

The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict Is a Product of the Soviet Union's Collapse

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The war in Ukraine has overshadowed the ongoing battle between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But both conflicts show the Soviet Union is still unraveling — with devastating, bloody consequences.

With the world's attention focused on the war in Ukraine, another bloody post-Soviet conflict is flying under the radar — the ongoing battle between Armenia and Azerbaijan over a territory called Nagorno-Karabakh. These neighboring former Soviet republics have fought two wars against each other in the last three decades — the first from 1989 to 1994, and the second in the fall of 2020.

The 2020 war ended with an uneasy ceasefire, and in late 2022 Azerbaijanis instituted a blockade of the Lachin corridor, a narrow road linking ethnically Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia proper. This roadblock has cut off thousands of people from food, fuel, and medicine, and thousands have been unable to return to their homes.

Ronald Suny is a leading historian of the Soviet Union and the author of many books, most recently [Stalin: Passage to Revolution](#). He spoke to *Jacobin's* Chris Maisano about the roots of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, its place in the ongoing process of Soviet collapse, and the need for complexity and nuance in thinking about the post-Soviet world.

A Brief History of Armenia and Azerbaijan

CHRIS MAISANO | Many of us might have trouble locating Armenia or Azerbaijan on a map, so let's start by just situating these countries geographically.

RONALD SUNY | The word Armenia appeared first in the fifth century BC as Armina, and as a country it has always been a presence somewhere, even when there was no Armenian state. Armenia was once a large territory and several times a state in what we would call today Eastern Anatolia or Eastern Turkey, the South Caucasus, and part of modern-day Iran. The lakes of Sevan, Van, and Urmia make up what was known as the Armenian plateau, and that term has a long history.

The term Azerbaijan is a more recent term. Azerbaijan is also located in the Southern Caucasus, or what during the tsarist period, and even the Soviet period, was called Transcaucasia. There were Muslims in Eastern Transcaucasia and Northern Iran who spoke a Turkic language, and who were Shiite rather than Sunni Muslims. They were incorporated into the Persian Empire. We don't use "Transcaucasia" anymore, because it implies an imperial gaze over the mountains from Russia toward the south. The South Caucasus is a big area, including Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

CHRIS MAISANO | Historically, this has been a part of the world where empires and peoples have come together, both to fight wars and to engage in cultural and economic

exchanges.

RONALD SUNY | Yes, this has always been an area of transition. The old Silk Road route went through what we would call historic or Western Armenia, and it was important. It was a place where several major empires, the tsarist empire (eventually the Soviet empire), the Ottoman Empire, and the Persian Empire in various forms clashed.

So it was an area of contestation, and the Armenians were a Christian people in what became largely a Muslim region. The region is a kind of tectonic plate between much of the Middle East and Europe. Economically, it's an area that has important natural resources and minerals of various kinds.

Modern-day Armenia and Azerbaijan were formed in 1918 as independent republics, and then they were conquered and integrated by the Bolsheviks into the Soviet Union. Armenia was one of the poorest parts of the Soviet Union — it basically produced rocks and intellectuals. Armenians became important in terms of their diasporas, including the Soviet diaspora of engineers and various kinds of intellectuals.

Armenia is a Christian country. It's connected to the West and can draw on a reservoir of sympathy because of the genocide of the Ottoman Turks against Armenians in 1915. They have a large diaspora in Europe and America, which is an asset for them.

Azerbaijan is a traditionally Muslim country. Its great asset is its wealth. It has the oil city of Baku, which was one of the first oil centers in the world. The Caspian Sea's oil and gas makes Azerbaijan an extraordinarily wealthy state, and therefore oil companies and various powers in the West, as well as in Turkey, are interested in Azerbaijan. In the post-Soviet period, Azerbaijan became richer, more powerful, and better armed, while Armenia lagged behind and became dependent in some sense on foreign aid and the diaspora.

CHRIS MAISANO | **Both countries are former Soviet republics, and they are right next door to each other. But as you note, they've gone in different directions since the Soviet collapse, not just economically but politically. Armenia is relatively democratic, particularly for the area, while Azerbaijan is a neo-patrimonial state with a hereditary president. What accounts for this divergence?**

RONALD SUNY | To begin to answer that question, you need to go back to before the Soviet Union. In the late tsarist period, there were clashes between Caucasian Muslims and Armenians. Armenians were, particularly in Baku, a more privileged class than the Muslims, who were the poorest and most downtrodden workers in that period. These clashes definitely had an ethnic dimension to them, but there was a social class basis to them as well.

The Soviets came in 1920, and for the next seventy years there wasn't the kind of violence there was in the late tsarist period or in the early stages of the revolution.

CHRIS MAISANO | **Why was that?**

RONALD SUNY | The Soviet Union was all about *druzhba narodov*, or "friendship of the peoples," and there was not supposed to be ethnic or national conflict according to the official ideology. Though there were differences and still some clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (or between Christians and Muslims) in the Soviet period, they were carried out largely on the soccer field or through forms of discrimination within each republic. But in general, there were no ethnic clashes for the next seventy years. There was a *Pax Sovietica* in which the imperial power suppressed and managed these ethnic differences. And indeed, in that period there was some

intermarriage between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and relatively peaceful relations.

I would argue, though, that Armenians always considered themselves a superior people, and they looked down on Muslims, as did most other Europeanized populations in the Soviet Union. Among Azerbaijanis and other Muslims, there was resistance to that condescension and resentment at the privileges that urbanized and educated Armenians had.

Fast forward to the end of the Soviet Union. My interpretation has always been that the end of the Soviet Union was not a bottom-up process. There were not massive social movements calling for the dissolution of the union. There was some nationalism, miners' strikes, etc. But the Soviet Union committed suicide. It collapsed because the center tried a very radical reform program that it couldn't handle, and Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately was unwilling to use violence to keep the thing together. He was no Abraham Lincoln or Deng Xiaoping, willing to use massive force to keep the country united. So it eventually dissolved into fifteen independent republics.

That process played out in different ways in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia had a nationalist, anti-communist, but democratic movement called the Pan-Armenian National Movement, led by intellectuals. That movement eventually came to power in independent Armenia.

In Azerbaijan, there was a very weak popular front. There were democrats in that country, but in general the *nomenklatura*, the Communist ruling class, maintained its power. The old first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, Heydar Aliyev, came to power as head of independent Azerbaijan. When he died in 2003, his son, Ilham, took over control of a very repressive and despotic regime, all based on the richness of the oil reserves and the family power of the Aliyev family.

Armenia is still democratic. It was ruled for a while by corrupt politicians and oligarchs that are a kind of national mafia. But a couple of years ago, there was a very popular democratic movement that overthrew these mafias and came to power under the current prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan. So there is a tremendous contrast between these two political systems.

The Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh

CHRIS MAISANO | Right now, Armenia and Azerbaijan are fighting over a disputed area called Nagorno-Karabakh. This is not the first time these countries have come to blows over Nagorno-Karabakh. What exactly is at stake here?

RONALD SUNY | Nagorno-Karabakh, or Mountainous Karabakh, is a largely Armenian area the Soviets made into an autonomous national region — but placed it entirely within Azerbaijan. It has a tiny little road called the Lachin corridor that connects it to Armenia proper.

Why did that happen? Nagorno-Karabakh was, at the time of the formation of these republics in the 1920s, 90 percent Armenian. But the Soviets didn't give Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, even though Leninist nationality policy based on national self-determination might suggest otherwise. In the beginning of the Soviet period, Armenia was an incredibly poor, devastated republic of refugees and disease while Azerbaijan had its oil wealth. Most of the roads from Nagorno-Karabakh ran down into Azerbaijan, to the plains of Karabakh and to Baku. So it made economic sense.

Some would say this decision was about divide and rule, but no, the Soviets sincerely tried to get these things right because they needed to manage a huge multinational empire. But one of the anomalies that resulted was the placement of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and there it remained. Occasionally there were movements or petitions to try to get it moved into Armenia, but they never worked.

Then along came Gorbachev, and suddenly there was space for civil society. You could organize, you could protest. One of the earliest manifestations of nationalist revolt was in Karabakh in February 1988, when local Armenians demanded that they be moved into Armenia. Then a million people came out on the streets of the Armenian capital, Yerevan, in support of this demand, showing just how much popular support there was for it.

As you can imagine, Gorbachev had a real dilemma on his hands. If he gave Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenians, he'd alienate not only Azerbaijan, but most of Muslim Central Asia and other Muslim areas like Tatarstan on the Volga.

So he finessed it and tried not to do it. In response to the Armenian movement, Azerbaijanis, many of them refugees from Armenia, went out on the street in a small industrial town called Sumgait and essentially carried out a pogrom against local Armenians. There were all kinds of horror stories, about disemboweling pregnant women and whatever. We don't know how many of these atrocities were actually true or not, but a couple dozen or so people were murdered in that event.

That put a stop to any possible move by the Soviet government in Moscow to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. The Soviets tried everything — financial concessions of various kinds, more autonomy for Karabakh — but nothing could stop the Armenian nationalist movement there. Azerbaijan had fewer of those national movements. I would say that Azerbaijani nationalism is a reactive nationalism that has developed as a reaction to the loss of territory, to the actions of these Armenians. So it took on disorganized and often violent forms.

As the conflict developed, Armenians in Armenia decided to get rid of Azerbaijanis. There were about 180,000 Azerbaijanis living mostly in villages in Armenia. They were always said to be, as I remember people telling me, producers of the best fruit in the country. There was perfectly peaceful relations between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Armenia — though with all the condescension and discrimination you can imagine in an ethnically based republic. But after 1989, many Armenians said, "We've got to get rid of these Azerbaijanis." They organized, without much violence, to uproot these people, put them on trucks, and send them to Azerbaijan, where they lived in refugee camps and cattle cars. This created a festering wound of resentment and anger and hatred in the Azerbaijani public.

At the same time, Armenians were moving out of Azerbaijan, because it had become dangerous for them since the Sumgait pogrom. There was another pogrom in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, in January 1990. Gorbachev sent in the Soviet army this time, and there was a clash between them and Azerbaijanis. It's called Black January in the Azerbaijani imagination and memory, and they tend to remember it as something akin to a genocide. By that time, Armenians who had lived pretty well in Azerbaijan began leaving the country, except for the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. They defended themselves there and declared themselves independent of Azerbaijan.

Nobody in the world recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state — not even Armenia — because there are two conflicting principles here. First, there is the Leninist — or Wilsonian, if you prefer — principle of national self-determination. According to this principle, the Armenians of Karabakh should determine who rules them and how they should be ruled. But this clashes with another principle in international law that is often considered a higher principle, and that is the principle of territorial integrity. According to this concept, you cannot change a border or effect a secession without the agreement of both sides. So Baku would have to give permission for Nagorno-Karabakh to become independent, and of course they would never do that.

In 1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians won a war against Azerbaijan and basically took over Nagorno-Karabakh — as well as additional territory in Azerbaijan — with the help of Armenia. They,

in turn, drove many Azerbaijanis out of those areas. They held this ground, and the Yeltsin government in Russia brokered a ceasefire in 1994 that held until the [war of the fall of 2020](#).

The War of 2020 and the Aftermath

CHRIS MAISANO | Why did Azerbaijan feel like it could reverse its 1994 losses in 2020?

RONALD SUNY | From 1994 to 2020, the Armenians were satisfied with the status quo. They thought they were like Israel, that they could control this land and make it part of Armenia. But unlike the West Bank in Palestine, nobody from Armenia was settling in those “liberated” areas of Azerbaijan. There were attempts to promote some kind of permanent negotiated settlement of the conflict through bodies like the Minsk Group, but nothing came of it.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan was increasing its oil production and becoming a very wealthy state. It was militarizing and becoming much stronger than Armenia. Azerbaijan wanted to change the status quo and gain back those areas that Azerbaijanis considered part of their homeland. In the fall of 2020, they launched a war with the support of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, which sent Bayraktar drones as well as weapons from Israel.

Israel and Azerbaijan have good relations because Azerbaijan has bad relations with Iran — two-thirds of the world’s Azerbaijanis live in Iran. The geopolitical lineup put Israel and Turkey with Azerbaijan, while Iran and Russia supposedly were with Armenia — but neither came to Armenia’s aid as it was battered by this attack. Azerbaijan enjoyed overwhelming military superiority and crushed the Armenians. The war lasted for just forty-four days.

Much of Nagorno-Karabakh came under Azerbaijani control while the Russians sat on their hands, because they were mired in war in Ukraine and conflicts elsewhere. They had a treaty with Armenia, and were responsible for aiding Armenia in case of war. Legally, however, the Azerbaijani war was only with Karabakh — the Azerbaijanis, wisely, did not attack Armenia proper. So the Russians sat there until things were really desperate. Putin finally intervened and [forced a settlement](#), and Russian troops came in and sat on the border between Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

CHRIS MAISANO | Armenians are criticizing the Russian peacekeepers for not doing much to intervene and reduce tensions at the current flashpoint, the Lachin corridor — which, as you said earlier, is the main connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. What explains the recurrence of tensions, and what’s been the effect on the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh?

RONALD SUNY | After the 2020 war Armenia was defeated, depressed, demoralized, and divided. Since the war had been lost under the democratically elected government of Nikol Pashinyan, he faced opposition from the old oligarchic regimes, from the people who had ruled before Pashinyan was elected to office.

So Armenia had a government that was defeated in war, but was in power because of a democratic election. What could they do? They were highly dependent on Putin’s Russia, which then launched this unprovoked, disastrous war in Ukraine in February 2022. After that, Azerbaijan saw an opportunity to get what it wanted from the Armenians.

There were various aspects of the 2020 armistice that were very hard for the Armenians to accept. For instance, there would be a corridor through part of Armenia that would link Azerbaijan proper with an Azerbaijani exclave called Nakhichevan, where the Aliyev family is from. The Armenians were very reluctant to grant that corridor, which would give some external sovereignty in part of

Armenia to Azerbaijan.

When Putin invaded and got bogged down in Ukraine, the Azerbaijanis began to cross the Armenian border, make incursions into Armenia, and blockade the Lachin corridor. The blockade started in December 2022 and is going on as we speak. It's trapping and starving out the Armenians of Karabakh, who are ostensibly protected by Russia. That's the current situation.

Of course, the idea is to drive them out of there altogether. The Azerbaijanis would like these Armenians to leave for Armenia proper, so they can take over all of Karabakh. President Aliyev has issued statements making this intention very clear.

CHRIS MAISANO | Russia is nominally Armenia's ally and main security guarantor. One might think this means that Azerbaijan has bad relations with Russia, but that's not the case, is it?

RONALD SUNY | No, and the reason is oil and gas. With the war in Ukraine, Europe is looking to move away from Russian energy imports. So now they're importing lots of gas from Azerbaijan. At the same time, the Americans are quickly building plants so they can supply liquefied natural gas to countries in Europe.

The whole world energy equation is shifting as we speak, and Azerbaijan has got a big card to play. Its oil and gas can leave the country through a pipeline that runs around Georgia and through Turkey to the Mediterranean, and on to Europe. The geopolitics and the fossil-fuel politics are coinciding here in a way that's absolutely disastrous for Armenia, which has nothing to offer except an embattled, besieged, democratic regime.

The only person who seemed to care was Nancy Pelosi. I wouldn't say her trip to Taiwan was well advised, but she came to Armenia because she's very committed to it. She put the recognition of Armenian genocide resolution through Congress, and of course she represents San Francisco — the Armenian diaspora is big in California. She came to Armenia to show solidarity with this little besieged and isolated democracy.

CHRIS MAISANO | To your knowledge, was Pelosi's visit her own initiative or did it reflect a wider policy orientation in the US government?

RONALD SUNY | To my knowledge, it was her own initiative. Of course, there are lots of things about Armenia that the Biden administration and the foreign policy establishment don't like, namely its alliances with Putin's Russia and Iran, the US nemesis in the Middle East.

So here's little Armenia with these odd bedfellows. Then you have the Americans, who are apparently willing to overlook the despotic Aliyev regime in Azerbaijan because of its natural resources and other advantages. Azerbaijan is also close with NATO member Turkey, and the Israelis too. So it's a disastrous situation for Armenians, who feel like they're in existential danger. There's a lot of despair there right now.

In the Wreckage of the Soviet Union

CHRIS MAISANO | With these latest tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the war in Ukraine, it seems like we're still living through the Soviet Union's collapse.

RONALD SUNY | The unraveling of the Soviet Union is still going on, and has led to colossal violence in Georgia, civil war in Tajikistan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the war in Ukraine. That list even leaves out a few others, like the situation in Transnistria or last year's incursion of

Russian forces into Kazakhstan during the protests there.

The Soviet Union ruled over this imperial setup across the entire region relatively successfully for seventy years, with Stalin and his horrors not to be ignored or trivialized in any way. Over the last thirty or forty years of the Soviet Union's existence, relative peace was developed among most of those nationalities. Soviet leadership thought it solved the national problem. Gorbachev basically ignored it, and it came and bit him you know where.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, it was celebrated by some political scientists and pundits as the most amazing thing — that a great power and empire could disintegrate without much bloodshed. “Just wait,” I said at the time, and I knew what was already going on in Karabakh. Of course, we're seeing the results today in a war that is pitting nuclear powers on opposite sides of the barricades. We're in an extremely dangerous situation, and at the moment no one seems to have any solution except further escalation of the conflict.

We're arming and rearming Ukraine — OK, I don't see what else you can do against Putin. On the other side, Putin is getting ready for a major mobilization and offensive against Ukraine. In that context, who cares about Armenia? Armenians are peripheral. They are like the Palestinians, or the Kurds, or the Yemenis, or other people forgotten in the midst of this existential conflict going on between Ukraine and Russia.

CHRIS MAISANO | You're of Armenian descent. You've written the [leading historical study of the Armenian genocide](#). You devoted your professional and scholarly life to studying and explaining Russia, the Soviet Union, and the entire region. I imagine this all must have significant personal resonance for you.

RONALD SUNY | Absolutely. My whole career, fifty-five years of teaching, has been trying to get Americans — during the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and up through Putin — to understand Russia and understand the Soviet Union and not demonize the country. Yes, there were and are many horrors, but there's also the victory over fascism. They took three quarters of the Nazi troops while losing twenty-seven million people. It was the [Soviets who liberated Auschwitz](#) and brought the Holocaust to an end. It was the Soviets who modernized this backward empire and turned a country of 80 percent peasants into 80 percent urban dwellers. There were enormous achievements, all against the background of incredible violence and a dictatorial regime under Stalin. There's complexity here that we often ignore.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine blew everything up again, and in some ways turned what I thought was my life's work into dust and smoke. Because now it's very hard — understandably hard — in the current war atmosphere and the emotional commitment to the Ukrainians' historic and heroic struggle for independence and hopefully democracy to think objectively or complexly about Russia. Instead, we are essentializing Russia as an expansionist empire, as fascists. There are pundits and important scholars who call them fascist, and use the word “genocide” to describe what's going on in Ukraine.

There's no question that what Putin did was and is outrageous. It is a war crime. The war was unprovoked. It's causing horrendous damage to Ukraine, and damaging Russia in many ways as well. Many Russians have fled the country, or [are being arrested](#) as they place flowers on the Taras Shevchenko monument in Moscow. We're in a really terrible situation, and how we'll ever get back to a more nuanced and complex view of Russia, Ukraine, the former Soviet Union — it's hard for me to imagine at the moment.

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