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The Violent End of Nagorno-Karabakh's Fight for Independence

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In less than a day, indiscriminate shelling in the region killed hundreds, displaced tens of thousands, and wiped out a thirty-five-year battle for political autonomy.

A thirty-five-year war reignited last week. Hundreds of people died. Tens of thousands may have been displaced. The world, focussed on the United Nations General Assembly and the war in [Ukraine](#), barely noticed. On September 19th, Azerbaijan started shelling towns and military bases in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave that had long fought for independence. In less than a day, the self-proclaimed republic was effectively disarmed and forced to capitulate. Russian forces, ostensibly there to prevent just this kind of outcome, offered little or no resistance. The most generous reading of the situation is that they were caught unawares. The least generous is that Russia had given its approval to the attack, perhaps in exchange for maintaining a military presence in the region.

The Karabakh conflict dates back to 1988. It prefigured a dozen others that would erupt in what was then the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Nagorno-Karabakh was, legally, an autonomous region within Azerbaijan, a constituent republic of the U.S.S.R. As [Mikhail Gorbachev's](#) government loosened political restrictions, Karabakh Armenians demanded the right, which they argued was guaranteed to them by the Soviet constitution, to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia, also a Soviet constituent republic. Moscow rejected the demand. Meanwhile, shoot-outs between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh sparked violence elsewhere. In February, 1988, anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait left dozens dead. Two years later, a week of anti-Armenian violence in Baku, Azerbaijan's historically multiethnic capital, killed dozens more. Thousands of ethnic Armenians fled Azerbaijan, where their families had lived for generations. Some left on a plane chartered by the chess champion Garry Kasparov, probably the best-known Azerbaijani Armenian, who was also leaving his motherland forever.

In 1991, the Soviet Union broke apart and each of its fifteen constituent republics became a sovereign state. For Karabakh Armenians, this meant that any legal basis for their secessionist aspirations had vanished. Nagorno-Karabakh became one of several ethnic enclaves in the post-Soviet space that was fighting for independence from the newly independent country of which they were a part—South Ossetia and Abkhazia tried to break free from Georgia, the Transnistria Region fought to separate from Moldova, Chechnya wanted out of Russia. In the early nineteen-nineties, each of these conflicts became a hot war. In every case outside its own borders, Russia supported the separatist movements—and, in most cases, used the conflicts to station its own troops in the region. Two decades later, Russia used the same playbook to foment [armed conflict in eastern Ukraine](#).

Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh lasted until 1994. Both sides engaged in ethnic cleansing: the deliberate displacement and killing of people based on their ethnicity. Moscow secretly supported

Azerbaijan in the conflict. The war ended with a de-facto victory for the Armenians, who were able to establish self-rule on a large part of the territory they claimed, even though not a single country—not even Armenia—officially recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Whether it was because the Armenians won, or because the conflict ended when Russia had been destabilized by its own bloody constitutional crisis, Nagorno-Karabakh was the only conflict region in the former empire where Russia did not station its troops.

For the next three decades, the political paths of Armenia and Azerbaijan, two neighbors inextricably linked by blood and war, diverged. Azerbaijan transitioned from Soviet totalitarianism to post-Soviet dictatorship, with a ruling dynasty, censorship, and widespread political repression. One of the world's original oil powers, Azerbaijan also grew comparatively wealthy. It nurtured diplomatic, economic, and military ties with neighboring Turkey and with Israel, which views Azerbaijan as an ally in any confrontation with Azerbaijan's next-door neighbor Iran. Armenia, at least formally, undertook a transition to democracy. That transition hit a dead end in October, 1999, when a group of gunmen burst into the parliament and assassinated nine people, including all the leaders of one of the two ruling parties. The leader of the surviving party, Robert Kocharyan, led the country for another decade, and his clan remained in power until 2018, when a peaceful revolution seemed to start a new era. The new leader of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, is a former journalist.

In both countries, Nagorno-Karabakh remained the focus of political life. For Azerbaijan, the pain and humiliation of the 1994 defeat formed the centerpiece of the national narrative. "Azerbaijan got its independence in parallel with the war, so Nagorno-Karabakh has played a major role in shaping Azerbaijani national identity," Shujaat Ahmadzada, an independent Azerbaijani political scientist, told me. "There was the memory, the images of internally displaced people, adding to the narrative of having suffered injustices. And conflict is important to keeping and solidifying power."

In Armenia, what became known as the Karabakh Clan has held power for most of the post-Soviet period. Kocharyan is a former leader of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Armen Martirosyan, an Armenian publisher and longtime political activist, told me that, in 2018, he had hoped that Nikol Pashinyan would finally represent a "party of peace." But even Pashinyan, who was born in 1975, was compelled to claim that he had got his political start in Nagorno-Karabakh. "Seven out of eight of our political parties are parties of war," Martirosyan said.

Both sides continued to arm themselves. The self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic formed its own armed forces, aided and supplied by Armenia. Azerbaijan imported arms from Israel. "It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that an oil-rich country with an authoritarian regime can put together a well-trained, cohesive army," Alexander Cherkasov, a Russian researcher in exile who has been documenting ethnic conflicts in the region for thirty-five years, said. In 2020, Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh. Fighting lasted forty-four days. Thousands of people died. Azerbaijan reestablished control over much of the self-proclaimed republic and adjacent territories. In the end, Moscow brokered a ceasefire that rested on the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. The status of the self-proclaimed republic remained undecided but, for the time being, it seemed that a shrunken Nagorno-Karabakh would continue to be self-governed.

Less than fifteen months later, Russia [launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine](#). Hundreds of thousands of Russians fleeing political persecution, the draft, and Western economic sanctions flooded into Armenia. Security guarantees offered to Armenia by Russia began to seem less reliable, and the price of these guarantees seemed to rise. According to Arman Grigoryan, an Armenian-born political scientist at Lehigh University, Pashinyan launched a "grandiose project of pulling Armenia out of Russia's orbit." Apparently counting on Russia's waning influence in the world and weakening interest in the region, Pashinyan dragged his feet on signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan, at least one that involved having Russia at the table. He also did not deliver on one of the obligations

Armenia had accepted as part of the 2020 ceasefire agreement: to provide Azerbaijan with an overland corridor to Nakhchivan, the country's exclave on the other side of the Armenian border, three hundred miles from Baku. Such a corridor would, under the terms of the ceasefire agreement, be controlled by the Russian security services. Pashinyan's reluctance was understandable, but his hope that Western support would allow him to stall indefinitely proved unfounded. Pashinyan also took a number of diplomatic—or, rather, undiplomatic—steps that galled Russia. Most recently, he asked the Armenian parliament to ratify the Rome Statute, the founding document of the International Criminal Court, which has indicted Vladimir Putin for war crimes allegedly committed against Ukraine. (Russia, like the United States, has not ratified the Rome Statute.)

Late last year, Azerbaijan started ratcheting up pressure on Nagorno-Karabakh. In December, a blockade was imposed, apparently aimed at cutting off the only supply route to the enclave. People found some ways to circumvent it, but over time the situation grew dire. Thomas de Waal, a London-based senior fellow with the Carnegie Europe Endowment for International Peace, who has been documenting the Karabakh conflict for nearly thirty years, told me that “thousands of people were without gas and there was bread rationing, down to two hundred grams a day. This and having to walk everywhere for miles, for anything. And then, out of nowhere, getting shelled.”

The shelling on September 19th was shocking, but it was by no means unexpected. Ahmadzada, the Azerbaijani researcher, told me that Azerbaijan had been pursuing what he calls a “three-‘D’ strategy”: deinternationalization, deinstitutionalization, and deterritorialization. The conflict was effectively deinternationalized when all sides agreed to a peace agreement brokered by Russia, leaving out the more conventional (and arguably more trustworthy) European or U.N. actors. Deinstitutionalization has been achieved in the latest round of fighting, with self-rule now clearly off the table. The next stage would likely be the forced exodus of Armenians from the region. This is also known as “ethnic cleansing,” a phrase that has resurfaced in reference to the Karabakh conflict.

On September 22nd, de Waal tweeted that, watching the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, he was experiencing “a disturbing déjà vu of the beginning of the Bosnia war.” Perhaps more accurately, the events are reminiscent of the 1991-94 Karabakh war, whose atrocities were overshadowed by atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia. “And of course today we are seeing pictures of convoys on mountain roads, people having grabbed their possessions and abandoned their homes,” de Waal told me on the phone. “I am having flashbacks to the early nineteen-nineties.” At first, Armenian and Karabakh authorities talked of evacuating only the people whose homes had been destroyed in the fighting. But Armenian N.G.O.s put out the call for people experienced in building refugee camps at a large scale. The population of Nagorno-Karabakh is believed to be around a hundred and twenty thousand people, though, according to de Waal, some eighty thousand to a hundred thousand people were in the region when it was attacked. About half of them are now believed to have left their homeland.

On September 27th, Azerbaijan arrested Ruben Vardanyan, an Armenian-born entrepreneur and philanthropist who had made billions in Russia before moving to Nagorno-Karabakh to lead its government in 2022. (Vardanyan resigned his position in February, in an effort to facilitate negotiations with the Azerbaijani side.) Vardanyan, who had stayed in the region during the shelling, was apparently also trying to leave when he was detained. On September 28th, the government of the self-proclaimed republic announced its intention to disband by the end of the year.

The Nagorno-Karabakh independence project has ended. But, Grigoryan told me, the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict is not over. “Azerbaijan has the military capability to take over southern Armenia, possibly on the pretext of needing a corridor to Nakhchivan.” Russia may have an interest in maintaining a military presence in the region, and further conflict could serve as the pretext. For now, the Russian media machine is working to destabilize the political situation in Armenia. Russia's

chief propagandists, at least two of whom happen to be ethnic Armenians, have blamed the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh on Pashinyan. They have unleashed diatribes against him, employing obscene language. Under a special legal arrangement between the two countries, Russian television is widely broadcast in Armenia. "I have understood that Armenia should not insert itself in the games big countries play," Martirosyan, the publisher, said. "Because the big ones will have a spat and kill a small country. Or at least hurt it very badly."

Masha Gessen became a staff writer at The New Yorker in 2017. Their latest book is "[Surviving Autocracy](#)."

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