

Anatomy of an Escalation

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"It came quite suddenly", answered Aleksandr Yakovlev when asked by *Der Spiegel* as to whether he had personally reckoned with the explosive nature of the nationality issue in the Soviet Union.¹ In 1988, in fact, these and connected problems developed with a force of escalation which made only too clear a fundamental characteristic of nationality issues in multi-ethnic states: under certain conditions, or during periods of crisis, transition or liberalisation, such issues can develop with an impetus which can prove difficult to keep under control. In reality, however, none of the problems in this field developed so "suddenly". *Glasnost* and *perestroika* have catalysed the nationality problem in the Soviet Union at the most; they are not its cause. From the Baltic to Central Asia, or from the Siberian north to the Transcaucasus, almost all Soviet nationality problems possess a profoundly historical dimension alongside their contemporary background of causes (such as economic development, ecological problems or demographic development).

A textbook example of this is the most serious contemporary Soviet nationality problem, the Karabakh conflict between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In February 1988, it was first brought to the attention of worldwide public opinion, and the Western media very soon came to consider it a *pars pro toto* of Soviet nationality relations as a whole, at the same time giving it the impression of "suddenness", as though the conflict had broken out overnight.

With breathtaking speed, this conflict then developed those aspects of

escalation which characterised the dynamics of the nationality issue for the whole of 1988: mobilisation, politicisation and over-emotivity.

The fact is that this conflict has a long prehistory behind it, though before February 1988 only a few Western experts knew that there existed a "Karabakh issue" at all. The autonomous region known as Nagorno-Karabakh (Nagorno-Karabachskaja Avtonomnaja Oblast) is a part of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, and is today inhabited by a 76 per cent Armenian majority (total population 180,000). Its integration within Azerbaijan in the years 1921-23 was primarily justified for economic and geographic reasons, and before Sovietisation it had not belonged administratively to Armenia, but to those administrative units of the Russian ruled eastern Transcaucasus which subsequently gave place to Azerbaijan in the twentieth century. During the brief period of Transcaucasian national independence between 1918 and 1920-21, Karabakh also belonged to the republic of Azerbaijan.

Overture to conflict

When the Armenians talk of "reunification", then, they must go way back in time, at least as far as territorial-administrative affiliation is concerned. Nonetheless they are right in recalling the ethnic and cultural-historical links between Karabakh and Armenia. Unification of the region with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic as demanded by the Armenians would, however, create an exclave out of Karabakh, as it is separated from Armenia proper by a mountainous strip of land.

The Armenians justify their view that such a situation might be reconcilable within the national-territorial constitution of the Soviet Union with reference to the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan, yet another region connected to Armenian history. Inhabited by a strong Armenian minority before Sovietisation, this latter region is today almost exclusively populated by Azerbaijanis, and is administrated from Baku, even though it lies on the Armenian side, separated as it is from Azerbaijan by a wide strip of territory.

Both areas have been the object of hefty border disputes between the Soviet republic of Armenia (3.4 million inhabitants, 90 per cent Armenians) and Azerbaijan (6.8 million inhabitants, 78 per cent Azerbaijanis of Turkish origin). The conflict is made all the more acute by the fact that strong minorities of each of the two peoples live in the other republics. As both ethnic

groups also live in other parts of the Transcaucasus (in Georgia, for example), the conflict thus possesses regional, pan-Caucasian significance. With its mass-demonstrations, organised strikes and violent inter-ethnic quarreling, the 1988 Karabakh conflict opened up a new dimension in the problematic field of the Soviet nationality issue.

With a preliminary phase after autumn 1987, the Karabakh conflict developed in two main phases: between February and July 1988, and then again from autumn 1988. In August 1987 in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenians sent Gorbachev a petition with 75,000 signatures, in which they expressed their desire for annexation to Armenia. The text also contained various passionately anti-Turkish passages.² Prominent Armenian intellectuals such as the reform-economist Abel Aganbegyan also declared their solidarity with this desire.

In October 1987 there were demonstrations in Yerevan against environmental policies in Armenia, especially against the nuclear power station Metsamor, and these developed into the first national demonstrations for "reunification" with the Karabakh region. As the petition remained unanswered, demonstrations and school strikes broke out in both Yerevan and in Stepanakert, the capital of the disputed region. On February 20, 1988, a large voting majority of the regional soviet in Nagorno-Karabakh passed a resolution urgently petitioning the Supreme Soviets of both the Soviet republics, as well as the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, for annexation to Armenia. Shortly after, however, the Politburo branded this request as "directed against the interests of the workers in both of the Soviet republics", and ordered the Party authorities in Yerevan and Baku to carry out timely measures to normalise the situation. The Soviet Central Committee then sent high-ranking emissaries to the respective republics, the Central Committee secretary responsible for Party officials, Georgy Rasumovsky, and the acting Prime Minister Piort Demichev to Baku and Stepanakert, and the Central Committee secretaries Vladimir Dolgich and Anatoly Lukyanov to Yerevan, in order to make it clear that there could be no question of any changes in regional structures.

By February 26, the number of demonstrators in Yerevan had risen to a million, and it was on this day that the Armenian writers Zori Balayan and Silvia Kaputikyan met Gorbachev and his counsellor Aleksandr Yakovlev in Moscow. During the conversation Gorbachev is said to have referred to a "stab against *perestroika*" with regard to the Karabakh events, though holding out the prospect of a "just solution" of the problem at the same time. Meanwhile

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the "Organisational Karabakh Committee" formed in Yerevan had decided for a moratorium on further protest action up to March 26, in order to give Moscow the time to examine the Karabakh question as it had promised to do.

Flashbacks of 1915

In this tense atmosphere, on February 27 there came the news that two young Azerbaijanis had been killed in a tumult in Agdam, south of Karabakh, and it was this which led to the tragedy that marked a turning point in the crisis. In Sumgait, not far from Baku, an over-emotional mob attacked the Armenians in the open streets and in their apartments, recalling the classical pogroms of the czarist past. Armenian sources depicted the scenes of terror as similar to those in Franz Werfel's novel on the Armenian tragedy in Turkey in 1915, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. The forces of law and order only intervened after the orgy of violence had spent itself two days later. Nationalist passions then ran so high that on March 5 the supreme Moslem authority of the Transcaucasus, the Sheikh-ul-Islam Allashukur Pashayev, was obliged to call publicly for reason and reconciliation, and in Armenia the equivalent supreme church representative, Catholicos Vaghen also attempted to soften the mood of his fellow citizens.

With Sumgait and its thirty-two officially confirmed victims, of which twenty-six Armenians, the wave of nationalist passion passed on to the Moscow Armenians, a community of some 40,000 people. The Moscow Armenian cemetery became the centre for communications regarding the Karabakh region, though conditioned more by the Armenians than by the Azerbaijanis. Meanwhile, Soviet information policy exercised a total retraction of *glasnost*, the joke soon circulating that "the only reliable information we have from Armenia is the weather forecast at the end of the news".

During the Armenian funeral ceremonies for the Sumgait victims, the speakers recalled the traditional trust the Armenians placed in the Russians, and depicted the excesses as being an "intervention of pan-Turkism". The massacre did result in the Armenians being subsequently more prone than before to classify the Karabakh conflict as part of their "Turkish trauma", and to comment on the whole in passionately anti-Turkish terms. Meanwhile, the behaviour of the Azerbaijanis was superficially compared to the organised genocide of the Armenians by the Young Turks. The Soviet Union was blamed for having given way to pan-Turkism with regard to its territorial dispositions in the Transcaucasus in the 1920s, and this added a foreign-political dimension to an already complex conflict, insofar as the events "in and around Karabakh" were being attentively followed in Turkey itself.

On March 24, the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR deliberated the first concrete measure in the form of a programme for the socio-economic and cultural development of the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the investment plan providing for a total of 400 million roubles to be allocated between then and 1995 for the building of accommodations and the development of the economy in the region. Cultural facilities were to be enlarged on, and the Armenian population was to be furnished with television and radio broadcasts in the Armenian language.

At the same time the media first admitted the national-cultural state of deprivation in which the Armenians in Karabakh lived. "An impenetrable curtain has been drawn between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, where not even books are allowed to appear in the mother tongue."³ Later, Nagorno-Karabakh was also described as being the most neglected region in the USSR, the chief responsibility for this state of affairs being ascribed to the local Party chief, Boris Kevorkov, who was fired and substituted by Genrikh Pogosyan. Meanwhile restrictive measures were also taken, and the Organisational Committee for Karabakh Armenians, which had been founded in Stepanakert and named "Krunk", from the Armenian homeland symbol of the crane, was banned.

"Enemies of *perestroika*"

At the beginning of April, *Pravda* then came out with a conspiracy theory in an article entitled "The Fomenters," making them out to be "Western radio

broadcasts," "dissidents" and "extremists."⁴ Since the Alma-Ata tumult in late 1986, in fact, this had been how Soviet commentaries had been viewing contemporary nationality problems. Local power chiefs had also been using this interpretation of nationalism as an instrument for undermining *perestroika*, and in December 1988 even Gorbachev one-sidedly and reductively liquidated the Karabakh conflict, a situation which mobilised millions of people, as the result of the activity of local mafia groups.

In a reader's letter to *Ogonek*, the Azerbaijani Akif Reza-kuli ogly Nadshafov hit out at the opponents of *perestroika*, nationalists and Stalinists, describing the roots of the conflict as follows:

"I am convinced that the events in Alma-Ata, the nationalist conspiracy in Stepanakert, the pogrom in Sumgait, the letter (by Nina Andreyeva to *Sovietskaya Rossiya*), and the tearful petitions in defence of Stalinism ... all depict adulation of the one same god, the god of reaction: reaction against democratisation and the inevitable redistribution of power".⁵

Public opposition thus began to be voiced against this way of viewing the situation, which overlooked examples such as the fact that the agitation of the Armenian intellectuals in the Karabakh affair was also directed at the corrupt *apparat* of their fellow-native Party chief Demirchyan. Warning was issued against projecting older, traditional hostile images on to contemporary nationality conflicts, and the catchphrase "enemies of *perestroika*" was relegated to the ranks of past destructive labels such as "saboteurs", "bourgeois nationalist" and so on.

It was gradually admitted, however, that the conflict, which had previously been referred to as irresponsible disruption of the "traditional friendship" between the two ethnic groups, in fact had a profounder historical and psychological background, and that inter-ethnic problems had been given insufficient consideration by Soviet policy in the past.⁶ Yet at the same time it was also emphasised that an over-precipitate change in inner-Soviet borders would destroy well-developed economic structures. On April 26, 1988, the Soviet television broadcast an hour-and-a-half long programme about the conflict, the central issue being the Sumgait events. Images of demolished automobiles and destroyed apartments gave mute impressions of the excesses of violence, and the commentary criticised the media for having contributed to the stepping up of the escalation.

On May 21, the Party chiefs of both republics, the Armenian Demirchyan and the Azerbaijani Bagirev, were removed from their posts during simultaneous CC Plenum meetings in Baku and Yerevan. Before the outbreak of the conflict, in fact, both had come under critical crossfire for their opposition to *perestroika* and their immobile behaviour. In both republics there were problems of illegal economic activity, corruption, ecological offences and unemployment. In May the situation got even more extreme, with protests in Baku and other cities in Azerbaijan to the slogans "Azerbaijan to the Azerbaijanis" and "Not only the Armenians can demonstrate". The national fronts in both republics had hardened so, that a compromise solution was almost no longer in sight, and Moscow was thus presented with a real dilemma.

On May 23, a general strike was organised in Stepanakert and in other parts of the Karabakh region, which impeded public life in the whole area, and on June 11, demonstrators in Yerevan also called for a general strike. In order to prevent this, the new Party chief Suren Arutyunyan assured the demonstrators that the Supreme Soviet in Armenia would accept the resolution of the regional soviet in Nagorno-Karabakh, and on June 15, in fact, the Supreme Soviet in Yerevan deliberated the approval of the petition of February 20. Two days later in Baku, however, the Supreme Soviet met and refused the resolution as being anti-constitutional.

On June 23, *Pravda* reported that troops had been stationed in various cities throughout the region, and that the Party authorities in the Karabakh had collapsed. The strikes spread further, and the imminent Party conference in Moscow heightened the feeling of expectation in Armenia, as a clear statement of opinion on the Karabakh issue was expected in this highest of forums. Gorbachev's opening speech, however, betrayed this expectation, in dealing only indirectly with the problem in connection with the theme "Abuse of democratisation and *glasnost*". The Armenian delegates submitted compromise proposals amounting to the temporary separation of the region from Azerbaijan without its annexation to Armenia, in other words, to its coming under Union jurisdiction. On the other hand, the Azerbaijani delegates categorically refused any administrative or territorial alterations.

Setting a precedent

After the Party conference the conflict entered a phase of escalation, with the appearance of more and more forms of open violence alongside the more

disciplined actions which had been taking place in Armenia up to that point. Demonstrators occupied Yerevan airport, and there were two killed and a number injured when the occupation was cleared by the authorities. Armenian intellectuals warned against further radicalisation, and above all against any "anti-Russian" or "anti-Soviet" changes of feeling.

In the meantime, the Soviet press sharpened its threats against the banned but still active Armenian solidarity committees. "Unshaved youths" from the Krunk Committee were leading the strike activity "using refined tactics". Stocks of arms were shown to the public, and the economic damage due to the striking was reported to be over fifty million roubles.⁷

On July 12 the Nagorno-Karabakh soviet unilaterally deliberated separation from Azerbaijan and the re-naming of the area as the "Autonomous Region of Artsakh in Armenia", "Artsakh" being the medieval Armenian name for Karabakh.⁸ This step signified an unbelievable precedent for Soviet history, and even a critic of Soviet nationality policy like Roy Medvedev called it "not legitimate". A decisive assembly of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, the ultimate organ responsible for the question, was no longer to be put off.

The assembly took place on July 18 and led to a resolution containing three points: the first, that it was not possible to alter the constitutionally defined national-territorial form of the two union republics; the second, that all forms of fomenting national hatred in both republics had to be decisively stopped; and the third, that the Supreme Soviets of all the national territories had to keep the principles of internationalism permanently in mind. During his address to this meeting, Gorbachev declared the Karabakh issue to be "a problem affecting the whole Union", and feelingly reprimanded the delegates from both of the republics and the disputed region for their "lack of compromise".

As compensation for the decision against alteration of the territorial status quo, which had already suffered from many previous prejudices, the Armenians in the Karabakh were offered the prospect of improvements in their situation, among which even the juridical elevation of the region to the rank of an autonomous republic was mentioned. The wave of national agitation expected in Armenia as a reaction to the decision initially ran a lighter course than had been anticipated, and at first the situation was normalised. The central organ of the Communist Party in Armenia *Kommunist* recognised the decision as being constitutional and defined it as a factor of progress in the Karabakh issue,

declaring that the resolution had thus recognised the conflict's ethnic conditionality (*narodnost'*), while previously only taking economic arguments into account, and had provided "reliable guarantees for the Armenian population".⁹

This first phase in the Karabakh conflict, then, was accompanied by growing national confrontation, outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence, the first movement of refugees, and the complete laming of local Party authority, but also by a remarkable ability for social self-organisation into disciplined forms on the part of the Armenians. In the republic of Armenia, the smallest from the point of view of territorial extension, up to a third of the entire population of the Armenian nation took part in the demonstrations, yet by and large these demonstrations were most disciplined.

"Special" administration

In the second phase of the conflict, on the contrary, the "atavistic" or terror-inculcating aspects of nationalist behaviour came to the fore in both ethnic groups. It became not so much a question of the Karabakh region as one of the historically nurtured animosity between the two ethnicities, and throughout Soviet public opinion there circulated the comparison with "relations as in Northern Ireland".

This second phase began in September 1988 with the death of an Armenian during a clash between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the village of Khodsaly near Stepanakert. The further development of events was then determined by local incidents, rumours, and by the problems stemming from refugee movement between the two republics. In Azerbaijan, the emotionally aroused masses reacted to the rumour that the Karabakh was still going to be separated from Azerbaijan, as also to the death sentence pronounced on one of the Sumgait activists by the Supreme Court, this leading to demonstrations in Lenin Square in Baku involving millions of people. The Soviet media complained that in both of the republics, the respective ethnic minorities from each nation were subject to pressure, and this aided and abetted by the respective authorities.

In November and December, according to *Pravda*, a total of some 3,000 incidents of a pogrom nature took place in the two republics, and the official figures for 1988 state that the conflict cost seventy-eight lives. During 1988

almost 300,000 people fled from one republic to the other as a result of the conflict, aided at the last moment by the earthquake on December 7. On one single day, December 3, more than 15,000 Armenians left Azerbaijan for Armenia. As a whole, more Azerbaijanis fled from Armenia than did Armenians from Azerbaijan, and even the terrible earthquake did not break the chain of aggression.

The Soviet leadership reacted to this with the reinforced stationing of security troops in Yerevan, Baku and other cities, and on January 12, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided on "special administration" for Nagorno-Karabakh, placing the region under the direct authority of the Union, though expressly leaving it still as a territorial part of Azerbaijan. The local soviets were suspended until further notice, and a special government commission under Arkady Volsky, who had already been sent as a special Moscow plenipotentiary to Nagorno-Karabakh after the Supreme Soviet resolution of July 18, 1988, received far-reaching executive powers which had to be jointly ratified by the Council of Ministers in Baku only in the case of economic issues.

Before this decision, the Soviet leadership had intensified its efforts to steer the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh away from dead-end developments, and in both Armenia and Azerbaijan the turn of the new year brought further change in the local leadership teams.

Territorial mentality

Both of the ethnic groups concerned, the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, consider the disputed region as an integral part of their national history. Yet the controversy contains a principle which is clearly contrary to the postulates of Soviet nationality ideology, and which is responsible for national ambitions and frustrations not only in this region: the "principle of territoriality". There are many national ethnic groups living in the Soviet Union which possess their own national history linked to a particular territory, and recently these have been making stronger and stronger demands regarding the individuality of "their territory", demands which are in part contrary to the constitution of the multi-national Soviet Union. This "individual property right" of a republic and its respective national ethnic group to its own territory was recently formulated in clear terms in the so-called "declaration of sovereignty" by the Supreme Soviet of Estonia on November 16, 1988. It is also expressed in slogans such as



Haik, founder of Armenia.

“Kazakstan to the Kazaks” or “Kazakstan is indivisible”, which, for example, were provoked by the attempt to establish an autonomous territory in Kazakstan for the German minority. With respect to this tendency, in fact, unsolved problems of “national borders” and of the establishment of the

"national-territorial structure of the USSR" in the 1920s and 1930s re-attain their significance even today.

The Armenians and Azerbaijanis both cling on to the disputed region as though their national survival depended on it, and both sides have announced their readiness to fight for Nagorno-Karabakh to the very last drop of blood. In a *Pravda* article dated January 15, 1989, Moscow's special administrator Arkady Volsky expressed his astonishment over this effect of "territorial thinking" as follows:

"What does the term 'border' mean, then, within the framework of our socialist state? It is only an imaginary line, a dash on the map. We have no border fences or barriers within our country. And when we hear of references to the 'sacred integrity' (of a territory), or of the 'need to defend every stone, tree or mountain', then we must wonder exactly whom this defence is against."

The ethno-territorial history of the Caucasus is inextricably complicated, and the Karabakh is a part of this historical labyrinth. As Russian domination spread throughout the eastern Transcaucasus after the two wars against Iran and Turkey during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Karabakh was one of the semi-sovereign Moslem governed khanates of this region, and possessed a mixed Turkish (Azerbaijani)-Armenian population. Due to the chronology of the Russian conquests, both the Karabakh and the settled areas of Yerevan and Nakhichevan (similarly mixed from the ethnic point of view) were brought under separate but linked administrations, the Karabakh being included in one of these administrative units (from 1867 the Elizavetvol Government) out of which Azerbaijan was later formed.

The conflict between the Armenian and Turkish ethnic groups came into full play as the Russian conquest of the region provoked waves of Armenian immigration from out of the Turkish and Iranian sovereign territories. There was thus an increase in the Armenian sector of the population, also in the Karabakh, due to which the Turkish group felt threatened. Anti-Armenian feeling fed on this unease and developed into a national consciousness which first came to its full expression in the twentieth century.

Parallel to this, the Armenians developed their own national consciousness towards the end of the nineteenth century, directed against both the Russian assimilation policy as also their Moslem neighbours and competitors. 1903-

1905 witnessed violent clashes between the two ethnic groups, terminating in genuine pogroms in Baku and Elizavetvol, (today Kirovabad).¹⁰

The conflict involved victims from both sides, and left the ethnic groups with a "heritage of hatred", but looking back, the Armenians class the situation as a "period of persecution by the Turks", and as a national trauma. Since 1894, the Armenians in Turkey had, in fact, been subjected to considerable persecution culminating in *jegherrn*, an ancient Armenian sacred term meaning "great calamity". This calamity here referred to the organised extermination of Armenians in Anatolia in 1915 by the Young Turks: the event is now firmly anchored as a central theme in the contemporary Armenian consciousness, and forms an emotional starting point in the Karabakh conflict which Soviet commentary has scarcely taken into account.

In 1918, the independent Transcaucasian states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan grew out of the aftermath of world war and revolution. A short-lived state alliance immediately failed because of Armenian-Azerbaijani disaccord, and due to territorial disputes regarding the Karabakh region among others, in Armenia and Azerbaijan there were military skirmishes in which Turkish troops were also involved. When the Red Army occupied Azerbaijan in April 1920, the Soviet Union thus inherited these territorial problems, and the chairman of the Azerbaijan revolution committee, N. Narimanov, immediately made clear what was to happen regarding the Armenian claims to the Karabakh, Nakhichevan and Zangezur regions: "Withdrawal (of these regions) would discredit Soviet power not only in Azerbaijan but also in Persia and Turkey".¹¹ This was a sensitive point to Soviet foreign-political plans, for the young Soviet state saw the national movements in Turkey and Iran as models of anti-imperialist revolution and thus as potential allies.

The end of 1920 marked a spectacular turning point, however, as after the Bolsheviks took power in Armenia, the revolution committee in Azerbaijan sent a telegram to the new Armenian government ceding the disputed areas to Armenia.¹² This announcement was celebrated by S. Ordsonikidze, a key figure in Soviet Caucasian policy, as an example of the "new socialist understanding between peoples",¹³ but was soon rescinded, however. In fact, already by March 1921, in the treaty between the Soviet government and Turkey, Nakhichevan was to be subordinated to administration by Baku as an autonomous enclave on express Turkish request, and the government of Azerbaijan thus claimed the Karabakh for its own republic, declaring that

otherwise anti-Soviet groups might form there. In this conflict between the two Soviet republics, Moscow finally decided in favour of Azerbaijan, which played a key industrial role in the Caucasus thanks to the oil-fields at Baku, and which had more importance for Soviet policies in the Orient, the ethnic group being Moslems and Turks. In justifying this decision it was always possible to refer to the previous territorial-administrative allocation of the Karabakh to the Azerbaijan region.

On July 4, 1921, the Karabakh issue was raised by the Caucasian *Buro* (Kavbjuro) of the Central Committee, the majority of the committee (including Ordsonikidze and Kirov, who had just become the Party chief in Azerbaijan) voting for the annexation of the Karabakh to Armenia. On the intervention of Narimanov, the ballot was repeated the day after, as the matter would otherwise have had to be brought before the Central Committee. Today it is maintained in Azerbaijan that Lenin intervened in order to prevent an "injustice towards the Azerbaijani nation".¹⁴ In any case, in the new ballot on July 5, it was decided by four votes in favour, with three abstentions, to leave the area as part of the territory of Azerbaijan. In November 1923, the area with the Armenian population majority received the status of "autonomous region."

It is since that time, then, that the supreme Party and state organs in Moscow have constantly been faced with Armenian revisionist claims. Under Stalin all national protest was rigorously reduced to silence, but after his death, Armenia, like the other non-Russian regions, experienced a certain degree of liberalisation and "national Renaissance". Since 1965 the Armenians have also been allowed to celebrate their *jegherrn* publicly, which previously had been a taboo for both external reasons (consideration for Turkey) and domestic reasons, (limitation of Armenian nationalism). A further subject still remained forbidden, however - the claim for unification with the Karabakh region - even though during the 1960s the Armenians stepped up their petitioning of the Party and the government in Moscow with regard to the Karabakh question. In 1977, the Soviet authorities issued the whole world with a comprehensible answer to all these petitions and complaints. In an article in *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, the question was dealt with once and for all.¹⁵

Cultural denial

To justify their claims, the Armenians advance two arguments: that Nagorno-Karabakh, or "Artsakh" as they call it, has close ethno-historical links with

Armenia, and that it is inhabited by an Armenian population majority today. They feel that under the Azerbaijani administration, this majority is subjected to a policy of intentional neglect and de-nationalisation. For many decades now, Armenian complaints have been focused on the economic structure of the region, with its dependence on Azerbaijan, on the neglect of its socio-economic and cultural development by the authorities in Baku, and on the crass underdevelopment of its transport system. The Armenians feel that they are tangibly limited in their employment choices and in their educational opportunities in the Karabakh as well as in other parts of Azerbaijan.

All this, then, has led to a steady exodus out of the Karabakh, and the Armenians have before their very eyes the example of Nakhichevan, where the Armenian part of the population has practically disappeared since the 1920s. They thus reproach Baku for pursuing a similar policy of "de-Armenianisation" in the Karabakh, which is already largely cut off from any influence from Armenia itself. The schools are mainly attended by Armenians, but the teaching of Armenian history is not allowed, and the publishing of literature in the Armenian language is equally restricted. Even the radio and television broadcasts from the Armenian SSR cannot be received, and thus the 1923 provision for autonomy is certainly not appreciated by the ethnically predominant part of the population.

Both the above-mentioned arguments must be considered as a whole, in order to understand how it is not simply a question of nationalist-revisionist territorial claims which are recurring for purely historical reasons. Armenian nationalism does exist, of course, with irredentist claims on regions previously populated by Armenians (as in Turkey, for example), but in the Karabakh issue it is above all the problem of contemporary Armenian life in this region, and this was first admitted to Soviet public opinion in 1988. As Arkady Volsky declared in *Pravda* on January 15, 1989:

"Why has the population brought up the question of unification with Armenia? Because they must have seen how the former government of Azerbaijan was driving the region further and further down a dead-end, and how it was intent on interrupting the natural links of the population with Armenia in the cultural and linguistic fields and on creating obstacles in the way of the Armenian-language intelligentsia. This is all reality, it is the truth. Out of all my journeys I have never witnessed such neglect of the population as in Nagorno-Karabakh."

As far as the historical arguments are concerned, the Armenians go back to ancient times, when authors such as Strabo, Pliny and Plutarch already recognised the region as belonging ethnically and historically to Armenia.¹⁶ The Karabakh and its surrounding areas had formed part of the ancient Armenian kingdom - with interruptions - from the fourth century B.C. to the eleventh century A.D. After the fall of the kingdom, and the Turkish conquest of the region, minor Armenian aristocrats ruled over the area as a semi-sovereign feudal state, under the nominal supremacy of Moslem authority. During the seventeenth century it served as a place of refuge for Armenians from the dominions directly to the east, and as a reservoir for an Armenian independentist movement which was attempting to persuade the czars of Russia to liberate Christian Armenia from the hands of the sultans and shahs. The Turkish component of the population only attained political dominance in the eighteenth century, turning the Karabakh into a Moslem khanate, in which form it passed from Iranian to Russian hands in 1813.

The Armenians still refer to initial Soviet promises to unify the region with the Armenian SSR, and the quite different regional asset is thus attributed to the influence of "pan-Turkish" authority on Soviet policy. In many Armenian approaches to the problem, in fact, there may be found extreme anti-Turkish, that is, implausible arguments,¹⁷ which are mainly intended to deprive Azerbaijan of its character as a "nation".

The assumption is that in contrast to the age-old Armenian nation, the name "Azerbaijan" simply stands for a region with a national hybrid population, and Armenian comments on their neighbours are thus often sniffily arrogant. At the same time there is also the superficial generalisation that Azerbaijanis equal murderers, and this is especially common when referring to the terrible incidents in Sumgait. Demonstrations in Baku accompanied by extremist language were recently commented on by the Armenian television as follows: "They thus show their real nature, the psychology of the Azerbaijanis. There is nothing but murder and bestiality in their souls".¹⁸

In the first phase of the Karabakh conflict, from February to July 1988, the Armenians did show, however, a greater disposition for compromise than the other side. Some of their speakers announced their readiness to be content with simple separation of the region from the repressive Azerbaijani discredited administration, rejecting the claims for "reunification". The action and

agitation by both sides in this phase did convey an image - perhaps distorted - of "disciplined" action by Armenians and "atavistic" reaction by Azerbaijanis.

The side least known

The Armenians have certainly been more strongly articulate than the Azerbaijanis as far as world opinion goes, and the Azerbaijani point of view which follows, in fact, is largely unknown.

Azerbaijani intellectuals warn against describing their ethnic group in the conflict as a dark, conservative, destructive power, against the identification of Azerbaijanis as murderers, and against linking the conflict with the "genocide" of the Armenians by the Young Turks. They point out the reciprocal nature of the violence throughout the history of the conflict between the two ethnic groups since the nineteenth century, and how, in the confusion following World War I, large numbers of Azerbaijanis fell victims to armed actions by Armenian Dashnaks¹⁹ in Yerevan, Eshmiazdin, Zangezur and Nakhichevan.

Secondly, Azerbaijani territory together with the Karabakh, just as the Transcaucasus as a whole, has no connection with the history of Armenia. The historical homeland of the Armenians, in reality, was in Anatolia and not in the Transcaucasus.²⁰ Armenian settlement of the eastern Transcaucasus is essentially a product of refugee movement from Iran and Turkey, and of czarist settlement policy during the nineteenth century. In fact the Azerbaijanis can prove this objection by reference to czarist demographic documents which circumstantiate the constitution of the Armenian part of the population during the nineteenth century, while before, the population of the region was preponderantly Moslem (Azerbaijani). Since the 1828 peace treaty of Turkmentschai in which the territory of the present-day Azerbaijani SSR came under czarist domination, the ethnic proportions have changed enormously. According to the official revision of the census, the Karabakh consisted of 65 per cent Azerbaijanis and 35 per cent Armenians in 1832, while the figures had changed to 42 per cent for the Azerbaijanis and 53 per cent for the Armenians by the end of the 1880s.²¹

A third Azerbaijani objection is that the Karabakh has been an integral part of Azerbaijani possessions "for eternity" (though this poses the question as to what Azerbaijan was an "eternity" ago, as the word appears as an ethnonym only in recent history). In ancient times the region was a "part of the

Azerbaijani state of Albania", and its rulers bore the title of "Czar of Albania", not "of Armenia".²² From 1747 to 1828, the Karabakh was a semi-sovereign khanate, which then came under Russian domination as a Moslem state, administratively never having formed part of the Armenian regions in the Russian Empire. The respect shown to the Armenian population majority by giving Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy in 1923 was unjust, from the Azerbaijani point of view, to all those Azerbaijanis who still live in compact settlements in Armenia without enjoying any particular autonomous rights.

The Azerbaijanis accuse the Armenians of having "appropriated" their historical and cultural monuments in the Karabakh and elsewhere, as also of having changed Azerbaijani toponyms into Armenian names, (though vice versa this reproach is likewise made by the Armenians). Apparently the latter have even claimed Turkish-Azerbaijani dishes such as *dolma*, *shashlik* and *ayran* for their own national cuisine.

Finally, the Azerbaijanis feel that the Armenians are instigated by notorious nationalists. These extremists, "who make the honour and conscience of the Azerbaijani nation and their sacred territory the object of shameless bartering", above all include the writer Zori Balayan, the economist Aganbegyan and the historian Sergey Mikoyan. In any case, the Armenian demand for the "reunification" of the Karabakh with Armenia is unconstitutional.

The Azerbaijani standpoint, however, is also largely permeated by national hatred, and an example of this is a treatise by eight Baku professors bearing the title *The Voice of History and Reason*, which combines partly plausible historical arguments with general defamation of the Armenians.²³

Lenin vs. Moscow

The opening of barriers in the media for repressed problems and themes which had long been a taboo has led to the development of a new kind of circulation of information in the Soviet Union, through which a large part of the non-Russian population groups can articulate their national problems. But the Soviet leadership was not prepared for this specifically "national" reaction to their reform signals. In the highly tense field of nationality issues, *perestroika* and *glasnost* have led to forms of much vituperated "street democracy", with the development of Baltic and Armenian variants of Solidarity that have undermined local Party authority, or even attracted it on to their side, and the

result of all this is now a series of "stab-in-the-back myths" on the subject of *perestroika* and the nationality issue.

The strength of the nationalist movements within the Soviet Union above all consists in the fact that they can justify their claims for a revision of Soviet nationality policy and Soviet federalism by reference to the greatest *perestroika* authority available: Lenin. They can always demonstrate that their various causes for complaint are the results of clear deviations from Lenin's affirmative nationality policy, whether it is a question of the Ukrainians complaining about the repression of their national language by the Russians, or the Estonians and Latvians complaining about the failure of migration policies. With regard to the situation of their fellow-countrymen in the Karabakh, the Armenians can always refer to Lenin's statement that the principle of self-determination and the instrument of the referendum are central to the regulation of inner-Soviet border differences. "Such borders must be regulated democratically", that is, "following the will and the 'sympathies' of the local population".²⁴

Especially in the first phase of development of the conflict, during 1988, the Armenians clearly called on Gorbachev and his reform policies. As in other regions of the Soviet Union, the language of reform has been "nationalised" in the same way:

"*Perestroika* means that we are beginning to see many things anew, which have been holding out in a state of stagnation for decades long. The most important matter for us Armenians in the Soviet Union is naturally the Karabakh issue".²⁵

During demonstrations, the Armenians carried portraits of the General Secretary with them. After the decisive assembly of the Supreme Soviet on July 18, 1988, and Gorbachev's speech on this occasion, however, sympathy for the General Secretary in Armenia diminished, and national agitation and articulation in Armenia took a turn against central authority.

Although developments in the Baltic republics are of fundamental political significance for the future of Soviet federalism, the Soviet leadership recognised the Karabakh affair as the most dangerous challenge on the nationality scenario due to several characteristics. First of all, the aggressive potential which was released in the course of the conflict brought to a dizzy

collapse the fiction of an "essentially resolved national question" in the Soviet Union. The conflict obliged Soviet public opinion to make comparisons with inter-ethnic crises under "capitalist conditions".

Secondly, in resolving the crisis the leadership had to calculate the effects of the precedents on all the other national conflicts involving inner border disputes and controversies over autonomy. This concerns the Georgian SSR, for example, which incorporates autonomous structures such as Abkhazia, Adzhar and Ossetia; Uzbekistan, with its Tadjik minority, Moldavia with its Turkish minority, and various other cases.

Thirdly, the conflict did have its implications for the nationality problem as a whole. The size of the Armenian mass-demonstrations, their disciplined course, and the astonishing forces of social self-organisation supporting them, left a profound impression on the other nationalities despite the strong limitation on *glasnost* temporarily applied for the occasion.

Fourthly, the Karabakh conflict actualised all other components of national and political dissent in the two union republics involved. Especially after the Supreme Soviet's July resolution, Armenia meditated more and more strongly on its past period of state independence from 1918 to 1920. Nationalist-separatist elements which had previously been insignificant now took the platform. During the second phase of development, Islamic and pan-Turkish ideas also came to the fore in Azerbaijan. The irredentist potential of the respective national consciousnesses thus found an outlet on both sides. The Armenians more and more insistently referred to "Greater Armenia," words which were weighed with special attention in Turkey. The Azerbaijanis began again to demand unification with their fellow-countrymen on the other side of the Soviet-Iranian border. In fact they have been a divided people since 1828, one half having been apportioned to the Russian Empire, and thus the Soviet Union, while the other half lives around the regional centre of Tabriz in northwest Iran.

Fifthly and finally, the conflict has brought out unclear aspects and contradictions in the constitutional structures of Soviet federalism. Article 70 of the Soviet constitution, which postulates the voluntary nature of alliance and the right to national self-determination as a foundation of Soviet federalism, thus contradicts Article 78, which provides for territorial situations as already established between two union republics, and says that changes are only

possible with the approval of both republican soviets and the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, even though the rights of self-determination of the local population involved might require change.

In conclusion, then, the conflict has developed into an unsolvable dilemma for the Soviet leadership. It is confronting Gorbachev with the weight of ancient historical problems, and with a profound historical-psychological background which he could hardly envisage in his previous official declarations. Gorbachev has reacted with security measures and a message to the tune of "Calm down, you two down there". In any case, not even the most sensitive search for a solution would have resulted in removing the state of frustration left on either both, or even on just one of the two sides.

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¹⁷ This is the argument that Turkey might be planning the "Islamisation" of the southern Soviet regions. Above and beyond this, there is the fact that in modern Turkey, Islamisation tendencies are considered to be dangerous for state order.

¹⁸ Quoted in Fuller, E., "Nagorno-Karabakh: an Ulster in the Caucasus?" *Radio liberty research*, 534/88, December 12, 1988.

¹⁹ Followers of the "Dashnaktsutiun", the "Armenian revolutionary federation", a nationalist party which ruled the republic of Armenia from 1918 to 1920.

²⁰ *Golos istorii i razuma*, p. 13. The statement is based on the thesis of an Armenian historian, (Ischanyan, B., *Narodnosti Kavkaza*, Petrograd, 1916).

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²² In ancient times, the Caucasian Albanians, (not to be confused with the Balkan people), a paleo-Christian state on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan.

²³ Cf. note 14.

²⁴ Lenin, V.I., *Polnoe sobranie socinenij*, t.30.

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