

The Logic of Occupation in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: The Cases of Agdam and Shaumyan

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Public and International Affairs
In
The School of Public and International Affairs

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April 28, 2016
Alexandria, VA

Keywords: Ethnic war, territory, Eurasia, Caucasus, Karabakh

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ABSTRACT

Why do warring parties sometimes end up occupying territories they do not claim while not occupying territory they do? How do they explain this and how can we, from this explanation, understand the logic of occupation at work in these cases? This is the puzzle and the research questions at the center of this thesis. Using a case study of the Karabakh War (1991-94) it seeks to understand the rationale behind the Armenian occupation of previously undisputed Azerbaijani-populated territories around the contested entity of Nagorno Karabakh (NK). To achieve this objective the thesis considers one of these districts – Agdam – and contrasts its occupation to the lack of a concerted effort to return control over previously Armenian-populated district of Shaumyan, a territory Armenians view as under Azerbaijani occupation. The thesis presents the circumstances and rationales provided by the Armenian leaders for these counter-intuitive policies of occupation they pursued during the Karabakh war. This necessitates examining the prior meanings of these places, the contested and changed significance of Agdam and Shaumyan since the Karabakh war.

There are five distinct explanatory accounts of logics of occupation. These are accounts based on 1) military/security needs; 2) political elite-driven decisions, 3) economic gain, 4) psychological and 5) identity-related factors.

Process tracing and archival research points to primarily security and psychological rationales for the original actions, whereas economic gain played a secondary role. While these factors remain significant in justifying continued occupation, today they are also strongly augmented by newly-constructed identity markers and political elite-driven considerations.

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General Audience Abstract

This paper considers the evolving role of territory in conflicts driven primarily by competing ethnic groups. I look at the various theories of territorial conquests and try to determine to what extent such acquisitions are driven by security, economic, political, psychological and/or identity factors. I find that the significance of territorial control changes over time, adding scrutiny to long-held assumptions and associated policies.

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Preface

It was April 1993 and I was a high school student in Tucson. I remember picking up a copy of the local *Arizona Daily Star*. Scouring as I always did for international news, I located a short blurb about the Karabakh war. It announced that Armenian forces achieved a sudden battlefield surprise, occupying the previously undisputed Kelbajar district located in the mountains between the Armenian populated Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia proper.

Many wondered at the time why Armenian forces would devote time and effort to taking territory beyond the land they claimed when the Nagorno Karabakh Republic was first proclaimed in September 1991 while parts of the very territory being claimed was at that time occupied by Azerbaijani forces. Already by then the war had cost many thousands of lives and displaced more than half a million people. The conflict that preceded the war affected nearly all Armenians and Azerbaijanis of the region, no matter what political views, if any, they may have had about Nagorno Karabakh. The conflict was responsible for our family's own forced relocation from Baku – our home for four generations – and ending up as refugees, in the faraway southwestern corner of the United States.

Fast forward more than two decades and the conflict remains on a low boil. Shootings on the Line of Contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani armies are almost a daily occurrence. There is little expectation for peace and, given that the last two years has seen a body count that is the worst on record since 1994, growing nervousness about more escalation. With war having consumed Ukraine and Russia – two countries with scarcely any history of past warfare – gloomy forecasts seem more likely to be realized in the historically more volatile Caucasus.

All these years, Karabakh has loomed large in my life. With the Armenian presence erased in Baku – and the city demography changing so much – Karabakh remains the only ancestral home of many Baku Armenians, including my family. It is the only place, where our old family home – serving as our summer vacation destination in the years of peace – is still intact. Two of my grandparents and most of my great-grandparents are buried there. The place is full of familiar faces, views, sounds and smells.

Aside from this personal attachment and desire to see Karabakh persevere, there is a realization that peace can only be achieved through mutual recognition of past wrongs, compromises – including through surrender of many of the conquered territories by both sides – and building of a new foundation for co-existence.

Because the Karabakh conflict is still very much a live one, and because my own personal history has been shaped by this conflict, this thesis is ‘asymmetrical’ in that it examines mostly the Armenian perspective and experience of the war.

Chapter I. A Puzzle from the Karabakh War

Located in a relatively remote corner of the world, and directly involving two small countries with a combined population of about ten million people, the Karabakh conflict is predictably under-studied. The Caucasus region remains in a geopolitical flux with Russia, the Euro-American alliance, Turkey and Iran all seeking various degrees of influence, and the existing security regimes increasingly coming under strain.

Karabakh's sibling conflicts in Georgia's former autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, most recently, Ukraine's Crimea and Donbass conflicts, while relatively less intense and bloody than Karabakh, have drawn greater attention, likely because they directly involve Russia and are also more easily accessible for research. The Karabakh conflict only indirectly involves Russia, and other Great Powers, yet it has locked up the strategic region between Turkey, Russia and Iran for more than two decades.

While all violent conflicts between different states have distinctive territorial aspects, Karabakh's is more unusual than most.

First, there is a live Line of Contact, policed by enemy forces, with no working crossings and no regular over the Line communications. There is no permanent international presence, with a small group of monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) visiting on average once a month. A state of war has been ongoing for two decades since the cease-fire agreement, even though clashes are limited mostly to the use of light arms. Most of the time there is little to no shooting.

Second, both sides claim to be liberating their territories and both claim their territories are under occupation of the other. These claims are not symmetrical. In addition to what they already control Armenian claims extends to territories that Azerbaijan overran during the war, the Shaumyan district and, sometimes, portions of the adjacent Khanlar district with villages of Getashen and Martunashen. Azerbaijan claims all of the territory of Nagorno Karabakh along with adjacent districts under Armenian control and, through pronouncements of President Ilham Aliyev, articulates historical claims on all of the territory of the Republic of Armenia, including its capital Yerevan.¹

Third, Armenian forces occupy territories that were previously not in dispute. These include districts to the east, south and west of the former Nagorno

¹ "Armenia of today is a historic Azerbaijani land... Our main goal is restoration of the territorial integrity of our country, our return to our historic lands, including the return of Azerbaijani population to the territory of today's Armenia." From "Ilham Aliyev meets with a group of youth of the country," January 29, 2016, accessed at <http://ru.president.az/articles/17644>.

Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). Taken together these territories are about twice the size of the original NKAO. As a result, Azerbaijan is more aggressively trying to challenge the status quo than the Armenian side.

This thesis focuses on the following puzzle: why have Armenian forces focused on occupying areas they did not originally claim, while effectively acquiescing to Azerbaijani control of the other, more “Armenian” areas of Nagorno Karabakh that they previously controlled?

To establish a foundation for examining this question, this chapter provides an account of the historic evolution of Nagorno Karabakh as a political and geographical entity, and a brief account of the war that developed over the territory as the Soviet Union tried to reform in the later eighties before collapsing in 1991.

Historical Background



Figure 1. A political map of Russia’s South Caucasus governorates circa 1914.
Courtesy of RusDeutsch.ru

The Russian Caucasus

The concept of “Nagorno Karabakh” is largely a Soviet-era construct with its origins in the 1921 decision by Soviet Russian and Caucasus leaders to establish the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast within newly-constituted Soviet

Azerbaijan. As much of the rest of the Caucasus, the territory known as Nagorno Karabakh² had a mixed Armenian and Azerbaijani population for at least three centuries. Through this time the region was disputed by local lords, the Armenian *meliks* and Muslim *khans*, in conflicts that were primarily political but with strong religious overtones. Power-sharing arrangements were stabilized with the region's incorporation into the Russian Empire in the first half of the 19th century.

With the spread of nationalist ideologies through the latter part of the 19th century, regional politics became increasingly ethnicized, with first Armenian-Tatar clashes of 1905 taking place in Karabakh and other areas co-habited by Armenians and Caucasus Tatars.³ With the emergence of the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1918, Karabakh was one of many areas in dispute between the two newly emergent state formations and nascently nationalizing states.

One mark of the ethno-complexity of the Caucasus is that both republics were proclaimed in Tiflis (Tbilisi)⁴, a multi-ethnic city with an Armenian plurality that was the Russian imperial center for the Caucasus, and which itself became the capital of the newly-established Georgian Republic. The respective Armenian and Azerbaijani national governments then moved to Yerevan and Baku, the governorate (*gubernia*) centers, both with ethnically mixed populations. From West to East, the Armenian government claimed all of Kars oblast and Yerevan governorate and the “Armenian” portions of Tbilisi and Yelisavetpol (Ganje) governorates. From East to West, the Azerbaijani government claimed all of Baku and Yelisavetpol governorates along with all of Zakatali district and the “Muslim” portions of Tbilisi and Yerevan governorates. Nagorno Karabakh was located fully within the Yelisavetpol governorate and was subdivided into districts (*uezds*), from north to south, of Yelisavetpol, Jevanshir, Shusha and Jebrail.

Soon after the declarations of independence the South Caucasus republics were occupied by the Ottoman and German forces. Then, following the Entente victory in WWI, by the British. Intermittent fighting continued in Karabakh between Armenians and Muslims.

Following the Ottoman occupation of Shusha, the National Council of Karabakh Armenians agreed to “temporary” rule by the Turkish-backed

² A 20th century name, for the region, which was known as Karabakh, Aghvank, Khachen and Artsakh before. De Waal (2003) remains the most comprehensive account of Karabakh history available today. The terms “Azerbaijan” and “Azerbaijani” are also mostly 20th century constructs; prior to the 1920s most Azerbaijanis were referred to as the Caucasus Tatars or simply Muslims, while the term “Azerbaijan” applied to the Iranian province south of the River Araxes.

³ The 1905 events mirrored anti-Armenian violence in the Ottoman Empire, as well as anti-Jewish violence in the Russian Empire, in that they were initially instigated by authoritarian monarchies fearing political challenges to their rule. In 1905, Russian officials reportedly mobilized and armed Muslim militias to attack Armenians seen as supporters of revolutionary movements.

⁴ Tbilisi’s last pre-revolution mayor Aleksandr Khatisov became prime minister of the Republic of Armenia.

Azerbaijani republic. British occupation conserved this status quo, with forces from Armenia prevented from entering Karabakh. Spring of 1920 saw the destruction of the Armenian half of Shusha and a number of villages to its East, with thousands killed. At the same time Armenian forces “cleansed” Muslims from much of the Zangezur *uezd* to Karabakh’s West.

The numerous territorial disputes were expected to be addressed by an international peace conference. However, even before they could be considered, in 1920-21 Soviet Russian forces secured control over the entire Caucasus with Moscow reemerging as the only regional powerbroker.

The birth of NKAO

As the new Soviet administrative system came into place, Nagorno Karabakh became an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in 1921. That decision came after difficult negotiations and as a compromise between newly Sovietized Azerbaijan and Armenia. Soviet Azerbaijani leaders initially appeared to agree to Karabakh’s incorporation into Armenia, but that position was later reversed. The establishment of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast within Georgia in March 1921 served as a precedent for the formation of NKAO a few months later (Saparov 2012; Derluguiian 2005, 186).⁵ Neither Armenian nor Azerbaijani leaders were fully satisfied with this compromise arrangement.

Elsewhere in the Caucasus, the division into Soviet republics centered on the governorate capitals, but cut across old Russian borders: all of the Kars *Oblast* and Surmalu (originally Surb Mariam or St. Mary) *uezd* of the Yerevan governorate along with Mt. Ararat were ceded to the Republic of Turkey. Nakhichevan, also an *uezd* within the Yerevan governorate, became a physically detached Autonomous Republic of Soviet Azerbaijan, with Turkey serving as a guarantor of its status. Ethnically mixed Zangezur *uezd* of Yelisavetpol governorate became part of Armenia. And, finally, the southern portions of the Tbilisi governorate were divided between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Soviet decision-making reflected the status quo in Karabakh and the reality on the ground that neither Azerbaijani government nor the National Council of Karabakh Armenians had complete control over the region: Azerbaijan held the region’s only urban center – Shusha – and Armenians most of the rest. At the same time, other areas with Armenian populations outside NKAO were incorporated

⁵ Derluguiian citing research, by Grigoriy Lezhava, notes that Georgian Communists played an important role in the decision to include Armenians of Karabakh in Azerbaijan, as they sought to retain control of Ossetian- and Abkhaz-populated areas inside Georgia.

directly into Soviet Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani-populated areas were included into Soviet Armenia without receiving ethno-autonomous status.

Demarcation of NKAO borders took nearly a decade. Early maps showed NKAO connected to Soviet Armenia by a sliver of territory in what later became Lachin district. In mid-1920s, Lachin along with Kelbajar to the north and Kubatly to the south – all areas lying between NKAO and Armenia – were declared “Red Kurdistan”⁶ *uezd* within Azerbaijan. But any plans for Kurdish autonomy were soon abandoned and NKAO became an enclave fully surrounded by Soviet Azerbaijani territory.

It is notable that from 1921-25 Soviet Azerbaijan was led by Sergey Kirov, a prominent Russian Bolshevik, and from 1926-29 by Levon Mirzoyan, an Armenian originally from Karabakh, who previously also headed the Baku Communist organization. These appointments must have helped facilitate NKAO’s incorporation into Soviet Azerbaijan after several years of ethnic violence.

Soviet Perestroika and early violence

Throughout the Soviet period, Nagorno Karabakh continued to resurface as a disputed area. The increasingly ethno-centric politics of the Soviet republics and the infrastructure of autonomy in Karabakh contributed to the dispute’s longevity. Lobbied by Karabakh and Yerevan intellectuals, Soviet Armenian officials repeatedly appealed to the Kremlin to re-adjust the inter-republican border, with publicized demands dating to the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. Predictably, Soviet Azerbaijani officials lobbied against changes and sought to remake Nagorno Karabakh’s demographic make-up by reducing the Armenian presence there, while also distancing it from Armenia. With the ascendance of Heydar Aliyev to the top post in Baku, a non-Karabakhi Armenian Boris Kevorkov was appointed to lead NKAO in 1973. As an Aliyev loyalist, Kevorkov maintained a distance from Yerevan, refusing to visit Armenia, and seeking to curtail all Armenia-NKAO contacts. Local activists for unification were exiled from NKAO.⁷

The combination of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reformist policies and the re-emergence of the “national question” throughout the USSR, particularly by Crimean Tatars seeking a return to their homeland,⁸ encouraged long suppressed local activists to re-launch their campaign in 1987. The ouster of former Soviet Azerbaijani leader Aliyev from Politbureau was also seen as an opening for more

⁶ Most local Kurds were Shiite and Turkic-speaking and by 1930s self-identified as Azerbaijanis, particularly as the Soviet government ordered Caucasus Kurds to be deported to Central Asia in 1937.

⁷ NKAO-era official Vladimir Tovmasian described the period in his memoirs.

⁸ Arkady Karapetyan noted the importance of Crimean Tatars’ public protests in Moscow in mid-1987 as a precedent for re-launching of the Karabakh movement at this time

effective lobbying. The initially peaceful letter-writing campaigns, demonstrations and legislative appeals culminated on February 20, 1988 in the NKAO legislature's official appeal to Baku, Moscow and Yerevan to re-assign the oblast to Armenia. That decision was followed by violent pogroms against Armenians, and later tit-for-tat attacks and Soviet government crackdowns.

Just two days after the February vote, a group of Azerbaijani protesters armed with sticks attempted to march from Agdam to Stepanakert. They were stopped by counter-protesters at Askeran, on NKAO's administrative boundary with Azerbaijan; in subsequent fights two people were killed. A week later there was a pogrom against Armenians in the town of Sumgait, with 32 people killed.

The NKAO request meantime was officially denied by Moscow and Baku authorities, while the reaction of Armenia's Communist leaders was initially muffled. However, as violence targeting Armenians in Azerbaijan escalated Armenian official support became more public.

In the following months, Soviet security forces were deployed throughout the two republics, but made no effort to stem the flight of Armenians from Azerbaijan or Azerbaijanis from Armenia that continued unabated through 1988. Inter-ethnic tensions rose in November with the Armenian quarter of Kirovabad (Ganja, the former Yelisavetpol) coming under seige and anti-Azerbaijani violence breaking out throughout northern Armenia (incidentally, just weeks before it was struck by a devastating earthquake).

In early 1989, Soviet leaders introduced direct rule in NKAO that lasted for most of that year and helped temporarily stabilize the *oblast* and the two republics. The move also effectively abolished the local self-governance bodies. In January 1990 came another spike in violence, as 90 or more Armenians were killed in pogroms in Baku with most of the rest fleeing the city, and more than 100 Azerbaijanis and over a dozen Soviet soldiers killed in subsequent clashes between the military and local activists. Between 1990 and 1991, NKAO was ruled by the so-called Organizing Committee led by Soviet Azerbaijani officials and pressure on Karabakh intensified, with local activists turning to guerilla tactics against now militarized Azerbaijani police forces and Soviet security forces that began to expel residents of Armenian villages inside and in vicinity of NKAO into Armenia. By mid-1991, two dozen Armenian villages in Khanlar, Shaumyan, Hadrut and Shusha districts were depopulated.

The failure of August 1991 coup halted these operations. Subsequent to the coup, Russia and nearly all Soviet republics formally moved towards sovereignty from USSR. Azerbaijan declared its independence on August 30, and two days later Armenian activists in NKAO and the adjacent Shaumyan district, citing the

Soviet law on secession⁹ and the right of nations to self-determination, jointly announced the establishment of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic (NKR). The Republic of Armenia formally proclaimed independence after a referendum – demanded by the law on secession – three weeks later, on September 21. NKR held its own referendum and first elections at the end of 1991. By then the conflict's death toll had reached into many hundreds and the ethnic un-mixing of Armenia and Azerbaijan was nearly complete with more than half a million people displaced. Azerbaijan's Organizing Committee moved from central Stepanakert to Shusha. Most of Nagorno Karabakh was controlled by local self-defense forces backed by volunteers from Armenia.¹⁰ These forces were surrounded by Azerbaijani security and self-defense forces deployed around NKAO and Shaumyan district, as well as several enclaves in and around Stepanakert.

After NKAO's appeals for its reassignment from one Soviet republic to another were rebuffed, the Soviet law on secession – triggered by Azerbaijan's declaration of independence – became the legal path out of still Soviet Azerbaijan. The declaration of NKR by the Armenian majority NKAO and Shaumyan district was seen as a stop-gap measure with a view to eventual union with Armenia. Fearing an escalating confrontation with Azerbaijan, Armenia's leadership did not formally back NKR's independence.

On September 23, leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, with mediation by Russia and Kazakhstan and participation of Karabakh Armenian representatives, agreed to establishment of a cease-fire and peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict, including a reversal of ethnic cleansing. The status of Karabakh was not addressed.¹¹

As the Soviet Union formally disintegrated in December 1991 and Soviet forces began to pull out from the Caucasus, Azerbaijani and Armenian forces were left face to face in Karabakh. Already by then, nearly all of Armenian population had been expelled from Azerbaijan, as was Azerbaijani population from Armenia. Earlier in 1991, Soviet and Azerbaijani forces depopulated dozens of Armenian villages in the north, south and southeast of Karabakh. The Karabakh autonomy was formally abolished by Azerbaijan in November 1991. The stage was set for an

⁹ This law was adopted by the Soviet Union in April 1990 in response to Lithuania's declaration of independence and made secession contingent on referenda backed by super-majority of local residents. Under this law, individual autonomous entities and "compactly settled national minority population" were given the right to secede from republics seeking independence from USSR. Available online at http://www.nkrusa.org/nk_conflict/ussr_law.shtml.

¹⁰ As of early 1992, the majority of Armenian fighters in Karabakh were locals. This, for example, is made clear by the list of names and biographical details of the 52 Armenian fighters who were killed in the capture of Shusha and Lachin in May 1992. 32 of them were born in Karabakh, 9 in Baku and Sumgait (and displaced to Karabakh or Armenia in late 1980s), 10 were natives of Armenia (mostly from or near Gyumri) and 1 from Beirut, Lebanon.

¹¹ Known as Zheleznovodsk Declaration and available in English translation at

http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Azerbaijan_ZheleznovodskDeclaration1991.pdf.

ethnic war, in which Armenians viewed Azerbaijani military control over Karabakh as resulting in total expulsion of the Armenian population. The official Armenian term for the war became *goyamart* – a war of survival. Moscow's role in the 1991 deportations and lack of any international effort to stop them, left Karabakh Armenian leaders convinced that only through direct military action against Azerbaijani forces they could safeguard the region's remaining Armenian population from expulsion.

In Armenia proper the events in Karabakh and Azerbaijan were widely seen as a repeat of the Armenian genocide of 1915, when the Ottoman Armenian population was largely eradicated through deportations and massacres.¹² This helped generate strong public solidarity with Karabakh, with thousands of volunteers joining the war effort.

The War from the Armenian Perspective

Four distinct periods of the Armenian military campaign in Karabakh can be identified. The first period (February 1988 – October 1991) focused almost exclusively on self-defense: armed units were set up to protect Armenian-majority settlements from harassment, attack and deportation. Occasionally Azerbaijani police and Soviet security forces were attacked, but no Azerbaijani-majority areas in or near NKAO's administrative borders were occupied. The second period (October 1991-March 1993) saw a shift towards more aggressive steps to lift the siege of NK and its main town of Stepanakert, as well as more aggressive Azerbaijani efforts to force the Armenian population out of Karabakh. In the process Azerbaijani-populated settlements inside NK and at the narrowest point between NK and Armenia were occupied; as the Azerbaijani forces took control of the northern one-third of NK. The third period (March 1993-May 1994) saw more aggressive expansive action into previously undisputed Azerbaijani territory, including Agdam. Yet, at the same time no focused effort was made to recover the Shaumyan district in northern NK that Azerbaijani forces captured in the summer of 1992. Finally, the fourth period began following the May 1994 cease-fire and continues to date. It is largely characterized as a tense stalemate with frequent skirmishing.

Within these periods were certain key turning points in the tide of the conflict. At the end of 1991, as the Soviet Union was dissolved on the Russian leadership's initiative, Soviet turned Russian internal security forces were pulled

¹² More than half of Armenia's present-day population traces their origins to refugees from modern-day Turkey, so the Ottoman Armenian experience is a family experience for many Armenians. This is less of a formative experience for Karabakh Armenians, most of whom had no direct connections to Turkey and did not study Armenian history in schools. A significant minority of Armenians of Armenia have roots in Karabakh.

out from Karabakh and Armenians and Azerbaijanis were left largely to their own devices.

Initially, the Armenian side found itself at a severe disadvantage of a dual encirclement. Not only were Karabakh Armenians completely encircled by Azerbaijani territory and as a result under nearly complete overland blockade, but Karabakh's main town – Stepanakert - was also nearly surrounded by Azerbaijan forces positing in and around Shusha to the south and west, Khojali to northeast and Malibeyli to the east of Stepanakert.¹³ The rest of Nagorno Karabakh itself was surrounded on all sides and supplied from Armenia only by aircraft.

The Armenian forces were also severely outgunned. At the start of 1992, the local self-defense only had a few armored vehicles acquired after Soviet Interior forces withdrew. In March, three tanks were captured after several ethnic Armenian officers of the Stepanakert 366th Motor-Rifle regiment disobeyed orders to withdraw from Karabakh and joined the local self-defense. No other armor was available until the summer 1992, after Karabakh forces took Shusha and Lachin and opened a ground corridor to Armenia.

Enjoying early access to Soviet weapons arsenals on its territory, Azerbaijan began to launch missile and artillery attacks into Armenian-controlled areas, especially Stepanakert. According to Azerbaijani government documents obtained by Armenian forces during the war and published by a former NKR official, the Azerbaijani leadership was aware of the damage these attacks were causing. In the January 29, 1992 session with then President Ayaz Mutalibov, Azerbaijani officials estimated that already by then one-third of all buildings in Stepanakert were damaged by shelling.¹⁴ The documents also report on Azerbaijan's planning for offensive operations to capture Stepanakert.

The Armenian leadership in Karabakh saw their community's only chance of survival within their homeland in breaking out of the encirclement. That meant, first of all, lifting the siege of Stepanakert and capturing Azerbaijani areas around it, including Khojaly, where the Stepanakert airport was located. Because the first phase of the conflict had resulted in large-scale population displacements, by then the operational rules of the Karabakh conflict meant that the capture of any territory from the other side would result in the expulsion of the local population of the other side. According to Memorial human rights group,¹⁵ in preparation for the offensive against Khojaly the Armenian leadership in Nagorno Karabakh in the Directive No. 1 to its self-defense forces demanded fair treatment of enemy

¹³ This military disposition bore striking similarity to Bosnia, where government forces were surrounded on all sides by hostile Serbian and Croatian forces and their capital Sarajevo itself was under near encirclement and siege.

¹⁴ The documents were reportedly captured by Armenian forces during the war and published by a former Karabakh Armenian official Levon Melik-Shahnazaryan at <http://voskanapat.info/?p=1288>.

¹⁵ Moscow-based Memorial human rights organization published a detailed report on Khojaly capture.

prisoners and civilians. In practice there was little oversight and reciprocal violence was commonplace.

What happened next is one of many contested moments in the Karabakh war, but perhaps the most painful and notorious from the Azerbaijani side. There were between two to three thousand civilians in Khojaly along with several hundred fighters. The Armenian attack began on the night of February 25-26. As Azerbaijani defenses there were overwhelmed, most of the civilians and fighters fled through a corridor designated by the Armenian forces to the Azerbaijani town of Aghdam, about 10 to 15 kilometers away. But several hundred fleeing civilians along with dozens of fighters were killed in the fields near the frontline as they attempted to cross to the Azerbaijani-controlled territory. Armenian and Azerbaijani officials disagree on circumstances of their deaths. Azerbaijan claims the killings by Armenian forces were deliberate. Armenian and NKR officials deny they are responsible, noting that passage from Khojaly through a specially-designated corridor to that frontline section was safe as proof and that about 700 civilians who either stayed in Khojaly or were detained by Armenian forces just outside were in subsequent days transported to the frontline and crossed over to the Azerbaijani side, mostly unharmed.

In May 1992, Armenian forces took the town of Shusha and then established what they called a “humanitarian corridor” to Armenia, by capturing a road running through the Lachin district. This also became the first time, Armenian forces crossed into territory that was not part of the original 1988 claim encompassing NKAO territory, as well as the 1991 independence declaration that included both NKAO and Shaumyan, since Lachin was both outside NKAO and did not have an Armenian population.

As a result of these actions, some 40,000 Azerbaijanis were displaced from Shusha (inside former NKAO) and Lachin. While these moves were seen as a major escalation in fighting, they came after four months of bombardment and blockade of Stepanakert and international criticism was limited.¹⁶

But events that followed the lifting of the siege of Stepanakert and corridor to Armenia proved that these gains were insufficient for Karabakh’s security. In terms of human resources, Azerbaijan’s population was more than twice the size of Armenia and fifty times more than there were Armenians in Karabakh. As Azerbaijan mobilized its forces quickly outnumbered those of Armenians in Karabakh. Additionally, Azerbaijan benefited from the larger Soviet arsenals on its territory, acquiring substantially more military equipment than Armenia. In the air, Azerbaijan had nearly total dominance, flying dozens of combat aircraft and

¹⁶ The taking of Khojaly, Shusha and Lachin was not condemned by the UN Security Council unlike subsequent captures of Azerbaijani territory in 1993

about a dozen helicopters; Karabakh Armenians aviation was limited to helicopters supplied by Armenia.

In June 1992 fortunes of war shifted. Before Armenia reinforced Karabakh's defenses, Azerbaijani forces bolstered by Soviet equipment transfers and direct backing of Soviet/Russian forces still in Azerbaijan, as well as some military support from Turkey, went on the offensive, capturing more than one-third of the territory claimed by NKR, including Shaumyan and Mardakert districts in the north of Karabakh.¹⁷ Further Azerbaijani advance were stalled by October 1992 and a large-scale Azerbaijani offensive in the winter of 1992-93 failed to make any headway. Still, these attacks caused some 50,000 Armenians – or about a third of NKR population – to flee to Armenia. Once again there were no international sanctions.¹⁸

The Azerbaijani offensive operations were led primarily by a local rich man Suret Huseynov who developed a close relationship with the command of the Russian military base in Ganja. Huseynov became the government's formal "czar" for Karabakh and many of the combat-capable Azerbaijani forces in Karabakh were loyal to him rather than the Popular Front government of Abulfaz Elchibey that ousted Mutalibov in spring 1992. In February 1993, after Huseynov's forces lost nearly half of their personnel fighting in Mardakert district, Elchibey and Huseynov had a falling out. Huseynov was sacked from his official positions and pulled back to Ganja.

The resulting disarray in Azerbaijan helped facilitate the Armenian counter-attack in northern Karabakh. After consolidating their control over much of the Mardakert district, Armenian forces caught Azerbaijanis by surprise when in late March 1993 they focused their efforts on Kelbajar, a sparsely-populated mountainous district between northern Karabakh and Armenia, capturing it after a week of fighting. As a result, Armenian forces in northern Karabakh and in the Lachin corridor area now had some depth to conduct military operations, and the overall frontline was reduced by about 40 kilometers (see map on p. 15).

Armenian forces appeared poised to move further north to recapture the remainder of the Mardakert district and potentially move into Shaumyan district lost in June 1992. From the fall of 1992 to spring of 1993, Shaumyan district's self-defense commander Shahen Megryan¹⁹ reconstituted his forces into a guerilla-style unit that operated behind Azerbaijan lines, and was resupplied by helicopters.

¹⁷ There were no UN SC condemnation for the Azerbaijani move into northern NK and expulsion of its population

¹⁸ One significant exception was the U.S. Congress, which after lobbying by Armenian Americans, passed legislation in late 1992-early 1993 to severely restrict U.S. aid to Azerbaijan until its government is seen "taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh." This amendment to the Freedom Support Act became known as "Section 907."

¹⁹ Megryan was awarded the title of Hero of Artsakh, 21st person to be so honored, in October 2014, more than two decades after his death.

On April 12, Megryan's forces captured the village of Gulistan inside Shaumyan district. But on April 17, Megryan was killed when a helicopter he was in was shot down.²⁰ A prominent Karabakh Armenian figure, Megryan was also a senior member of NKR parliament.

Most of the military operations in Karabakh ceased for the next two months, as mediators from Russia and the West demanded via a UN Security Council 822 resolution that “local Armenian” forces pull back from Kelbajar and negotiations commenced.

Taking advantage of the hiatus in Karabakh fighting, Azerbaijani president Elchibey attempted to arrest Huseynov and disarm his forces in Ganja. But the June 4 effort failed spectacularly, with the government forces defeated in a bloody confrontation and Huseynov threatening to take Baku and overthrow Elchibey. Panicking, the government invited Azerbaijan’s former Soviet leader Heydar Aliyev, then leader of his native Nakhichevan region, to Baku. By June 18, Elchibey fled Baku and Aliyev, now the acting head of state, entered an alliance with Huseynov who became prime minister. Military units seen as loyal to Elchibey were ordered disbanded.

Armenian forces, still outnumbered and outgunned compared to Azerbaijan’s, benefited from this. After effectively deterring Azerbaijani air force from raids on Karabakh’s main town²¹ and with the earlier capture of Shusha, pushing Azerbaijani artillery beyond the 40-kilometer artillery range from Stepanakert became the pre-eminent security concern for Armenian forces and that meant occupation of Agdam.

The first Armenian offensive against Agdam, between June 12 and 18, 1993, was mostly unsuccessful. Armenian forces attacking from Askeran, on the main road between Stepanakert and Agdam, predictably accounted stiff resistance. But that direction was most likely to distract Azerbaijani forces from the main line of attack to the south. On June 12 forces from Martuni district advanced to southeast and east of Agdam, but that effort also stalled after Martuni Armenian commander, the U.S.-born Monte Melkonian was killed in fighting. In the following days, Armenian forces launched another attack, capturing heights to northeast of Agdam, but Martuni forces pulled back.

In late June, Armenian forces re-focused on Mardakert, retaking the town almost a year after losing it to Azerbaijani forces in the summer 1992 offensive. Since Mardakert is located northwest of Agdam, this also put pressure on the Azerbaijani town, which by early July 1993 was under siege with only the main road towards Barda and Yevlakh open and clogged by refugees.

²⁰ Aleksandr Kurepin, Artsakh in Soldat Udachi, October 1, 1999

²¹ Zhirovov describes the successful efforts by the Armenian air defense in Karabakh who shot down at least ten Azerbaijani attack planes.

Another Armenian attack was delayed because the OSCE envoy Mario Raffaelli visited the region between July 9 and 15.²² Fighting resumed after his delegation left. Within a week, Agdam's resistance was broken with Azerbaijani forces pulling out and the town occupied by Armenian forces on July 23. The move was condemned by the OSCE Minsk Group, which questioned the security rationale for the capture of Agdam,²³ and resulted in the second UN Security Council resolution on Karabakh.



Figure 2. A rough sketch of the Karabakh war (note that pre-war NKAO borders are accurately shown, but the 1994 Line of Contact is not). Courtesy www.otvaga2004.ru.

From August to October 1993, Armenian forces captured four more Azerbaijani districts located to the south of NKAQ along the Iranian border: Fizuli, Jebrail, Kubatly and Zangelan, in the order of occupation. The length of the

²² Human Rights Watch, *Seven Years of Conflict*, p. 45

²³ Report by the chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, July 27, 1993 S/26184

frontline was further reduced, and Armenians held on to the areas through the 1993-94 winter offensive by Azerbaijan that saw the war's bloodiest fighting.

The occupation was preceded and accompanied by a mass flight of the local population and looting of the abandoned properties, providing for an additional impetus for expansionist actions. The years of war and accompanied shelling left much of NK's population homeless and impoverished. The war trophies were seen as partial restitution for the suffering, with civilian looting convoys following on the heels of military advances from both sides.

In the end, more than 20,000 people²⁴ died in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict between February 1988 and May 1994. This statistic includes more than 12,000 Azerbaijani and about 6,500 Armenian fighters, as well as 1,264 Armenian and a similar number of Azerbaijani civilians. About 650,000 Azerbaijanis and 350,000 Armenians were displaced as a direct result of the conflict.

The Armenian military setbacks early in the war – and lack of foreign support to mitigate them – contributed to the Armenian side's *reliance on preemptive warfare*. As the areas outside the disputed NK were captured, the Armenian side presented their actions as temporary and intended to boost NK's security. The conquered areas were dubbed a "buffer zone." By capturing areas west, east and south of the former NKAO, Armenian forces reduced the length of their defensive perimeter by more than half, making it less difficult to hold with an outnumbered force. Significantly, after the capture of Agdam the frontline was pushed to 40 kilometers from Stepanakert, putting NK's main town out of range of most Azerbaijani artillery. In peace-time, Agdam also served as NK's main transportation hub straddling the only paved road connecting southern and northern Karabakh. By controlling Agdam, Armenian command could move their increasingly motorized forces along the frontline faster than through interior dirt roads. The "buffer zone" also restricted the lines of attack by Azerbaijan to areas to the east and north of Nagorno Karabakh, assured safe communications between Armenia and Karabakh, and gave Armenian forces additional depth they lacked at the start of the war. In short, these actions made Karabakh much more defensible against a large-scale military attack.

Another factor favoring the occupation was that it was accomplished with relatively few Armenian casualties. About 50 Armenian soldiers died in the operation to take Shusha and fewer died taking Lachin and Kelbajar. The Agdam operation took longer and was probably the costliest of all of the offensive operations, with estimates for Armenian deaths at about 100. But many more Armenian soldiers died in fighting to keep these areas than in the initial effort to

²⁴ Some government and media estimates are as high as 30,000, but more detailed estimates by the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments add up closer to between 20,000-21,000 for between 1988 and 1994. Fatality toll since 1994 to 2016 is currently approaching another 1,000 people, most of them military servicemen. .

occupy them, with the largest single-time casualty events for the Armenian side occurring in defense of Mardakert in the summer of 1992 and Kelbajar in January 1994. Considering the course of the war and subsequent cease-fire, Armenian forces minimized their own casualties – particularly casualties among civilians – through this occupation, by transferring the costs onto Azerbaijan.

The relative stability of the subsequent two decades has also been used as the argument for the need to keep the territories. Armenian decision-makers *do not* see the occupation as increasing their security dilemma, since they believe the same challenge of protecting Karabakh – just under less favorable geographic conditions – would exist without the occupation of adjacent districts.

Cease-fire

Concurrently with the war, Azerbaijan sought to attract Western investment in development of its offshore oil and gas reserves. The contract were finalized months after the 1994 cease-fire, and between 2006 and 2014 produced more than \$100 billion in revenue for the Azerbaijani government. The focus on enrichment from energy development and hopes that with time Azerbaijan would have a greater negotiating leverage, helped solidify the cease-fire.

The two decades that followed the May 1994 cease-fire agreement significantly reduced the intensity of violence but did not eliminate it: more than a 1,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani servicemen along with dozens of civilians on both sides are estimated to have been killed in mine incidents, skirmishes and sniper fire since 1994. The chances for another big war remain all too real.²⁵

The cease-fire period, especially in the last ten years, has also seen hardened official and public rhetoric on both sides of the conflict. Little empathy is offered to the suffering of the “other” side. Armenian officials and public figures emphasize the early violence directed against ethnic Armenian residents of Azerbaijan – particularly in Sumgait and Baku – even before the war began and overlook the suffering of Azerbaijanis who lived in Armenia as well as in and around Nagorno Karabakh. They also point to the continued official hate rhetoric by Azerbaijani officials as the reason for lack of progress towards peace. Azerbaijanis tend to focus on Azerbaijani civilian losses in Khojaly, as well as the de-facto annexation of the previously undisputed Azerbaijani territories.

Following the war, new settlements were established in the occupied territories for the Armenians displaced from the north of NK and much of the land was put to agricultural use. Today, it is politically incorrect in Armenia to refer the

²⁵ Between July 31 and August 2, in a series of tit-for-tat raids Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, called in Armenia a “micro-war,” sustained their worst one time casualties in over a decade, with some 20 servicemen killed.

territories as “occupied.” The preferred term is “liberated.” On maps, the occupied areas have been incorporated into districts of NK giving the state of affairs internal legitimacy and a sense of permanence. People in NK now say that they see the areas as part of the Armenian “homeland.”²⁶

One of the Karabakh conflict’s key features was the extent of ethnic cleansing, resulting in the displacement of about one million people²⁷, including about 650,000 Azerbaijanis and 300,000 Armenians. From 1988-91, most of the Armenian population of Soviet Azerbaijan outside Nagorno Karabakh fled or was driven out, as were close to 200,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia. As recently as in the 1980s, there were large Armenian communities in Baku and Azerbaijani communities throughout rural Armenia. The latest census figures show only dozens of people, most of them elderly members of inter-ethnic families, still identifying themselves as Azerbaijanis in Armenia or Karabakh, or as Armenians in Azerbaijan.

In the last decade, the Azerbaijani government has curtailed most internationally-funded civil society contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. A number of Azerbaijani activists, including former government officials and war veterans, have been harassed and imprisoned as “Armenian spies.”

This nearly total ethnic unmixing combined with the sense of collective trauma and mutual imposition of collective guilt, on top of the original political and territorial disagreements, is what makes any peaceful compromise so difficult and so remote in the Karabakh conflict.

Political debate

In the early stages of the Armenian movement for Karabakh in 1988, nationalist activists in both Stepanakert and Yerevan pursued essentially the same goal – Karabakh’s peaceful unification with Armenia as part of the Soviet Union and through Kremlin-centered decision-making. But initial euphoria over reunification soon disappeared as ethnic Armenians began to be targeted throughout Azerbaijan and Soviet authorities launched arrests of activists in both Yerevan and Stepanakert, making it clear that the Soviet government wasn’t about to satisfy their demands. In Yerevan, cracks began to emerge in the movement on whether to shift the emphasis of the Karabakh movement towards demands for greater democratization and sovereignty for Armenia, rather than for a change of Soviet administrative borders, the initial basis for mass mobilization.

²⁶ Toal and O’Loughlin 2013

²⁷ The war and continued hostilities certainly encouraged additional emigration from both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with some three million people estimated to have left the two republics for various reasons since independence.

As the former activists consolidated their power as the new government of Armenia, they abandoned past demands for reunification and the Nagorno Karabakh activists were forced to declare independence, which Armenia's government also refused to recognize. Throughout the Karabakh war, in spite of Karabakh Armenians' heavy reliance on help from Armenia, relations between Yerevan and Stepanakert remained uneasy, often standoffish and on occasion openly hostile.

From early on in his presidency, Ter-Petrosyan saw Armenia's foreign policy priority in overcoming the post-Soviet economic devastation of Armenia brought on first by the 1988 earthquake and then an end to Soviet subsidies by normalizing relations with Turkey and peacefully ending the Karabakh conflict. As the war in Karabakh escalated, it became an additional hindrance to normal ties with Turkey, which reassumed its early twentieth century role as Azerbaijan's chief foreign backer.

There was a domestic political driver as well, by 1991, the newly-elected Ter-Petrosyan's main domestic opponents were no longer the Communists, but the resurgent Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun), which was actively engaged in assisting Karabakh. The ARF and other opposition groups called for Armenia's recognition of NKR, but only succeeded in passing legislation that prohibited the Armenian government from agreeing to any documents that would endorse Azerbaijan's claim on Karabakh.

In early January 1992, an ARF representative Artur Mkrtchyan defeated a Ter-Petrosyan-backed candidate in the election for parliament speaker, NKR's then top leadership position. Ter-Petrosyan refused to congratulate Mkrtchyan. After visiting the Armenian president in Yerevan, Mkrtchyan told his friends he would have to resign for Karabakh to be able to count on Armenia's support. Nevertheless, Ter-Petrosyan and the rest of Armenia's leadership did support Karabakh in its efforts to break out of the encirclement and capture Shusha and Lachin in May 1992.

But in June 1992, as Azerbaijani forces overrun the northern third of Karabakh, Ter-Petrosyan publicly distanced himself from the Karabakh war, going to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and then the Black Sea Economic Cooperation summit in Istanbul, where he held talks with Turkish leaders. NKR's then representative in Yerevan Manvel Sargsyan complained in June 1992 that Armenia's leadership still thought that Karabakh could remain inside Azerbaijan.

While many in political opposition publicly charged Ter-Petrosyan with outright treason, NKR official Boris Arushanyan thought the president's views stemmed from his excessive caution. "His main problem was that he did not believe in our victory," remembered Arushanyan, who led the NKR delegation to the internationally-mediated talks in Italy in the summer of 1992. Ter-Petrosyan

insisted that Karabakh leaders should agree to pull out from any occupied areas in exchange for internationally guaranteed cease-fire.

“Had we signed those papers [on troop pullouts] as Ter-Petrosyan insisted, what would we have ended up with? [...] We had to drag the president along to our position. *It was not he who was directing us. It was us – the collective Artsakh Armenian leadership – who were directing him.* And we succeeded.”²⁸

Meantime, the Ter-Petrosyan-ARF standoff culminated with the expulsion of ARF leader Hrair Maroukhian from Armenia in July 1992. The following month in Stepanakert, amid setbacks on the front, the ARF-led Parliament agreed to hand executive power to the newly established State Defense Committee led by Robert Kocharian, who was seen as Ter-Petrosyan’s main local ally at the time.

In June 1993, shortly after the first unsuccessful Armenian effort against Agdam, Ter-Petrosyan made a rare visit to Stepanakert to demand a return to cease-fire. According to Babayan, by that fall as additional Azerbaijani districts were captured, Ter-Petrosyan ordered the volunteer units from Armenia proper, by then consolidated into a single army brigade, to be withdrawn from Karabakh. But as Azerbaijan launched a fresh offensive in the winter of 1993-94, the forces from Armenia returned and helped hold the defensive perimeter established in 1993.

Since Armenia distanced itself from unification with Karabakh or even its recognition, Armenian leaders were able to argue that they were not directly involved in the occupation. And since NKR was not internationally recognized, the international community could not directly sanction it. The UN Security Council resolutions thus demanded territorial withdrawals by “local Armenians forces” and called on Armenia to use its influence on Karabakh to achieve this goal. Armenian leaders have since argued that they have continued to do so since the 1990s. At the same time, Armenia’s official position on Karabakh’s status at the time was to agree to any solution accepted by the Karabakh leadership.

“Armenia’s leaders should either clearly state their position or keep silent,” the Karabakh Armenian commander Samvel Babayan said in an interview in 1997, adding that he was ready for another round of fighting, if it was needed to “convince” the Azerbaijani leadership to relinquish its claims on Karabakh, as well as two districts that connected it to Armenia: Lachin and Kelbajar. Ter-Petrossian made his long-held position on Karabakh public at his first major press-conference in five years just weeks after Babayan’s interview. In essence, Ter-Petrossian argued that Armenia and Karabakh should agree to pull out from occupied districts in exchange for international security guarantees, because they could not mobilize enough international support for a protracted confrontation with Azerbaijan. Five months later he resigned from the presidency, under pressure from Armenia’s

²⁸ Arushanyan interview 2009

defense minister Vazgen Sargsyan, then seen as the most influential politician in Yerevan, and Karabakh leaders.

While Ter-Petrosyan instrumentalized the conflict to justify lack of Armenia's economic progress, Ter-Petrossian's preference for a moderate position in Karabakh gave him international respectability, but also undermined his domestic position. In the Karabakh case, the periphery drove the agenda, in the end successfully marginalizing Armenia's chief decision-maker.

With Kocharian's rise to the presidency in Armenia in 1998, Armenia's position became aligned with Karabakh's as far as main demands for settlement and potential return of the occupied territories. These principles included the non-subordination of Karabakh to Azerbaijan (meaning recognition of NKR's independent status), non-return to enclave conditions (meaning that Lachin and possibly Kelbajar could not be returned) and international security guarantees for non-resumption of fighting.

Under Kocharian's successor, Serge Sargsyan, Armenia's position on Karabakh status evolved somewhat. Instead of outright recognition, Yerevan agreed to a transition status for Karabakh, with its final status to be decided via referendum at an undetermined date, possibly postponing it indefinitely. Karabakh officials predictably refused to compromise on their status and have rejected this concession. However, since Azerbaijan refused to agree to any referendum-based compromise, this Yerevan-Stepanakert disagreement remained more or less moot.

Today Nagorno Karabakh has a number of distinct, contradictory definitions. The most popular view in Armenia is that it is an Armenian territory that includes both former NKAO and most if not all of adjacent formerly Azerbaijani districts; and while Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh have separate political systems, the two comprise one cultural, economic and security space. The dominant view in Azerbaijan is that Nagorno Karabakh is wholly Azerbaijani territory (without reference to NKAO's past administrative borders) under Armenian occupation. And for most of the third parties, Nagorno Karabakh is a disputed area and a subject to negotiations; while the United Nations and other organizations have explicitly recognized the occupied nature of the six of seven Azerbaijani districts, its opinion on NKAO and Lachin is less straightforward.

As shall be seen further, there are many aspects of the Karabakh conflict that are less than straightforward.

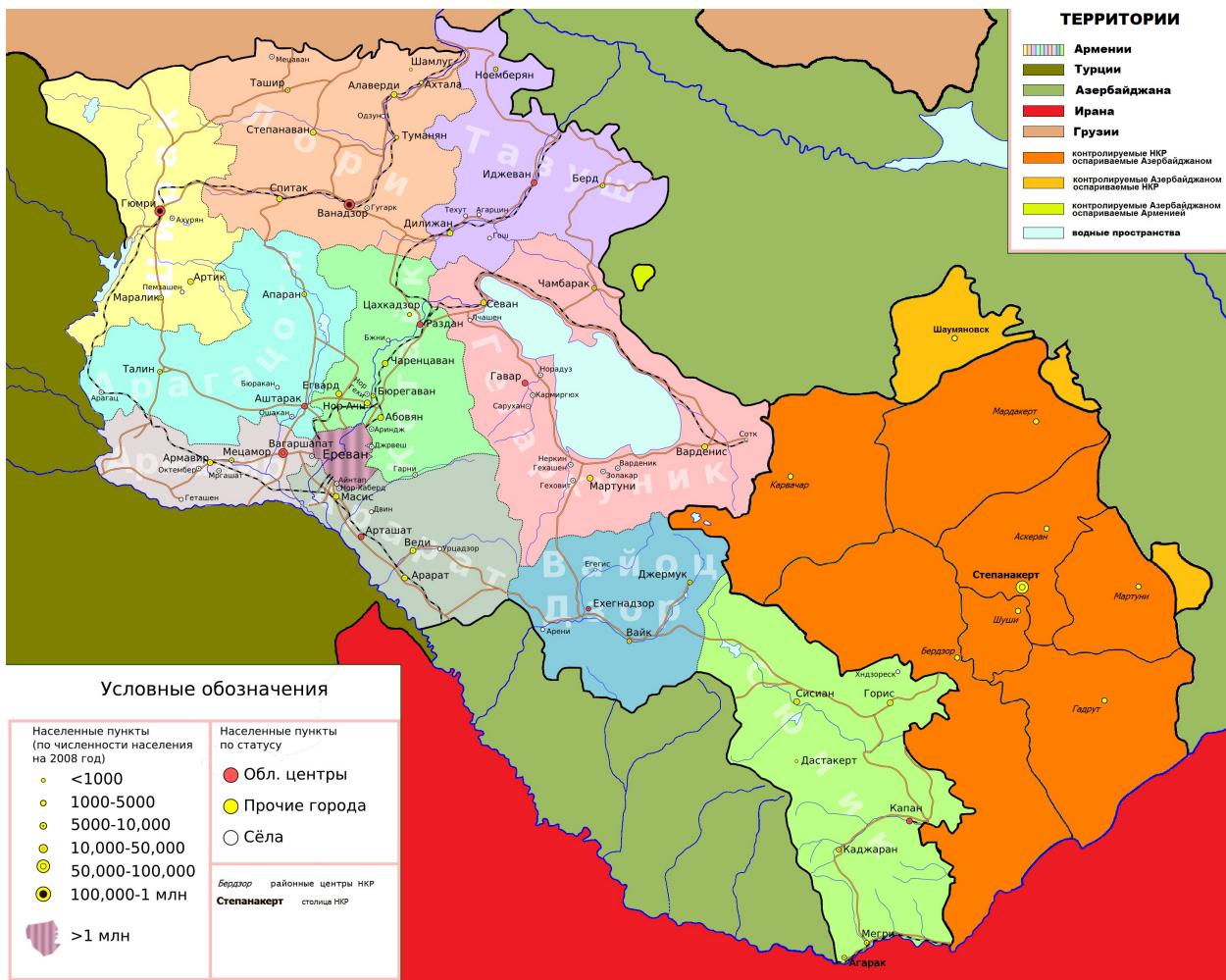


Figure 3. Contemporary Armenian map of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. The latter (in dark orange) includes territory of the former Azerbaijani districts that lay outside NKAO before the war: Lachin, Kubatly and Zangelan now united into a single Kashatagh district with center in Berdzor (former Lachin); Jebrail and half of Fizuli district incorporated into Hadрут district; most of the Agdam district divided between Martuni, Askeran and Mardakert districts; and Kelbajar district transformed into New Shaumyan district with center in Karvachar (former Kelbajar). Territories that were part of NKAO and Shaumyan district before the war and now controlled by Azerbaijan are shown in bright orange. Courtesy Prof. Eiki Berg, Univ. of Tartu, Estonia

Chapter II. Research Question and Design

Military occupation is a common fixture of protracted conflicts, of which there are many dozens now underway around the world. Occupations can be caused by a contradictory mix of factors. Deconstructing the variety of influences that combine to explain the original logic of expanded control and subsequent retention of a previously undisputed territory can help in the understanding of conflict dynamics beyond their formal and superficial elements. The Karabakh case is rife in contradictions, be they in the realm of security, politics, economics, psychology or identity.

In negotiations, the Armenian side has refused to vacate the seven occupied districts until the status and security of Nagorno Karabakh is addressed in a “comprehensive” way. Azerbaijan refuses to address the status issue or commit to non-use of force until Armenian forces withdraw from most of these districts. An improved understanding of the prevailing wartime logic of occupation could help all involved better address this conundrum.

With the passage of time, attitudes have hardened. Public opinion surveys inside Nagorno Karabakh (O’Loughlin & Toal 2013) have shown that a majority of respondents now prefer to keep the “liberated” districts rather than trade them for international recognition of NKR’s independence. In Azerbaijan little distinction is made between the Armenian-populated Nagorno Karabakh and formerly Azerbaijani-populated districts, and the combined area is treated as an “occupied” territory in need of “liberation.” The longer the current security configuration is in place the more difficult any changes seem.

Most of the Azerbaijani displacements – about 450,000 people – were from initially undisputed seven districts around Nagorno Karabakh that Armenian forces occupied in 1992-93 and have held since (in the order of occupation): Lachin, Kelbajar, Agdam, Fizuli, Jebrail, Kubatly and Zangelan. In four separate resolutions in 1993, the UN Security Council called for withdrawal of occupying forces from the six of the seven districts (there was no resolution about Lachin). Various compromise proposals discussed by the mediators since the early 1990s have assumed complete Armenian withdrawals from five of the seven districts, with special modalities for Lachin and Kelbajar. But with Azerbaijan refusing to compromise on the status of Nagorno Karabakh itself, no progress has been made on the status of other districts as well.

This thesis looks at how the occupation of these previously undisputed territories came to be, focusing specifically on Agdam, the largest of the seven by population and arguably most important politically. The contrast is drawn with the Shaumyan district, which joined with the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast

in declaring secession from Azerbaijan, but was lost to Azerbaijani attack during the war.

Five of the Azerbaijani districts, starting with Agdam, were occupied in a relatively compact period of time between July and October 1993. At the same time, Armenian forces appeared poised to reenter Shaumyan, and certainly had the military ability to do so, but never did.

The precise Karabakh-centered research question this thesis addresses is the following: *How can the Armenian claim on Agdam and the effective abandonment of Shaumyan be explained?* This is the double-sided question that this thesis attempts to answer.

The relevance of this question is two-fold. On the local level, in the context of the Karabakh conflict and efforts to resolve it: to be able to understand the likelihood of future territorial compromises it would be useful to understand why the occupation happened and why it has persisted. And more broadly, such examination can contribute to the debate on how claims on territory emerge and are continuously recast in security, political, economic and identity terms amidst the turmoil of conflict.

Existing Literature on the Karabakh conflict

Much of the research on the Karabakh conflict has focused on its history and ways to find a resolution. Works have included general histories of the conflict (Croissant 1998, Chorbajian 2001, De Waal 2004), studies of identity politics (Karny 2001, Kaufman 2001), implications for international law (Potier 2000, Krüger 2010), and, increasingly, critiques of conflict mediation efforts (Ambrosio 2011, Cheterian 2012, Kambeck 2013). Several international NGOs, such as the International Crisis Group, Conciliation Resources and Saferworld, have issued prescriptive reports with recommendations on how to defuse tensions and improve the climate for conflict resolution.

Although the issue of occupied territories is one of the central aspects of the Karabakh conflict, having figured in all known peace proposals and recommendations, it has been given only superficial academic attention. While nearly all authors note that the occupation was a significant development, most consideration is given to its humanitarian consequences, legal assessments and to its discussion in the negotiations. Little has been offered in the way of understanding the logic of occupation. This thesis seeks to fill this gap in the current literature on the conflict.

This research question is examined through analysis of professional scholarly histories of the Karabakh conflict, and other secondary and primary texts. Since this thesis seeks only to understand the Armenian perspective, it will engage

Azerbaijani perspectives only tangentially. In addition to the widely cited book by de Waal, several lesser known studies of the Karabakh conflict have been published. These include works by former Armenia parliament member and educator Suren Zolian, journalist Tatul Hakobyan, former Azerbaijani official Yevgeniy Aliyev and historian Mamed Velimamedov. Memoirs or biographies of former Armenian military commanders Arkady Ter-Tadevosyan, Samvel Babayan and Monte Melkonian, and retired Russian diplomats Vladimir Kazimirov and Vladimir Stupishin have also been published, as have been a number of interviews and articles by early nationalist activists Igor Muradyan, Vache Sarukhanyan, Arkady Karapetyan and Zardusht Alizade. Previously unpublished official information has also emerged in the public utterances of the former Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003), as well as in recently published documents from the Ayaz Mutalibov presidency (1990-92). Little scholarly use has been made of these material to my knowledge.

Research design and methodology

The following chapters provide a discussion of the major theories of ethnicized conflict as sources of explanation for the territorial puzzle found in the Karabakh war (Chapter III). The two place-centered chapters thereafter (Chapters IV and V) examine the theoretical approaches next to the empirical evidence revealed in the archive of memoirs and wartime documents discussed above. This works concludes with a discussion (Chapter VI) that restates the main findings of the thesis.

More specifically, Chapter III reviews five theories of ethnicized conflict that focus respectively on security dilemma, political manipulation, economic competition, psychological explanations and nationalist myths. These theories help generate respective hypotheses that can serve as explanations for the war-time actions.

The case study method is then used to examine the war-time histories of two geographic spaces where these actions and inactions were situated.

I propose to outline the two key actions identified in the research question: to occupy Agdam and abandon Shaumyan and examine the Armenian public discourse about them. The dependent variables in these two cases are, respectively, to occupy or abandon. The puzzle is to determine how have independent variables, specifically the security, elite, resource, psychological and identity arguments, influenced the dependent variable: the decisions to occupy Agdam and abandon Shaumyan.

Why apply five theories to one case study? This multi-theory approach offers an opportunity for a fuller understanding of the puzzle. If original decisions

were primarily driven by security variables, they may not inform the subsequent developments. Over time acquisition of more advanced military technologies – such as longer-range missiles – alter assumptions about sufficient buffer zones. Also over time, alternate factors – politics, identity, psychology and economics – come to greater prominence as explaining factors.

To assess the security variable, one needs to study the details of the Armenian military campaign to understand the circumstances in which the occupation occurred and the military consequences that it helped generate. Some of the key questions to ask in this process tracing exercise include: What was the public rationale expressed at the time of Agdam's occupation at the leadership level? Was this rationale contested and how? Were there alternative explanations involving factors not publicly declared?

With regard to the elite manipulation line, consideration would be given to the dominant trends in domestic politics and the views by various influential figures, both in and out of government. The research would focus on efforts to make their often conflicting and shifting views into policies.

To study the resource variable, an assessment is required of the type of resources captured on the occupied territories. What resources have NK Armenians gained as a result of the occupation? What resources have been expended to take possession of the territories? What resources could they have potentially gained if other areas were occupied?

The psychological variables that informed Armenian attitudes towards Agdam before and after the occupation will also be examined. Was Agdam especially hated prior to occupation? Was it treated in a manner substantially different than other occupied areas?

And, finally, to assess the national identity variable, an overview is required of the treatment of the territories in question in the mainstream Armenian historic narratives compared to other territories that make up the territory of NK proper and other territories that were left beyond Armenian control.

Chapter IV focuses on the history of Shaumyan, tracing its role in the overall campaign for the Armenian control of Karabakh, circumstances of its loss by Armenian forces, subsequent guerilla campaign by its self-defense forces and post-war status. Chapter V will consider the role of Agdam for Karabakh Armenians in the period up to the July 1993 occupation and subsequently. The chapter will discuss the town's history, its role in the Soviet period and during the conflict and war. It will also consider its evolving security, political, economic, psychological and identity value.

The concluding Chapter VI returns to the research question and assesses the implications and shortcomings of the answers generated by the case study.

Chapter III. Five Theories of the Drivers of Ethnic War

A number of theoretical approaches have been developed in the effort to understand the logic of ethnicized conflicts that focus on territorial control and frequently involve occupation of territories of the other side. The approaches identified as relevant for this study include:

- (1) ethnic security dilemmas as construed by Barry Posen and Chaim Kaufmann;
- (2) elite-driven political manipulation as suggested by V.P. Gagnon;
- (3) competition for economic resources as discussed by Phillip Le Billon;
- (4) emotion-based explanations developed by Roger Petersen; and
- (5) territorial nationalism and nationalist myths and their significance as explained by Alexander Murphy and Stuart Kaufman.

(1) The security dilemma driver

Drawing on the realist theories of international relations, Posen argues that competition for power between various countries and groups is a natural process and it can become violent, particularly when sovereignty regimes collapse and conditions of anarchy emerge. States and groups begin to assess threats they are facing; reflect on past conflict experiences; construe worst-case scenarios; assess their relative strengths and weaknesses; and lean towards preemptive warfare.

In essence, Posen sees conflicts as an outcome of a collective rational choice for self-defense, but one that also leads to an increasing spiral of violence and instability. This gives rise to what Posen terms ‘security dilemmas’: “what one does to enhance one’s own security causes reaction that, in the end, can make one less secure.” (1993: 28) Acquisition of particular types of weaponry by one country, for example, is likely to be seen by its neighbors not as a self-defense measure, but as a prelude to aggression, triggering arms races and alliance-building involving third countries, under certain circumstances pushing parties involved towards open hostilities, even when these could have been avoided.

When hostilities get underway, territory under the other side’s control is thoroughly securitized: people become “enemy soldiers,” “enemy sympathizers” or “collateral damage;” settlements - “positions,” buildings – “bases,” elevated locations – “strategic heights,” roads – “transportation corridors” for the military, and so on. Reactive or preemptive seizure of territory – “suppression of firing points” – is presented as *building* of a “security buffer” intended to preempt attacks rather than an act of aggressive *destruction*.

In his review of Charles Glaser's book²⁹ critiquing realist approaches towards security dilemmas, Robert Jarvis notes Glaser's argument that "the international system does *not* consistently favor competitive policies." (Jarvis, 2011: 417). Security dilemmas emerge not so much from "inherent" competitive tendencies, but through miscommunications and misperceptions. But when cooperative mechanisms for achieving security are lacking and opponents are signaling hostile intentions, "a state [or group] that wants to maintain or increase its security can believe that this requires it to expand at the expense of others," particularly (Jarvis 2011: 421), such as hostile rhetoric, economic sanctions or outright violence.

In his contribution to security dilemma discussion, C. Kaufmann sought to explain dynamics of violence in ethnic wars. He argued that: "Ethnic wars... generate intense security dilemmas, both because the escalation of each side's mobilization rhetoric presents a real threat to the other, and even more because intermingled population settlement patterns create defensive vulnerabilities and offensive opportunities...Once this occurs, the war cannot end until the security dilemma is reduced by physical separation of the rival groups" (Kaufmann 1996: 139). Posen also notes that ethnic security dilemmas are intensified when islands of one ethnic group are surrounded by territory of the other group, spurring offensive actions to "save" these islands, and conversely, sieges to isolate and eliminate them. (1993: 32)

Outside the Karabakh conflict, such ethnic security dilemmas were particularly evident in the former Yugoslavia, where Serbian forces fought to challenge first the Croatian and then the Bosnian government control while establishing geographic contiguity with Serbian-populated Krajina in southwestern Croatia and Republica Srpska in northern Bosnia, on the one hand, and eastern portions of Bosnia and Serbia proper on the other, while also eliminating Bosnian Muslim "islands" in eastern Bosnia, most infamously in Srebrenica. Later in the war, Croatian forces fought with the Bosnian government over access to Herzegovina. And finally, the Bosnian-Croatian alliance then sought to relieve the Muslim enclave in Bihac, while eliminating Serbian control in Krajina.

A key outcome of these struggles is increased ethnic unmixing and homogenization of territories controlled by each side, a process that also ends up altering the original security dilemmas. As Kaufman argues "once populations are separated, both cleansing and rescue imperatives disappear; war is no longer mandatory. At the same time, any attempt to seize more territory requires a major conventional offensive. Thus the conflict changes from one of mutual pre-emptive

²⁹ Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010)

ethnic cleansing to something approximating conventional interstate war in which normal deterrence dynamics apply” (1996:150).

One example where the “normal deterrence dynamics” are illustrated particularly well is in the case of Georgia. After fighting and losing two wars against ethnic minority groups in its former autonomies Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s, the Georgian government sought to return control over both. By early 2000s, South Ossetia began to slowly reintegrate with Georgia economically, although it remained politically separate; many Georgian and Ossetian refugees returned to their homes. Abkhazia, a larger, seaside province, from which two hundred thousand Georgians were expelled, remained a scene of intermittent hostilities and by all accounts, should have been the main focus of Georgian “reintegration” efforts. Instead the Georgian government sought to focus on smaller South Ossetia whose demographic map continued to include substantial Georgian “ethnic islands” and political center lay just a few kilometers from Georgian-controlled territory, making it more exposed to Georgian conventional offensive. While Russia had military presence in both former autonomies, its presence in Abkhazia was more substantial than in South Ossetia, logically offering a better deterrent against Georgian actions in Abkhazia than in South Ossetia.

Looking at what motivates states to favor status quo or aggression, Robert Jarvis notes that the “same behavior can be caused by different motives and the same motive can lead to different behaviors depending on the circumstances.” (Jarvis 2011: 2011). This highlights the importance of process-tracing methods to establish key factors that could be driving security dilemmas.

Thus if Georgia’s motive with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia was generally the same – restoration of political control coupled with a return of displaced ethnic Georgians and discouraging other minority majority areas of Georgia from attempting to separate – the actual behavior was built on the circumstances of locally present factors judged as opportunities or deterrents, starting from the size of separatist entities, their ethno-geographic configurations and their implied importance to their main external sponsor – Russia. The Georgian leadership certainly miscalculated the determination and perhaps also the capability that the Russian side could bring to bear as they reacted to the start of hostilities in South Ossetia. However, it is unlikely that had Georgia attempted hostilities in Abkhazia instead, Russia’s reaction would have been any less severe.

Certainly, looking at Georgia’s security dilemma vis-à-vis the former autonomies and Russia would be incomplete without considering Georgia’s campaign to join NATO and the Russian government’s view of NATO expansion into the former Soviet space and simultaneous exclusion of Russia from NATO, as

a paramount security threat. Had NATO membership not been on Georgia’s agenda, would Russia seek to support the autonomies’ integration with Georgia as it did in the early 1990s? Perhaps using their status as leverage to keep Georgia within the zone of its “privileged” interest? While these questions are speculative they get at the question of how Russia’s behavior was motivated: at what point did Abkhazia and South Ossetia stop being merely hot spots where Russia sought to “extinguish” ethnic strife – as was the case initially – and when did they become effective extensions of Russia, which “pro-Western” Georgia was challenging?

Jarvis notes that “informational problems are central to the security dilemma,” looking at how states choose to communicate or signal their intentions. Georgia’s signaling to Russia – refusing to participate in Moscow’s post-Soviet integration projects, seeking to replace Russian peacekeepers with Western forces, join NATO and the European Union – all were read by the Russian leadership as Georgia’s hostile intent precipitating the reaction that followed.

The Armenian security dilemma in Karabakh began to emerge in the intra-state framework of the Soviet Union when long-held assumptions about basic security guaranteed by the central government began to fall apart. As the initial campaign to win Moscow’s support for Karabakh’s integration with Soviet Armenia gathered pace, few expected the long-established Armenian-Azerbaijani competition to turn violent. When it did, however, conditions of an ethnic security dilemma emerged engulfing the “ethnic islands” throughout Armenia and Azerbaijan. Following these islands’ erasure through often violent expulsion, only the Nagorno Karabakh enclave remained, initially in conditions of a precarious siege.

NK leaders, with some help from Armenia, then proceeded to “save” themselves, eventually also at the expense of adjacent Azerbaijani districts. It may be argued that by capturing previously uncontested territory, Karabakh Armenians and their patron Armenia deepened their security dilemma, making their claim for Nagorno Karabakh’s separation even less tenable for Azerbaijan, even though put on the defensive the Azerbaijani government began to reach out to NK leaders to suspend hostilities lest more territories were lost. Eventually, in conditions of ethnic unmixing, control over additional territory has come to be seen by Karabakh Armenians as one of the key elements of security and even deterrence against Azerbaijan’s policy of reclaiming Nagorno Karabakh.

(2) The political elite driver

Gagnon suggests that ethnicized conflicts are primarily the product of political elite manipulation and entrepreneurship. According to this explanation ruling elites instrumentalize nationalist discourses and practices in order primarily

to fight off domestic challengers, particularly in periods of political transition and upheaval. In other words, their “threat perception” is primarily domestic and intra-elite. By setting the national agenda focused on an external enemy, elites can successfully de-mobilize their domestic opponents, reducing all politics to war. These elites do not seek to mobilize the population, but to use authoritarian political structure to launch actions that majority, pro-peace constituencies have not endorsed. Such violence, according to Gagnon, plays a key role in the elites’ ability to ethnicize conflicts and making issues of ethnic victimization and justice central relative to “minor” concerns over government corruption (Gagnon 2004: 179).

Gagnon looks in particular at the inter-ethnic violence in the Balkans and argues that is not inherent to areas where it occurred but “imported” from national capitals. His approach emphasizes the role of the central authority as the factor radicalizing the peripheral actors. While Gagnon’s theory does have empirical support in the Balkans, elsewhere there are many examples of domestically-challenged elites that do not choose to instrumentalize existing or provoke new ethnic wars, viewing such actions as too risky.

All elites espouse some of the same self-preservation motives, however actual behaviors clearly depend on a set of factors related to their political ideology, capabilities and exposure to external and internal influences and events. Gagnon’s explanation fails to account, for example, why warfare occurred in certain places in Central Asia and not others, whereas all these places are ruled by anti-reformers and all possess significant degrees of ethnic diversity and competition.

In the case of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, in particular, there is plenty of evidence of domestically-challenged Armenian leadership seeking to restrain actions by Nagorno Karabakh leaders, particularly in the matter of expanded territorial control into Azerbaijani districts. As one of the war-time Karabakh Armenian leaders Boris Arushanyan noted with regard to Armenia’s president Levon Ter-Petrosyan: “We had to drag the president along to our position. It was not he who was directing us. It was us – the collective Artsakh Armenian leadership – who were directing him. And we succeeded.”

(3) The economic driver

Le Billon studies the interconnection between natural resources and violent conflict. He argues that while resources in themselves do not cause conflicts, they can “make wars more likely, nasty, and lengthy.” (Le Billon 2013: 2). Le Billon notes that the role of natural resources has increased in recent years, with more countries and insurgent groups relying on them for funding. Natural resources

more often become the point of conflict. (2013: 562) Le Billon's argument is not for economic determinism, but a more constructivist account of how the importance of resources is construed. He also sees a potential for resources to play a positive role in conflict settlement if they are properly handled.

In their study of conflicts Collier and Hoeffler note that by the end of the 20th century inter-state conflicts have become a rarity in international practice, with most conflicts occurring at intra-state level. This also meant that resource control and sharing is now probably more relevant to most conflicts than before. They further concluded that opportunities for rebellion related to greed factors provide a better predictive model than the one based on grievances. (2013: 587-588) Le Billon offers three sets of factors that influence the impact of resources on conflict: vulnerability, risk and opportunity.

Economically poorer countries that are rich in resources are particularly vulnerable to conflict. Resources they possess may not be sufficient in themselves to lift a country out of poverty, but they are often enough to sustain and motivate a corrupt government and often equally corrupt insurgents, resulting in institutional weakening of states. At the same time richer, more developed countries are less vulnerable to this "resource curse."

Resources also tend to generate conflict risks by inducing certain social relations, in which resources themselves or conditions of their exploitation become an object of conflict. This is not about zero-sum fight for distribution of resources, but rather more nuanced historical inequalities; scarcity and availability of resources are not absolute, but relative.

Depending on their type and location, certain resources provide more of an opportunity for conflict because of their "lootability," stimulating the particular "greed and grievance" mechanisms. For example, diamonds located in shallow ground in remote areas of the country can be more easily accessible for insurgent groups and then smuggled out. Timber and oil require more effort to move, and all resources located closer to capitals are likely to be better protected.

These three dimensions then can facilitate three types of violence: structural, environmental, as well as the armed violence. Structural violence deals with the failure of spreading the wealth and "one that curtails opportunities, fosters inequalities, and arouses frustrations." Environmental violence relates to the long-term ecological impact of resource extraction on local populations, both through pollution and land use policies. Finally, armed violence includes direct physical violence and forced displacement. (2013: 5-7)

The particular forms of armed violence can depend on the location and distribution of resources. According to Le Billon resources that are proximate to political centers and are concentrated facilitate coups; proximate and diffused –

mass rebellions; distant and concentrated – secession; and distant and diffused – warlordism. (2013: 39)

At the same time, Le Billon seeks to avoid economic determinism or suggestions that because certain areas are resource-rich they are, therefore, conflict-prone. He also suggests that excessive securitization of resources can also contribute to conflict, and encourages deconstruction of narratives of threat and insecurity by means of in-depth historical and geographical investigations.

He also looks at how inter-connection between resources and conflict can help generate third party interest in addressing such conflict. (2013: 21-22) One process is commodity chain activism, a study retracing resources to their places of origin and conditions of their production. Another is “de-fetishization” of particular resources, such as ‘blood diamonds.’ Finally stereotypical representations of resource wars in media and mass culture make publics aware of faraway conflicts, even if in superfluous ways (2013: 24).

This is particularly the case in the Karabakh conflict as well, where external, particularly Western media attention has often tended to focus on the conflict’s impact on Caspian energy development rather than on conflict itself, in part as a relevance-building exercise by journalists reporting from the edge of Europe. And while natural resources have had a role in how Azerbaijan sought to win allies abroad and build up its military capability, it is hard to represent Karabakh as particularly economically important area for either Armenia or Azerbaijan, and suggest economic factors as anything other than secondary elements to the conflict.

(4) The psychological driver

Petersen’s focus is on “why individual human beings commit acts, sometimes brutal and humiliating acts, against other individual human beings from another ethnic category.” His explanation is emotions - fear, hatred, resentment and rage – that serve as mechanisms to satisfy pressing concerns. “It is assumed that almost all individuals strongly and commonly desire a few basic things: safety, wealth and status or self-esteem” (Petersen 2002, 1-2, 17). Acting on fear individuals seek to address safety, similar to the way states and groups become entangled in security dilemmas. Hatred relates to vengeance and resentment to perceived status injustices, built largely on prevailing nationalist ideologies. Finally, the focus on wealth or greed relates to fight for economic resources theory. All of these concerns are heightened in periods of state collapse. Fundamentally, Petersen’s explanation is that individuals engage in ethnicized warfare because they want to, and not through calculation or manipulation.

Petersen’s perspective perhaps lies closer to Posen’s in that he sees “ethnic violence and discrimination as inherent to human nature.” The emotional

explanation, according to Petersen, “challenges the assumption of the stability of preferences” that underline approaches, such as those proposed by Posen and Gagnon. When one emotion is stimulated and becomes dominant over another, actions might be taken that were previously constrained by other emotions, say fear over resentment, or vice versa. (2002: 3)

Citing empirical evidence from 20th century conflicts Petersen argues that presence of a “resentment narrative centered on a belief and sense of unjust group status, provides the best predictive and descriptive fit toward a variety of cases of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe” (2002: 2). In that sense Petersen aligns more closely to ideology-based approached described in the next section, while focusing on mechanisms on individual rather than group level.

Petersen’s approach is useful to understanding the early stages of ethnic conflict, when previous assumptions are challenged and particular emotions are kindled through combination of new opportunity and/or new threat, contributing a to shift from a relatively more peaceful status quo to an escalated conflict. When a more full-fledged conflict gets underway, decisions become subordinate to dynamic developments. While decision-making often remains emotional, larger decisions – such as to seize particular areas – are hard to conceive of as mere emotional outbursts.

(5) The identity driver

S. Kaufman proposes a concept of “symbolic politics” that attempts to incorporate security, political and economic logics of theories of conflict (Kaufman 2011: 11). While Kaufman uses Karabakh conflict as one of his case studies, he focuses on the early stages of mass mobilization for ethnic war, rather than the war itself. He sees national symbolic myth complexes as the driving force behind ethnicized conflicts that can make mass mobilization for conflict happen when opportunities arise. In other words, Kaufman’s explanation for motivation of actions in ethnic war primarily relates to ideology.

Somewhat similarly, M. Toft’s focus is on how identity is inscribed onto specific territories, establishing them as “indivisible components of group’s identity” (Toft 2005: 1). A. Murphy argues that “disputed territory [is] the outgrowth of a dynamic relationship existing between an area and the social processes and ideologies that give it meaning.” As he notes virtually all modern claims on territory come with some form of historical justification, typically built around the claim that the territory in question had been wrongfully seized before and should thus be reclaimed. (Murphy 1990: 531-532)

Murphy further examines the topic of what he terms “territorial ideology.” As he writes: “some, but not all, states share territorial understandings that

influence how they view their boundaries.” These include two main concepts that the legitimacy of many modern states rests on: “that states should be discrete territories and that the pattern of states should reflect the pattern of nations.” (2005: 281-282) What Murphy further terms “regimes of territorial legitimization” include an array of practices and discourses that are foundations of state nationalisms around the world. They “are grounded in particular understandings of state entitlement to a certain piece of the Earth’s surface, and that sense of entitlement, in turn, is rooted in what the state is imagined to be.” Murphy suggests three broad categories of territorial ideology:

1. An established “historical homeland” (e.g. France or Poland)
2. “A distinctive physical-environmental unit” (e.g. Hungary or Australia)
3. “Modern incarnation of a long-standing historical entity” (e.g. Egypt or Mongolia) (2005: 283-284)

“Modern reincarnations” are particularly prone to spur boundary conflicts since they appear not in a political vacuum, but in place of previous territorial ideological regimes, and typically only in a partial segment of their “historic lands.” Most of the Balkan states, Greece, Armenia and Georgia are examples of such reincarnates.

If identity politics comprise the most influential ingredient in ethnicized conflicts, what is the interplay between nationalist territorial narratives and their assumed practical outcomes? Does ideology frame political practice, or is it more likely to be constructed to justify the realities on the ground? Murphy cautions that these categories, while influential in informing state ideologies, are not deterministic and actual state behaviors are “mediated by a variety of political, cultural and economic factors.”

In addition to Nagorno Karabakh, the other Armenian majority area found outside Soviet Armenian borders, but also nearly adjacent to them was in southwestern Georgia, in the Soviet-era Bogdanovka, Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe and Tsalka districts, now mostly part of the province of Samtskhe-Javakheti (or *Javakhk* in Armenian parlance). By many measures, Javakhk Armenians have been closely linked to Armenians in Armenia proper and have produced a number of political, military and cultural figures that rose to prominence in Armenia. Also, Armenian-Georgian territorial disputes are as long-standing as the Armenian-Azerbaijani ones. Shortly after the end of WWI and Turkey’s pullout from the South Caucasus in late 1918 there were brief but intense hostilities between Armenian and Georgian armies in the Armenian-populated portion of Tiflis governorate that are now parts of Lori and Tavush provinces in northeast of Armenia and Kvemo Kartli province in southern Georgia.

So why did Nagorno Karabakh become a violent conflict in the late 1980s and Javakheti, to date, has not?

There are several mediating factors that can be identified. First, Javakhk's place in the Armenian historical-political imagination is not as strong as Karabakh's. The main Armenian historical markers: the centuries-old churches and monasteries that are quite prominently present in Karabakh are few in Javakheti, which instead has prominent Georgian religious sites. Secondly, Javakhk lacked the Soviet-era autonomous institution and concrete boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh that helped solidify the local Armenian territorial identity. When Javakhk Armenians organized and pressed their demands, including for autonomy, Georgia's reaction – for a variety of reasons – was of relative restraint, particularly in contrast with the sort of violence that occurred in Azerbaijan since 1988. Finally, with the conflict with Azerbaijan ongoing, the Armenian leaders in Yerevan have put a particular premium on stable relations with Georgia and played an important role in moderating Javakhk Armenians' expectations. In effect, the political considerations based primarily on security considerations helped mediate the identity driver in this case.

In the case of Karabakh, former Azerbaijani districts south and east of Nagorno Karabakh occupied during the war lay outside the imagined historical Armenian homeland and were not initially inscribed into Armenian territorial ideology. After two decades of control they are now increasingly viewed not merely as a "security buffer," but a land populated and defended by Armenians.

Chapter IV. Shaumyan: A Stepchild of Karabakh

The place and ethno-territorial claims

Shaumyan – known historically as Gulistan – was one of the five Karabakh Armenian statelets (*melikdoms*) that survived into the 18th century as part of the Persian Shah’s empire. During the intense intra-Iranian warfare of the 1790s, almost the entire population of Gulistan ended up as refugees in Georgia. Destitute and impoverished, the Melik-Beglarians of Gulistan – together with another displaced melik family from Karabakh, the Melik-Shahnazarians – set off for Saint Petersburg where they were received by Emperor Paul, who offered support. The offers materialized after Russian takeover of eastern Georgia in 1801, where the Karabakh meliks received the status of land-owning nobles.

In 1813 Gulistan became the site of the Russian-Iranian treaty that formalized the Russian takeover of much of the South Caucasus, including Karabakh (but not yet Yerevan or Nakhichevan). Soon after the Russians consolidated their control over Karabakh, displaced Armenian clans such as Melik-Beglarians partially returned to their native lands.³⁰ Through the Russian period Gulistan was part of Yelisavetpol District (*Uyezd*) of the same-named Governorate (*Gubernia*), which incorporated the rest of Karabakh into several other *Uyezds*. As of 1897 census, Yelisavetpol Uyezd had a population of 160,000, including 40,000 Armenians, most of them concentrated in the main city and others in rural areas, such as Gulistan.

In the period of 1918-20 fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Gulistan, like most of the rest of Karabakh, enjoyed de-facto self-rule until it was occupied and devastated by Azerbaijani army in the spring of 1920. Within two months, the Red Army arrived and inter-ethnic calm returned.

Geographically separated from the rest of Karabakh by a high mountain chain, Gulistan was not made part of the newly established Armenian autonomy, the NKAO, and through the Soviet period, it remained an outlier district, both physically and politically. Still, Gulistan became a separate district (*rayon*) in 1930 and, like the newly-built NKAO center of Stepanakert, was named after the same Bolshevik revolutionary hero of Armenian descent Stepan Shaumyan³¹. Outside of NKAO, Shaumyan was also the only majority Armenian district in the Soviet

³⁰ Much of the information on this period of Karabakh history comes from the research by Raffi (Hakob Melik-Hakopian) conducted in Karabakh in the 1880s and based on a number of previously unpublished manuscripts, as well as translations of early 19th cent. Persian and Russian official reports by Prof. George Bournoutian

³¹ Born in northern Armenia, Shaumyan came from a family with roots in Karabakh; his native town Jalal-ogli, was also renamed in his name – Stepanavan in 1924, a year after Stepanakert; Shaumyanovsk and Shaumyan district were so named in 1938, on the 20th anniversary of Shaumyan’s death.

Azerbaijan. The areas in and around Ganja (Kirovabad), including Shaumyan and adjacent Armenian villages in Khanlar, Dashkesan and Shamkhor districts, came to be referred by Armenian writers as “northern” Karabakh.

Through the 1980s these areas were home to some 75,000 Armenians, about half of them in Ganja; by comparison 150,000 Armenians lived in the NKAO. In 1987, as Karabakh activists re-launched their campaign of letter writing and petitions for Karabakh’s transfer to Armenia, the first publicly reported conflict was in the north. Residents of the Armenian village of Chardakhli in Shamkhor district resisted the appointment of an ethnic Azerbaijani to replace a local Armenian as the head of their state farm. Chardakhli had a major claim to Soviet fame, being the birthplace of two Soviet field marshals and heroes of the World War II.³² Nevertheless, the Shamkhor Communist party boss Ajdar Asadov led a large police troop into the village to enforce the decision, resulting in fights and arrests of about a dozen locals.³³

Shaumyan was not mentioned in NKAO’s February 20, 1988 resolution requesting unification with Armenia.³⁴ But four weeks later, leaders of the Shaumyan district and nearby Getashen launched their own petitions: to join the NKAO.³⁵ “Yerevan agitators came to [northern Karabakh] no less frequently than to Stepanakert,” recalled Vagif Guseynov, Soviet Azerbaijani KGB director from 1989 to 1991. In May 1988, Igor Muradyan, one of the early Karabakh movement leaders arrived in the large village of Getashen (Chaykend) in Khanlar district, and was promptly expelled for his “anti-Soviet, anti-Azerbaijani speeches during demonstrations” in the village.³⁶

As the conflict escalated and Armenia’s leadership appeared reluctant to directly challenge the Soviet leadership, Karabakhis began to complain of being abandoned by leaders in Yerevan. For their part, Shaumyan and other northern Karabakh residents felt they were left to their own devices by Armenian leaders in Stepanakert. At the same time, they sought to develop their own lines of communications with Yerevan and the rest of the world.

³² Chardakhli natives are Soviet army marshals Ivan Bagramian and Amazasp Babajanian. In general, Karabakh takes the place of pride in producing Soviet Armenian elites. Navy admiral Ivan Isakov came from Ajikent in Khanlar district and Air Force marshal Sergey Khudyakov (Khanferyants) from Mets Taglar in Hadrut district; Levon Mirzoyan, a native of Ashan in NKAO’s Martuni district, led Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1920s and Kazakhstan in the 1930s; born in northern Armenia, Anastas Mikoyan is also said to have Karabakh roots.

³³ “Prisoners of the Past” by [E. Bekker in Selskaya Zhizn](#) (Rural Life newspaper), December 12, 1987. In November 1988, Chardakhli families left their village, settling in a former Azerbaijani village in northeastern Armenia, now called Zorakan. Moskovskiy Komsomolets, December 14, 2004.

<http://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2004/12/15/201911-rodina-krasnyih-volkodavov.html>

³⁴ Text via Kavkazsky Uzel, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/220788/>

³⁵ Aleksandr Manasyan in [Novosti-Armenia](#), June 13, 2012

³⁶ Guseynov, pp. 343-352

Shaumyan at war

Residents of northern Karabakh, including Shaumyan, bore the brunt of violence in the first stage of the war (February 1988-October 1991). Unlike ethnic Armenians from other areas of Azerbaijan, as well as Azerbaijanis from Armenia, Shaumyan survived this stage, only to succumb in the second stage of the war, when it was completely occupied in June 1992.

Already by 1990, with most of the Azerbaijani villages in Armenia and Armenian villages in Azerbaijan emptied of their original residents, Soviet Azerbaijan began to push remaining Armenians out of Shaumyan and NKAO. If KGB's Guseynov is to be believed, the locals were only happy to leave their homeland to escape the war, but they were pressured into staying by "criminal gangs" from Armenia and even, incredibly, one figure "with ties to the CIA," who dug in to prevent their departure. But imminent expulsion from Shaumyan was delayed through the intervention of Soviet Prime Minister Nikolay Ryzhkov, who dispatched an inspection team.

Encountering resistance, the Soviet Azerbaijani leader Ayaz Mutalibov worked to win Kremlin's support for deportations. On March 17, 1991 Azerbaijan voted in a referendum in support of Mikhail Gorbachev's plan to preserve a decentralized Soviet Union. Armenia, where non-Communists were already in power, having won the first pluralist election the previous year, boycotted the vote along with Georgia, Moldova and the Baltics.

"I told Gorbachev, this document [on Azerbaijan's support for the Union] has a price," Mutalibov recalled.³⁷ "He asked 'what is it?' I told him: 'Clean out Karabakh.'" Just days later Soviet forces moved against two recalcitrant Armenian villages in the Khanlar district just northwest of Shaumyan. The populations of Getashen and Martunashen were expelled and 29 dead included two volunteers from Yerevan: 52-year-old geologist Simon Achikgyozyan and 26-year-old graduate student in history Tatul Krpeyan. KGB's Guseynov later argued that the expulsion – codenamed Operation Ring - was justified, since the local residents supported illegal 'gangs.'

"The loss of Getashen was primarily a political defeat," recalled its last mayor Hrant Gurdjiyan a decade after the deportation. "Armenia's authorities should have pursued a more flexible policy with Moscow, rather than seeking to break off ties" with the USSR.³⁸ At the same time, the deportation effort attracted the attention of prominent Soviet liberals and their Western supporters. An international delegation of human rights advocates – then attending the Sakharov

³⁷ Mutalibov interview with [Radio Azadlyq](#), March 14, 2013

³⁸ Marina Grigoryan in *Golos Armenii*, May 1, 2001

Memorial Congress in Moscow - visited Shaumyan and issued a report condemning the deportations and associated killings, abductions and looting. Their intervention appears to have helped postpone the operation against Shaumyan by another two months.³⁹

While deportations proceeded in Karabakh's southern districts of Hadrut and Shusha, with more than a dozen villages depopulated and their population expelled to Armenia, Shaumyan was left alone, under protection of the Soviet security forces. But that changed in July, when Gorbachev ordered Soviet security forces⁴⁰ of the district. On the same day, Soviet and Azerbaijani forces moved in, expelling the population of four Shaumyan villages.

By then, volunteers from throughout Armenia had flocked to Shaumyan, with a few even trickling in from the Armenian Diaspora. Soon to be famous military commander, California native Monte Melkonian entered Armenia on a student visa and in September 1991 took a helicopter ride into Shaumyan as a translator for a journalist from France. During the week he spent in Shaumyan, Melkonian joined about 120 fighters – half were locals and half from Armenia – in fighting the Soviet Azerbaijani security forces.

Following the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991, Soviet security forces pulled back to their bases, and Armenian militias fought back against Azerbaijani militarized police (OMON), recapturing three of the four villages lost previously. “And so, for the first time in modern history, the Armenians were able to retake territory,” surmised Melkonian.⁴¹ The effort of volunteers in Shaumyan, located outside NKAO, became the first Armenian military success against Azerbaijan and a *Cause Célèbre* throughout Armenia and the Diaspora.

Perhaps more importantly, the deportations in northern Karabakh provided a blueprint for future warfare in Karabakh. Whenever Azerbaijani forces captured an Armenian village or Armenians – an Azerbaijani village, this meant violence against civilians, plunder of their property and wholesale expulsion or detention for subsequent exchange of anyone who stayed on. In October 1991, Karabakh Armenian forces first used this tactic in Tog, in NKAO’s southern Hadrut district. Tog was a unique place since it was NKAO’s only mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani village at the time.⁴² From May 1988 Soviet internal security forces kept peace, and the village was not directly impacted as about a dozen nearby Armenian villages in the same Hadrut district were emptied out by Soviet Azerbaijani forces

³⁹ Sakharov Memorial Congress 1991

⁴⁰ From 1990 to 1991 the Shaumyan district was protected by elements of Kiev-based 290th motor-rifle regiment of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs

⁴¹ Melkonian 2005, 198

⁴² In the 18th century, Tog was the center of Dizak, the southernmost Armenian melikdom in Karabakh. To cement their influence with the Khan, much of the Melik-Yeganian (Yeganov) family converted to Islam. Two centuries later, they were sufficiently Azerbaijani to be expelled by their Armenian neighbors.

since the spring of 1991. But after Soviet security forces pulled out in mid-October 1991 violence intensified in Tog. Within two weeks, local Hadrut militia joined by those from Stepanakert expelled both the Azerbaijani OMON and Azerbaijani residents from Tog. It was a symbolically rich endpoint to the Armenian-Azerbaijani campaign for ethnic un-mixing in NKAO.

When the Nagorno Karabakh Republic was proclaimed in September 1991, it was a joint proclamation on behalf of both the NKAO and the Shaumyan district. But throughout this time Shaumyan remained largely cut off from NKAO, receiving supplies by helicopter directly from Armenia. During a heated parliamentary debate in January 1992, Igor Muradyan blasted leaders in Stepanakert for failing to extend any help to Shaumyan during its first, attempted deportation. “Shaumyan was bleeding and nobody was sent there from [the Soviet Azerbaijani-controlled] Stepanakert, nobody even called there to offer any help... and nobody went to Getashen either,” recalled Muradyan, who spent much of 1991 in northern Karabakh. “And this is called leadership?”⁴³

In the end, the fate of the 20,000 residents of Shaumyan may have been sealed in a \$20 million deal. According to Azerbaijani military sources, this is the amount paid in bribes to Russian military officials to secure the weaponry and hire several thousand personnel from the military base in Ganja. These forces captured Shaumyan within two days in mid-June 1992. According to the Azerbaijani defense minister at the time Rahim Gaziyev, his Russian counterpart Pavel Grachev approved of this and other deals. Money for payoffs came from wealthy officials, like the head of Azerbaijan’s largest oil refinery Rasul Guliyev, chief of police Iskender Hamidov and religious leader Allahshukur Pashazade.⁴⁴

The biggest individual contributor may have been Suret Huseynov, formally head of a wool processing plant, but widely seen as a local mafia boss.⁴⁵ After reportedly spending tens of millions to facilitate weapons and ammunition transfers from the Russian army in Azerbaijan, Huseynov was formally appointed commander of the 2nd Corps, which comprised most of the Azerbaijani units fighting in Karabakh in 1992-3. From June 1993 to September 1994 he was Azerbaijan’s prime minister.⁴⁶

In all, Azerbaijan acquired a massive weapons cache from Russia, mostly through legal transfers, but also through bribery and theft, totaling more than 400

⁴³ “Tertelev Patmutyan Ejere,” an Artsakh State TV documentary, 2006 via [YouTube](#)

⁴⁴ Yunusov 2003, 12-13; [Kavkazskiy Uzel](#), Jul. 24, 2002; [Vesti.az](#), Sept. 25, 2012

⁴⁵ [Zerkalo Nedeli](#), Feb. 17, 1995. The largest chunk of change for Azerbaijani government that year- \$30 million - came from British Petroleum and was delivered to Baku by former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in September 1992 as a “sweetener” for future Caspian energy concessions; Marriott, pp. 56-57

⁴⁶ Yunusov 2003, 11

main battle tanks, more than 1200 other armor, nearly 400 pieces of large-caliber artillery, 53 combat aircraft and 18 combat helicopters.⁴⁷

For a time, the Shaumyan cause lived on under the leadership of the district's last boss Shahen Megryan, who by 1991 emerged also as its self-defense leader. For nine months after June 1992, Megryan led a guerilla force behind Azerbaijani lines. The unit, dubbed Yeghnik (the Deer), hid in the forests, staging attacks against Azerbaijani forces and receiving reinforcements by helicopter from Armenia. In February-April 1993, Megryan's unit helped retake most of the Mardakert district and by early April, Megryan's native village of Gulistan in the southern-most Shaumyan district.⁴⁸ But after Megryan's death in the fighting that April, military efforts to retake Shaumyan were effectively abandoned by Armenian forces.

Throughout 1993, particularly after the fall of Agdam in July, Armenian forces encountered relatively little resistance as they captured the four Azerbaijani districts south of Karabakh. After beating back the Azerbaijani offensive of the winter of 1993-94, Armenian forces again advanced, this time towards the Terter district, northeast of Karabakh. But no concerted effort has been made in the direction of Shaumyan.

Initially, the Armenian political discourse frequently referred to the "betrayal" and "abandonment" of Shaumyan, but with passage of time, the topic began to slip from public radar. In his book about the war, Karabakh's war-time commander Babayan makes only one brief reference to the loss of Shaumyan.

Today, most analysts believe that "Shaumyan's fate was sealed by geography." "Since Shaumyan is separated from the rest of Karabakh by a high mountain range that can be defended with a relatively small force, it didn't make [military] sense to cross that range and try to hold on to a district that we would have difficulty supplying and probably would be unable to hold anyway," explains one veteran of the war.⁴⁹ "The district lies on a slope of a ridge with plains around it, which makes it difficult to defend," agrees a Shaumyan native now living in U.S.⁵⁰

But most Shaumyan natives find the topic too emotional to subscribe to this geographic determinism, pointing instead to the death of Megryan as the pivotal moment that left the exiles from the district leaderless and led to the eventual abandonment of Shaumyan.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Aliyev 2006, 14-15; by comparison transfers to Armenia; the transfers to Armenia were more modest: about 170 main battle tanks, about 450 other armor, 260 artillery pieces, 13 combat helicopters and no combat aircraft. Ibid, pp. 35-36

⁴⁸ "Artsakh" by Aleksandr Kurepin, Soldat Udachi (magazine), Oct. 1, 1999

⁴⁹ Author's interview with Eduard X-yan, a Karabakh war veteran, Sept. 1, 2014

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Simon Saradzhyan, a Shaumyan native, Sept. 2, 2014

⁵¹ "Had Shahen Megryan stayed alive, Shaumyan would have been liberated," [Hetz.am](#), Apr. 17, 2013

Post-war experience

In 1995, the New Shaumyan district was reconstituted in the Armenian-occupied Kelbajar district, just 30 kilometers southwest of the original Shaumyan. Several former Azerbaijani villages now bear the names of the former Shaumyan district villages: Nor (New) Verinshen, Nor Manashid, Nor Erkej, Nor Karachinar, Nor Kharkhaput.⁵² The move appeared to reflect the Armenian leaders' expectations that the original Shaumyan would not be returned any time soon.

Even those who agree with the military logic for abandoning Shaumyan, argue that "NKR and Armenia should have been more energetic in publicizing the plight of the district and need to address their grievances. Instead the issue of Shaumyan mostly comes up when NKR/Armenia need a case for 'whataboutism,'"⁵³ in response to protests over occupation of Azerbaijani districts. Most Armenian maps continue to show the old Shaumyan district along with Getashen and Martunashen as temporarily "occupied by Azerbaijan." But neither NKR nor Armenia make the return of Shaumyan a centerpiece of their negotiations strategy, hoping to keep the Kelbajar district instead.

"A key factor that makes Shaumyan's return so difficult is there are no people eager to return there. They have been lost and in another 20 years the issue will be forgotten completely," said a Stepanakert-based war veteran.

The New Shaumyan population is estimated at about 3,000, a minority of 20,000-some who lived in the Shaumyan district before the war.⁵⁴ Most of the rest are spread throughout Armenia, with others in Russia and a few hundred in the United States. Territory of the old Shaumyan district itself was dissolved in another Azerbaijani district and is sparsely populated with refugees from Armenia and Karabakh; as of 2010 only a couple of hundred people lived in the former district center of Shaumyan, whose population was about 4,000 before the war. Judging by satellite imagery, most of the former Shaumyan villages remain empty.

A prominent Karabakh politician Zhanna Galstyan recently called the loss of Shaumyan "our darkest and most shameful days [that] we continue to live with."⁵⁵ Along with other ethnically cleansed areas, Shaumyan was also an early warning to the Karabakh Armenians of what a military defeat would spell for them.

⁵² Similarly, many of the districts of Yerevan and other Armenian towns, bear the names of the Turkish towns formerly inhabited by Armenians: Malatya, Sebastia (Sivas), Arabkir (Arapgir), Hajin (Saimbeyli), and others.

⁵³ Author's interview with Saradzhyan

⁵⁴ NKR Statistics http://stat-nkr.am/files/yearbooks/2003_2009/8_Nasl_31-49.pdf

⁵⁵ Holland Doc: [Oleg Klimov , brieven aan jezelf](#), 2013

In the end for Shaumyan, the security and political variables, as defined by leaders in Stepanakert and Yerevan, have long overshadowed the district's nationalist or psychological significance.

The lack of effort to return Shaumyan, a district with no paved road connection to NKAO, also made sense from the military perspective, as any effort to reintroduce Armenian forces into Shaumyan would have to rely on helicopter airlift for resupply or, alternatively, require additional offensive operations to the East and West of Shaumyan in order to "stitch" the district geographically with Karabakh and Armenia proper.

Chapter V. Agdam: The Tormentor and The Vanquished

The place and ethno-territorial claims

By the 18th century the area that later became Agdam district, emerged as the power-base for the Javanshir khans of Karabakh, who established themselves in the fortress settlements of Bayat and Shahbulag⁵⁶ and challenged Ganja khans for primacy in the area between Kura and Araxes rivers. By the mid-18th century, the Javanshirs extended their writ over the highlands of Karabakh, with the seat of the Khanate moved to the mountainous Shusha fortress of Melik-Shahnazarians.

In subsequent century and a half, Shusha itself grew into a sizable town, with Armenian craftsmen from Nakhichevan settled inside city walls along with Armenian and Muslim peasants of Karabakh. Shusha flourished under Russian control since the early 19th century and by 1900s had a population of 46,000, about equal parts Armenians and Muslims, making it the third largest town in all of the South Caucasus.⁵⁷ The Muslim khans and beks of Shusha retained a connection to the nearest valley of Agdam, where many maintained their winter residences. Agdam itself served as the location for the Khan's family cemetery. The name Agdam – literally the “White Roof”⁵⁸ – referred to Khan's home in the area.

By 1912, Agdam was a village of some 600 Muslims, lying on the main road from central Azerbaijan to Shusha. With the decline of Shusha and the establishment of Armenian-dominated NKAO and the town of Stepanakert, which by 1989 had more than 50,000 mostly Armenian residents, Agdam began to grow as well, with population reaching 28,000 in 1989, nearly all – Azerbaijani.⁵⁹

Located just 25 kilometers from one another, Agdam and Stepanakert emerged as the main local rivals in the Soviet period. To the eyes of Stepanakert residents, Agdam always appeared better supplied with centrally-distributed goods. Agdam also sat on the only railroad running to Stepanakert and main paved roads

⁵⁶ In Soviet days, Shahbulag became a resort for Soviet Azerbaijani bosses; currently it is primarily known as the Tigranakert archeological site

⁵⁷ By comparison, at the time Tbilisi had 160,000 residents, Baku - 150,000 residents, Ganja - 40,000, Erevan – 35,000 and Batumi – 30,000; official census data. Following Armenian massacres in Shusha in 1918-20, the population fell below 10,000 and never fully recovered.

⁵⁸ “White roof” is a curious counterpoint to “Karabagh,” frequently translated as “Black Garden,” if “Kara” portion is read in Azerbaijani; alternative translation for Karabagh, if “Kar” is translated from Armenia as “stone” – and much more appropriate as far as the region’s geography and dominant color scheme – is “Stone Garden.”

⁵⁹ Official census data; in effect, largely mono-ethnic Stepanakert and Agdam became the two successor towns to the bi-ethnic Shusha.

in the area, so that cars traveling from Stepanakert to northern and southern portions of NKAO would go through Agdam.

Since the 1970s, Agdam gained Soviet Union-wide fame, producing a Port-style drink “Agdam” that was low in quality, but high in popularity as one of the cheapest brands in most Soviet liquor stores. Thanks in large part to this success, by the 1980s wine surpassed oil as Azerbaijan’s main revenue generator and Agdam reaped some of the cash windfall, causing additional jealousy in NKAO, which was a significant supplier of grapes, as well as in other parts of Azerbaijan. But the wine-making in the area suffered a major hit in the Gorbachev years, when as part of a campaign against alcoholism about half of all Soviet vineyards, including those in Azerbaijan, were destroyed.⁶⁰

Agdam at war

Throughout the first two phases of conflict (February 1988-October 1991 and October 1991-March 1993), Agdam served as the key staging point for Azerbaijan efforts to attack Nagorno Karabakh. Agdam’s capture during the third phase of the conflict became a key defeat for Azerbaijan, and the town has been laid to waste after the occupation.

Agdam’s significance became manifest early on in the conflict. When Armenian activists in Karabakh mobilized to pressure their Oblast Soviet to issue a declaration requesting unification with Armenia, Agdam reacted almost immediately. On February 22, just a day after the declaration was published in the local newspaper, crowds gathered in Agdam with an intention to march on Stepanakert. The march was stopped in Askeran, the first Armenian town midway between Agdam and Stepanakert and quickly turned into a mass fight that police was able to eventually break-up. Two Azerbaijanis, who were killed in the fight, became the first victims of the new Karabakh conflict.⁶¹

Already in 1989, Agdam began to emerge as a focal point of Azerbaijan’s campaign for control of Karabakh. Soon the rail and car traffic into Karabakh that normally went through Agdam - was suspended as part of the general blockade of Armenia and Karabakh. The exception was initially made for the natural gas

⁶⁰ [Trend.az](#), Oct. 31, 2007; in January 1994, journalist Dmitry Pisarenko met a man from Russia who came to Karabakh after hearing that the Agdam factory was captured and the wine was available for free; he was leaving at the time after having helped deplete the wine reserves.

⁶¹ “Cloud in the mountains” by Aleksandr Vasilevsky in [Avrora, no. 10, 1988](#). One of the Azerbaijanis was reportedly shot by a policeman from Agdam; while the march from Agdam did not appear fully spontaneous, some local authority figures, including local holy man Seyid Lazim Aga, are credited with defusing tensions. Five days later, the news of Askeran deaths announced over Azerbaijani radio helped spark anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait.

pipeline since it also supplied Shusha, but when Shusha was captured in May 1992, gas supplies to Stepanakert were immediately cut off.⁶²

Agdam served as headquarters of the Azerbaijani military effort until it was taken by Karabakh Armenian forces in July 1993. Starting in early 1992, a series of offensives were launched from Agdam towards the Armenian populated areas of Karabakh with more than a dozen villages razed by Agdam-based units. It is unclear when a decision to take Agdam was finally taken, but that operation was preceded by occupation of other areas of Azerbaijan proper located between the administrative borders of NKAO and Armenia.

The first step in this strategy was a direct link to Armenia established via the Lachin district in May 1992. While Lachin was an indisputably Azerbaijani territory, and some international concern was expressed, there seemed to be a general understanding that the effort was necessary to relieve the encircled population of Karabakh. But in the months that followed, the Armenian leadership came to believe that a narrow corridor to Armenia was not sufficient for the defense of Karabakh.

In June-July 1992, Azerbaijani forces managed to capture the northern third of NKAO. When in July-August 1992, Armenian forces staged a counter-attack in Mardakert they were nearly surrounded by Azerbaijani forces, attacking from both the west (Kelbajar) and the northeast. “That was a criminal act to send us into that offensive and it also resulted in some of the worst casualties for us throughout the war,” recalled one combatant.⁶³ Thousands of Armenian fighters are believed to have died in the pitched battles in the Mardakert⁶⁴ district in 1992-93, many more than would later die capturing Azerbaijani districts in 1993. The narrow width of the Lachin corridor also presented an obvious vulnerability. By October 1992, Azerbaijani forces nearly cut through the corridor, but were pushed back⁶⁵.

In the winter of 1992-93, subsequent Azerbaijani attacks from Agdam failed to make headway into central Karabakh, leaving an opportunity for Armenian counter-attack, which began in February and concluded in April with a sudden Armenian occupation of Kelbajar, with two Armenian assault groups attacking from Karabakh and Armenia, simultaneously.

⁶² Golos Armenii, May 8, 2008 cited at <http://www.gazpromarmenia.am/ru/infocenter/publications/66/>; the Azerbaijani nationalists didn't care as much for Nakhichevan, which lost its gas supplies together with Armenia. Stepanakert eventually received natural gas supplies from Armenia and Nakhichevan from Iran.

⁶³ Personal interview with Eduard X-ian, Sept. 1, 2014.

⁶⁴ At the time of the war, Mardakert was dubbed Marta-ker (literally “Man-eater” in Armenian), and sometimes also as “Vietnam” in reference to its thick vegetation and intensity of fighting. The name Mardakert itself is related the word “Mard/t,” which means “combat” in Armenian. The Azerbaijani government calls Mardakert - Agdere (“White Valley”), thus linguistically connecting it to Agdam.

⁶⁵ The road through the corridor remained under fire until the Armenian offensive of the summer of 1993.

The attack appears to have caught by surprise leaders in both Baku and Yerevan. A few months earlier, Monte Melkonian – who led the Kelbajar attack from the Karabakh side – met with a group of pro-Ter-Petrosyan members of Armenia’s parliament visiting Karabakh. A camera crew from Yerevan recorded the meeting. Turning to his large wall map Melkonian “placed an open palm on it, between the borders of Mountainous Karabakh and the Armenian Republic. ‘This area...’ he said, ‘this area is very important.’” After a moment of incredulous silence, one of the parliamentarians, Bagrat Asatryan, muttered under his breath, but audibly for the video camera behind him: ‘Nice dreams.’”⁶⁶

The Kelbajar occupation, like all the subsequent Armenian occupations, was condemned by the UN Security Council. Ter-Petrosyan sent a letter to NKR leaders warning that Kelbajar capture would lead to Armenia’s international isolation and undermines peace negotiations.⁶⁷

In late May, Armenian forces reportedly planned an attack in the direction of Kubatly, a border Azerbaijani district south of the Lachin road, but the operation was called off under Armenia’s pressure.⁶⁸ (The attack on Kubatly did materialize three months later.) But when the conflict between the Azerbaijani government and Suret Huseynov began to divert Azerbaijani forces from the frontline, the temptation was too high for NKR not to take advantage of the disarray to try to force Azerbaijan to a peace agreement that would recognize Karabakh’s independence. The focus shifted to Agdam.

“Nobody even pretended that Agdam was part of the Armenian homeland...,” wrote Markar Melkonian, the brother of Armenian American commander. “The battle for Agdam would be a battle for a bargaining chip, not a battle to defend the homeland.” Importantly, Agdam was also the only Azerbaijani outpost from whence its artillery could bombard Stepanakert.

The first attack came in mid-June, intended to test Azerbaijani defenses and they appeared formidable; the domestic crisis had not yet eroded the battle-readiness of Azerbaijani forces in Agdam. And the offensive was called off after Melkonian was killed in one of the skirmishes.⁶⁹

While Azerbaijani rhetoric regarding the loss of Agdam is about condemnation of the Armenian occupation and its humanitarian consequence, a few introspective opinions have also emerged that mirror Armenian justifications. “The capture of Agdam and the opponent’s decision to descend from their

⁶⁶ Markarian 2005, 243-244; Asatryan was an influential member of Ter-Petrosyan’s political team, serving as chair of Armenia’s Central Bank from 1994 to 1998.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 252

⁶⁸ Ibid, 254-255

⁶⁹ Ibid, 259-260; by then, Agdam also lost four of its local commanders. Shirin Mirzoyev and Allahverdi Bagirov, perhaps the most respected of them, died in June 1992. Bagirov’s rival, Yaqub Rzayev was arrested later in 1992 and subsequently died in prison; and Asif Maherramov was wounded out of action and died in 1994.

highland position was provoked by [our] artillery shelling,” Altaf Gulahmedov, an Azerbaijani army officer who participated in the town’s defense, wrote years later. “At some point they decided to stop giving us the opportunity to target their rear.”⁷⁰

In subsequent weeks, Armenians consolidated control over the Mardakert district and then began a siege of Agdam. For three weeks the town was approached from three sides and shelled with artillery, forcing most of its population to flee through the one remaining open road. Karabakh Armenians initially denied there was an offensive against Agdam, describing it instead as operations to suppress “firing points” of the Azerbaijani forces around the town. They later defended the capture as a temporary military necessity.

If the Armenian leaders hoped that by capturing Agdam, they made peace more likely, their plan initially appeared to work. After Agdam fell, and for the first time since the start of the war, the Azerbaijani government initiated direct talks with Karabakh Armenian leaders. Heydar Aliyev – newly returned to power in Baku in June – called Stepanakert directly and later held secret talks with then Karabakh Armenian leader Robert Kocharian in Moscow in September. Azerbaijan’s defense minister faxed a letter to the Karabakh army command, which it previously refused to acknowledge, requesting a cease-fire.

The cease-fire mostly held until December 1993, when after regrouping and reinforcing his military, Aliyev launched the largest offensive of the war that caused the most military casualties on both sides, possibly as many as 2,000 Armenians and 4,000 Azerbaijanis. Armenians held on to Agdam and in the last fighting of the war in early May 1994 extended their control in the district, capturing half a dozen more villages there.

The Agdam district thus became the scene of the first and last Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes between 1988 and 1994.

According to documents released following the war, the Armenian leadership in Yerevan opposed a sustained occupation of Azerbaijani districts fearing international sanctions against Armenia. These disagreements culminated in 1997, when the first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrossian publicly argued for relinquishing most of the occupied territories in exchange for international security guarantees. He was rebuffed by other government members and forced to resign in February 1998, near the tenth anniversary of the start of the conflict.

⁷⁰ Altaf Gulahmedov (Torkel) on [Disput.az](#), July 21, 2009

Post-War Experience

Since the cease-fire, Armenian forces have fully controlled the town of Agdam along with the three-quarters of the Agdam district. In the years following the occupation, Agdam was almost completely leveled, with its buildings pulled apart to serve as construction materials in the rebuilding of war-damaged Stepanakert and other Karabakh towns and villages. Much of the destruction was complete already by mid-1990s.

From its start, ethnicized violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis offered opportunities for plunder. Homes, other property and savings were seized from Armenians expelled from throughout Azerbaijan. Those who managed to sell or exchange their property did so at a deep discount. Since most of the Azerbaijanis fleeing Armenia came from rural areas, Baku apartments were often exchanged for less valuable homes in remote towns and villages.

While in certain cases in 1988 and 1989, wholesale exchanges of population was arranged as with an Armenian village from Shemakha area and an Azerbaijani village from northeastern Armenia or with some Armenian villages in Nakhichevan and Azerbaijani villages in southern Armenia, in most other cases populations were expelled.

Expelled groups displaced to their “native” republics, then went on to seek compensation in the form of properties “abandoned” by their refugee peers from the other side. Thus, most of the former Armenian villages in northwestern Azerbaijan were populated by Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia. One Azerbaijani village in southeastern Armenia – Nuvadi – held out until the late summer of 1991. Located on the border with Iran, for a while it enjoyed the protection of the Soviet border guards. After the expulsion of Armenians intensified in Karabakh, Nuvadi was sacked by Armenian forces.

Human Rights Watch concluded that the effort was coordinated by Karabakh Armenian authorities.⁷¹ Because the authorities controlled gasoline rationing and heavy transport, individuals had to receive permission to get both and go to Agdam for the collection of spoils. An effort was made to give preference to families who have lost bread-winners or property in the war.⁷² Already in 1995, the city was nearly levelled and white “Agdam brick” salvaged from its buildings could be seen in most Karabakh villages, already used to repair homes damaged during the war or piled up in case of future construction needs.⁷³ The former U.S.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch 1994, 47

⁷² Personal interview with Karen Ohanjanian

⁷³ Personal observation in July 1995

envoy for Karabakh Carey Cavanaugh called Agdam "the largest Home Depot on the planet."⁷⁴

Two symbolic exceptions were made amid this destruction that help the ruins of Agdam retain its Azerbaijani identity: the town mosque and cemetery. While there have been cases of vandalism at the cemetery, one grave is taken care of particularly well. It is the grave of Allahverdi Bagirov, the first commander of Agdam militia killed in June 1992 and subsequently awarded the title of Azerbaijan's "National Hero." Bagirov was better known as a local football celebrity before becoming a nationalist activist in Agdam. According to Armenian commander of Askeran district Vitaly Balasanyan, in the Soviet years he was friends with Bagirov's brother, who was a fellow restaurant manager, and that helped develop direct contacts, as was the fact that Balasanyan was fluent in Azerbaijani.

The two commanders, Balasanyan and Bagirov, first met on their frontline after the Armenian capture of Khojaly to arrange the transfer of Azerbaijani civilians that remained in the town. Since their position straddled the main highway between Stepanakert and central Azerbaijan, they became the main conduit for subsequent POW and hostage exchanges and frequently arranged – and as frequently violated – cease-fires.

"As a result of these meetings we helped save thousands of lives," Balasanyan told an Azerbaijani journalist, who is originally from Agdam.⁷⁵ Balasanyan, who is a member of NKR Parliament and was the main opposition challenger in 2012 presidential elections, denied he was the one, who take care of the Azerbaijani national hero's grave, pointing instead at another local Armenian who played football with Bagirov.

As opposed to the mountainous districts of Lachin (Kashatagh) and Kelbajar, located between the Soviet-era borders of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, and the four districts located south of Nagorno Karabakh, Agdam has a significant presence in the Armenian political discourse and is a topic of some controversy. Prior to the consolidation of Armenian control over the former Azerbaijani districts, few Armenians considered Agdam part of the Armenian historical patrimony, which generously extends from the medieval Cilicia on Mediterranean to the lesser Caucasus with the modern day Armenia and Karabakh.

In March 2005, during Armenian parliamentary discussion of potential compromises in Karabakh negotiations, Serge Sargsyan, Karabakh's war-time leader then serving as Armenia's defense minister and since elected president of Armenia, famously declared that, as opposed to Nagorno Karabakh itself, "Agdam

⁷⁴ New York Times, May 27, 2001

⁷⁵ İşgal altında qalan qəhrəman məzarına gül aparan erməni kimdir? Asaf Guliyev, Bugun.az, June 25, 2014

is not part of our homeland.” The fact that the statement generated considerable controversy in Armenia reflected the changing attitude towards occupied territories. Incidentally, also in March 2005 Armenian archeologists began working on a site inside the Agdam district, near the 18th cent. Shahbulag fortress, which they believe include ruins of an ancient Armenian city of Tigranakert built in the 1st cent. The new discoveries make “this region one of the early Christian cultural centers and this is very important,” argued a local official. “Because this shows that the inhabitants in this region were Armenians, that the owners of the homeland are the Armenian people and centuries later, the Armenian people have rediscovered a part of their homeland.”⁷⁶

Several former Azerbaijani villages, particularly the near Tigranakert site, have been settled by Armenian refugees from northern Karabakh areas controlled by the Azerbaijani army. In the manner similar to the New Shaumyan district now in Kelbajar, these villages are named after the lost Armenian village in the northeastern corner of Karabakh: Nor Seysulan, Nor Karmiravan and Nor Maraga. Agdam’s rich pasture lands have been appropriated by the NKR government and new private owners. Most recently, Agdam was renamed by Karabakh authorities as Akna and made an administrative part of nearby Askeran district.

Nevertheless, the Nagorno Karabakh Republic’s constitution allows for “the adjustment of its borders” as part of restoration of its own territorial integrity or, in other words, a return of the northeastern sliver of Mardakert and Shaumyan district that have remained under Azerbaijani control.

For now, Agdam district also serves as the main site for annual military exercises of the Armenian military. During one such exercise in November 2014, an Armenian combat helicopter flying over the Line of Contact in a show of force was shot down by Azerbaijani forces, bringing the two sides once again to the verge of large-scale hostilities. The helicopter fell in the no-man’s land between the two armies that in this area are only 300 to 400 meters apart. In a reflection of the level of hostility, the Azerbaijani side would not allow observers from the OSCE to approach the wreckage and remove the remains of the pilots. The bodies were eventually recovered by Armenian special forces. While the two sides have since de-escalated tensions, Agdam district may again become the site for another round of hostilities.

The occupation of Agdam began as an effort to improve Stepanakert’s security from long-range artillery attacks and in order to break Azerbaijan’s will to fight. With the passage of time, as the parties become more intransigent, security and psychological explanations for control remain. They have also been augmented by economic benefits and, increasingly, Agdam as an entity is disappearing into

⁷⁶ A city built by Tigran the Great is unearthed Tatoul Hakobyan, [Reporter.am, Sept. 26, 2011](#)

NKR, making its surrender more difficult due to political and nationalist ramifications now involved. Whereas Agdam was certainly not seen as part of the “Armenian homeland” prior to the conflict or at the time of its occupation, after more than two decades of Armenian control for many Armenians it now is.

Following the war, as discussions of limits of territorial compromises with Azerbaijan got underway, there was predictably strong opposition in Karabakh. One of the most prominent voices was Karabakh’s war-time commander Samvel Babayana.

“In all times, military commanders sought to have natural borders,” Babayan wrote. “In most places, border follows some kind of a natural divide, a river, or a mountain range,” not so with NKAO. Babayan regretted that Armenian politicians “have been unable to explain to the world that Karabakh couldn’t have such outrageous borderline as the NKAO did. The main puzzle is in these borders. They drew these borders so that Karabakh wouldn’t survive. Our responsibility is to make our borders natural.”⁷⁷ In other words, Babayan believed that Karabakh could under no circumstances return to pre-war enclave borders and should retain as much captured territory as possible.

⁷⁷ Babayan 2008, xx

Chapter VI. Argument in Summary

This thesis considered the origins and evolution of the Armenian claim on Agdam and the effective abandonment of Shaumyan. The main conclusion is that security considerations as outlined in the ethnic security dilemma theory were preeminent in the Armenian leaders' calculations, but also that over time maintaining control over Agdam has also attained economic and identity significance that makes reversing long-standing policy politically costly.

At its start, the Armenian campaign in Karabakh was confined within the discourse of the Soviet political system and the request for the transfer of NKAO from one republic to another but within a single country. The transfer was assumed to be strictly peaceful, enforced through central government mechanisms. The request was formulated in the context of "missteps" and "crimes" committed by past Soviet leaders and criticized openly under Gorbachev. But it was also an unmistakably nationalist effort, born out of institutionalized nationalism inside Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, institutionalized discrimination inside Azerbaijan and expectation that a "return to Mother Armenia" was both just and beneficial. Neither Agdam nor Shaumyan were part of this original claim, because they both fell outside NKAO.

As this request was rebuffed and the security situation unraveled, Armenian demands shifted from requests to unilateral declarations and active self-defense. When the Nagorno Karabakh Republic was formally declared in September 1991, Shaumyan was the only other Armenian-populated area in Azerbaijan to have successfully defended itself from Soviet Azerbaijan. In fact, at the time, Shaumyan – with the help from volunteers from Armenia – was able to defend itself more successfully than did NKAO, which lost over a dozen villages in the oblast's south. Unable to win the support of the Armenian government for unification, the Armenian leaders in NKAO and Shaumyan co-declared their independence.

But NKAO-Shaumyan unity remained more ideological rather than physical. When Shaumyan was lost to Azerbaijan, no concerted effort was made to return it, other than by a small force of Shaumyan exiles backed by volunteers from Armenia. The prevailing focus of Karabakh Armenian leaders throughout the war remained the security of central NKAO, especially the capital of Stepanakert. As the political/nationalist concerns gave way to military priorities, Shaumyan fell outside these security arrangements essentially for the same reason it fell originally outside NKAO – its geographic separateness. A further contributing factor was the war-time death of its leader, Shahen Megryan.

Early on in the conflict, Agdam emerged as the main staging area for Azerbaijan's pressures on NKAO. But both due to lack of resources, lack of nationalist agenda in Agdam and concern for their image in the world, there was no hint that NK Armenians sought to occupy Agdam until well into 1993. Two developments brought about the decision to capture Agdam. The first of these was the campaign of ethnic cleansing that got underway in Nagorno Karabakh in 1991 as part of the Operation Ring. With no outside efforts to stop this expulsion, Karabakh leaders were also left without an option to surrender and retain their autonomy. After the occupation of Lachin and Kelbajar, the two Azerbaijani districts outside NKAO without major international reaction – and without major casualties – precedents involving the seizure of non-claimed territories were established that made possible consideration of an attack on Agdam that was couched as necessary for NKR's security.

At first, Armenian leaders made clear their desire to trade Agdam and other districts for international – and most importantly Azerbaijan's – recognition of NKR's independence. But as an agreement with Azerbaijan on NKR's status began to be seen as increasingly remote, NKR began to incorporate Agdam and other districts inside its political system.

With the threat of war with Azerbaijan seen as growing, Armenian leaders would naturally prefer to fight as far from their main population centers as possible and do not agree to any unilateral territorial compromises. If in the past, Armenian leaders were particularly embarrassed by the international coverage of the destruction of Agdam, last year – in response to Azerbaijani president's threat to go to war and "end" the Armenian statehood – his Armenian counterpart warned of "new Agdams" in Azerbaijan. A potential site of shame had become a boast. This changing rhetoric reflects the growing intransigence in the conflict. If in the past such threats would be seen as politically incorrect in Armenia, today they are perceived as an appropriate response intended to put psychological pressure on the other side's decision-makers.

At the same time, in the effort to avoid a revision of the territorial status quo, Shaumyan and other lost, formerly Armenian-populated territories have largely fallen outside the official Armenian discourse with preference afforded to the New Shaumyan set up in the formerly Azerbaijani-populated Kelbajar district. Similarly, Armenians from Azerbaijani-controlled villages in the northeast of Mardakert district have been settled in portions of Agdam district. Like in Armenia, where many towns carry names of "lost" towns of "Western Armenia" – towns now in Turkey from which Armenians were expelled during the Ottoman genocide – many of the Armenian-populated villages in Kelbajar and Agdam districts carry the names of the lost villages of Shaumyan and Mardakert districts.

If the nationalist claim on Agdam is a relatively new phenomenon that is based primarily on the reality on the ground, the loss of Shaumyan – a blow to the wholeness of the nationalist claim – became subordinate to security calculations that also dominated the logic of occupation of the originally unclaimed territories, such as Agdam.

In his seminal work, Clausewitz wrote that “War is not only a true chameleon, because it changes its nature in some degree in each particular case, but it is also, as a whole, in relation to the predominant tendencies which are in it, a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason.”⁷⁸

In the case of the Karabakh war, what began and continues to be a war of survival and self-defense came to include ruthless calculations about military expediency and seeking to seize the opportunity for victory.

⁷⁸ Clausewitz, cited from www.clausewitz.com

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