

Armenia: Another Century, Another Genocide?

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35 years ago this week began the first Karabakh war: a devastating conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the periphery of the old Soviet world. Though ending with an uneasy ceasefire in 1994, the conflict suddenly resumed in 2020, when Azerbaijan launched an offensive across the 1994 armistice line. Here, two scholars explain why it is vital for all to pay attention.

What happens when, a century after a genocide, the perpetrator returns to attack the victim? This is exactly what happened during the Second Karabakh War, when Azerbaijan attacked Armenia and Armenians in mountainous Karabakh in 2020. This is a unique event, with no parallels in history. It would be like if, in the year 2039, a neo-Nazi regime in Germany, allied with a neo-nationalist and Islamist regime in the Middle East, sent their most advanced aviation to attack and silence Israel for demanding justice for the Holocaust. Or if, in the year 2073, a neo-Khmer Rouge regime ordered the deportation of the population of Phnom Penh to the countryside for hard labor.

Of course, this is not the case of Israel or Cambodia. Germany has recognized its crime of genocide against European Jewry and [pays yearly compensation](#) to the State of Israel and Holocaust survivors. (And in fact, it is Israel that is arming Azerbaijan to attack Armenia—another nation that survived genocide—not to mention violating basic rights of Palestinians living under occupation.) In Cambodia, one can visit the infamous [prison camp S-21 or Tuol Sleng](#) turned into a memorial museum, and an international war crimes tribunal spent 16 years tracking down and prosecuting former Khmer Rouge officials.

In Turkey, on the contrary, the state and the population continue to celebrate the genocidaires [Talaat](#), Enver, and Jemal, and others. The grandchildren of the Committee of Union and Progress are still in power. Indeed, it is not possible to believe that such an assault against the Armenians would have occurred without the direct participation of Turkey, or to imagine the emergence of today's conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan without the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Turkey. Most importantly, today's war would have been impossible without the thick shadow of the first modern genocide a century ago, which remains unrecognized by the perpetrator state.

From the first day of Armenia's independence in 1991, Turkey took a hostile position toward its erstwhile victim of genocide. As early as 1992, Turkey started a military collaboration with Azerbaijan, transforming its armed forces from an outdated post-Soviet military into a [NATO-grade fighting machine](#). Over three decades, Turkey encouraged and supported the militaristic policy of Azerbaijan. Ultimately, it even participated directly in the Second Karabakh War on Azerbaijan's behalf: in 2020, Turkey sent its generals and air force, US-made F-16s and Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 attack drones, to actually assault Armenian positions.

Such a direct military intervention by a genocide perpetrator against a formerly victimized people is wholly unprecedented in modern international relations. The assault calls into question the legitimacy of our post-World War II international order, which did not even react when a perpetrator of genocide casually attacked its victims yet again. It also questions the legitimacy of our international news industry, which did not even notice—with dire consequences to all of us, not just Armenians.

Failing to see the legacy of the Armenia genocide—especially its continuous denial—today was not only the fault of the undefined “international community,” the influential media industry, or self-declared human rights organizations. The Turkish liberal intelligentsia was also to blame.

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During the 2020 war and in its aftermath, Turkish intellectuals, dissidents, and oppositionists kept silent. This [unbearable silence](#) comes with a price: it casts doubt on the important progress made in Armenia-Turkey reconciliation since the mid-1990s. Turkish intellectuals had made slow, but regular progress in recognizing the importance of dealing with the past not only to bring justice to a wronged minority, the Armenians, but also as the cornerstone for the rule of law and democracy in Turkey itself. The [struggle of Hrant Dink](#), the Turkish-Armenian journalist and editor of *Agos*, and his assassination in 2007 had awakened the conscience of the Turkish public, it seemed. Yet the silence of Turkish civil society during the Karabakh war in 2020 with the participation of the Turkish military has raised many questions about this normalization process, which will also radicalize Armenian positions. The struggle for recognition of the Armenian genocide, led by Armenian diaspora organizations, political parties, and grassroots movements, will continue. Yet the 2020 Karabakh War, direct Turkish military involvement, and the deafening silence about it within Turkey will eventually make the old struggle obsolete.

In 1965, for the first time after the 1915 genocide, Armenians around the world organized mass demonstrations directed toward Turkey and the “international community,” demanding genocide recognition and compensation. After 2020, it became evident that the Armenian struggle since 1965 was a pyrrhic victory. Clearly, that struggle, those partial recognitions, did not have any real effect when Turkey decided to turn its support for Azerbaijan into an open war. The struggle for the recognition of the 1915 genocide aimed to make “Never Again!” not merely a slogan—chanted during demonstrations on April 24, [Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day](#)—but a political reality that would shield the victim population from new threats, attacks, and “ethnic cleansing.” That, unfortunately, did not happen.

THE 2020 KARABAKH WAR AND THE MEMORY OF GENOCIDE

One might argue that today’s Karabakh conflict was caused by the Soviet system. This argument maintains that the administrative arrangements made by Joseph Stalin ensured that regions like Nagorno Karabakh would be impossible to manage after the hegemonic power of the Soviet center disintegrated. This is because the Soviets, despite their Marxist ideological references, attempted to solve the “national problem” by creating autonomous national territories. Unfortunately, the problem of Nagorno Karabakh simultaneously concerned both the Armenian and Azeri people. Since the region had an Armenian majority of 94 percent in the early 1920s, it was placed not within the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic but within the Azerbaijani SSR. To underline its ethnic Armenian character, it was given a low level of autonomy. The Soviets imagined that with modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and mass education (in their terminology, advancing toward “socialism” and “communism”), Nagorno Karabakh’s ethnonational differences would lose

importance.

But instead, the opposite happened. For decades, under the shroud of socialist friendship (the famous *druzhiba!*), ethnic discrimination was the daily practice. Those systematic and routine acts of violence caused the mass mobilization of Karabakh Armenians in February 1988.

Until here, the developments of the Karabakh story remained within the context of the Soviet system and its contradictions. Yet, a week after the Karabakh Soviet passed a resolution demanding the unification of Nagorno Karabakh with neighboring Soviet Armenia, events took a turn. Karabakh began to echo another history, one outside the context of the Soviet Union.

On February 27, 1988—and for three days thereafter—anti-Armenian pogroms exploded in the Azerbaijani industrial town of Sumgait. The mass violence unleashed in Sumgait and the chain of anti-Armenian pogroms that continued in Kirovabad (now Ganja) and Baku strongly connected back to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict of 1918-1920, and the thick shadow of the unresolved history of the Armenian genocide.

For many decades, most journalists and scholars who researched and wrote about the Karabakh conflict made little or no reference at all to the impact of the 1915 genocide, and its denial, on the genesis of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Only a few understood how deep the connection was between the 1988 pogroms in Sumgait, Kirovabad, Baku, and elsewhere and the 1915 deportations and massacres executed by Turkey's Committee of Union and Progress during World War I. This connection—going back to the formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918—was profound and ideological, but it was also mutating.

For long years I opposed those who argued that the contemporary Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was rooted in the history of the Armenian genocide. The similarities were only on the level of symbols, I thought, while there were huge differences in context and institutional frameworks: the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict emerged from contradictory Soviet policies, and within the context of the unexpected collapse of the Soviet state and the struggle to define political community (self-determination) and boundaries of the state (territorial integrity).

But even then, unlike my international colleagues writing about the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, I had already documented how Azerbaijani nationalists had borrowed the most extreme form of denialism and the Unionist ideological baggage that came with it. [\[1\]](#) I realized that the memory of past mass atrocities is kept not only by the victimized group but also, in a deformed way, by the perpetrators and hegemonic forces associated with them. Mass violence is an exchange between two groups: dominant and dominated. When dominated groups mobilize to fight for their liberation, hegemonic forces through symbolic acts of violence remind them of past massacres. The message is clear: If you dare to change the status quo, we will unleash mass violence against you once again! This was the symbolic message in Sumgait back in 1988, when pogroms were orchestrated in Azerbaijan merely a week after Karabakh Armenians voted on a motion demanding to be freed from Soviet Azerbaijan and united with neighboring Soviet Armenia.

Later, developments became more alarming. I started to see a closer overlap between the 1915 genocide and the Karabakh conflict. Surprisingly, it was not the Armenian political leadership that was insisting on continuities between those two events, but that of Azerbaijan. For Turkey, the link was always there, from day one of independent Armenia. The trend started in the late 1990s under Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev but took a very extreme form under his son and successor, Ilham Aliyev. A new ideology was taking shape where Armenians were the perfect others of the

Azerbaijani nation, a national self-definition based on the negative other. [2] Turkish sociologist Ceylan Tokluoglu writes: “Azerbaijanis (re)construct Armenian identity by defining the Armenians, not themselves, as a ‘unique community.’ In this context, they stereotype the Armenians. They also attribute a ‘special mission’ to them, which is to occupy the lands of other nations.”

In this new state-sponsored narrative of Azerbaijan, not only did the Armenian genocide not happen, but also the Armenians became guilty: the perpetrators of a series of anti-Azerbaijani genocides.

A second development was taking place, parallel to the Karabakh conflict. Since the early 1990s, Turkey had joined in, supporting Azerbaijan and antagonizing Armenia. Even before Armenian forces overran and occupied the Kelbajar district of Azerbaijan (a province situated between Karabakh and Armenia), Turkey refused to normalize its relations with Armenia, establish diplomatic relations, or open its border. Yet after the failure of “football diplomacy” and the “Zurich protocols” in 2009, Turkey became much more menacing.

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By the centennial of the 1915 genocide, it was evident that Turkey wanted Armenia to abandon its international struggle for genocide recognition and give up any claims to compensation for the extermination of the Ottoman Armenians and plundering their properties. Turkey also wanted the Karabakh conflict to be resolved against Armenia and in favor of Azerbaijan. Such a geopolitical objective had been in Turkish policy starting in 1993. What was new (after the failure of Zurich protocols) was the emergence of an intense military collaboration between Turkey and Azerbaijan. This made the risk of a new war much higher.

Here, a second and quite surprising link between the 1915 genocide and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict came to light. The memory of genocide in a deformed manner was strongly present in Azerbaijani discourse. On the one hand, Azerbaijani officials became the most vehement deniers of the Armenian genocide. On the other hand, they made the memory of this genocide ever present in their propaganda. The victimhood of the Armenians was denied, and instead they became perpetrators of a series of genocidal events. Azerbaijan passed a presidential decree in 1998 that declared March 31 a “Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis.” The text referred not to any event but to a long history of two centuries, from the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) between Tsarist Russia and Qajar Persia until the contemporary Karabakh conflict, in which Azeris were represented as victims of ahistoric and continuous Armenian mass violence. This was followed by official commemorations of the Khojaly massacre in 1992 as a “genocide” and the construction of several museums in Azerbaijan to create a tradition of Azerbaijani victimhood. [3]

Those evolutions in Azerbaijan and in Turkey led me to change my analysis. [4] With Turkey supporting Azerbaijan, the militaristic positions in Baku moved to the extreme.

TURKEY IS PART OF THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

The Second Karabakh War was not possible without long-term Turkish participation: encouraging Azerbaijani militarism as well as threatening Armenia and pushing it into the corner. Turkey took direct part in the war by sending its generals, air force, and elite troops. At the end, when Ilham Aliyev organized his “Victory Parade” in Baku, he invited the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to celebrate their shared victory against Armenia and Armenians. There, Erdogan openly referred to the legacy of the 1915 genocide by mentioning [Enver and his brother Nuri](#), the leader of the “Army of Islam.”

Post-Soviet ethno-territorial conflicts are very complicated. Indeed, since these conflicts began erupting after the collapse of the Soviet Union, none has found a solution: not in Georgia (South Ossetia or Abkhazia) or in Moldova (the Transdnistria conflict). [5] The same may be true of the Karabakh conflict, which is shadowed by the Soviet Union but also by another unresolved conflict, inherited from the period of the Ottoman Empire: the 1915 extermination of Armenians and the continuous denial of the crime. With such a history, the Karabakh conflict seems impossible to settle.

But worse may still come. Today, there can be no more doubt that not only the Karabakh Armenians but indeed, all Armenians across the Caucasus are existentially threatened by the Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance. Moreover, today's threat is rooted in the continuous legacy of a genocide that is not only denied but also celebrated.

Vicken Cheterian

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P.S.

Public Books

<https://www.publicbooks.org/armenia-another-century-another-genocide/>

Footnotes

[1] See Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia's Troubled Frontier* (Hurst, 2009), chaps. 3 and 6.

[2] Ceylan Tokluoglu, "The Political Discourse of the Azerbaijani Elite on Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (1991-2009)," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 63, no. 7 (2011), p. 1225.

[3] [Vicken Cheterian, "The Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict,"](#) *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, no. 6 (2018), especially pp. 895-98.

[4] See Vicken Cheterian, *Open Wounds, Armenians, Turks, and a Century of Genocide* (Hurst, 2015), chap. 12.

[5] The conflict in Chechnya, which led to two bloody wars between Russian troops and Chechen fighters, is the only exception, achieved at the price of imposing a pro-Russian dictatorship led by the Kadyrov family in Chechnya.