

Armenia, Azerbaijan & the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Behind the Four-Day War

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Peace for Armenia and Azerbaijan will come from confronting their real enemy — capitalist elites.

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On the afternoon of April 2, Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, was gripped with anxiety. On the street, the dour, worried faces of passersby clashed with the unusually warm and sunny spring weather. By evening, the normally bustling bars and restaurants were nearly empty, and the few patrons that did come were loath to touch the food and drinks they ordered. Waiters too were morose, having dropped any pretense at a customer-service smile. Earlier that morning the “frozen” Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had erupted in violence, and just like that, the country was at war.

It seems that under the cover of darkness, Azerbaijani troops on the border with the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh pushed across the line of contact, and with the support of tanks, gunships, and heavy artillery overran many of the Armenian positions, including three villages.

The next day, a successful counterattack by Armenian and NKR troops recovered much of the lost territory, but at significant human cost to both sides. On the third day, dozens of Armenian and Azerbaijani tanks squared off against one another in open battle. By the fourth day, with at least one hundred and seventy two people killed and negligent territorial gains or losses, a temporary ceasefire was signed, that at least for now, still holds.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, like many conflicts born of the collapse of the USSR, is little known outside the region. But one would be remiss to ignore the recent bloody escalation. It was not a random outburst of violence, but the manifestation of acute socio-economic contradictions that have been developing in Armenian and Azerbaijani society since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

What's more, this month's events, if they do not lead to a full-scale war, are likely to change the course of both Armenia and Azerbaijan — and might even open up the space for an emancipatory alternative.

The Nagorno-Karabakh War

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh began, like many of the conflicts in the region, during the hopeful years of Mikhail Gorbachev's "*glasnost*" and "*perestroika*." In the spring of 1988, emboldened by Gorbachev's liberal reforms, ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region (comprising roughly 70 percent of the population) began to protest for a change in the legal status of the territory, petitioning the Communist Party to make Karabakh part of Armenia rather than Azerbaijan.

The protests by the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were soon echoed both in Armenia's Yerevan and in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku. In both cities, tens of thousands came out in support of their respective ethnic brethren. In Yerevan they demanded secession; in Baku, the status quo.

Within months of the initial protests, violence broke out in ethnically mixed communities in both countries. Eventually it escalated into a brutal spiral of pogroms, ethnic cleansing, and full-scale war. By the time a ceasefire was signed in the spring of 1994, an estimated thirty thousand people were dead, and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as several surrounding Azerbaijani regions, was under the military control of Armenia (nominally as part of the newly "independent" Nagorno-Karabakh Republic).

Since the signing of that ceasefire, a relative peace came to the region, though sniper fire and the occasional mortar meant that there was a steady dribble of death on both sides of the line of contact. Ironically, this incomplete peace ended up playing a key role in securing and consolidating the rule of oligarchical bourgeois governments in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

From the Collapse

Armenia, like many other post-Soviet states, suffered economic catastrophe in the 1990s. Without the production chains of the Soviet planned economy and subject to corrupt and capricious privatization schemes (conditions that were further exacerbated by an economic blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey), Armenia's once-booming industrial sector completely collapsed.

An economy that once produced cars, appliances, textiles, and industrial machinery had shriveled to producing primarily raw copper and brandy. Shuttered factories meant jobless workers, and Armenia found itself in possession of a massive excess population. And so, from 1991-99 one million people, roughly one-third of the population, left the country looking for livelihood in Russia or further abroad.

Out of this chaos two parallel elite groups emerged: the liberal nationalists, composed primarily of dissident Soviet intelligentsia; and the military nationalists, composed of guerrilla leaders from the Karabakh war. The power struggle between these two groups culminated in the bloodless coup against liberal-nationalist president Levon Ter-Petrosyan and his replacement by military nationalist Robert Kocharyan, the former leader of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

The new government was little different from the old; the budget pilfering, the violent maintenance of monopolies, and the general political gangsterism continued. However, with the liberals out of the way, the state strategy for attaining legitimacy reoriented almost entirely towards the Karabakh issue. The problems with the economy were set aside, Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's security were placed in the foreground, and any social disruptions (strikes, protests, etc.) were framed as an unpatriotic disruption of this security.

As in Armenia, the collapse of Azerbaijan's Soviet-era industry came hand in hand with the emergence of oligarchical elites. These elites, unlike in Armenia, did not wait until the war was over to settle their scores. As Azerbaijani troops transitioned to fighting a full-scale war over Karabakh in 1991, the country slowly came apart at the seams, transforming into a set of warring fiefdoms each with its own leading oligarch.

This internecine conflict, in addition to hampering the Karabakh war effort, brought the country to the brink of civil war. As Azerbaijan stood on the precipice, the embattled president, Abulfaz Elchibay, invited the shadowy ex-leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, to mediate the crisis. Two months later Elchibay was forced to resign, and Aliyev was elected president of Azerbaijan.

Heydar Aliyev: former leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, former head of Azerbaijani KGB, former member of Soviet Politburo — known unironically as “The Dragon.” He was as brutal and cunning as his resume and his nickname suggested. Shortly after his seizure of the presidency, he crushed his oligarchical opposition and united all of Azerbaijan in a near-totalitarian power vertical.

He reoriented the Azerbaijani economy solely towards oil production and used the significant revenues to enrich himself and his inner circle, as well as to construct a military and security apparatus to rival that of the Soviet years.

He also gave Azerbaijan a unifying nationalist ideology with Karabakh as a key pillar. If his rhetoric was to be believed, under his benevolent rule Azerbaijan would become a wealthy, modern, neoliberal state; and in due time, would redeem its honor and regain the lost territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Oil Crisis in Azerbaijan

Heydar Aliyev died in 2003, but his policies did not leave with him. His son, Ilham, succeeded him and wasted no time in further consolidating the family's power. He expanded the cult of personality that his father had begun, making sure that at least one street in every single city and town was named after his father, in addition to a large collection of museums, libraries, and stadiums. At the same time, he doubled down on Karabakh as a linchpin of national ideology, putting it front and center of all other national issues and exponentially increasing investment in the armed forces.

This trajectory only expanded following the oil boom of 2008. While much of the world was reeling from the recession caused by the US housing crisis, Azerbaijan was spending like there was no tomorrow. The military made multi-billion dollar deals with Israel to stock on the latest gadgets of destruction, while Baku's skyline was irrevocably transformed as mega-projects, designed by super-architects like Zaha Hadid, rose up towards the clouds. Azerbaijan even agreed to host a litany of lavish international events, such as Eurovision and the first-ever European Games.

When small opposition party protests inspired by the Arab Spring took off in 2011, the government's response was predictable: they arrested everyone, and further increased government spending. Bread and terror were a potent combination, and it worked — until oil collapsed in price.

Since crude oil comprises 90 percent of Azerbaijan's exports, the price collapse could only mean a parallel economic nosedive. Over the past year most of the Azerbaijani population has seen its savings evaporate and living costs skyrocket, as the Azerbaijani Manat was devalued against the dollar by over 40 percent.

Thus in January, as unprecedented demonstrations erupted all over Azerbaijan to protest against an

increase in the price of basic necessities, the Azerbaijani government found its options limited — there was not enough money to continue lavish state spending, and repression alone had too high a chance of backfiring. Aliyev decided to take a middle path: while he arrested many protesters, he nevertheless acknowledged their demands, and before the end of the month moved to cut taxes on basic necessities as well as to legislate a maximum price ceiling.

The monarchical levels of wealth and tendency for glitz and self-aggrandizing spectacle may have once served to buttress Ilham Aliyev's government, in a Louis XIV kind of way. But they became a massive liability this year. After all, what do shiny buildings and Shakira concerts matter to an Azerbaijani villager who has seen his income drop to under \$200 a month, less even than an impoverished villager in enemy Armenia?

The blitzkrieg on the morning of April 2 was most likely an attempt by Aliyev to resolve this problem; to transform from a figure of a decadent monarch like Louis XIV to that of patriotic militarist like Bonaparte.

Had the attack been successful, and a significant portion of territory won by Azerbaijan, this ploy might have worked. It is imaginable that he would have been able to shift the ideological load that the economy and the repressive apparatus could no longer support onto a renewed expansionary, militaristic nationalism.

But history has seen many more regime failures in such "wars of national salvation" than successes. Aliyev might have done well to study what happened in neighboring Georgia when President Saakashvili, following the military defeat to Russia in 2008, not only lost the subsequent election, but was effectively exiled from the country.

With no real victory from the recent conflict, and oil prices lingering at the bottom of the barrel, the Saakashvili scenario is not unimaginable. And unless Aliyev figures out some way to restart the economy, the events of this January will have been just the beginning.

Armenia's Growing Protest Movement

The prominent Armenian academic Alexander Iskanadryan once said, "God, after all, must love the Armenians, he gave them no oil." For this reason, Armenia's oligarchical rulers could, literally, never afford to be as repressive as the Aliyev government in Baku. Without their own petrodollar windfall, they simply did not have the money to equip and sustain such a formidable repressive apparatus. This has been a boon for Armenian social movements, which, while still subject to state repression, have flourished in recent years.

The latest wave of protests saw its first successes in August of 2013 when, in response to a 50 percent increase in Yerevan's bus fares, students organized a boycott. What started as small bus-stop demonstrations of maybe a dozen people quickly grew into a citywide movement. At almost any major bus stop you could find average citizens offering rides for needy passengers, so nobody would have to break the boycott.

Several weeks into the protest, the bus drivers got involved, and for the first time organized their own independent union. One of their first decisions was to let passengers ride free of charge until the price hike was rescinded.

It did not take long for the government to reverse its decision on the fare hike.

The success of the boycott encouraged further mobilizations, and since then, there has been a spate of protests focused on a variety of socio-economic issues. The biggest protest, which dwarfed even the fare boycott, happened this past summer, when government regulators approved a 17 percent increase in the price of electricity nationwide.

The day that the price hike was announced a small protest of several hundred people gathered at Freedom Square in the center of Yerevan. When the demonstrators tried to leave the square and march towards parliament they were violently dispersed, with dozens arrested.

Rather than quell dissent, the forceful response only further encouraged it. The following day several thousand demonstrators once again staged a march from Freedom Square towards the parliament down Baghramyan Avenue, the city's main artery.

When stopped by a line of riot police, the protestors built a barricade out of garbage containers and declared an occupation. Over the next two weeks, tens of thousands of ordinary Armenians came into the streets and took part in the occupation, participating in the biggest protest in the history of independent Armenia.

The occupation of Baghramyan Avenue was similar to other Occupy-style protests. It was proudly "leaderless" and "apolitical," with no formal structure, no ties to established political parties, and with no "political" demands. For most, to participate in the occupation was simply to demand the reversal of the electricity price hike and nothing more. While some prominent activist figures articulated more complex positions, such as calling for the re-nationalization of the electric grid, the dominant slogan of the protest remained the vague "No to robbery!"

In the end, the protest succeeded . . . sort of.

The government agreed to do an audit of the electricity company, and meanwhile funds from the national budget would be used to absorb the extra costs to consumers. Shortly after the announcement of these measures, the occupation dissolved.

But the social momentum born in Baghramyan did not die with the occupation. When, on April 2, word first came of the clashes on the line of contact, the same social forces that made the occupation possible mobilized once again. Food drives, blood drives, and the enlistment of military volunteers were organized within twenty-four hours. The state, on the other hand, seemed to be caught unawares.

That first day, even the major news channels feigned obliviousness, airing old Soviet cartoons with only cursory mention of what was happening in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Four days later, when the ceasefire was signed, the anxiety that had gripped the country transformed into jubilation. Optimistic pundits began to call the clash "The Four Day War," as if trying to will into existence a definitive end to the hostilities. But as jubilation faded, the issue of the state and the oligarchs forcefully reentered the frame.

The questions, "Where were they?" and "Why did they do so little?" were commonly expressed on the street and on social media. Armenia's talented meme-smiths contributed with countless images contrasting the ageing military tech of Armenian soldiers with the shiny new cars so beloved by the oligarchs. The nationalism carefully cultivated by Armenia's ruling elites may now be backfiring.

Future Possibilities

Beverly Silver, in her book *Forces of Labor*, points out that, historically, while beginning a conflict is good way to quash a rising working-class movement, the immediate period following a military conflict is when the working class wins the greatest gains.

The governments in Yerevan and Baku are in trouble both ideologically and economically. The “frozen conflict” which they have used to shore up domestic support and legitimize the crushing of dissent is not serving its purpose, or worse, creating blowback. Low oil prices are decimating Azerbaijan’s economy, and seriously harming Armenia’s (because of Armenia’s economic reliance on Russia).

But the regimes have few mechanisms to deal with this dilemma. The cumbersome and corrupt bureaucracies that they have constructed in the two decades since the Soviet collapse stand in the way of any nimble maneuvering through the coming crisis.

Of course, not just any revolution will do. As we have seen in the tragic aftermath of the Arab Spring, without strong and independent social structures, the workers and other subaltern classes are easily co-opted by newly emergent, or simply re-masked, bourgeois elites.

Yet there are some possibilities for change, especially in Armenia. With a recent history of protest, self-organization among the population, and a rejection of the usual liberal political opposition as “corrupt,” the emergence of viable left alternative is certainly in the cards. However, the lack of more permanent social organizations such as trade unions dampens the possibility somewhat, and makes any predictions about the direction, strength, and program of this not-yet-existing alternative almost impossible to make.

The people of Azerbaijan, on the other hand, have been cursed with an oil-infused repressive apparatus, which has deprived them of opportunities for independent organizing. While a political upsurge by the Azerbaijani masses is likely, it is also very likely that it will be co-opted by the neoliberal opposition (the political progeny of the oligarchs defeated by Heydar Aliyev in the 1990s).

Another likely possibility is the entrance of Russia into the fray. Currently a patron of the Armenian government, in the case of severe social conflict, Russia will likely try to secure the loyalty of the Azerbaijani government, or replace it with someone who is beholden to Moscow’s interests.

The worst-case scenario for both countries, and for the region, is if the governments in power attempt to resolve their crises with a full-blown return to war. Unlike the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, which was fought with weapons pilfered from Soviet army bases, this would be a war of tanks, missiles, and heavy artillery. Hundreds of thousands would likely perish.

There is only one way to ensure that this nightmare scenario never comes to pass. The peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan must recognize that for the past two decades, they were never really each other’s enemies; that their blood, their suffering, and their hatred were little more than a tool for capital accumulation by elites, and that it is only by facing the real enemy they will finally find peace.

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P.S.

* "Behind the Four-Day War". Jacobin. 4.13.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/04/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-war/>

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