Libaridian, *The Karabagh File, Documents and Facts on the Question of Mountainous Karabagh 1918-1988*, Cambridge: The Zoryan Institute, March 1988, pp. 44-6.

### *Karabakh in the age of reforms*

In the age of *glasnost*, Armenian mobilization around the Karabakh cause could only intensify. Armenian intellectuals living and working in Yerevan, such as Zori Balaian, or those working in Russia, such as Gorbachev's economic consultant Abel Aganbekian or the historian Sergei Mikoyan, increased their declarations in all-Union publications, as well as foreign ones, about the Karabakh issue. Delegations from Stepanakert or Yerevan took turns to go to Moscow to express their dissatisfaction, and their complaints received a certain attention. One report mentions a Karabakh Armenian delegation led by the filmmaker Edmond Keosayan carrying a "petition signed by close to 100,000" persons, meeting high ranking officials in Moscow who later put "forward their case to the Committee of Nationalities for their evaluation."<sup>8</sup> On 12 February 1988 a delegation of Karabakh intelligentsia flew to Moscow and presented to the Kremlin sixty thousand signatures demanding the unification of their Autonomous Region with Soviet Armenia.<sup>9</sup> A *New York Times* article talked of three separate delegations carrying petitions to Moscow. The first delegation composed of 12 people went to Moscow in November 1987, while the second met a non-voting member of the Politburo, Pyotr Demichev, in the Kremlin; he later considered the demands of the delegation "neither anti-Soviet nor nationalistic."<sup>10</sup> The third delegation made its pilgrimage to Moscow in "early" February, and found an even warmer reception. "When they came back, they were celebrating their victory," said Mofses Gargisyan, editor of a dissident magazine in Yerevan. "They really thought they had won."<sup>11</sup>

As the tension in Stepanakert rose, demonstrations in Yerevan became more frequent, and delegations from Armenia and Karabakh regularly visited the centre of Soviet power demanding the application of "Leninist"

8 "Report of a Karabagh delegation Meeting with Soviet official in Moscow", *Asbarez*, Los Angeles, 21 January 1988.

9 Pakur, *Yev Nra Shurch*, Yerevan: Arevik, 1990, p. 6 (in Armenian). It is not clear whether the January and February petitions are one and the same, or two separate ones.

10 Felicity Barringer and Bill Keller, "A test of change explodes in Soviet", *New York Times*, 11 March 1988. The quote comes from Igor Muradyan, a member of the delegation and an early leader of the Karabakh Movement in Yerevan.

11 *New York Times*, 11 March 1988.

principles of nationalities policy in the case of Karabakh. Armenian activists and intellectuals had the perception that Moscow was at last listening to them, that they could solve this problem through constitutional ways, and within the limits of Soviet legality. They naively thought that their national demands coincided with the official policies articulated around *perestroika* and *glasnost*. In the meantime, a new event took place that became a milestone in the mobilization of the Armenians of Karabakh. On 20 February 1988 the Soviet of the Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region met in a special session to discuss the increasing tension within the region. After heated debates, the Karabakh Soviet adopted a resolution by the vote of 110 out of a total of 140 deputies demanding "to transfer the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabagh from the Azerbaijani S. S. R. to the Armenian S. S. R."<sup>12</sup> For Levon Ter-Petrosian, this was a unique event where a "state structure could adopt an independent decision"<sup>13</sup> without previous orders from above, from Moscow. When the news reached Yerevan, small environmentalist activists who were demonstrating against the construction of a new chemical plant in one of the suburbs of Yerevan swelled immediately and in a couple of days attracted hundreds of thousands. They gathered at the Opera Square in support of the Karabakh Soviet demand for *miyatsoum*, or unification in Armenian.<sup>14</sup> Thus an autonomous political movement came into being, independent from the official party-state-KGB structures of the Soviet Union, and in the following few years had not only a deep impact on the politics of the Transcaucasus, but also a transformative effect throughout the Soviet Union.

### *Karabakh, Southern Azerbaijan and the Baku intelligentsia*

While for Armenian intellectuals and dissidents the issue of Karabakh was a topic of mobilization, for Azerbaijani intellectuals it did not have

12 The text of the resolution was published in *Sovetakan Gharabagh*, Stepanakert, 21 February 1998. An English translation can be found in Libaridian, *The Karabagh File*, op. cit., p. 90. See also Chorbajian et al., *The Caucasian Knot*, op. cit., p. 149. 17 deputies voted against and 13 abstained. The English translation of the text of the resolution can be found in the same book, on p. 180.

13 Author interview with Levon Ter-Petrosian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

14 According to press reports, up to 1 million demonstrated in Yerevan by the last week of February 1988. See William Eaton, "1 Million Reportedly Take Part as Protests Continue in Armenia", *Los Angeles Times*, 26 February 1988.

the same significance in Soviet times. Until the start of mass mobilization in Stepanakert and Yerevan in 1988, the question of Karabakh did not constitute part of the Azerbaijani national agenda. Karabakh was part of Azerbaijan, and the official policies of Baku were enough to counter Armenian actions; there was no need for independent mobilization within the Azerbaijani intelligentsia and broader social circles. Outside a handful of historians, who were engaged in debates with their Armenian colleagues about the ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity of lost tribes of the Caucasus in early history and the Middle Ages, or the ethnic composition of Karabakh and Zangezur in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and population movements in those regions, the larger public—even the greater part of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia—did not take notice of the existence of such a debate. In mainstream Azerbaijani art and literature the Russo-Persian wars of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the "division" of Azerbaijan as a result of the Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828), was the dominant theme, and the cornerstone of Azerbaijani national identity. Such expressions of nationalism, directed against Iran and not against Russia, were not only tolerated but actively encouraged by Moscow, as a Soviet foreign policy instrument to influence Iran and formulate territorial claims towards it. "Soviet Azerbaijani intellectual publications indicated that the subject of the connection between Azerbaijanis in the north and the south was of constant interest throughout the post-World War II period. These writings, produced primarily for readers in the republic of Soviet Azerbaijan, were published almost exclusively in Azerbaijani and rarely in Russian."<sup>15</sup> The official institutions in Azerbaijan encouraged raising of the "South Azerbaijan" problem, and a main centre for publicizing this issue was the Azerbaijan Writers Union, since many of its members had been active in Iran under Soviet occupation.<sup>16</sup> For example, during a congress of the Azerbaijani Writers' Union in 1986, Ismayil Shikhli argued for incorporating themes from

15 Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren, Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 72.

16 David Nissman, *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan, The Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987, pp. 46-7. Shaffer mentions that an outspoken champion of unification between the two Azerbaijanis in Baku was none other than Mirza Ibrahimov, a long term head of the official Writer's Union. In *Brother and Brethren*, p. 72.

Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan into Soviet Azerbaijani literature.<sup>17</sup> The debate about the separation of Azerbaijan between "north" and "south" and between two foreign empires, Russian and Persian, was the dominant debate among Azerbaijani intellectuals until February 1988, while the problem of Karabakh and the rivalry with Armenia was a marginal one.<sup>18</sup> In December 1989 thousands of Azerbaijani demonstrators, led by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, gathered in several spots near the Soviet-Iranian border in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, attacked border posts and burned them down, and crossed the Arax river to the other side, to Iran. Many chanted slogans for the unity between "north and south Azerbaijan". With the emergence of the Karabakh problem the political context changed dramatically, and the question of "southern Azerbaijan" was pushed to the background under the pressure of developing events. It is difficult to imagine what the consequences would have been had the Azerbaijani national movement developed in the absence of the Karabakh factor, pouring its energies and mobilized masses to the other side of the Arax river, and clashing with the guardians of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The question of "southern" Azerbaijan remains on the political agenda for many Azerbaijani political activists. Nizami Guliev, a member of the Milli Majlis (Azerbaijani parliament) and an activist of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, stressed the importance of unifying the two parts of Azerbaijan. For Guliev, this unification should be seen in the context of "collapse of empires", like the unification of the two parts of Germany. "The Popular Front is just in its struggle for the unification of the two parts of the Azeri people. The thirteen million Azeris have the right to their language and to practice their culture."<sup>19</sup> He added that this could happen as a result of democratic developments within Iran.

Not only did the Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsias have different perceptions about their national problems under the Soviet re-

17 Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection, Research Series #95, 1997, p. 220. Internet address: <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/research/95/>

18 Shireen Hunter, "Azerbaijan: Search for Identity" in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 229-30.

19 Author interview with Nizami Guliev, Baku, 2 July 1999.

gime, and different perceptions of the situation of Karabakh; they did not have instruments and channels for negotiations to regulate existing problems, nor any means for restraint once the conflict erupted. This role of mediation had been fulfilled for seven decades by the Moscow authorities. The Azerbaijani leadership was ill-equipped to articulate a position in response to the Armenian demands. In a characteristic manner Ayaz Mutalibov, a high-level Azerbaijani party official, said in answer to the questions of a TASS correspondent: "In many areas of national economy, Nagorno-Karabagh, in which Armenians make up the majority, is noticeably ahead of the average indicators of the entire republic."<sup>20</sup> He added: "There are more kindergartens, hospital beds and libraries per capita of its population compared to an average in Azerbaijan."<sup>21</sup> In other words, for the Baku authorities discussions and negotiations were not on the agenda.

### *Sumgait: the birth of the Karabakh conflict*

There are individual events that come to trigger decade long conflicts. The operation of the Colombian Army in May 1964 in Marquetalia not only led to the birth of FARC (the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces) but also set into motion a conflict which is now over four decades old. The attack in Ain al-Remmane, a suburb of Beirut, against a bus full of pro-Palestinian activists on 13 April 1975 led to the fifteen-year-long "little wars" of Lebanon. Describing those events is a difficult task for a historian, because time has transformed them into potent political symbols. According to a Colombian researcher, even the name of the operation launched by the Colombian army in Marquetalia is the subject of one of the most passionate debates in Colombian historiography.<sup>22</sup> The reason is that it has become the founding myth not only of the conflict, but also of the political traditions that emerged out of the armed confrontation and developed as institutions under the legitimacy of this founding myth. Any interpretation given by the historian could follow the positions defended by one side of the conflict or the other,

20 TASS, 23 February 1988, reprinted in Libaridian, op. cit., p. 99.

21 Ibid., p. 100.

22 Eduardo Pizarro Leongomez, "Le mythe fondateur des FARC", translated into French in *Courrier International*, Paris, No. 711, 17-23 June 2004, p. 12.

and can potentially be seen as defending the new political system that took power after the events, or criticizing it.

The bloody events in Sumgait in the last three days of February 1988 have played a similar role in the Karabakh conflict. The first blood was spilled in Sumgait, turning a political confrontation which was just taking form into a violent one. Before Sumgait, it was possible to imagine a *deus ex machina* intervening and calming the passions, proposing compromises, or imposing a new order. After Sumgait, such an eventuality became hardly possible. Sumgait opened the doors of Caucasus history into the unknown, launching an adventure that broke the old rules of the political games, without defining new ones. While trying to describe the events of Sumgait, one is confronted with two sets of questions. First, was Sumgait an "explosion" of passions, a spontaneous action by uncontrolled and uncontrollable masses, or was it planned and organized? And, if it was a planned event, who bears the responsibility—who could possibly organize such an action, and what political forces had an interest in it?

According to Garry Wills, any analysis of war has to consider three stages in its development: "the causes of war, the conduct of war, and the consequences of war."<sup>23</sup> What Wills considers as the causes of war in itself could be divided into two distinct parts; the first is the background of war, various historic, cultural, economic factors that lead to the building up of antagonistic sides and a rise in tension, which create general conditions for violence to take place; the second is a conscious effort by a group of people who profit from changing political circumstances to advance a programme, or try to preserve the existing political arrangements, through the use of violence. This use of violence, initially intended as precise and limited in time and space, bears the risk of changing the rules of the existing political order established thus far, and creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, thus sparking a long and bloody conflict. While a large part of conflict studies has focused on the second stage, the conduct of war after it starts, it is highly important to study the causes of war. For Wills, to study a just war, one has to embark on its causes, since once a war erupts it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep it under control and not to reach extreme prac-

23 Garry Wills, "What Is a Just War?" *New York Review of Books*, Volume 51, Number 18, 18 November 2004.

tices and hurt innocents or destroy their property, thus questioning the moral high ground of the warring sides.

Now, what exactly happened in Sumgait is naturally controversial. There are "facts" that are contested by some, while others propose a different set of alternative facts, or different interpretations for the same facts. Eventually, each side of the conflict has a different version of the events, to defend its own position in the conflict. Moreover, researchers and commentators, whether from the region or from outside, consciously or not, have defended one version or another of the events in Sumgait, and by doing so have revealed their sympathies towards one of the conflict sides.

As we have seen, the peaceful campaign to transfer Karabakh to the Armenian SSR led to mass mobilization in Armenia in February 1988, starting with the vote of the Karabakh Soviet on 20 February that led to demonstrations in the next days in Stepanakert and Yerevan. In a short time, several isolated clashes led to a chain reaction and a major explosion of violence. Even before Sumgait, several dispersed acts of violence were reported. Two days after the resolution of the Karabakh Soviet, anti-Armenian disturbances broke out in the town of Hadrut in Nagorno-Karabakh, injuring sixteen and killing two. On the same day, 22 February 1988, the head of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, Kyamran Bagirov, arrived at Aghdam. On the same day also a group of Azerbaijanis moved to the neighbouring Armenian town of Askeran, on their way to Stepanakert, burning down property and overturning cars. The Soviet press reports that the "first outburst occurred in Azerbaidzhan's Agdam District (...) Nationalistically inclined elements managed to assemble a crowd and lead it to Askeran District in Nagorno-Karabakh to establish order.' As a result of the clash two people were killed and many were hospitalized with injuries."<sup>24</sup> The two killed were young Azerbaijanis from Aghdam, probably killed by police officers. For many Azerbaijani authors this was "the first blood" and therefore the responsibility of the initiation of the bloody conflict should go to the Armenian side.<sup>25</sup>

24 The article is signed by Yu. Arakelyan, Z. Kadymbekov and G. Ovcharenko: "Emotion and Reason", *Pravda*, 21 March 1988. English text in: *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (hereafter *CDSP*), XL, No. 12, 1988, p. 9.

25 Taleh Ziyadov, "Eine Vergessene Tragödie Im Kaukasus", *friz*, Zurich, No. 3, 2005, pp. 14-16; Adil Baguirov, "Top 5 Myths Circulating about the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", *Azerbaijan International Magazine*, Baku, Spring 1998.

In the same days, high level officials from Moscow arrived in Baku, Stepanakert, and Yerevan. Among them were Georgi Razumkovsky and Pyotr Demichev (who met an Armenian delegation earlier in February 1988 in Moscow), both Politburo candidate members, arriving in Stepanakert on 22 February; Alexander Katusev, the deputy Attorney General of the USSR, in Baku; and the Moscow envoys Vladimir Dolgikh and Anatoly Lukyanov who arrived at the same time in Yerevan. Katusev in Baku and Dolgikh in Yerevan made somewhat strange but quite similar statements to the local media. On 27 February Katusev said on Baku radio that "as a consequence of those disorders, two inhabitants of Aghdam district ... fell victim to murder."<sup>26</sup> Katusev gave two names, both Azerbaijani.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to attribute this to human error, since the text of the declaration was seen by the First Secretary of the Karabakh Regional Party Committee, Henrik Poghosian, "who insisted that the mention of the victim's nationality be removed from the announcement. Poghosyan explained to Katusev that isolated from other relevant facts the announcement would cause grave consequences."<sup>28</sup> Dolgikh made a similar declaration in Yerevan, telling Armenian TV that there were "clashes in Karabakh between Armenians and Azeris; there are casualties."<sup>29</sup> As we shall see later, the declarations played a fatal role in the eruption of violence.

Sumgait, an industrial city situated on the Caspian coast to the north of Baku, was inhabited by 223,000 people of a mix of ethnicities, including a substantial Armenian minority (15-20,000). Built in the 1940s, it was then populated by Azerbaijanis who were deported there from Armenia as Stalin was making space for Armenian repatriates after World War II. Other Azerbaijani families had moved there only recently, in

26 *New York Times*, 11 March 1988.

27 Robin Lodge, "Moscow Reports New Violence in Troubled Transcaucasia", Reuters, Moscow, February 29, 1988. According to this report, the two victims are: "two youths aged 16 and 23 (...). It was clear from the names of the victims, Bakhtiar Uliyev and Ali Gadzhiev, that they were Azerbaijanis."

28 Samuel Shahmuratian (ed.), *The Sumgait Tragedy, Pogroms against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan*, Volume I, Zoryan Institute, MA, 1990, p. 4. This volume, based on interviews with Sumgait survivors a few months after the events, gives a graphic description of the pogrom.

29 From *Kommunist*, Yerevan, 25 February 1988, quoted in: Igor Nolyain, "Moscow's initiation of the Azeri-Armenian conflict", *Central Asian Survey*, 13 (4), pp. 541-63, 1994 (p. 541).

the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> A creation of rapid Soviet industrialization efforts, the city suffered from a deep social crisis, including unemployment and housing problems. According to the Azerbaijani official paper of 1 March, "On February 28 a group of hooligan elements provoked disturbances in Sumgait. There were instances of outrages and violence." Under the title "Communique" the paper did not give any details about who were the "hooligans", nor about the identity or the number of the victims, but concluded: "Measures have been taken to normalize life in the city..."<sup>31</sup> On 3 March, the same newspaper added some information: "Unstable and immature people who fell under the influence of provocative rumours and inflammatory talk about the events in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia were drawn into illegal actions." And: "Tragic events occurred, and there were fatalities."<sup>32</sup> Two days later *Pravda* added that the number of those killed was 31, "among them people of various nationalities."<sup>33</sup> The number rose to 32 dead, 197 injured (among them "about" 100 policemen), and 47 arrested.<sup>34</sup>

A long article in *Pravda* on 21 March studied extensively, for the first time the background of the conflict in Karabakh.<sup>35</sup> It mentioned the complex history of the province, and emphasized that the status of the province was only decided in 1923, taking into "consideration first and foremost which republic will enable the region to develop more rapidly in economic and social respects"; this decision, it went on, did not put an end to controversy over the issue, which erupted "again and again" each time "Armenian leaders stood to benefit by distracting public attention from the numerous unsolved economic and social problems..." After criticizing the Communist old guard of Armenia,

30 Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks, Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992, p. 197.

31 *Bakinsky Rabochi*, "Communique", 1 March 1988. English translation in *CDSP*, XL, No. 9, 1988, p. 7.

32 *Bakinsky Rabochi*, "On the Situation in Sumgait", 3 March 1988. English translation in *CDSP*, XL, No. 9, 1988, p. 9.

33 *Pravda*, 5 March 1988; in *CDSP*, XL, No. 9, 1988, p. 9.

34 "In the USSR Prosecutor's Office", *Pravda*, 22 March 1988, in *CDSP*, XL, No. 12, 1988, p. 11.

35 The article is signed by Yu. Arakelyan, Z. Kadyzbekov and G. Ovcharenko, "Emotion and Reason", *Pravda*, 21 March, 1988, in *CDSP*, XL, No. 12, 1988, pp. 7-9.



and the egoistic nationalism of the demonstrators, the article admitted that real "problems exist" and listed some: "We were told that even now (...) Azerbaidzhan's executive agencies still stifle local initiative, that capital investments in Nagorno-Karabakh are lower per capita than in other parts of the republic, that arbitrary orders 'from above' in Baku eliminated the study of the history of the Armenian people in Armenian language schools, and even the program of cultural ties with Armenia has to be approved by republican departments." Eventually focusing on current events, the newspaper reported that violence first erupted when a crowd from Aghdam moved towards Askeran (a town in Karabakh, half-way between Stepanakert and Aghdam) igniting clashes. As a result "two people were killed" and many more injured. And: "The events of Sumgait were more awful." A certain "General V. Krayev" was quoted as saying, "There would have been more casualties if the residents hadn't helped us." This strange information about a Soviet general present in Sumgait during the tragic events, according to *Pravda*, while the Soviet army failed to stop a pogrom carried out by a mob armed with knives and chains creates ground for suspicion.

The declaration of "General V. Krayev" about Sumgait civilians helping the army to put down the violence is equally bizarre. But as we saw earlier, the reports in the Soviet media were often political essays rather than journalistic reporting, written in political organs in offices far away from the actual events, and full of contradiction. This long article in *Pravda* seems to have been written by shadow authors: one of its "authors", Yuri Arakelyan, later disavowed any knowledge of or involvement in this article, protesting to the *Pravda* editors: "By putting my signature beneath the dishonest materials of the Communist Party, you have insulted me before the whole country."<sup>36</sup>

But who were those "hooligans" who perpetrated the crimes, and why did the police or the army not intervene earlier? In his paper, Igor Nolyain refers to several sources to show that the criminals in Sumgait came from all over Azerbaijan. He quotes a Russian dissident, Andrei Shelkov, who went to Sumgait just after the events, as saying "the violence was the work of Azeris who came to Sumgait from throughout

36 Felicity Barringer, "Pravda writer disavows article on Armenia," *New York Times*, 23 March 1988.

Azerbaijan."<sup>37</sup> The army seems to have arrived only "three to five days" after the pogrom started, although even a small force was enough to stop a criminal group of fifty people from continuing the rampage for several days. Strangely enough, while the local police stood still, and troops from other garrisons took several days to arrive to a town in turmoil, the Deputy Interior Minister of the USSR, Nikolai Demidov, was quoted saying that he himself "went to Sumgait during the clashes," adding that the local militia "proved to be not up to the job."<sup>38</sup> Was the Deputy Minister in Sumgait during the clashes to evaluate the functioning of the local police force? Why could he not manage to bring in forces from Baku or even from Russia for three days? Was Katusev's declaration of Azerbaijanis' deaths an attempt to stir up trouble? At least this is what foreign journalists thought a few days later: "It is considered highly likely that the disclosure of the two Azerbaijani deaths led to the violence in Sumgait and Kirovabad."<sup>39</sup> For Nolyain, it is clear that the events in Sumgait were organized and monitored by the centre, with the knowledge of the head of the state, and Katusev's declarations to Baku Radio were the clear signal: "It divulges Moscow's double ulterior aim: to calm the Armenians while bloodying them, and to leak that Azeris are moved by 'ethnic hatred' and not by the KGB provocateurs."<sup>40</sup> He fitted this into a more general policy of Russia towards its colonies:

Many reporters and Sovietologists apparently don't know that 'a history of conflict predating' the USSR includes the same method to instigate the Caucasian peoples against each other. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, tsars used the same technique to subjugate the Caucasus.<sup>41</sup>

But the KGB's acts—whether with the knowledge of the Soviet Politburo or without—cannot on their own write the history of the Caucasus. If the Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsias had rejected the logic of inter-ethnic conflict and had a different vision of how to solve the real and difficult political questions that the transformation of the

37 Igor Nolyain, "Moscow's Initiation of the Azeri-Armenian Conflict", *Central Asian Survey*, 13 (4), pp. 541-63, 1994, p. 542.

38 *Reuters*, 18 April 1988.

39 Felicity Barringer, "Soviet Armenians mourn their dead", *New York Times*, 9 March 1998.

40 Igor Nolyain, "Moscow's initiation of the Azeri-Armenian conflict", p. 558.

41 Nolyain, p. 559.

USSR was posing, they could have tried a different political development other than ethnic violence.

What was lacking in Baku in those crucial days was an outright mobilization to condemn those acts of massacre, and thus dissociate Azerbaijan from the crime just committed. Instead, Ziya Buniatov accused the victims<sup>42</sup>, reflecting the opinions of a leading historian and the intellectual mood in Baku. In face of the immensity of the developments, the only explanation was to think in categories of plots. A more powerful argument, which has found resonance until today, is the one put forward by another historian, Igrar Aliev. He considers that the pogroms in Sumgait were a reaction to Armenian actions:

Days-long meetings in Yerevan, eyewitness stories about persecutions and violence against Azerbaijanis living in Armenia, led to a group of rootless elements, who had no relation to the Azerbaijani people, succeeding in provocation of a part of the youth to commit public disturbances...<sup>43</sup>

What Igrar Aliev recounts here later took the shape of another narrative, which with time took on a life of its own, by being quoted and re-quoted without any checking back to the original source. According to this, the fifty or so "hooligans" who committed the crimes in Sumgait were themselves victims, ethnic Azeri refugees from the Armenian town of Ghapan. The position of Azerbaijani intellectuals and public figures is highly important; instead of condemning the acts of violence in Sumgait and thus making it an isolated event, they justified the pogroms, or even accused the victims of being responsible for the acts of violence. Such a position was instrumental in having Sumgait events repeated elsewhere in the coming months, in Kirovabad (Ganja), Baku, and many other localities.

Western authors, wishing to take a "neutral" position in this inter-ethnic conflict, have found it appropriate to present the initial act of violence as if it came from both sides. For one author looking at ways to resolve the conflict, "Violence was unleashed, with each side claiming that the other initiated the hostilities. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were created as both Armenians and Azeris fled to avoid the fight-

42 Ziya Buniatov, "Pochimou Sumgait?", op. cit.

43 Igrar Aliev, *Nagorni Karabakh: Istoria, Fakti, Sobiti* (in Russian: "Mountainous Karabakh, History, Facts, Events"), Baku: Elm, 1989, p. 96.

ing or were expelled or forced out."<sup>44</sup> The description is neutral—and lacks precision—in an attempt by the author not to take sides. We are unable to know who started the violence or where. Did violence start in Sumgait with the pogroms of February 1988, or was it the result of a furious Azerbaijani mob composed of refugees freshly arrived from Armenia? Was Sumgait action or reaction? An author, who has written extensively on the Caucasus, is more precise and proposes the theme of the refugees:

In January, large numbers of Azeris had fled their homes in Armenia due to harassment; (...). In Azerbaijan, Baku radio reported that two Azeris had been killed in Karabakh, and as a result counter-violence erupted and the ethnic conflict (...) followed its own logic. This led to the pogrom of Sumgait, where Azeri thugs, with the help of frustrated refugees from Armenia, attacked Armenians in the dark industrial town of Sumgait...<sup>45</sup>

For this narrative, the Sumgait pogrom was a reaction not to political demands, but to violence from the Armenian side. The author claims that there were massive deportations of Azeris from Armenia in January 1988, that is even before the resolution of the Karabakh Soviet (20 February) and the start of demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan. Yet, although Cornell's narrative incorporates the Azerbaijani version of events, he does not provide us with facts, and it is difficult to know his sources. It is also very unlikely that "harassment" could cause the fleeing of "large numbers" of people from their place of origin to a neighbouring country. In a later writing, the author mentions the possibility of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia, but diminishes its significance, and influenced by Nolyain's analysis tends to lean towards the possibility of outside manipulation of this conflict: "The discussion on Sumgait is difficult to conclude; the event remains a mystery and makes no sense.

44 Patricia Carley, *Nagorno-Karabakh Searching for a Solution*, Washington: United States Institute for Peace, at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks25/pwks25.html>

45 Svante E. Cornell, "Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh: A Delicate Balance," *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 1998), pp. 51-72. The author expressed a similar position a year later: "During 1988, ethnic cleansing first in Armenia and later in Azerbaijan developed unhindered..." without presenting any facts about how, when, where, and how many people were displaced. Svante Cornell, "The Devaluation of the Concept of Autonomy: National Minorities in the Former Soviet Union," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1999, p. 190.

There was no mobilized Azeri ethnic nationalism to speak of on 26 February 1988."<sup>46</sup>

It is true that Azerbaijanis suffered discrimination in Armenia as Armenians did in Azerbaijan all through the Soviet period, and there was regular migration of Azerbaijanis from Armenia to Azerbaijan to seek better living conditions. But one cannot find traces of mass ethnic violence either in Armenia or in Azerbaijan until late February 1988, that is until the Sumgait pogroms.

Similar positions are defended by Azerbaijani authors: these commentators consider that Sumgait was not the main event, that the trigger to the conflict should be seen as the killing of the two Azerbaijanis in Askeran, four days earlier: "...even before these murders, there was the fact of expulsion of Azerbaijani population from Armenia, particularly from the Megri and Kafan districts, by February 1988 numbering in thousands, even according to official statistics."<sup>47</sup> Sometimes in the imagination of some authors roles are reversed. Adil Baguirov writes that "Armenian nationals actively participated in the mob" and adds to this KGB involvement, while "Azerbaijan and its people" were meanwhile in Baku and elsewhere "involved in saving the lives of many of their Armenian neighbours."<sup>48</sup> It is well documented that Azerbaijanis in Sumgait, as well as later in the Baku pogroms, did save their Armenian friends and neighbours, by hiding them in their own apartments or providing them protection in various forms. Baguirov is not mentioning this to underline the numerous cases of solidarity Azeris expressed towards their Armenian neighbours, but is trying to make victims into criminals, which has nothing to do with any attempt to understand past events and is not any special expression of political wisdom; it is simply a propaganda effort that unfortunately continues as the historic distance between the present and those dark days widens.

One should add that in February 1988 there was no violence committed in Armenia to generate Azerbaijani refugees. The demonstrations in Armenia in early 1988, and until the pogroms in Sumgait,

46 Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers, A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, London: Curzon, 2001, p. 83.

47 Adil Baguirov, "Top 5 Myths Circulating about the Nagorno-Katabakh Conflict", *Azerbaijan International Magazine*, Baku, Spring 1998.

48 Ibid.

remained peaceful and within the limits of civil disobedience. As the demonstrations were gaining volume in Yerevan's Opera Square, and days before the pogrom in Azerbaijan, Gorbachev received the poetess Silva Kaputikian and the journalist Zori Balaian, to discuss the Karabakh situation. Gorbachev himself acknowledged the peaceful nature of the demonstrations, "noting with approval that the crowds marching through the streets hushed when they passed a hospital, to avoid disturbing patients."<sup>49</sup>

Three Armenian politicians who played key role in the late 1980s as leaders of the Karabakh Movement had different interpretations of "why Sumgait?" For Levon Ter-Petrossian, the leader of the Karabakh Committee and later the first President of independent Armenia, the Sumgait events "turned the constitutional process to physical clashes. (...) Until then, we believed that if the Soviet Union was going towards democratization those questions had to be opened."<sup>50</sup> Although Sumgait dramatically changed the context of the Karabakh problem, Ter-Petrossian believes that it was organized "neither by Moscow, nor by Baku". What about the passivity of police and armed forces for several days? "There could have been provocations by GRU,<sup>51</sup> or others. The local police and authorities collaborated in the events. (...) And as for Moscow being late by three days in intervening, I do not find in this any organized element, we know that the state was badly organized. Look at Beslan and Nord Ost."<sup>52</sup> He added that in those dramatic days the Politburo in Moscow "had difficulties to take decision" due to the unforeseen developments in the Caucasus.

Vazgen Manukian, the former mathematics professor who became the "ideologue" of the Karabakh Movement, was one of the most influential leaders of contemporary Armenian politics. He said, "[Sum-

49 *New York Times*, 11 March 1988.

50 Author interview with Levon Ter-Petrossian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

51 GRU: military intelligence.

52 Beslan and Nord Ost were terrorist operations launched by Chechen fighters on the territories of the Russian Federation, the first in a school in the town of Beslan in North Ossetia in September 2004, and the second in a Moscow theatre in October 2002. In both cases the reaction of the Russian Special Forces was heavy handed and badly organized, and medical intervention to help the victims was nearly non-existent. As a result, there were 344 civilian victims in Beslan and the official death toll of civilian victims in Nord Ost was 129.

gait] was organized. Armenians and Azeris lived in the Soviet Union as neighbours, the existing contradictions did not go out of the limits of daily life, and there was no hatred between the two peoples. (...) I cannot say on what level the events were organized, whether it had reached up to Gorbachev, or whether it was organized on the level of Azerbaijani Central Committee First Secretary level, I do not have such information, but it is clear that the events were organized."<sup>53</sup> For Manukian, the problem of the Soviet leadership in those days was to reform the countries' economy, to restructure its political system, while at the same time trying not to lose its control over the Communist Party. In the Brezhnev era the party had turned into "khanates" in the various republics. In Central Asia, "cotton affairs" were a way to gain control over the local party apparatus. In the Caucasus the way to break the local clan structure was through inter-ethnic conflicts. "What concerns the issue of refugees from Ghapan, there is a mistake in chronology: it was first the events in Sumgait, and only later Azeris from Ghapan were expelled."<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, *The Washington Post* reported at the time that "incidents of violence in Gafan [Ghapan] could not be confirmed by Soviet officials. Armenians have flatly denied that any violence took place in connection with their protests, and the official Soviet media also reported none."<sup>55</sup>

Ashot Manucharian, another member of the Karabakh Committee, the fiery orator of the demonstrations in Opera Square—the Trotsky of the Armenian demonstrations—also says Sumgait was organized, but his analysis differs from previous ones. For Manucharian, the conflict was organized by the Soviet secret services "as a work<sup>56</sup> against Gorbachev's political project. Without the KGB it was impossible to organize such an event. In Azerbaijan there were no organizations, not even mobilization yet on the Karabakh issue."<sup>57</sup> He added that there

53 Author interview with Vazgen Manukian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

54 Ibid.

55 Gary Lee, "Tensions Build as Ruling on Soviet Region Nears", *The Washington Post*, 21 March 1988.

56 Manucharian used the Armenian expression "gordz", which is the translation from the Russian "delo", which meant in the Soviet context a KGB organized plot to persecute a suspicious person. Here Manucharian meant by "work" a KGB organized plot.

57 Interview with Ashot Manucharian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

were people both in Armenia and in Azerbaijan who had an interest in the Karabakh issue, and the "KGB encouraged those people to mobilize a larger movement. But very soon they lost the control over the movement."<sup>58</sup> Manucharian also said that the first forced migration of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia started as late as November 1988, after the anti-Armenian pogrom in Kirovabad (now Ganja, the second major urban centre in Azerbaijan). In the early weeks of the Karabakh Movement, Armenian intellectuals and activists were very conscious that they were treading a fine line between posing Armenian particularist demands thanks to *glasnost* and hurting the reform movement by their mass mobilization. According to Zori Balayan, a journalist and writer and one of the early leaders of the Karabakh movement: "We understand that all the demonstrations were a result of glasnost and perestroika (...) Now, if we believe in glasnost and perestroika, we must take care not to harm them by our actions."<sup>59</sup>

Among a number of Azerbaijani leaders, the idea that Sumgait was organized as a result of a KGB plot is equally popular. For the leader of the Azerbaijani Musavat Party, Isa Gambar, Sumgait was initiated so that Moscow could keep its leverage on both Armenians and Azeris. "That pogrom was organized to drive a wedge into future relations between Azeris and Armenians (...) unfortunately, when a secret organization conducts an operation on such a scale, there is no record of proofs of their guilt -- these services know how to cover up their wrongdoing."<sup>60</sup>

Looking back at past events, one's memory will necessarily be shrouded with interpretations and explanations that are relevant to one's understanding of the order of things, corresponding to one's worldview. In the absence of hard documentary evidence, KGB reports or Central Committee documents, it is impossible to completely demystify this event so charged with emotions. In the meanwhile, we can do one thing: to study how Sumgait changed the course of the events, how different sides reacted to it, used it, as we will see in the next part.

58 Ibid.

59 Bill Keller, "Armenians and Glasnost, Soviet press debate on regional discord underlines party split on democratization", *New York Times*, 28 March 1988.

60 Jolyon Naegle, "Azerbaijan: Armenians and Azerbaijanis remember suffering", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2 March 1998.

Looking at the larger picture of political manipulation in the last years of the USSR, one can see that a KGB-prepared "provocation" could suit the trend of events. The Soviet secret services intervened in the political domain to bend, blackmail, or discredit individuals and organizations, and even provoke events, known as "active measures" or "special tasks". Those methods were also used by the KGB in this period, under the orders of the Soviet leadership. Andrew Wilson has looked at Soviet leadership efforts through KGB agents to manipulate dissident groups, create fake "opposition" parties controlled by agents, and thus weaken any independent political initiative and narrow the possibilities of their political action. As the USSR cancelled Article 6 of its constitution, which guaranteed the leading position of the CP, and adopted a pluralistic political system, the KGB initiated a number of "opposition" parties including the nationalist Pamyat (Memory), or The Liberal Democratic Party of the Soviet Union—later of Russia—led by the notorious Vladimir Zhirinovskii. That party was second only to the CP to be registered as an official party by the Soviet administration. Its "first role was a fake liberal, not a fake nationalist, initially designed to steal democratic votes".<sup>61</sup> Other such operations, as suggested by Wilson, included the launching of the hard-line Union (Soyuz) faction within the Soviet parliament, the Interfronts in the Baltic republics, Moldova and Ukraine, and Intersoiuz in Uzbekistan, supporting the preservation of the Soviet Union (December 1990), and possibly the "Virtual Coup" of August 1991.<sup>62</sup> In this context, organizing a pogrom in Sumgait to stifle the growing independent Armenian political activism does not seem out of context. "In the eyes of the Kremlin, what happened in Sumgait was 'hooliganism', but what was going on in Armenia – mass mobilization, nationwide strikes and political demands – was much more dangerous."<sup>63</sup>

The effect of Sumgait on the Armenian psyche was devastating. "Sumgait influenced us very strongly. It was like putting salt on our wounds. We had already complexes linked with the 1915 Genocide,

61 Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics, Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 23.

62 Ibid., p. 27.

63 Alexie Zverev, "Ethnic Conflict in the Caucasus 1988-1994" in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, VUB Press, 1996, pp. 21-2.

with our former history, and Sumgait made us understand that Soviet Union was no guarantee against new massacres."<sup>64</sup> The overlap between the 1915 Genocide and the Sumgait pogrom was strongly emphasized in the imagination of the Armenians. A number of the Sumgait victims, and later the dead of the early clashes on the various fronts of Karabakh or near the border with Nakhichevan, are buried in the park surrounding the memorial of the Genocide victims in Dzidzernakapert, in the Armenian capital. And what power can mobilize people to go to war as much as fear and victimization?

As the conflict unfolded, Azerbaijan acquired its own myth of victimhood. During the entry of the Soviet army to Baku in January 1990 dozens of activists were killed, turning the whole population of Azerbaijan against Moscow and weakening the grasp of the Communist Party over the republic. But even more, it is the massacre in Khojali, a small town near the main airport in Mountainous Karabakh, that remains a wound until today.

### *Moscow loses control*

Whatever Moscow's role was in the Armenian mobilization for the unification of Karabakh with Armenia, and whatever its role in the Sumgait pogroms, in the following months its role in the Transcaucasus was limited to desperate attempts at conflict management, while progressively the Kremlin lost control over the events and over the political processes in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Whatever it tried to achieve, whatever step it took, it backfired and weakened even more its hold over the Transcaucasus.

Moscow failed to punish those who initiated violence, whether in Sumgait or elsewhere. Soviet official papers initially reported up to 80 arrested for "hooliganism" in Sumgait, but the trials were a pathetic show that did not satisfy the Armenian demands for justice, and mobilized Azerbaijani nationalism for the defence of the Sumgait "heroes". The failure of the Soviet authorities to punish severely the culprits later led to similar events elsewhere in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In 1989-90 inter-ethnic clashes took place in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (as we will see later), as well as in Osh and Uzgen in southern

64 Author interview with Vazgen Manukian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, and pogroms against Meskhetian Turks in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley.<sup>65</sup> Although those inter-ethnic clashes gave the central authorities room for some short-term manoeuvring, in the medium term they were catastrophic for the image, prestige and power of the Soviet authorities, and undermined dramatically the legitimacy of the Soviet state.

According to Vazgen Manukian, in the first few days of the mass demonstrations in Yerevan the Soviet Army was brought in there. "If the army had the order to repress us, they could have put an end to the movement right away, just like China did in Tiananmen. But either Gorbachev did not want or did not dare to use force."<sup>66</sup> Massive bloodshed by the Red Army needed direct and clear orders from the master of the Kremlin. Such an eventuality would have put a final stop to the logic of Gorbachevite reforms, of restructuring, transparency, democratization, and better relations with Western democracies. Squeezed between the prerogatives of reform and the pressure of popular mobilization in Yerevan, and later in other capitals of the Baltic States and the rest of the Caucasus, Gorbachev's policies were half-hearted measures of political crisis management and the threat of repression.

The first decision the Kremlin took was to study Armenian demands. On 23 March 1988, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet met to study the situation in Mountainous Karabakh, and came to a decision rejecting the "recarving of national-state and national-administrative borders, which can lead to unpredictable consequences..."<sup>67</sup> In an earlier article published two days earlier, the official *Pravda* had already given the tone. It said that the Soviet leadership was not likely to accept any change of borders, since this would open the door for more demands of border adjustments elsewhere in the Soviet Union. It would also disturb the existing administrative mechanisms, and have serious repercussions

65 On the inter-ethnic clashes in Osh, see Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union*, London: Sage, 1997, chapter 7, pp. 135-54; on the clashes in the Ferghana Valley between Uzbeks and Meskhets, see Kenneth Weisbrode, *Central Eurasia: Prize or Quicksand?, Contending Views of Instability in Karabakh, Ferghana and Afghanistan*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper 338, 2001, pp. 47-8.

66 Author interview with Vazgen Manukian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

67 Gary Lee, "Kremlin rebuffs demands of Armenian Nationalists", *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1988.

on the economy. The article harshly criticized the Armenian leaders, accusing them of diverting the attention of the public from "unresolved social problems",<sup>68</sup> and recalled that in the 1918-20 war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Karabakh "a fifth of the population" was killed.<sup>69</sup> To conclude, the Karabakh campaign was "anti-socialist".<sup>70</sup>

The article in the organ of the CP was like a cold shower to the Armenians. Troops were sent to Yerevan to stop street demonstrations, which had reached to up to one million in late February and early March. Moscow's position did not calm the mobilization in Yerevan, but rather changed its nature. The self-image of the Karabakh movement shifted from being part of the new policies of reform to becoming an anti-Soviet movement seeking national independence.

Meanwhile, as a reaction to demonstrations and events in Armenia and Karabakh, a parallel popular mobilization started in Baku. In mid-May tens of thousands demonstrated in the Azerbaijani capital to support one of the defendants charged over the Sumgait pogrom, 20-year-old Talekh Ismailov, and also to protest against the burning of houses belonging to Azerbaijanis in villages near Yerevan. A population exchange, or as it was later termed "ethnic cleansing", accelerated between the two republics. In most cases Armenian families in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani families in Armenia exchanged each others' houses, fearing an escalation of the situation.<sup>71</sup> In other cases, population exchange took rather the form of ethnic cleansing, where people left under threat, or following a new wave of pogroms, as we will see later.

In the meantime, Moscow tried to use the opportunity of unrest in Armenia and Azerbaijan to introduce a change in leadership of the local communist parties. The first change was the sacking of Boris Kevoorkov, the ethnic Armenian ruler of Karabakh who was extremely loyal to Baku, who lost his position on 24 February 1988. In Azerbaijan, Bagi-

68 *Izvestia* and *Pravda* on 24 March 1988. Excerpts in English can be found in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, XL, No. 12, 1988, pp. 11-12.

69 Charles Powers, "Unrest won't change borders, Pravda indicates", *Los Angeles Times*, 22 March 1988.

70 "Pravda criticizes Armenian demands", *Chicago Tribune*, 22 March 1988.

71 Author's notes based on interviews in April 1992 with two Armenian families in Vardenis (Armenia), who had exchanged their apartments in Ganja and Baku with the ethnic Azeri inhabitants of the houses where they lived at that moment.

rov was replaced by Abdul-Rahman Vezirov, a career diplomat, and in Armenia Karen Demirchian was replaced by Suren Harutunian, a party functionary, both in May 1988. Earlier, in the autumn of 1987, Heydar Aliiev, the former boss of the Azerbaijani CP, was excluded from the CPSU Politburo. But these changes did not create preconditions for the local Communist Parties to tackle the Karabakh problem. On the contrary, each new party leader took positions reflecting the power balance between Moscow on the one hand and, on the other, the rising tide of mass mobilization and public opinion back home. Poghosian—who became the new party chief in Karabakh—energetically defended the Armenian cause, while Harutunian declared to demonstrators in Yerevan that Armenian deputies would “vote in favour of unification” in the republic’s Supreme Soviet. In Azerbaijan Vezirov declared to a rally in Baku that the Azerbaijani party leadership “had voted to reject the idea of giving up Nagorno-Karabakh.”<sup>72</sup> The reshuffling of old party leaders did not lead to solving of the deep rooted problems, but to the destabilization of the Communist Party structures in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and further weakening of the pillars of the Soviet state.

In July 1988 the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet appointed Arkadi Volsky, a member of the CPSU Central Committee, as its delegate to Mountainous Karabakh, with sweeping powers. This move was a compromise measure by Moscow; while taking the political and economic management away from Baku, it did not satisfy Armenian demands for unification. The Volsky Committee was the most elaborate effort Moscow would ever try to find a compromise in this conflict. Nevertheless, this measure did not ease the tension, and the developments in Karabakh and bordering regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan progressively developed into a civil war. Volsky introduced a state of emergency in Karabakh and the neighbouring Aghdam district.<sup>73</sup> Moscow’s choice of its envoy was revealing of the kind of policies the centre imagined for Karabakh and the Caucasus: he had been an adviser to Andropov and Chernenko on industrial issues, and the Soviet leadership wanted to bring change through massive investment in Karabakh

72 The two quotes are from: Paul Quinn-Judge, “Armenian protests gather momentum”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 June 1988.

73 See the “Address” signed by A. Volsky in *Kommunist*, Baku, 25 September 1988; English translation in *CDSP*, Vol. XL, No. 38 (1988), p. 9.

and neighbouring areas, with a 400-million rouble development programme, as its answer to the brewing inter-ethnic clashes. Later, Gorbachev confessed that this economic emergency programme was ineffective, as the Baku authorities “were distributing the monies from the centre according to their own wishes, with only a small part reaching the intended recipients.”<sup>74</sup> He was also supported by a large military force composed of 5,400 Interior Ministry troops, a military force which would make sure in the following three years that the localized clashes would not grow into a larger war. But this attempt failed to do more than freeze the situation. Most of the funds allocated for the revival of Karabakh did not go further than Baku. After more than a year of crisis management, the USSR Supreme Soviet abolished Volsky’s Committee in November 1989. Azerbaijani rule over Mountainous Karabakh was re-established, restoring the *status quo ante*. This step taken by the Kremlin was explained as a punishment for Armenians, among whom the rule of the CP was peacefully overthrown and progressively dismantled, and the pro-independent leaders of the Karabakh Committee had taken over the republican leadership. Yet this step too did not help, since both Karabakh and Armenia took more radical measures to end Baku’s influence over the mountainous region, and create conditions for Armenian self-rule in Karabakh.

### *Mobilization in Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan’s independent political movement came into being under outside pressure, and had to take a reactive form. The Azerbaijani intelligentsia was unprepared for *perestroika*. Not only was the party leadership hostile to the new line in Moscow, but also the Azerbaijani intellectuals did not have the independent activism of underground organizations, such as existed in neighbouring Armenia and Georgia. While in Armenia there was mobilization around cultural rights, or environmental causes, issues that mobilized people in the mid-1980s and even took the form of street demonstrations in 1987, before being swept away by the wave of nationalist mobilization, in Azerbaijan the process was the other way round. It was nationalist mobilization around the idea of defence of Azerbaijani territorial integrity which opened the

74 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, London: Bantam Books, 1997, p. 433.

way for discussion of other problems of the Soviet system, including the enormous ecological disasters in this oil producing nation. The result was the emergence of an opposition movement which was rapidly radicalized under the pressure of events, but also fragmented, lacking coherent leadership and a strategic vision, and unable to control its own supporters, simultaneously coming under heavy pressure from republican and central authorities. "The fact that the first and most persistent bearers of a glasnost'-style political activism in Azerbaijan emerged not among the majority Azerbaijanis but from within the Armenian population of the NKAO [Nagorni Karabakh Autonomous Oblast] would set the process of political change in the republic along a troubled, contradictory path."<sup>75</sup>

The demand of the Karabakh Soviet for border change, and mass demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan, surprised public opinion in Baku. Later came the shock and the stigma of the Sumgait pogroms, the sense of insecurity and population exchanges. For the Azerbaijani public, the understanding was that those events were orchestrated by Yerevan because of Armenian territorial ambitions towards Azerbaijan.

Throughout 1988-89 Vezirov tried to reform the Azerbaijani Communist Party (AzCP) structures, while trying to keep Karabakh under Azerbaijani rule. Vezirov introduced a massive purge within the party, and in two months alone (December 1988 and January 1989) "2,532 cadres, including 612 in position of leadership, were censored by the party and 22 officials were removed from their posts" within the KGB and Ministry of Internal Affairs alone.<sup>76</sup> Simultaneously, he tried to keep the newly emerging Azerbaijani opposition formations away from the political scene, to ensure that politics remained the monopoly of the AzCP.

In spite of the AzCP's policies, in November 1988 the first mass demonstrations broke out in Baku and in other cities of Azerbaijan. They were triggered by rumours that the Karabakh Armenian authorities were cutting down trees at the Topkhana nature reserve near Shushi (Shusha), in collaboration with an Armenian aluminium enterprise and without the authorization of Baku. It is interesting to note the symbolic

75 Mark Saroyan, "The 'Karabakh Syndrome' and Azerbaijani Politics", *Problems of Communism*, September-October 1990, p. 16.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

importance of nature preservation, one of the initial foci of mobilization in a number of Soviet cities during *perestroika*, overlapping with the inter-ethnic rivalry in the Topkhana affair. Thousands demonstrated in Baku, to demand a stop to felling of the forest, but also to assert Azerbaijani authority over Karabakh.<sup>77</sup> The event led to the initiation of the first informal groups in the country. Among them were Birlik (Unity), the Azerbaijan Resurgence Party, the Kizilbash People's Front and the Social Democratic Organization of Azerbaijan. But the most important organization that later played a historic role was the Azerbaijani Popular Front (Azerbaychan Khalq Chebhesi, APF). Started by a group of writers and intellectuals led by the author Babak Adalati, it was initially concerned with development of relations with Southern Azerbaijan, the old cause of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia. In March 1989 an "initiative group" was formed to lead the APF, composed of writers such as Ismayil Shikhli, Yusif Samadoghlu, and Sabir Rustamkhanli. The goals of the Front were the democratization of Azerbaijani society; the sovereignty of Azerbaijan within the USSR; relations with Southern Azerbaijan; and environmental protection.<sup>78</sup> Created on the model of popular fronts in the Baltic countries, the APF initially included leaders coming from different political horizons, varying from the populist Nemet Pankhov to the Social Democrat Zardusht Alizade.<sup>79</sup>

It was the Karabakh conflict that gave the APF mass appeal. During 1989 the APF mobilized several strikes, and imposed a blockade of transport of goods and fuel from the territory of Azerbaijan to Armenia. Although initially the AzCP tried to ignore the Popular Front, the influence of the Front grew in proportion to the incapacity of the authorities to find a way out of the crisis. The APF came under the control of younger intellectuals such as the physicist Tofik Gasimov, the Arabist Abulfaz Aliev (Elchibey), and the historian Ekhtibar Mamedov,<sup>80</sup> who

77 Since then 17 November is celebrated as "National Revival Day". See Azar Panahli, "When a Tree isn't a Tree, The Topkhana Demonstrations of 1988", *Azerbaijan International*, Baku, Autumn 1994.

78 Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks, Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992, p. 205.

79 Ariel Kyrou and Maxime Mardoukhaiev, "Le Haut-Karabakh, vue du côté Azerbaïdjan", *Hérodote*, Paris, No. 54-55, 1989, p. 268.

80 Later, in 1991, Mamedov broke with the Popular Front. Now he is the head of the National Independence Party.



led the more radical fraction of the movement. The APF's influence became so great that the Communist Party ruler Vezirov had to negotiate with its leadership and sign a "protocol" of ten points, so that the Front would end its strikes that were paralyzing the economy of the republic. The most important points of the protocol were the legalization of APF, the lifting of a military curfew, and enactment of a sovereignty law.<sup>81</sup> In return, APF promised to end the strikes and to ease the blockade of railway communications.

This success in such a short time had a price. As the APF radicalized its positions on the Karabakh issue, its ranks swelled with "the lowest strata of society – the urban poor, the unemployed, the several hundred thousand Azerbaijani refugees",<sup>82</sup> and simultaneously its leadership lost the support of urban intelligentsia which could not identify itself with the aims and the militant faction of the Front. The population exchange between Armenia and Azerbaijan had by then displaced around 200,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia, and from villages of Mountainous Karabakh, to urban centres in Azerbaijan, polarizing public opinion and radicalizing the opposition movement.

Ideologically, the APF adopted secular, pan-Turkist positions, and rejected Islamic orientation. This ideological position was in harmony with the world-vision of the APF, that is antagonism towards Iran— which, according to the APF, by its occupation of Southern Azerbaijan had divided the Azeri homeland into two—and was a pro-Western position by its opposition to Russian (and Soviet) domination over Azerbaijan. In early 1989 the APF developed its first political programme; in this document, it defined how it imagined the identity of its people: "the platform stated the name of the people of Azerbaijan as the 'Azerbaijani Turks'".<sup>83</sup>

The political developments within Azerbaijan continued the violence against the Armenian minority there. A new tragedy took place in Kirovabad (now Ganja), the second largest city of Azerbaijan. There, in

81 Bill Keller, "Nationalists in Azerbaijan win big concessions from Party chief", *New York Times*, 13 October 1989.

82 Elizabeth Fuller, *Azerbaijan at the Crossroads*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994, p. 3.

83 Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren, Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 132.

compact neighbourhoods within the old town, an Armenian community of 40,000 lived. On 21 November 1989, events similar to those in Sumgait took place there, causing the departure of the Armenians from Kirovabad.<sup>84</sup>

In January the situation in Azerbaijan escalated further. In spite of the existing agreement between the Communist authorities and the Front leadership, uncontrolled regional groups, under the banner of the APF, destroyed fortifications and crossed the border into Iran, demanding free movement between Azerbaijan and Iran. The demonstrations, which first started in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, soon spread to other southern regions such as Lenkoran. For the radical wing of the Popular Front, the spontaneous popular uprising was a step in the right direction, for the unification of the two parts of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, moderate and secular factions of the opposition were suspicious towards those border events, and towards Islamic and pro-Islamic Republic slogans chanted in those uprisings, and they feared that such events could be used against the opposition movement in Azerbaijan.<sup>85</sup>

Events soon took yet another dramatic turn. In the west of the country, to the north of the administrative border of Mountainous Karabakh, Armenians were expelled from Khanlar and Geranboy in Shahumian district.<sup>86</sup> In Baku, the opposition organized demonstrations against the government's handling of the Karabakh crisis on 11 January 1990, which lasted for several days. On 14 January a radical group on the margins of a demonstration moved to the Armenian neighbourhood of Baku, organizing yet another pogrom against the elderly of Armenian origin who still had not found refuge outside Azerbaijan. Several dozens were killed, and the last Armenian population within Azerbaijan (excluding Karabakh) was wiped out. Later, the survivors were transported by the Soviet authorities to Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea, or through an airlift to the southern Russian region of Stavropol.

84 Christopher Walker (ed.), *Armenia and Karabakh, the Struggle for Unity*, London: Minority Rights Publications, 1991, p. 128.

85 Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan, A Borderland in Transition*, p. 203.

86 Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, p. 89.

A large army formation estimated around 26,000 troops was sent to Baku on the night of the 19-20 January. The main reason for sending the troops was to establish law and order, after the Soviet regime in Azerbaijan had come near collapse and the supporters of the Popular Front had virtually taken power in Baku and most of the regions of Azerbaijan. The Soviet troops met resistance, and clashes led to scores of victims. According to the memoirs of Alexander Lebed, who was heading the Tula Regiment, the air bases in the west of the country at Yevlakh and Gyanja, where the Soviet airborne troops were deployed, were surrounded by demonstrations. The roads between Ganja and Baku were blocked with barricades, and once the Soviet troops reached Kala airfield near Baku, they discovered that the base was surrounded by several dozen lightly armed Azeri volunteers, and even within the perimeter of the airfield there was gunfire.<sup>87</sup> In the following hours, the Soviet troops destroyed the resistance of the Azerbaijani Popular Front and took over control of the Azerbaijani capital. "Black January", as it was later known in Azerbaijani sources, became the (first) reference to victimhood in Azerbaijani mass consciousness,<sup>88</sup> playing the same role as the pogroms in Sumgait in the Armenian consciousness. According to Azerbaijani sources, over 170 people died in the clashes of 19-20 January, although the official website dedicated to the commemoration of the Black January victims counts 132 names.<sup>89</sup> It is interesting to note that Azerbaijanis felt victims not of Armenians, but of acts committed by the Soviet troops, under orders from the Kremlin.

After the Baku events, Moscow replaced the Communist chief in Baku, Vezirov, with Ayaz Mutalibov, the former chairman of the Council of Ministers. A state of emergency was declared and an armed force of 11,600 troops was stationed in Baku to safeguard the authority of Mutalibov and prolong Soviet rule in Azerbaijan by an additional two years. But policy towards the Karabakh conflict did not change under Mutalibov. On the contrary, repression increased to new levels.

87 Harold Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin, Alexander Lebed: Power and Illusion*, London: Warner Books, 1998, p. 107.

88 See the Azerbaijani "January 20" internet p. on the background of the Soviet troop intervention. The p. does not mention the anti-Armenian pogroms which preceded the troop deployment, and served as pretext for the military operation: <http://www.january20.net/history.html>

89 See <http://www.january20.net/victims.htm>

In January 1990, Azerbaijani governmental troops "cleansed" Armenian-inhabited villages of the Khanlar and Shahumian districts. In May 1991 Armenian villages to the north of Karabakh, Martunashen and Kedashen, were surrounded by Azerbaijani Interior Ministry troops and the *Spetsnaz*, the special operation units of the Soviet Army. The code-name of this operation was Kaltso—Operation Ring. On the pretext of Armenian guerrilla activities, the inhabitants of these two towns and several villages, a total of 10,000 people, were deported to Armenia and their property confiscated.<sup>90</sup> According to Azerbaijani sources, this act of deportation was necessary self-defence:

...[B]andits blocked roads between Azerbaijani villages, established military posts on the highway leading from Khanlar to Kelbajar, and blew up water pipes supplying Ganja with drinking water. Their unpunished activity was a direct threat for the activity of Western Azerbaijan with more than one million inhabitants. In this condition, and to implement the decree of the President of the USSR to disarm illegal military formations, the police of the republic with the support of Internal Ministry Forces of the USSR, in April 1991 started implementing the passport regime in the villages of Chaykend and Martunashen.<sup>91</sup>

In his memoirs, the head of the Soviet KGB notes that Gorbachev wanted to discuss the Kaltso operation with Mutalibov, but the latter refused to go to Moscow: "It is not the first time I oppose you. We will continue disarming the bandit formations with our OMON [Interior Ministry troops], since we consider it our internal affair. Inform Mikhail Gorbachev that I will not pay the visit to Moscow."<sup>92</sup> Under Mutalibov, ethnic cleansing had become government policy. In Karabakh itself repression of Armenians increased. Armenian activists were arrested and jailed in Shushi prison, while in Armenian villages self-defence forces were established. The Soviet Army was still present, its role reduced to separating the various fronts in a situation which increasingly looked like an open war. The Soviet armed forces supported the conservative Mutalibov government of Azerbaijan in Baku, which in turn showed loyalty to the

90 *Report on Ethnic Conflict in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, op. cit., p. 74.

91 Ismet Gaibov and Azad Sharifov, *Armianski terorizm* (in Russian), Baku, 1991, p. 6.

92 Cyril Stolyarov, *Raspad: Ot Nagornovo Karabakha do Byeloezhskoi Pushchi* (in Russian), Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001, p. 165.

Soviet Union, while at the same time Moscow aimed to punish the Armenian national leadership which was slowly seceding from the USSR.

### *The Armenian National Movement takes power*

The Armenian mobilization around the Mountainous Karabakh issue went through a rapid transformation in its orientation and political philosophy. The movement started as an offshoot of democratization in the Soviet Union, the official policy in the years 1987-88. But the Sumgait pogroms, the ambiguous if not negative position of Moscow towards Armenian demands, and repressive policies towards the popular movement transformed this mobilization from a movement seeing itself as part of the new official policies of reform within the USSR into a movement openly hostile to the Soviet order. The Armenians' faith in Moscow collapsed just like the Soviet-made apartment blocks in the Spitak earthquake on 7 December 1988, which killed over 25,000 people and crippled a third of Armenia's industrial potential. In the meantime the foundations of the Soviet state had been weakened, and Moscow lost control of its provinces to the south of the Caucasus Mountains. Armenia's independence moved swiftly from the realm of the impossible to that of the inevitable.<sup>93</sup>

Although the Karabakh Movement was described in the Western press as nationalistic, its own self-image was often a democratic one. In the words of Levon Ter-Petrossian, "Karabakh was not land, Karabakh was the human being, it was the people (...) For me Karabakh was people who for 75 years lived continuously under national repression. The Karabakh people did not have the same rights as the Azerbaijani people. This repression was killings, unjust trials, cadre policy, deformation of school programmes, and thousand of such things. Individually, those events were not significant, but put together it added up to national repression."<sup>94</sup> Although the mass movement was the result of the passions around the Karabakh problem, it expressed in itself all the desire for change in Armenian society after long decades of Soviet authoritarianism, corrupt social relations and inefficient economy. Ronald Suny

93 As in the formulation by Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, op. cit, chapter 1.

94 Author interview with Levon Ter-Petrossian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

suggested as the best description of the Karabakh Movement's trajectory, "A nationalist struggle for recovery of ethnic irredenta was combined with a broader movement for political reform and ecological survival."<sup>95</sup>

During the spring and summer of 1988, a new leadership was formed known as the Karabakh Committee, which directed the mass movement. At its head were Levon Ter-Petrossian and Vazgen Manukian, who later became the first president and prime minister of independent Armenia. By June 1989, the Armenian National Movement (Hayots Hamazkayin Sharzhoum, ANM) was formed, transforming the Karabakh Committee into an instrument for the struggle of national independence.

Initially, the Armenian activists did not take the existence of the Azerbaijani political factor into account when they raised the territorial issue. They understood their own role to be limited to convincing Moscow about the justice of their cause, and solving the Karabakh problem "in the spirit of *perestroika*". Later, as their anger turned towards Moscow, they saw their struggle in the spirit of national liberation from the repressive Soviet empire. But Azerbaijan as a political actor did not exist then. "Those who took decisions were in Moscow," in the words of Ashot Manucharian, "Azerbaijan as a factor started to take form after January 1990."<sup>96</sup> For the leadership of the political movement in Armenia, it was impossible to imagine that for the Azerbaijanis the demand for unification of Karabakh to Armenia could also cause passionate reaction, mobilize people, and thus sooner rather than later turn the Yerevan-Moscow "dialogue" on Karabakh into a triangular conflict over the control of Mountainous Karabakh and over the control of Baku and Yerevan. The national mobilization in Azerbaijan changed this illusion: the fight was not simply against Moscow and its *apparatchiks* in Baku, as there was soon a symmetrical popular movement developing in Azerbaijan, with at the top of its agenda the preservation of Karabakh within Azerbaijan. The Karabakh issue became by a historical accident the cradle of contemporary Azerbaijani political identity, and even years after the signing of a cease-fire it continues to brew modern Azerbaijani national identity.

95 Ronald G. Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat, Armenia in Modern History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 193.

96 Author interview with Ashot Manucharian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

The Communist Party in Armenia, destabilized by the popular mobilization on the one hand and multiple pressures from Moscow on the other—in the form of a change of its Brezhnevite leadership, and an unfavourable position on the Karabakh issue—tried to find a difficult accommodation with the ANM. The CP chief Suren Harutunian tried to win public support by liberating the leaders of the Karabakh Committee, arrested in the aftermath of the earthquake, and decided to adopt the 1918 tricolour flag as the national flag, but to no avail. Shooting in border villages escalated, and Armenia and Karabakh were increasingly under a tight blockade. The dissolution of the Volsky Committee brought Karabakh back to its initial political situation, leading to more mass demonstrations in Yerevan. By late 1989, twelve members of the Armenian parliament and the ANM called for the abolition of Article 6 of the Soviet constitution, an end to the CP's political monopoly, and respect for universal human rights.<sup>97</sup>

By that time, both the ANM and the Armenian public were radicalized into anti-Soviet positions. With Moscow's grip over Eastern Europe failing, it was possible in Yerevan to talk about national independence. In an interview given to a Yerevan paper in 1990, Vazgen Manukian, the theoretician of the movement, defined the two main goals of the ANM: "...the re-establishment of independent statehood and the territorial question [Karabakh unification]", and then said: "in order to resolve the territorial problem we must have independent statehood."<sup>98</sup> With the collapse of trust in Moscow and dependence on it for physical security, after the increasing acts of violence in Azerbaijan and the public perception that Moscow had sided with Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue, the idea of independence was no more taboo, nor politically suicidal in Yerevan. During parliamentary elections in the summer of 1990, the ANM won a majority and its leader Ter-Petrosian was elected the new chairman of the parliament.

The ANM was a revolution in Armenian political culture. It liberated contemporary Armenian thinking from the fixed obsession of traditional Armenian parties: that of fearing Turkey and therefore depending on Russian protection, whether this Russia was Soviet or Tsarist. This was

97 *Armenpress*, Yerevan, 22 December 1989.

98 See Gerard Libaridian, *Armenia at the Crossroads, Democracy and Nationhood in Post-Soviet Era*, Watertown: Blue Crane Books, 1991, p. 40.

the position of the Diaspora Hnchakian (Social Democrat) and Ramgarvar (Liberal) parties, while the Tashnaksutyun (nationalist) opposed the USSR while being hostile to Turkey. The three Diaspora parties came up with a joint statement in 1988 to call for calm and prudence, fearing that weakening Soviet rule would expose Armenia once again to Turkish danger.<sup>99</sup> The ANM concluded that the Soviet Union was crumbling, and that the question of liberation of Karabakh could only be achieved under the conditions of a sovereign Armenian political will—that is, independence. A major difference from traditional Armenian political thought was that the ANM considered it possible to have normal relations with Turkey; this was the only way to achieve liberation from Armenia's historic dependence on Russia. In fact, in the late 1980s many historians and political analysts in Armenia were revising the traditionalist thought which was based on the stereotypical fear of Turkey, and admiration of Russia, overriding historical realities. The new school dug into the archives to reveal that Moscow's policies in the Caucasus were never based on "friendship" and similar sentiments, but on *Realpolitik*, which often happened to clash with Armenian interests.<sup>100</sup>

The ANM's politics brought Armenia into confrontation with Moscow. After Gorbachev had lost control over Armenia, following the ANM's assumption of power in Yerevan, the only way to influence its policies was through pressuring Yerevan through the military developments in Azerbaijan and in Karabakh. The participation of Soviet troops in deporting 10,000 ethnic Armenians from the Shahumian region (north of Karabakh) in the spring of 1991 was the price of Yerevan's moves towards sovereignty.

The ANM and its leaders could guess the direction of history, and in spite of suffering Soviet repression in the years 1988-91, they prepared their nation for the coming independence and for the coming war that was in the making. Politically, the ANM could unify the Armenians behind the project of national independence, and when the putsch took place in Moscow in August 1991, they could profit from this opportunity without having to go through internal political upheavals. They could

99 Gaidz Minassian, *Guerre et terrorisme arméniens*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002, pp. 136-43.

100 Gabriel Lazyan (ed.), *Hayasdane yev Hay Tade, Hayyevrus Haraperutyunneru Luysin Dag* (in Armenian), Yerevan: Adana Publishers, 1991.

also build important relations with Russian democrats, which would be decisive for the Karabakh war in 1992-94. Lastly, as Soviet troops sided with Azerbaijanis until 1991, Armenians were forced to develop their self-defence battalions, which played a key role in developing efficient armed forces later in the war years.

Azerbaijan was ready for none of this. Politically, Baku relied on the support of Moscow until very late to preserve the legal status quo in Karabakh. This was the most important element of legitimacy for the Communist *nomenklatura* to stay in power. As a result, when the putsch occurred a destabilized Mutalibov initially supported it, and then, like so many conservative politicians in the USSR that year, had to take confused and confusing steps backwards. Mutalibov had no friends in Moscow with the arrival of the Yeltsin team, and had many powerful enemies at home. Militarily Azerbaijan, which had so much depended on Soviet troops to keep its control over Karabakh, could not hold its positions once the Soviet forces withdrew and their remnants changed sides to support the Armenian fighters. Determined Armenian forces, liberated from Soviet military pressure and facing Azerbaijani police and volunteer groups, went on the offensive.

Most of all, Mutalibov ruled over a country divided and fragmented politically. Two visions of Azerbaijan clashed with each other in this period—a contradiction that persists until the present day. As one scholar emphasizes, “two major competing political discourses” uneasily coexisted with each other, “namely the ideology of *Turkism* of the opposition and the ideology of the *Azerbaijanism* of the government”.<sup>101</sup> The ideology of *Turkism*, popular among the intelligentsia and the vision of the opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan as well as the Musavat party, came to power for a short period of one year from mid-1992 until mid-1993.

### *Total war*

It was a sunny April day in 1992, the first time I was in Karabakh. On the second day I met Serge Sarkissian, then the Minister of Defence of the Karabakh forces. Then, accompanied by Stefan, a French photojournalist of Armenian descent, and Samvel, a volunteer in the

101 Ceylan Tokduoglu, “Definition of National Identity, Nationalism and Ethnicity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, July 2005, p. 725.

Karabakh army, we went westward from Stepanakert towards Shushi, the second major town of Karabakh. Rising high majestically over a rocky mountain, Shushi was the major stronghold of Azeri troops inside Karabakh, from where they controlled the main road linking Karabakh to Armenia, and regularly shelled Stepanakert with howitzer and Grad missiles. We passed next to Krkjan, a small locality previously inhabited by ethnic Azeris, which was overrun by Armenian forces in February of the same year; all the houses were burnt to ashes. Samvel had a bullet hanging over the belt over his chest: “This one is for me,” he said. “I do not want to be taken prisoner.” A cruel war was in the making, and there was no way to stop it.

The collapse of the USSR created a power vacuum in Karabakh, a region ready to explode by that time. The 11,000 or so Soviet troops stationed there by 1991 constituted the buffer between Armenian and Azerbaijani paramilitaries, and the removal of this last restraining force led to the eruption of the war. The military positions of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis were difficult on both sides. Armenian positions were vulnerable, since they occupied urban and rural zones within Karabakh, and in Shahumian district to its north. This exclave was cut off from Armenia proper, and in early 1991 Armenian forces did not control the Karabakh civilian airport situated near the village of Khojali, nor the strategic town of Shushi, dominating on the one hand Stepanakert (the district capital) and on the other the Stepanakert-Lachin-Goris pass, on the main road linking Karabakh and Armenia. This meant that the 140,000 or so ethnic Armenians trapped in this region could only communicate with the outside world through the 6-8 helicopters (Mi-8) that Armenia could deploy. This included transporting of people and materials for civilian use: everything from flour to diesel, plus all the necessities for the military effort from fighters to ammunition, as well as evacuation of the wounded.<sup>102</sup>

For Azerbaijani forces the military map was equally problematic. Not only did it have a hostile Armenian population within the mountainous region of Karabakh, but also isolated villages within Karabakh that were

102 For a detailed description of the initial period of the war, see the two features by the author after this trip: “Ein Augenschein in Nagorno Karabach”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Zurich, 14 May 1992; “De la guérilla à la guerre totale”, *Les Nouvelles d'Arménie*, Paris, June 1992.

home to 40,000 Azerbaijanis. Moreover, it had four districts (Kelbajar, Lachin, Ghoubatli and Zankelan) that were pressed between Karabakh and Armenia proper. This made moving troops from the Azerbaijani heartland to towns such as Kelbajar, Lachin or Khojali very difficult and time-consuming, while by comparison Armenian forces within Karabakh had shorter distances to move to change fronts, which gave them a strategic advantage. To the east, Azerbaijani towns such as Aghdam, Fizuli and Jebayil were at a disadvantage, being in lowlands below hills dominated by Armenians. Moreover, Azerbaijan had its own exclave of Nakhichevan, cut off from the traditional communication lines by an Armenian blockade, on the border of which there was growing tension and frequent clashes. The situation of military imbalance and dispersion of forces and the long stretch of war front was untenable, and had to lead to a violent clash.

Starting from November 1991, the Armenian side went on the offensive. The first major target was Khojali, where the region's airport was situated. The attack took place on the symbolic date of 26 February, and after the Armenian forces took the village, a terrible massacre followed. As in similar events, here too each side contests the version of the other. For Azerbaijanis, Armenians cold-bloodedly killed several hundred civilians (some sources talk of 1,500), to spread horror among Azerbaijanis elsewhere and force them to leave their villages. Armenians contest this narrative and say they committed no massacre, and that it was Azeri forces themselves who opened fire on civilians who were trying to escape. They quote the Azeri President himself, who laid the blame of the atrocities in Khojali on the APF seeking to try to bring down his regime.<sup>103</sup>

Several hundred civilians were also arrested, among them Meskhet Turks who had escaped earlier pogroms in Uzbekistan and had come to Azerbaijan in the hope of returning to their ancestral lands in southern Georgia. Instead the Azerbaijani authorities, in their efforts to tilt the demographic balance of Karabakh, had settled them in Khojali.<sup>104</sup>

103 Few weeks after the event I interviewed Armenian fighters in Yerevan and Stepanakert, in March and April 1992, and what I could conclude is that Armenian fighters did commit a massacre, after the Azerbaijani soldiers and police had surrendered and the civil population was escaping eastwards towards Aghdam.

104 Viktoria Iyeva, "Casualties and refugees, an eye-witness account", *Moscow News*, 15-22 March 1992.

The war in Karabakh had its own rules. In those early months of 1992: while massacres were repetitively perpetrated by the both sides of the conflict; prisoners were often tortured to death. Families who had members held by the other side tried to take hostages from the other ethnic group and keep them until it was possible to identify the captors of their loved ones, and try to negotiate an exchange. Corpses were also exchanged, sometimes in return for cash or a gallon of oil.

There was no shortage of arms and ammunition. The 366<sup>th</sup> Motorised Infantry Regiment, originally under the command of the Soviet Interior Ministry, which had an initial force of 11,000 soldiers, started its withdrawal from Karabakh in November 1991, and had completed it by February 1992, leaving behind its armament, including heavy weaponry.<sup>105</sup> Thus there was more armament in 1992 in the hands of Karabakh Armenians than ever before. Azerbaijanis had even more, five to six times more armour and ten times more ammunition, after they had taken over the Aghdam and Kirovabad (Ganja) Soviet military bases.<sup>106</sup> Even so, availability of weapons did not mean having an army. Both military knowledge and discipline were very low. Similarly, military hierarchy did not exist in either of the camps in early 1992. Up to then, Armenian forces were composed of localized defence units, or brigades of 10-15 volunteers who had come from Armenia, and they had loose coordination among themselves. The situation was even worse in Azerbaijan. The journalist Kemal Ali says that in Aghdam, which was the centre of the Azerbaijani military command, "in 1992, there wasn't a single army, there were six or seven separate units, fighting the Armenians. (...) But these units were in conflict with each other as well as with the Armenians."<sup>107</sup> Similarly, when I visited the advanced positions near Stepanakert in April 1992, I was told by local commanders that they faced three distinct military groups, and that at that moment they were in a kind of cease-fire situation with two, while continuing to fire on the third.

105 This included 10 T-72 main battle tanks (of which five were functional), 3 ZSU-4 mounted anti-aircraft systems (4 barrelled 23 mm machine guns), 8 122 mm field-guns, 70 BMP personal carriers. This information is based on an interview with Serge Sarkisian, the Defence Minister of Karabakh, in Stepanakert on 6 April 1992.

106 Author interview with Monte Melkonian, the commander of Martouni district, in Martouni (Karabakh), 9 April 1992.

107 Quoted in Thomas de Waal, *The Black Garden*, p. 165.

Both sides exaggerated the existence of foreign fighters, their role and importance in the war. Reporters and other "travellers" to war zones often hear about mythical creatures, and in Karabakh there were rumours about women snipers and "black" fighters, supposedly the most redoubtable of all fighters. Other exaggerations were about the role and manner in which Russian (and other former Red Army) soldiers took part in the military operations. During a first visit to Karabakh in April 1992, one could meet several Russian and Bielorrussian soldiers, and even an Uzbek soldier with an ethnic Tajik background fighting on the side of Karabakh troops.<sup>108</sup> They were former soldiers of the 366<sup>th</sup> Motorised Infantry Regiment, who had decided for whatever reason to stay behind instead of return to the uncertainty of their countries. Others, more specialized helicopter, aircraft and tank officers, were highly appreciated by both Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, and were paid as mercenaries to deliver the first punch for the opening of a campaign. Most probably, at this stage Russian soldiers and officers were acting from material motives, and their participation on both sides of the battle lines was in no way the result of a "Russian hidden hand" aiming to re-dominate the Caucasus. If anyone had seen Russian soldiers in those days, completely abandoned by their leadership, having no orders, not even knowing who their superiors were, often without food and protection, and—most important—noted their participation on both sides of the war, he would have found it hard to believe that Russia's Defence ministry had any grasp of, still less a plan for, the Caucasus military developments. Lastly, Armenians often talked about Turkish and even Iranian fighters among Azerbaijani ranks, without any proof.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Azerbaijanis exaggerated the participation of Diaspora Armenians in the fighting operations. One did play an important part, the legendary Monte Melkonian,<sup>110</sup> the commander of the eastern Martuni district. Overall, not more than few dozen Diaspora Armenians from Iran, France, Lebanon and the USA participated in the fighting, if one excludes the war tourists who passed a couple of weeks in Karabakh.

108 Author's notes, Karabakh, April 1992 and February 1993.

109 "We did not kill nor capture any Turkish or Iranian volunteer," Serge Sarkissian, the Defence Minister of Karabakh, told me on 6 April 1992, in Stepanakert.

110 The highly interesting biography of Monte Melkonian is written by his brother Markar. See Markar Melkonian, *My Brothers Road, An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

More important than its role in direct military operations was the political and financial importance of the Diaspora in the Karabakh conflict. While in 1989-90 the ANM leadership in Yerevan refrained from arming various battalions in Karabakh, the Tashnak party was active in distributing money and helped arm Karabakh Armenians. As a result, the party enjoyed great prestige in Karabakh in the early years of the war.

In early 1992 the Armenian forces were on the offensive. Now they had weapons, and the Soviet troops were away. Most important, they sensed that the Azeri leadership in Baku was divided and Azerbaijan did not have a political or military plan for Karabakh. "The Azeris are weak because they do not have a clear political leadership," said Serge Sarkissian, adding, "They (...) don't have a unified military leadership."<sup>111</sup> The Azerbaijani forces also lacked military experience, cadres and discipline. One American journalist who visited Khojali, whose strategic importance cannot be over-emphasized, reported that there was only one armoured vehicle in the town, and from the sixty fighters defending the village and the airport only four volunteers from outside the region had military experience, acquired during the Afghanistan war.<sup>112</sup> Such a force had no military significance, and most Azeri civilians had left towns like Khojali or Shushi, reducing the motivation of the Azeri troops to fight. In contrast, Karabakh Armenian political and military authorities strictly forbade the evacuation of civilians, saying that emptying Karabakh of women and children would reduce the incentive of their men to defend the land.

### *The battle for Shushi*

Following the Khojali victory, after which the Armenian forces ensured an air link with Armenia, they started planning the Shushi offensive to open a corridor to link Mountainous Karabakh with Armenia, to end a three-year-long blockade of the region imposed by Azerbaijan.<sup>113</sup> Shushi, or Shusha in Azerbaijani, was the most populated Azerbaijani-held position within the administrative boundaries of Mountainous Karabakh.

111 Interview with Serge Sarkissian, the Defence Minister of Karabakh, Stepanakert, 6 April 1992.

112 Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, p. 120.

113 *Gharapah yan Azadakeragan Badevazm, 1988-1994* ("Karabakh Liberation War", in Armenian), Haygagan Hanrakidagan Hradaragchutyun, Yerevan 2004, p. 529.

It was extremely difficult to take the town, since it was positioned over a rocky structure, with only two roads linked to it: one sliding down eastwards towards Stepanakert, and the second moving to Lachin, the former capital of "Red Kurdistan" (1923-29), still at the time under Azerbaijani military control. Therefore, militarily the Armenians had basically one road to climb up towards Shushi, and the Azeri defenders clearly knew this and expected an attack.

The Azerbaijani forces within Shushi had enough provisions as well as arms and fighters. According to the military commander of the town, Elbrus Orujev, he had "a few hundred" fighters under his command.<sup>114</sup> But they lacked coordination, discipline and morale. Most important, Azerbaijan was in a war without any military planning and military strategy. While the Azerbaijani side was losing one village after the other in central and western Karabakh, its forces were attacking Armenian villages in north and eastern parts of Karabakh, without being able to win territory of strategic significance. In fact, Azerbaijani military attacks had a local nature, armed groups in one village reinforced by volunteers from Baku or elsewhere attacking a neighbouring Armenian village. Even operations coordinated at the highest level failed to achieve any success; for example, in January 1992, Azerbaijani forces led by the Defence Minister Tajedin Mehdiiev in person,<sup>115</sup> at the head of a large force of around 500 fighters with three armoured vehicles, attacked the village of Karintak (literally meaning "under the stone"). This village is located just under the rocky structure below Shushi. The 60-70 Armenian fighters defended the village for 12 hours until assistance arrived from neighbouring villages, and Azerbaijani forces withdrew with heavy losses.<sup>116</sup>

The Armenian offensive was planned for 4 May 1992, but for various reasons, such as lack of ammunition and bad weather,<sup>117</sup> it was postponed by several days. General Arkadi Ter-Tadevosian (known as

114 Thomas de Waal, *The Black Garden*, p. 178.

115 Mehdiiev served as Defence Minister from mid-December 1991 until mid-February 1992.

116 According to Armenian sources, the defence forces lost 20 fighters, while the attackers lost 100 men. See *Gharapaghyan Azadakragan Baderazm, 1988-1994*, op. cit., p. 664.

117 *Gharapaghyan Azadakragan Baderazm, 1988-1994*, op. cit., p. 531.

Komandos), a career officer who was sent by the Armenian army to Stepanakert on June 1991 to "coordinate and direct"<sup>118</sup> the war effort, was the commander of the Shushi operation. With 1,200 troops, the military operations started in the early hours of 8 May. (This was to create a diplomatic scandal with Iran, as we will see later.) Four attacking and one reserve group took part in the operation, the first moving from Stepanakert uphill; the second moving from the village Shosh from the east on Shushi; the third trying to cut the Shushi-Lachin main road to the south of the town; and the fourth advancing from Stepanakert towards Azerbaijani villages to the north-east of Shushi (Janhasan, Javartlar, Pashkent). The initial Armenian push was thrown back, the Karabakh forces losing one of their T-72 tanks.<sup>119</sup> But by the evening, panic hit the Azerbaijani defenders as the third army succeeded in cutting the Shushi-Lachin main road (this group was led by Samvel Babayan, later Defence Minister of Karabakh), and started evacuating the town. The next morning the first Armenian fighters entered Shushi, and were amazed to discover the quantities of arms and ammunition left behind. They were followed by bands of looters, who after emptying shops and apartments put the rest on fire, causing the destruction of a major part of this historic city.

The fall of Shushi continues to be a subject of polemic. Many in Azerbaijan think that the Baku leadership "sold" this invincible city. There are rumours that the Azerbaijani Defence Minister ordered the withdrawal of armoured vehicles from the town and mine clearing from the front lines.<sup>120</sup> But a careful look at the situation reveals bad organization, confusion and mistrust that led to the fall of this city-fortress. The various military groups in the town did not obey the military hierarchy, and often refused to coordinate among themselves. The inhabitants of the town had left or had been evacuated by the authorities fearing a second Khojali, which gave less incentive for the fighters to resist to defend a civilian population. In the early days of May some of the troops

118 *Gharapaghyan Azadakragan Baderazm, 1988-1994*, op. cit., p. 629.

119 Visitors to Karabakh can see this tank, converted to a monument, on the main highway at the entrance of Shushi.

120 See the interview with the former Azeri Defence Minister Rahim Qaziyev, a few days after being freed from prison, in *Ekho*, Baku, 23 March 2005. Qaziyev refutes both charges.



with their equipment seem to have left the town. A final problem for Azerbaijani troops, whose main body was concentrated in Aghdam, was logistic. As the Karabakh troops started their offensive on Shushi, the Azerbaijani troops needed a day or two to start bringing support to Shushi, too late to change the outcome of the battle. On the other hand, the Armenian side showed a high level of discipline and organization skills. As a result of the two-day battle, the Armenian side lost 57 fighters, while Azerbaijani losses were near 200.<sup>121</sup>

In June the Armenian forces continued their offensive, and this time attacked Lachin from the east coming from Shushi, as well as from the west from Goris in Armenia. Azeri forces abandoned Lachin without much resistance. The inhabitants of Lachin were mostly ethnic Kurds, and in spite of Armenian-supported efforts to declare a "Kurdish state"<sup>122</sup> based in Lachin, Kurds had left the town with the departing Azeri fighters. This is not surprising after the treatment the civil population had received from the Armenian fighters in Khojali, since ethnic Kurds had close family ties with ethnic Azeris. Attempts by Karabakh Armenians to create an alliance with ethnic Kurds inhabiting Lachin and in Kelbajar further to the north had had no result.

With the fall of Lachin, for the first time a physical link was created between Armenia and Karabakh, and supplies could move at last to

	Tanks	Artillery	Combat aircraft	Combat helicopters
Armenia	77	160	3	13
Azerbaijan	278	294	50	6

Table 2: Military hardware in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1992

Source: Roy Allison, *Military Forces in the Soviet Successor States*, Adelphi Paper 280, London: IISS, 1994, p. 86.

121 *Gharapaghyan Azadagrakan Baderazm, 1988-1994*, op. cit., p. 536. This source puts Armenian losses at 57 dead, while Azerbaijani losses "250-300 killed, 600-700 wounded". The Azerbaijani military commander Elbrus Orujev puts Azerbaijani dead at 159 and 22 missing. See Thomas de Waal, op. cit., note 44 on p. 314.

122 Author interview with Levon Melik-Shahnazarov, head of Karabakh parliamentary committee for foreign relations, Stepanakert, April 1992. See also Suleiman Ali, "Kurdistan: the secret of Lachin", *Moscow News*, 7 June 1992; and Judith Perera, "Azerbaijan: Kurds declare their own state", *Inter-Press Service*, London, 18 June 1992.

encircled Karabakh. The Armenia side thought for the moment that the war was over and celebrated victory ahead of time.

### *Changing fronts, changing leaders*

After the Armenian victories in Shushi and Lachin, and the opening of a land corridor between Mountainous Karabakh and Armenia proper, many in Armenia thought that this was the victory and the main part of the military operations were over. They neglected important ongoing developments in the Azerbaijani political system that were to change that system and the realities of the frontline. Following the fall of Khojali and the massacre of the Azerbaijani civilians there, Ayaz Mutalibov found himself in a delicate situation. APF-led demonstrations pushed for his resignation, supported by a public opinion infuriated not only because of the Khojali massacre, but also because of the official position which until the last moment was spreading baseless press-releases claiming victories on the front.

Mutalibov's position had been compromised since the August coup in Moscow. In the first hours following the coup, Mutalibov came out with pro-putchist declarations, and the fact that he "corrected" himself a couple of days later did not help erase the initial mistake. More important than the declarations, the August coup had reshuffled the geopolitical equilibrium between Moscow and the Transcaucasus, in which Moscow was trying for a time to preserve the Soviet Union and therefore supported a political system in Azerbaijan, favourable to the status quo, and punished a rebellious, nationalist Armenia that was deconstructing the Soviet order. With the Soviet Union dead, Moscow did not need to preserve the status quo in the Transcaucasus; nor did it have the means to do so. Moreover, the new political leadership in Moscow around Boris Yeltsin was of the same political current as the Armenian leadership, called "democrats" in the context of that time, and both had emerged in opposition to Gorbachev's project of preserving a reformed, federative USSR. The Yeltsin leadership had very close relations with the Armenia of Ter-Petrossian and rejected collaboration with old apparatchiks like those who composed the Mutalibov administration. With the military defeats on the front and the shock of Khojali, the Azerbaijani public was convinced that "only independence from

Russian military presence (...) would perhaps help Azerbaijan resolve its conflict with Armenia",<sup>123</sup> a conclusion very similar to that of the Armenian leadership a couple of years earlier.

Huge demonstrations in Baku demanded the resignation of Mutalibov. In a stormy session of the Azerbaijani parliament in March 1992, Mutalibov was accused of not having done enough to protect the Azerbaijani population of Karabakh, and was stripped of his post.<sup>124</sup> The parliament nominated as temporary head of state Yakub Mamedov, who was a former rector of the Baku Medical Institute and the speaker of the parliament, and scheduled presidential elections for June 1992. Azerbaijan was clearly in a situation of dual power. On the one hand the influence of the APF was growing in the street with daily demonstrations in Baku, and among the Azerbaijani volunteers fighting on the Karabakh front, and on the other hand the legal power and state administration was still held by the *nomenklatura*. The struggle between the two camps was more about taking power in Baku, and a divided vision of the future geopolitical orientation of Azerbaijan, than about the actual war going on in Karabakh. The military defeats of the Azerbaijani forces were mainly conditioned by this political division within the Azerbaijani elite and public opinion. Two days after the resignation of Mutalibov a Canadian journalist interviewed the leader of the Azerbaijani opposition, Abulfaz Elchibey, and concluded: "For him, the debacle in Karabakh was of lesser import than the opportunity Mutalobov's departure presented for reworking an essentially colonial relationship with Russia."<sup>125</sup>

Following the fall of Shushi and Lachin, Mutalibov tried to organize a come-back to power, on 14 May 1992. The parliament blamed the defeat on the acting President, Mamedov; it cancelled the scheduled presidential elections of 7 June. Mutalibov declared a two-month state of emergency.<sup>126</sup> But mass demonstrations staged by the opposition in

123 Leila Alieva, "Reshaping Eurasia: Foreign Policy Strategies and Leadership Assets in Post-Soviet South Caucasus", *Berkeley Programme in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*, 2000, p. 21.

124 Elizabeth Fuller, "The Ongoing Political Power Struggle in Azerbaijan", *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 1, No. 18, 1 May 1992.

125 Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations, The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, London: Zed Books, 1994, p. 119.

126 *Report on Ethnic Conflict in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Harvard

front of the parliament, some of them armed with rifles, forced Mutalibov to resign for a second time and leave the country. The presidential elections of June 1992 gave victory to Elchibey with 59 per cent of the votes. Nizami Suleimanov, a close associate of Heydar Aliiev, came second with 38 per cent of the votes. Aliiev himself was barred from participating in the elections on the pretext of his advanced age (a limit of 65 years was set for the candidates, with the clear purpose of excluding Aliiev). The several months of power struggle cost Azerbaijan dearly on the war front. The Armenian fighters had succeeded in occupying all of the territory of Mountainous Karabakh, and the Karabakh Armenian forces had succeeded in occupying the town of Lachin in Azerbaijan proper, creating a land corridor linking Karabakh to Armenia.

As we will see later, most Armenian military victories coincided with internal strife within Azerbaijan. And power struggle there was a regular phenomenon, reflecting the fractured nature of the Azerbaijani political elite and Azerbaijani identity more generally. This identity was based on regionalist loyalties, in themselves a true reflection of the history of this land, which was either integrated in larger empires, or disintegrated into khanates centred around large cities such as Baku, Shirvan, Ganja, etc.<sup>127</sup>

When Abulfaz Elchibey acceded to the presidency, Azerbaijan got a unified leadership: the state institutions and the former opposition representing large sectors of the public opinion now expressed a unified will. It did not take long for this change to be felt at the front. Elchibey promised to finish with the war "in three months".<sup>128</sup> And indeed, on 4 July 1992, only days after Elchibey's election, a massive Azerbaijani offensive started from the north of Karabakh. According to Armenian sources the former Soviet Fourth Army, which was based near Ganja, took active part in the military operations.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Azerbaijan had just received its part of the Soviet military heritage, and thus had a large number of tanks and artillery. It could also mobilize larger numbers of

University, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Cambridge, MA, July 1993, p. 78.

127 Semih Vaner, "Les Ambitions de l'Azerbaïdjan", *Politique Internationale*, No. 57, Autumn 1992, p. 355.

128 Goltz, op. cit., p. 262.

129 *Gharapaghyan Azadkragan Baderazm, 1988-1994*, op. cit., p. 466.

fighters, compared with the limited numbers available for the Karabakh Armenian leadership. The Azerbaijani armed forces first occupied the Shahumian region<sup>130</sup> and later took most of Martakert region, causing a mass exodus of 40,000 Karabakh Armenians towards Stepanakert and into Armenia proper.<sup>131</sup> The wave of Azerbaijani advances was stopped to the north of Stepanakert. Other massive onslaughts to the east and the south, against Martuni and Hadrut, failed to make any change in the front line.

As in the fields of internal politics, management of the economy, and international relations, the Elchibey administration did not show developed skills in the art of military leadership. The initial successes on the northern front of Karabakh proved to be an isolated event in the overall military developments of the Karabakh conflict. In fact the Karabakh Armenians quickly learned from their former failures. In the autumn of 1992 they brought in a State Defence Committee headed by Robert Kocharian which put an end to the volunteer brigade system inherited from the guerrilla phase of the conflict, and created a centralized control and command. It went further and mobilized all resources of Mountainous Karabakh for the war effort. The Lachin corridor also permitted the transport of needed equipment and ammunition from Armenia. Already in that autumn of 1992 the Karabakh Armenian forces were marking slow but regular progress by retaking village after village in the Martakert region. In the spring of 1993 they had already taken the strategic road linking Martakert to Kelbajar, and started advancing west towards Kelbajar, a large mountainous territory that lies between Armenia and Karabakh.

The battle for Kelbajar started on 27 March and ended on 2 April 1993. The Armenian forces advanced from several positions, cutting the Azerbaijani troops in Kelbajar into two. By the time of the Kelbajar battle, the Azerbaijani forces had exhausted themselves. The invasion of the year before had caused huge losses of men and armour. The Azerbaijani defeat also forced some 60,000 ethnic Azeris and Kurds living in the region to cross the Mrav pass and become IDPs (internally displaced people).<sup>132</sup> After the invasion of Kelbajar, the Arme-

130 Rechristened as Geranboy region in Azerbaijan.

131 *Azerbaijan, Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994, p. 5.

132 Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear, *Humanitarian Action and Politics: The Case*

nian forces continued their initiative, taking Martakert in an attack on 26-27 June 1993, less than a year after the town was occupied by Azerbaijani troops. The Karabakh Armenian troops were now determined to deliver a hard blow to the Azerbaijani war ambitions. In the summer of 1993 they occupied several Azerbaijani districts around Karabakh, including Gubatli and Zankelan that lie between Armenia and Karabakh to the south of Lachin, but also Jebrayil, Fizuli and Aghdam to the south-east and east of Karabakh. Serge Sarkissian, the Karabakh Defence Minister, explained the victories of his forces by the huge losses Azerbaijan suffered in 1992-93; these raised morale on the Armenian side: "There were heavy Azerbaijani losses until spring," which he put at 15,000 Azerbaijani soldiers killed against 2,000 on the Armenian side. "Azerbaijan has no tank-armour superiority over Karabakh forces. The air force could never cause any serious military harm, it hurts only civilians."<sup>133</sup> Sarkissian also said that the Azerbaijanis could "reconstruct their forces, but it needs several months", clearly expressing the feeling that he had to make the most of the current confusion on the side of his antagonists.

The military defeats created an atmosphere of uncertainty in Baku, and further weakened the already dwindling popularity of Elchibey. His downfall was triggered by a military rebellion led by the Karabakh war hero Surat Huseinov. The chain of events started with the Soviet Fourth Army suddenly withdrawing from Ganja in May 1993, handing over parts of its weaponry and large stocks of ammunition to the forces of Huseinov. This latter was a former wool factory director in Yevlakh, who had made large financial contributions to the war effort, and had himself led a group of fighters during the various episodes of the war. He had also won medals for his heroism during the capture of Martakert, during which his private army had played a key role. In February 1993, he fell out with the Elchibey government, and was dismissed, along with the Defence Minister, Rahim Qaziyev. Huseinov pulled his 709<sup>th</sup> brigade from the battle lines, and retreated to his power base in Ganja, creating a vacuum at the front.

To regain the military equipment left behind by the departing Russian troops, the government sent loyal soldiers to Ganja in early

*of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Providence: Watson Institute, 1997, p. 17.

133 Author interview with Serge Sarkissian, Stepanakert, 10 July 1993.

June 1993. The forces under the orders of Surat Huseinov resisted, resulting in violent clashes in which up to seventy people were killed. This ignited a rebellion that first took control of Ganja and then started marching eastwards to Baku, demanding the resignation of Elchibey. Although the numbers of Huseinov's troops marching on Baku were small<sup>134</sup> the Elchibey government had no more defences, no one wanted to stand up and fight for him. In the confusion, as the rebel army was 30 kilometres from the capital, Heydar Aliev, the former head of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, returned to Baku from Nakhichevan, and very skilfully took power away from Elchibey. He was first elected member of the Milli Majlis (parliament) and then to head the Majlis, a post that also had the title of vice-president. Fearing the rebel forces would enter Baku, Elchibey left for his native village in Nakhichevan, and a few days later (24 June 1993) the Milli Majlis appointed Aliev to the presidency. The rebel Huseinov became the new Prime Minister. In a Soviet-style election organized on 3 October, Aliev defeated two unknown figures with 98.8 per cent of the votes. Thus ended the Azerbaijani experiment with democracy, and the Soviet-era *nomenklatura* returned to power.

As in the spring of 1992, the power struggle in Baku and the leadership vacuum that it caused had a disastrous effect on the Azerbaijani military. The Armenian side profited from this opportunity as best it could, creating a *cordon sanitaire* around Karabakh. As Aliev was taking power Armenian forces entered Aghdam. Later they took Fizuli to the south-east of Karabakh, and Jebrayil to its south. This left over a hundred thousand civilians in western Azerbaijan trapped by Armenian forces. In a later offensive in November 1993 the region of Zankelan fell to the Armenian fighters without much resistance, and thousands of Azerbaijani refugees crossed the Arax river into Iran, before being settled in refugee camps in central Azerbaijan.

To add to the confusion, a short-lived rebellion hit south-eastern Azerbaijan around the city of Lenkoran, a region inhabited by the Persian-speaking Talish minority. Led by Alikram Gumbatov, an army officer, the rebellion declared the establishment of Talish-Mughan repub-

134 Some rumours even suggested that it was just a thirty-man force, see Goltz, op. cit., p. 364. Even if this seems an exaggeration, it reveals how small the rebel army was and how weak Elchibey had become just after a year in power.

lic in August 1992.<sup>135</sup> There was a fear that more minorities would revolt and Azerbaijan as a state would disintegrate. But loyal troops crushed the rebellion, forcing Gumbatov to escape to exile in Russia. Later he was handed back to Baku where he was tried and sent to prison.

Like his predecessors, Heydar Aliev opened his presidency yet with another offensive on the Karabakh front. The offensive started by late November and lasted for four months. This winter offensive was very costly for both sides, as both fighting armies were increasingly organizing their command structures, mobilizing more men, and using sophisticated weapon systems. The offensive was possible after the Azerbaijani army declared a general draft of young men into the national army, and reinforced its ranks with foreign military experts and fighters, who came from various and quite unusual sides: US instructors, former Turkish army officers, Afghan Mujahideen... Several thousand (estimated from 1,500 to 2,500) Afghan fighters from Hizb-i-Wahdat under the leadership of Gulbeddin Hekmatyar were flown to Azerbaijan by fall 1993, after a visit to Afghanistan by the Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister, Rovshan Javadov.<sup>136</sup> They seem to have taken part in several battles in 1993-94. US military experts and Turkish officers took part in military training and advice.<sup>137</sup> The initial offensive concentrated on the south-eastern part of the front, and the Azerbaijani troops tried to recapture Horadiz, an important railway junction. Later in January 1994 the Azeri offensive concentrated on the Mrav mountain chain, in an attempt to take the Omar pass. Initially Azerbaijani forces scored some successes, crossing the pass and entering the villages of Kelbajar region. But soon snow and Armenian counter-attack cut them off from their supply lines.<sup>138</sup> Azerbaijani losses were heavy, many being killed by the

135 Hugh Pope, "Azerbaijan may split into two", *The Independent*, London, 18 August 1993.

136 On the use of mercenaries by the Azerbaijani army, see: *Azerbaijan, Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994, p. 46; see also Hayk Demoyan, *Karabakh Drama: Hidden Acts*, Yerevan: Caucasian Center for Iranian Studies, 2003, pp. 34-6.

137 Former American officers turned mercenaries, with experience in the Iran-contra affair and connections with the little known MEGA-oil company, appeared in Baku in 1992 to provide training and mercenaries for the Azerbaijani army. See Goltz, *The Azerbaijani Diary*, pp. 270-9.

138 Idrak Abbasov and Jasur Mamedov, "Azeri Veterans Recall Military Fiasco", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 219

cold, with estimates of over 5,000 soldiers killed and over 60 armoured vehicles destroyed.<sup>139</sup> In spite of the fierce fighting, the four-month offensive did not bring about any significant alteration of the war front as established by the autumn of 1993.

By the spring of 1994 the Azerbaijani forces were exhausted, and it was rumoured that the Armenian side was on the point of starting a new offensive to take Yevlakh, an Azerbaijani town on the road between Ganja and Baku.<sup>140</sup> As a result of heavy Russian pressure, a cease-fire agreement was signed by Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert in Bishkek on 18 May 1994, under the patronage of the Russian Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev. In spite of the absence of peacekeeping troops, this cease-fire has preserved the status quo since 1994.

### *Why negotiations and mediation failed*

I will conclude my discussion of the Karabakh conflict by addressing three questions. The first is whether it was possible to solve the Karabakh problem without violence: was it possible to negotiate a solution, a new format of coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis as the Soviet Union was crumbling? The second is, what role did Moscow or other foreign powers play in the conflict? And the third question, which goes to the essence of my work, is whether nationalism should be seen at the heart of the conflict, and its mobilization as the cause of the political and military developments, or whether nationalism could become an agent of change because of more global shifts in the political-institutional framework. The intention I have here is not essentializing, but rather proposes a new weaving of causes and narratives.

The first remark to be made on the Armeno-Azerbaijani conflict is the radical shift in the geopolitical context as the conflict started in 1988 and developed into a full-scale war in 1992. The conflict started with Armenia and Azerbaijan as sub-entities of the Soviet state, and by the end of 1991 they emerged as independent states. In 1988 the Karabakh conflict was an internal problem of the USSR; it was transformed in December 1991 into an international conflict as Armenia

London, 21 February 2004.

139 Michael Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, op. cit., p. 96.

140 Author interviews in Yerevan, April 1994.

and Azerbaijan were recognized as independent states which joined the United Nations. As we saw earlier, during the start of the movement the Armenian militants were making demands on Moscow, not Baku, for the rectification of a political error under Stalin—as they saw it at the time. The centre of power of the Soviet state was in Moscow, and any change had to come from there. They thought that once Moscow accepted the idea of change, there would be very little resistance from the Azerbaijani side. “In 1988 Armenians in Karabakh and Armenia tried to solve the question of Karabakh through constitutional ways,” according to Vazgen Manukian. “There was some sort of romanticism in our belief that the question could be solved peacefully: no people gives up land without struggle” was his conclusion.<sup>141</sup> The same idea is shared by Anatoly Chernyaev, an adviser to Gorbachev, who said the conflict could have been solved when the Armenian mass mobilization was in its early stage, and before a similar mass movement emerged in Azerbaijan: “To achieve that [peaceful solution to Karabakh conflict] we would have had to give Karabakh to Armenia immediately, as early as 1986, when the crisis there was only beginning and Azerbaijani nationalism was still in deep slumber or at least wasn’t yet “organized”. (...) In fact that is what actually did happen, only without the process being dragged out over many torturous, hellish years.”<sup>142</sup>

It took several months for the leaders of the Karabakh Movement to realize that Azerbaijan was an independent political factor. They started seeing Azerbaijan as an independent player in the Karabakh conflict from November 1988, after the emergence of a popular movement in Azerbaijan itself, well after the Sumgait pogroms. The popular movement in Azerbaijan, as we have seen earlier, was mobilized around the idea of defending Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the emergence of the Karabakh movement gave the Armenian side a mobilized force and a political will, which was a source of concern for the Kremlin.

During the Karabakh conflict there were several attempts to create dialogue between Baku and Yerevan. One initial attempt to create links between the Armenian National Movement and the Azerbaijani Popu-

141 Author interview with Vazgen Manukian, Yerevan, 16 March 1994.

142 Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years With Gorbachev*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000, p. 185.

lar Front took place in Riga, in February 1990. On the agenda were the territorial question, stabilizing the security situation, the return of refugees from both sides, and discussion of the humanitarian consequences of the conflict.<sup>143</sup> This ambitious plan did not take off because of the violent events in Baku at the time, and the meeting did not go further than a basic exchange of views.<sup>144</sup> The defeat of the APF in the September 1990 elections marginalized the Front and led to a break in the negotiations.

A researcher has questioned whether the war was inevitable, and suggested that in summer 1991 "there was a possibility to avert the war at that time, more than three years after the events in Sumgait."<sup>145</sup> The author has the best of intentions, to show theoretically that the Karabakh confrontation was not predetermined, and that at any moment a solution was possible. But in spite of the intention, it is very difficult to project such an analysis on the reality of the Karabakh conflict, and even more so to suggest that a negotiated solution for this complex conflict was possible in, of all years, the fatal year of 1991. He bases his analysis on one episode of negotiations between Baku leadership and a Karabakh Armenian leader, Valerii Grigorian, following Operation Kaltso, during which Armenian villages in Shahumian, Shushi, and Hadrut districts were emptied by a joint Soviet Army and Azerbaijani Interior troops operation. Elsewhere, he says that if the Azerbaijanis had foreseen the outcome of the conflict "they would reasonably have preferred to cut their losses rather than use force to resist Armenian separatism and irredentism."<sup>146</sup> One could argue that even if a small circle of Azerbaijani leaders believed that they had no chance of winning a war (in fact Azerbaijani leaders thought that their superiority in arms and numbers would prevail), they still had to face their population, heavily mobilized around the cause of defending Karabakh within Azerbaijan. Around this notion there crystallized an Azerbaijani mass

143 Irina Litviyova in *Izvestia*, 31 January 1990, in English in *CDSF*, Vol XLII, No. 5, 1990.

144 Hambartsum Galstyan, "The Riga Meeting", in G.J. Libaridian, *Armenia at the Crossroads*, pp. 47-50.

145 Erik Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited, Was the War Inevitable?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 2, Spring 2001, p. 48.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

movement claiming sovereignty and independence. What Azerbaijani political leader, even a very enlightened one, could have had the courage to tell his people to give up Karabakh in the early 1990s?

The whole political dynamism in Armenia and Azerbaijan was developing towards confrontation, and it was not Sumgait which was an isolated event, but negotiation initiatives: the assassination of Grigorian in the streets of Stepanakert, probably by radical Armenians, put an end to his efforts. The most important misunderstanding in this analysis is the assumption that any agreement could have had serious consequence on the ground: in 1991 the only existing state structure (the USSR) was crumbling, and failed to impose its will on the conflict parties. On the other hand, there was no unified leadership on either side of the conflict that could negotiate a political resolution. The unstable political context made any attempt to negotiate a risky political endeavour, exposing its supporters to accusations of "treason", and the continuous sporadic violence made the role of any negotiator a nearly impossible mission.

A more serious effort of mediation was initiated by the then president of the Russian Soviet Federal Republic, Boris Yeltsin, supported by the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev. Both heads of state arrived in Stepanakert in September 1991, and their mediation led to the "Zheleznovodsk Declaration" to regulate the conflict. But it did not take long before this agreement turned into a dead letter. In November of the same year Armenian forces shot down an Azerbaijani helicopter which was transporting Azerbaijani officials as well as Russian and Kazakh diplomats, on a mission to implement the agreement. In 1991 the security situation on the ground did not permit any negotiated solution to take root. Formerly mixed Armenian and Azerbaijani regions, towns and villages had gradually polarized, and increasing violence led to mass refugee movement. Roads linking towns and villages were insecure for both sides, since each locality had formed its own guards who blocked the free circulation of the opposite ethnic group. Practically, Armenians were blocking large sections inhabited by Azerbaijani population, while Azerbaijanis had imposed a blockade on the Armenian settlements in and around Karabakh. This explosive situation was kept under control thanks to the presence of the Soviet Army, which accompanied convoys travelling along the main routes of Karabakh, permitting a minimum movement of goods and people. But after the August coup the Soviet

Army had no more leadership, its mission was unclear, it was cut off from its logistic bases inside Russia, and it could not continue its former mission. It started evacuating its positions in November 1991, finishing in a matter of three months. With the disappearance of this last force of interposition a violent clash between the two antagonistic sides was inevitable, and good intentions, whether from within or outside the region, had no chance to stop it.

Iranian diplomacy intensively mediated between Baku, Stepanakert and Yerevan to reach a cease-fire agreement in early 1992. At best, some cease-fire declarations held for a few days, before artillery fire and ground attacks resumed. Despite those setbacks, Teheran succeeded in bringing together the Armenian President Ter-Petrosian and the Azerbaijani head of state Yakub Mamedov. Yet, hours after their arrival in Teheran, the news of Armenian forces entering Shushi spread, making negotiations redundant. This was a heavy blow to Iranian diplomacy, which had invested its energies to bring peace to its northern borders. It was also embarrassing to the Armenian leader, who seemed either to have no control over the ethnic Armenian troops fighting in Karabakh, or to be determined to give a blow to Iranian mediators. The truth could be a third possibility, that the offensive on Shushi, planned to take place on an earlier date, was postponed because of bad weather and logistical difficulties, and was not planned deliberately to foil the Teheran negotiations.

### *The Russian role, outside intervention and the military outcome*

There is not a civil war or separatist conflict in the former Soviet Union without them. They fight alongside Armenians against Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh and fly bombing missions for Abkhaz rebels in the war against Georgia (...) They are the Russians...<sup>147</sup>

So started Goltz's article that had great impact on shaping American views on the Russian role in post-Soviet space. Goltz thought the Russian policy was to dismember "those states that wish to leave Moscow's

147 Thomas Goltz, "Letter From Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand", *Foreign Policy*, No. 92, Fall 1993, p. 92.

orbit".<sup>148</sup> He went so far as to suggest that the Khojali massacre was the work of Russians, to provoke further conflict between the two nations. In a word, he suggested, the Karabakh conflict was instigated, planned, and fought by the Russians. Such interpretations of the causes of wars in the Caucasus see the local belligerents as simple actors of a script written and a play directed from Moscow.

Goltz' assertions have two problems. The first is that they are very popular in Caucasian capitals, and serve to shift responsibilities away from local actors and leaders. During the war, and since, I have several times heard people in Baku and Yerevan insisting that the changing war fronts were the result of Russian manipulation, of conscious policies in Moscow; and that once the Russian factor was eliminated from the Caucasus, Armenians and Azerbaijanis could find a *modus vivendi*. Just to quote a few examples: the Yerevan based analyst Armen Baghdasarian considered that the Azerbaijani victory in the summer of 1992 could be explained only by Russian military support to the Elchibey regime;<sup>149</sup> the Azerbaijani presidential adviser Vafa Guluzade expressed a similar position, saying, "The current struggle is that of Russia against national independence movements (...) Without Russian protection [of Armenia] Azerbaijan could return Karabakh under its rule";<sup>150</sup> and Isa Gambar, parliament speaker in 1992-93, and one of the leaders of the Azerbaijani opposition, similarly declared: "Russia considers that until it solves its internal problems, it should not permit the normal development of South Caucasus states. If the foreign intervention is eliminated, the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict would be easier."<sup>151</sup>

The second problem with the "Russian Hand" theory is that it came at a time when Western views on a new policy towards Russia were taking shape, and in February 1994 the idea of eastern expansion of NATO while leaving Russia out had won in the policy debate.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, the West saw Russia once again as the potential enemy, and saw its intervention not as a stabilizing force, but as a source of trouble. On

148 Ibid.

149 Author interview with Armen Baghdasarian, Yerevan, 10 March 1993.

150 Author interview with Vafa Guluzade, Baku, 28 June 1999.

151 Author's notes of press conference given by Isa Gambar, Baku, 1 July 1999.

152 Gilbert Achcar, *La nouvelle guerre froide*, Paris: PUF, 1999, pp. 72-6.

the other hand, some Russian analysts were worried about a return of dictatorship, in the form of a nationalist ideology and neo-imperialistic policies in the "near abroad", as a result of the failure of the Russian economic reforms and democratization under Yeltsin and Gaidar. Such a shift in Russian policies from pro-democratic reforms to a nationalist backlash could only lead to renewed tensions between Moscow and Western capitals.<sup>153</sup> Perceptions between Russia and the West were changing, and this left a long shadow over the actual role played by Russia in the former Soviet republics.

Apart from perceptions and politically motivated representations, what was the real Russian policy in the Caucasus, and what impact did it have on the Karabakh war? The political reaction of the Kremlin in the initial phase of the conflict (1988-91) was surprise and bewilderment, followed later by an attempt to keep the status quo while proposing large economic investments, since Moscow thought solving socio-economic problems would solve the existing national-political ones. It also introduced the army as a peacekeeping force, to separate the warring factions and bring a minimum of stability to the mountainous autonomy. As the situation worsened Moscow tried to put the region under its direct rule by creating the Volsky commission. By the time that experiment had failed to produce results, Gorbachev was dramatically weakened and his main concern was to keep power and try to reorganize the USSR on federal lines, through constitutional reforms. When Armenia refused to take part in the referendum on the new union (March 1991), the Soviet troops which were deployed as peacekeepers were used to punish the Armenian side (and reward loyal Mutalibov) by Operation Kaltso and by organizing "ethnic cleansing" of Armenian villages to the north of Karabakh and around the town of Shushi.

As the Soviet Union crumbled, Moscow had military forces in the Caucasus region which it hardly controlled. From mid-1991 until the end of 1992, Moscow had little idea about the situation of the former Soviet bases in the Caucasus, and about how it could use them in the future. Nor did the Russian leadership have the means to preserve those bases from a logistic point of view, while the long-term strategic perspective was shrouded in darkness as national movements erupted in various

153 Alexander Arbatov, "A New Cold War?" *Foreign Policy*, No. 95, Summer 1994, pp. 90-103.

regions of the Caucasus hostile to Russian rule, calling the survival of those bases into question.<sup>154</sup> Most of those bases were isolated and did not receive either funding or food, and the soldiers were disoriented and starving. In those circumstances, local Russian military leaders had to manage their survival and that of their troops by all possible means, including selling weapons or working as mercenaries.<sup>155</sup> Seeing a conscious, manipulative "hand" behind this is an act of wild imagination.

In the fateful period of November 1991-June 1992, during which the Armenian forces succeeded in taking control of the whole of Mountainous Karabakh and opening a land corridor to Armenia, Russia did not have a clear policy in the Caucasus. Not only did various Russian institutions have contradictory policies—the president's office, the Foreign, Defence and Interior ministries—but even the Defence Ministry did not have control over "its" retreating forces from Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan, leaving behind large quantities of arms and ammunition. Some analysts see in the fact that Russian officers handed arms from the Stepanakert garrisons to Karabakh Armenians, or from the Gumri base to the forces of the local warlord Huseinov, a kind of Russian plot. Let us consider the question whether the Russian officials commanding those bases could have done anything other than hand over those weapons to local fighters. Surely Karabakh Armenians or Ganja fighters would not have tolerated the Russians taking those weapons away. Instead, the Russian officers were happy to cash in a few thousand dollars in return for a tank or a howitzer. Russian military as far away as the Baltic Fleet were selling arms and ammunition, which were later sent to the war fronts in the Caucasus.<sup>156</sup> Russian military assistance in the form of sending arms and ammunition to Armenia

154 See the article by Col. V. Kaushansky, "How 'Ours' Become 'Aliens'", *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 22 March 1991, quoted in *Russian Press Digest*, 22 March 1991, describing the difficulties of Soviet troops in Armenia; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* describes how North Ossets threatened to nationalize military bases on their territory unless the military supplied them with weapons for the fighting in South Ossetia; see *Russian Press Digest* on 23 May 1992.

155 On the condition of the Russian armed forces in 1991-92, see Pavel Baev, *The Russian Army in Times of Trouble*, PRIO/SAGE, London, 1996, pp. 115-20; see also William Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

156 Julian Borger, "Impoverished Russian troops sell stolen arms for cash", *The Guardian*, 21 May 1992.



was much more important in 1993-94, when the war took the form of confrontation between two regular armies. This assistance was key to creating an air defence system in Karabakh that neutralized the Azerbaijani air superiority, as well as giving the necessary military hardware for the Armenian offensive of 1993. Therefore, Russian policies during the Karabakh war should be seen in a much more nuanced way than by presenting Moscow as the manipulator of the war there for an imperial return to those formerly Tsarist and Soviet colonies. The empire was not returning, it was simply shrinking.

Russian analysts suggest that if manipulation happened, it was a two-way affair. According to Yevgeni Kazhokin, the director of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies in Moscow, it was not just the Russian policy makers who manipulated the situation in Azerbaijan and Georgia to overthrow nationalist leaders and bring back former Soviet officials; rather it was the old *nomenklatura* figures, Aliiev and Shevardnadze, who used their connections with Russia and succeeded in bringing the local Russian military power to support their bids to retake power.<sup>157</sup>

The question remains, how did numerically inferior Armenians, with a difficult geographical position during the initial months of the war, and a big inferiority in arms and ammunition, succeed in winning the war? Many analysts refer to the military tradition of Armenians in the Soviet army, while Azerbaijanis and Muslims in general were discriminated against and did not have specialized military training. Others note the better social organization of Armenians, their discipline and motivation relative to that of Azerbaijanis. On the political level, the Armenian side registered its most dramatic successes when Baku was in a state of turmoil, suffering from a power struggle between various elite factions. Whenever Azerbaijan was united under one leadership it went on to counter-attack, with limited success. Last but not least, the Armenian efforts to build a professional army came much earlier, while Azerbaijan lagged behind. Vazgen Manukian, who was Prime Minister and later Defence Minister of Armenia (September 1992-April 1993), said that he tried to attract ethnic Armenian officers in the Russian Army by offering them wages higher than what they earned in Russia.<sup>158</sup> What has not been remarked so far is that political and military de-

157 Author interview with Yevgeni Kozhokin, Moscow, 15 May 1998.

158 Author interview with Vazgen Manukian, Yerevan, 18 December 2004.

velopments in 1988-91 prepared each of the antagonists Armenia and Azerbaijan for a different war.

The presence of the Soviet troops and their pro-Azeri political sympathy and continuous pressure on the Armenian side (Operation Kaltso, April-September 1991) forced Armenian villages to create their self-defence units and fight back. From 1988 until end of 1991 the Armenians of Karabakh not only witnessed direct military pressure but also had the examples of the Sumgait, Kirovabad (later Ganja) and Baku pogroms driving out Armenian populations. The Karabakh Armenians, frightened and encircled, had their backs to the wall. The Azerbaijani side was prepared for another sort of war. In Sumgait and Baku Azerbaijani mobs had numerical superiority and could chase out the ethnic Armenians by the superiority of their sheer numbers. During Operation Kaltso in 1991 they were supported by the superior forces of the Soviet troops against lightly armed Armenian villagers. Their military strategy basically consisted of spreading fear through shelling (as in Stepanakert in 1991-92) and massive attacks that lacked coordination and strategic depth. This military style could not match the organization and determination showed by the Armenian side. Once the Soviet troops withdrew, in the initial year of the war (1992) the Armenian and Azerbaijani self-defence units formed at village level, supported by volunteer battalions coming from Yerevan and Baku, were left to face each other, and on this level the Armenian side was better organized and had more experience.

#### *Causes of war: fear or opportunity?*

Stuart Kaufmann proposes an interesting argument on the origins of the Karabakh conflict by criticising the "intellectual conceit that ethnic war is simply the logical result of the pursuit of group interests".<sup>159</sup> He insists that ethnic wars are primarily driven by fear, "which in turn has its sources in prejudice by which ethnic conflicts escalate to war".<sup>160</sup> For Kaufmann, it was the irrational explosion of sentiments that caused the emergence of insecurity and violence, which in its turn eroded the

159 Stuart Kaufman, "Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabagh", Washington: CSIS, 1998, p. 2. Internet address: [www.csis.org/ruseura/ponars/workingpapers/008.PDF](http://www.csis.org/ruseura/ponars/workingpapers/008.PDF)

160 Ibid.

power of Moscow over the two Caucasian republics, and not conscious elite-led calculations of win-or-lose. "Rather, ideological and prejudice-driven ethnic fears caused conflict and violence that, over time, weakened and finally destroyed the state."<sup>161</sup> But why does such fear erupt at certain moments and not others? Or, why does this fear lead to violence in certain circumstances, and is either repressed or finds different, non-violent, expressions in others? Kaufmann says that just as in the case of Karabakh, "violence may erupt even before extremist elites start to mobilize people".<sup>162</sup> He calls such cases "mass-led", contrasting them with "elite-led" conflicts as in the former Yugoslavia. For example, he remarks that the initial rallies in Armenia in 1988 were mobilized well before the formation of committees at factory and university level. Similarly, mobilization in Azerbaijan, and the imposing of the blockade on Armenian villages within and around Karabakh, had a mass character and were not led by the Baku elite.

Let us put aside expressions like "extremist elites", or dozens of others such as "nationalist", "separatist", or "Christian" Armenians and "Muslim" Azerbaijanis, etc. which are value judgements that hinder our understanding of the political realities, and often are marred by imprecision and misunderstandings. Kaufmann's paper is highly interesting because it helps reconstruct a new argument by rearranging his. We can also see the same equation (nationalism leading to Soviet collapse) the other way around: it was not Armenian nationalism that led to the weakening of the Soviet Union, but the weakening of the Soviet rule that created a huge political space and a demand for the development of a new political legitimacy. Because of reasons proper to modern Armenian history, and because of the specific nature of Soviet policies and more precisely the creation of ethnically defined territories, the new political legitimacy could only be filled by a movement defining itself in national terms. Armenians—or Georgians or Ingushes for that matter—were no less nationalist in 1978 than in 1988, and one can recall the disturbances in Georgia and Abkhazia when Moscow tried to reform the Soviet constitution and questioned the place of the Armenian and Georgian languages in those Soviet Republics. But the Soviet Union

161 Ibid., p. 9.

162 Ibid., p. 10.

and its state structures were still intact, and as a result the nationalist outbursts did not develop into alternative political movements.

Gorbachev's reforms proposed new principles for political relations within the USSR, encouraging Armenians to put forward their age-old grievances (loss of land and people) and the territorial question of Karabakh where the majority of inhabitants were still ethnic Armenians. The contradictory policies of Gorbachev, the Sumgait tragedy, the shifts by Communist Party cadres, the rise of inter-ethnic violence and population exchange, all contributed to progressive undermining of Soviet authority in Armenia. As I explained above, Soviet structures were more solid in Azerbaijan, partially because of the weakness of the Azerbaijani popular movement, and because Azerbaijan was supported by Moscow to preserve the status quo. In any case, with the emergence of powerful mass movements and the development of politics outside the framework of the official party and the state institutions, Moscow lost its capacity and role of power broker and mediator, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis found themselves face to face for the first time since the Sovietization of the Caucasus. To conclude, it was the weakening of the Soviet state that led to political nationalism, and its collapse to the war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis to determine who would control the disputed territories.

Svante Cornell looks at the conflicts of the Caucasus from the perspective of the unstable institutional structures, the autonomy structures within the Union Republics. He notes that most secessionist movements took place where autonomy structures existed;<sup>163</sup> that ethnic mobilization takes place "as minority groups perceive themselves subjected to assimilation",<sup>164</sup> and that once conflict erupts minorities do not wish to return to the autonomy arrangement and demand full independence. He concludes:

In a sense, the autonomous status seems to have fuelled rather than diminished minority demands – a factor which is helpful in understanding why Central Asia, where there are few autonomous regions, has witnessed fewer instances of ethnic conflict than the Caucasus.<sup>165</sup>

163 Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Big Powers*, p. 40.

164 Ibid., pp. 41-2.

165 Ibid., p. 45.

While Cornell's remark about the interrelation between minority mobilization and institutional structures of autonomy is highly interesting, I would like to introduce a clear difference between minority mobilization and ethnic conflict. One does not necessarily lead to the other, at least not in a mechanical way. At the time of the Soviet collapse there were dozens of territorial disputes, various forms and levels of ethnic mobilization, and luckily only a few of those led to bloody confrontations. To move from ethnic mobilization to conflict we need a violent intervention to trigger a bloody conflict. This trigger often came in the form of military intervention by republican or central authorities (Baku in the case of Karabakh, Tbilisi in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Moscow in the case of Chechnya) to suppress the political movements of minority groups, transforming the conflict from a political level to a military one. This we will see even more clearly in the chapter on Georgia, while discussing the conflict in Abkhazia.

The cease-fire agreement in May 1994 reflected a power equilibrium reached after several years of war. On the one hand the Armenian side could bring its control over Karabakh, and also occupy vast regions of Azerbaijan proper. The dramatic defeat of Azerbaijan, plus the failure of the last offensive in 1993-94, reflected the creation of a military balance difficult to break. Equally important is the leadership of Heydar Aliiev, who could repress the power struggle in Baku under his leadership and impose on the country a cessation of hostilities. Aliiev knew that the greatest harm his opponents could do him was to attack him on Karabakh issue. But he was also conscious that three leaders of Azerbaijan before him had fallen from power as their forces were beaten on the front. Aliiev was already strong enough in May 1994 to sign a cease-fire agreement.

## GEORGIA, FROM NATIONAL LIBERATION TO STATE COLLAPSE AND BACK

### *Georgia's specific features*

Georgia was not an ordinary Soviet republic. It was the country where Stalin or Josef Vissarionovich Jugashvili was born, the person who has shaped the Soviet Union more than any other character. Georgia profited much from the fact that Stalin and several other Soviet leaders who ruled this vast country from the 1920s to the 1950s were of Georgian origin, including Lavrenti Beria, Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Abel Yenukidze. Under Stalin the country enjoyed privileges that other union republics did not have, with living standards higher than elsewhere in the Union, and became the Soviet republic with the highest percentage of its population completing university education. True, Stalinist purges hit the Georgian intelligentsia hard, but nevertheless Georgian attitudes towards the Soviet dictator remained ambivalent even in the age of *glasnost* and heated debates; in spite of his crimes Stalin was Georgian, and was defended by Georgian authors as "a statesman and military leader".<sup>1</sup> Georgia also went through national consolidation under Soviet rule, reinforcing the place of ethnic Georgians in the republic, as a result of out-migration of ethnic Russians and Armenians starting

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Fuller refers to an article by Levan Khaindrava in defence of Stalin published in *Literaturnaya Gruzziya*, No. 1, 1989, in her article: "Filling in the 'Blank Spots' in Georgian History: Noe Zhordania and Joseph Stalin", *Report on the USSR*, 31 March 1989, p. 21.