

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh

[By Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, *London Review of Books*, June 17, 2021](#)

Outside the town of Agdam, in the foothills of Nagorno-Karabakh, trucks and tank carriers had left tracks in the muddy road. Bomb craters and mangled military vehicles hid in the fog. Artillery dugouts lay behind a defensive embankment, some still covered with camouflage netting. In Soviet times, these fields were state-owned vineyards whose grapes produced a fortified white wine named after the nearby town. Agdam was the Soviet Union's best-known *bormotukha*, the cheapest kind of drink. A few months after coming to power, Gorbachev announced his *sukhoi zakon*, or dry law, to address one of the leading causes of Soviet malaise: alcoholism had led to a decline in productivity, rising crime and high mortality rates among the male population. Vineyards in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova were razed, as well as these fields in Azerbaijan. When Armenian forces occupied the region during the first Karabakh war in 1993, the vineyards of Agdam were incorporated into their extensive defensive networks, and the fields became the line separating the armies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Hundreds of kilometres of barbed wire stretched along the abandoned trellises. Tank traps and mines were planted and trenches dug.

For two decades the conflict was dormant, only occasionally interrupted by an exchange of artillery shells or a small-scale attack to capture a hilltop or village. But then last September Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, began a military offensive that lasted 44 days. Both sides used tanks, artillery, rockets, drones and cluster ammunition. More than six thousand soldiers were killed and thousands more injured, along with scores of civilian casualties. Azerbaijan reversed its defeats of the first war and recaptured the seven provinces that Armenia had occupied, along with parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, including the historic city of Shusha. Tens of thousands of Armenians fled their homes while their leaders spoke of a Turkish-orchestrated genocide. On 9 November the two sides agreed a ceasefire. Since then, Armenia has been in political turmoil: generals called on the prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, to resign on account of his role in the defeat; he accused them of planning a coup. In Azerbaijan, President Aliyev wears military uniform to public appearances while the state media whips up nationalist feeling to distract from the problems the country faces.

The war over the control of Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the only interstate conflicts in the world, a leftover from an age before the religious and sectarian contests of tribal militias which have turned the Middle East upside down. As in all nationalist conflicts, history – or the competing versions of history that each nation claims as the truth – has been as vital a weapon as tanks, rockets and soldiers in trenches. In *Black Garden* (2003), his authoritative book on the recent history of the region, Thomas de Waal writes that 'in untangling the roots of the Karabakh conflict, we should first of all dismiss the idea that this was an "ancient conflict". Both the form and the content of the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute date back little more than one hundred years.' Its roots, he argues, 'can be traced back to the period when the Ottoman and Russian empires were in their dying phases and both Armenians and Azerbaijanis discovered the idea of national

self-determination'. Since then, dubious historical narratives and the jargon of 19th-century nationalism have been deployed to reinforce a mutual antipathy.

Nagorno-Karabakh – Nagorny, Russian for 'mountainous'; Kara-Bakh, Turkish for 'black garden' – is a region in the South Caucasus with a predominantly Armenian population. It was a province of ancient Armenian kingdoms before coming under the successive suzerainty of the Sassanids, Muslim Arabs, Turkmen tribes and the Persian Safavids, with pockets controlled by the Armenian *meliks*, princes who used outside powers to bolster their claims to authority. In the mid-18th century, following the decline of the *meliks*, a khanate was established with Persian support by the Javanshirs, a Turkic Karabakh clan, who built the city of Shusha. The region was absorbed into the Russian empire in 1813 after the first Russo-Persian war, and Persia ceded the rest of the Transcaucasus to Russia a decade or so later.

Karabakh maintained a strong Armenian religious and cultural identity through the centuries, but like all frontier regions it was a place where cultures and peoples converged. Armenian, Persian, Arabic and Turkic influences produced a unique cultural heritage, manifest in food, music, art and architecture. Armenian churches and monasteries dotted the hills while Azerbaijani composers and writers flourished in Shusha. Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Kurds, both Yazidi and Muslim, lived side by side in towns and villages set among pine and birch forests, orchards, vineyards and highland pastures. Mulberry groves supported thriving silk industries.

In 1920 the Soviet Union's Caucasus Bureau, under the leadership of the commissar of nationalities, Joseph Stalin, made Nagorno-Karabakh an autonomous Soviet oblast. Initially, it was to become part of Armenia, a reward for its early support of Bolshevism. But after an Armenian nationalist uprising the Soviets reversed the decision, and in 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was absorbed into Azerbaijan SSR. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Communist leaders came to power in the Caucasus republics. While continuing to display the proper subservience to Moscow, they sought to consolidate their political power bases, creating local fiefdoms that would outlast the USSR. They built roads, dams and power plants; the region was prosperous, with living standards higher than in much of the rest of the Soviet Union.

This time of prosperity coincided with a period of national revivalism, when a direct line was drawn connecting the ancient past to the modern republics. Art, literature and music looked for inspiration to the traditions of the Caucasus, with sagas and myths reimagined and reinterpreted to serve a nationalist narrative. And here the problems began. When one nation asserts that its history has primacy over its neighbour's, disputes arise over who has the rightful claim to a territory. Each mountaintop, river or valley can mean different things to different peoples. Or, as one Azerbaijani I know says: in Karabakh each rock has two names. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, writers constructed an ethnonational narrative that aspired to negate the existence of the other country, or at least to assign it the role of newcomer in the region. This approach would eventually provide the justification for the violence in the streets.

Armenian writers pointed to Armenian churches and monasteries in Karabakh as proof of an uninterrupted presence in the area. They dismissed the term 'Azerbaijan' as a modern political label and exaggerated Turkish influences: although the Azerbaijani language is Turkic, the people are predominantly Shia with heavy Persian influences. But Azerbaijani Shiism is much

milder than the Iranian variant, tempered by 170 years of Russian and then Soviet secular rule. Unlike Armenia, whose version of Christianity goes back to the first century and is closely associated with national identity, identity in Azerbaijan is complex.

Historians in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, had to be creative, advancing two simultaneous and largely specious claims: that many Armenians were descendants of migrants who had fled Ottoman Turkey or Persia; and that the region's Christian monuments belonged to an earlier people, the Caucasus Albanians, a name given them by the Romans. Modern Armenians, they insisted, had erased ancient inscriptions and claimed monuments as their own. Thus two peoples could look at the same building and each see in it what they wanted to see.

Encouraged by glasnost, the Armenians of Karabakh, who had complained of economic and cultural marginalisation by the authorities in Baku, began agitating to secede from Azerbaijan. In 1987, tens of thousands signed a petition calling on Moscow to make the oblast part of Armenia SSR. In Armenia itself, a group called the Karabakh Committee used the plight of Karabakh's Armenians to mobilise demonstrations against Soviet rule. Counterdemonstrations took place in Baku rejecting the Armenians' demands. Sporadic attacks on Azerbaijani farmers and villagers in Armenia followed. 'The movement against the Soviet Union for independence was a call for decolonisation and national awakening,' the Armenian academic Philip Gamaghelyan told me.

Central to that nationalist movement was the memory of the 1915 genocide. 'Genocide is a major trauma in Armenia and central to its identity, determining historiography and school curriculums,' Gamaghelyan said. The Armenian nationalists framed the struggle against Azerbaijan for the control of Karabakh as a continuation of the fight against Turkey. A linguistic fluke helped to reinforce the connection: since Soviet times, Armenians have referred to Azerbaijanis as Turks. 'During the first war, in the 1990s, this mobilised the Armenians,' Gamaghelyan said. 'They were not fighting just for territory but against an existential enemy – the Turks. Nationalist sentiment, and historical trauma, helped cast Azerbaijan as an implacable enemy – an image that was ready to be exploited.'

In a decrepit Soviet sanatorium, now used as accommodation for Azerbaijani refugees, I met a former policeman called Shurnasi Babayev. He sat on the edge of the bed in a small room where a stove and samovar functioned as his kitchen. He recalled watching in disbelief the events of the late 1980s in Shusha, where he had grown up. It made no sense to him that the Soviet security apparatus was prepared to tolerate one ethnic group demonstrating against another. 'When I heard that Armenians from Shusha had joined the rallies in Stepanakert' – the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, eight miles away in the valley below – 'it felt like someone was stabbing me in the back. Back then, we didn't know what democracy meant, and the demonstrations triggered the first tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Shusha. We started looking at each other angrily.' Unlike the rest of Karabakh, Shusha has a majority Azerbaijani population and is considered Azerbaijan's cultural heartland. The Communist Party hierarchy had recognised this by ensuring that the city's first secretary was always an Azerbaijani.

When he was young, most of his friends and neighbours were Armenian, as were the other boys in his football team. The city had three high schools, all close together: Armenian, Russian and Azerbaijani. He went to the Azerbaijani school, but students from all three would gather together after classes. Their lingua franca was Russian, but the children exchanged jokes and jibes in all

three languages. Shurnasi wanted to be a journalist or artist, but like many of the region's young people he ended up finding work in an industrial town in southern Russia, where he settled into a comfortable life. He hoped not to return to Shusha until he was ready to retire. But when he heard about the Armenian demonstrations he took leave from work and came back home. His father had died and he didn't want to leave his five sisters alone. He was sure that the protests would be temporary and that he would soon return to his life in Russia.

'When the events started, I tried not to pick a side,' he said. 'Whenever I saw my Armenian friends I always approached them to show them that there was no hatred.' One night, after they'd all watched a movie at a local film club, an Azerbaijani man from a nearby town started arguing with an Armenian friend of Shurnasi's. 'The Azerbaijani guy was big and muscular, and I took the side of my Armenian friend in the brawl that followed. There were many such episodes,' he said. 'After a while I started hesitating whenever I saw my Armenian friends. I avoided them and they avoided me. We might want to meet and talk, but if we did, both communities would despise us.'

And then he heard that two Azerbaijanis had been attacked and killed in their car while going about their business. 'Suddenly I found myself taking part in anti-Armenian rallies in Shusha. I wasn't the most active participant but I listened to the speeches. Now I was sure I would never leave Shusha. I would stay even if it got me killed.' He took a teaching job in a local school and lived in fear of his former friends as incidents of communal violence in the countryside multiplied. Armenian gangs attacked Azerbaijani and Kurdish villages, burning homes, beating residents and sometimes shooting them.

When does a civil war begin? When does the rhetoric of hate turn into violence? Eventually there's a point of no return, and people look in disbelief at the charred remains of a neighbour's home and say that they never thought this day would come. For the Armenians that moment came in 1988. On 20 February, tens of thousands of Armenians demonstrated in Stepanakert, and the Supreme Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh responded by voting to join the Armenia SSR. A week later, demonstrations were held in Sumgait, a bleak industrial city thirty kilometres north of Baku, where the crowds called for the expulsion of the town's ethnic Armenian population. With its failing petrochemical factories lining the shores of the Caspian Sea and high levels of unemployment, Sumgait was the epitome of the social ills of the late Soviet years.

Angry mobs began attacking Armenians in the streets and ransacking their apartments. People were mutilated with axes and knives, and women assaulted and raped. The local police didn't intervene as Armenians were forced to take shelter with Russian or Azerbaijani neighbours. The authorities in Moscow, paralysed by indecision, debated whether a new Extraordinary Party Plenum was needed to redefine Soviet policy towards the nationalities, before agreeing, three days later, to send in the army and impose a curfew. Dozens were killed, and almost 14,000 fled the city. Sumgait was the first disaster in a war that would see escalating atrocities committed by both sides.

Many Azerbaijanis were appalled to see their compatriots respond with such violence to what was in effect still a peaceful secession movement. But conspiracy theories also proliferated: Armenian agents provocateurs had organised the pogroms, or the KGB had. For a large number of Armenians, the events in Sumgait entrenched the view of Azerbaijanis as the new Turks, bent on the destruction of Armenia – a repeat of the 1915 genocide. By the autumn of 1988, 200,000 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia had been expelled from their jobs and homes. Many ended up as refugees in Azerbaijan, squatting in public buildings. Others managed to exchange apartments with Armenians who had been forced to leave Azerbaijan. The process of ethnic consolidation in Armenia and Azerbaijan was almost complete.

Marina is a piano teacher in her seventies, a second-generation Bakuvian. Her grandmother was a Karabakh Armenian who moved to the city just after the Bolshevik revolution. Marina's mother, Marina and her sister were all born in Baku. Her husband is Azerbaijani, but the family consider themselves multi-ethnic natives of the city. With the discovery of oil, by the end of the 19th century Baku had grown from a small khanate on the Caspian shore to become the cosmopolitan capital of the Caucasus. Russian, Persian and Azerbaijani languages and cultures mixed to produce a city like no other. The old town, with its delicate mosques, courtyards, medieval walls and 15th-century palace, was surrounded by avenues of grand European-style buildings, commissioned by the new oil magnates who had profited from the activities of international operators like the Rothschilds and the Nobel Brothers. The new buildings towered over the old mahallas, Islamic districts where migrant oil workers – Armenians, Jews, Muslims and Greeks – were packed into small houses overlooking narrow streets. Despite the process of ethnic consolidation, which accelerated during the Karabakh conflict, Baku remained a diverse city, with a considerable population of Russians, Jews and Armenians.

Marina remembers the last decade of Soviet rule with nostalgia. It was when everything was still normal. 'Some of the best apartments in Baku belonged to the Armenians,' she said. 'The best positions in the government were for Armenians. Everything was great. We intermarried, we were friends. Armenians and Azerbaijanis were better friends with each other than with the Russians.' But as tensions escalated over Karabakh, things changed. Her husband was forced to resign from his teaching job at the university because he was married to an Armenian. 'The situation became difficult,' Marina said. 'Refugees were coming to Baku, people who had lost their homes. They were traumatised, and we were afraid of them. They were taking the flats of Armenians and driving the owners out. Many Russians and Armenians started leaving the city, anticipating violence.'

While the massacre in Sumgait was a spontaneous outbreak of violence, what happened in Baku was organised and deliberate. The nationalist, anti-Soviet Popular Front organised a rally in Lenin Square on 13 January 1990, calling on Azerbaijan to defend itself against Armenian aggression. By nightfall, gangs roamed the streets vandalising Armenian apartments, using lists of addresses made public a few days earlier. People were evicted from their homes, their furniture burned. The pogroms lasted for a week. Ninety Armenians were killed and hundreds injured while the police did nothing to stop the violence.

Marina's elderly mother, who lived alone, had taken to wearing a veil to pretend she was Muslim. 'I told her to leave, but she insisted that her neighbours would protect her,' Marina said. But the veil didn't fool the people who broke down her door and threw her out of her flat. She

was distraught, but managed to board a flight to Moscow. She planned to come back as soon as it was safe, but died in Moscow a few years later. Marina's brother-in-law wasn't so lucky. He was beaten up by a group of men, his kidneys severely damaged. He too died in Moscow.

Marina, her husband and their two daughters were given shelter by Azerbaijani neighbours. But Marina felt uncomfortable about putting their lives in danger. On the night of 20 January 1990 Russian troops moved into the city, and soldiers opened fire on civilians. Popular Front militiamen fired back at the troops, and the city descended into chaos. A friend of Marina's husband told him that the Russians were organising the evacuation of the Armenian population to the Turkmen SSR across the Caspian Sea, and that he should get his family onto one of the ferries. They decided to split up: her husband and their elder daughter would stay in Baku, while Marina and their younger daughter would leave. 'I took my child and went to the port. We found thousands of people queuing,' Marina said. 'I felt humiliated to be in that line of people. It was a long journey, and my child was crying and didn't want to leave.'

Baku had witnessed pogroms and communal violence before, after the 1905 revolution, and in the years after 1917, when first Armenian nationalists and then Bolsheviks massacred Azerbaijani Muslims. In retaliation, Azerbaijanis supported by the Ottomans' so-called Army of Islam turned against the Armenians, killing large numbers. These upheavals accompanied the collapse of a previous empire. And here they were again: two fearful communities, looking at each other with suspicion. 'We never thought this would happen to us,' Marina said. 'In Soviet times they never taught us in school about the history of 1919. You have to know your history so that you don't repeat the same mistakes.' Eventually, she returned to Baku, but it was no longer the easy-going cosmopolitan place she knew. Nationalist fervour reigned. A few thousand Armenians still lived in the city, but many, like her, were hiding behind their husbands' Azerbaijani names. 'I'm sure that in Armenia they are teaching schoolchildren that "we" are the enemy, just as we teach them that they are,' Marina said. It was as if she had forgotten for a moment that she was Armenian.

We were sitting on a bench, facing the dark green waters of the Caspian. Marina scanned the scene: mothers pushing their children in buggies, teenagers posing for selfies and a few older Bakuvians power-walking along the promenade. 'We have to forget and move on,' she said. 'Why do Armenians keep bringing up genocide? Why now? Why should I have to leave half my family and become a refugee?' Many Baku Armenians who resettled in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, had a ruptured sense of belonging. Bullied and called 'Azerbaijani', they were at home nowhere. Others, like Marina's sister and nephew, moved to Moscow, where they survived by selling pierogi and tea in the streets. When war broke out again last year, Marina was afraid that she would once again be under pressure to leave. 'I was afraid there would be another round of pogroms. Why hadn't I left before? There had been many chances to get out of Baku. But I didn't want to go. This is my city.'

The first Karabakh war, which lasted from 1988 to 1994, began with an insurgency of Armenian partisans in the countryside before becoming a civil war within the Soviet Union and finally a conflict between two recently independent nation-states. Folkloric nationalism, even when it has metastasised into a narrative of hate, is not enough to start a war. It was the chaotic conditions surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union that turned a local conflict into a full-scale struggle. Moscow was partly to blame. Following independence in 1991, thousands of tonnes of Soviet

armaments were given to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. On top of the official quotas, Soviet army commanders sold or donated weapons, equipment and ammunition, or exchanged them for vodka. Former Soviet soldiers, tank drivers and helicopter pilots freelanced for both sides, while former Chechen rebels and Afghan mujahedin fought with the Azerbaijanis.

Shurnasi doesn't remember exactly when he became a fighter. Armenians had attacked a village near Shusha and he joined a group of a hundred men who were building a checkpoint on the road between Shusha and the Karabakh capital. A few of them had hunting rifles or pistols; the rest were armed with axes and knives. 'People told one another: if I die, take my gun,' he said. There was a brief exchange of gunfire, but in the morning everyone went home. Eventually, a number of military groups were formed to defend Shusha, and Shurnasi joined a battalion set up by the Popular Front, rising to become chairman of the local commission on defence and military affairs.

One day he was sitting in the police station when a Grad missile hit the building. He remembers smoke and dust. He was seriously injured, losing part of his leg, and underwent 22 rounds of surgery, in Shusha, Baku, Kiev and eventually in Germany. 'Amputation would have been the easier option, but my mother begged the doctors to save my leg,' he said. 'The Ukrainian doctors treated me very well. But one of them – Leskov was his name – was pro-Armenian. One day he said: "If you've suffered so much, lost so much, why didn't your nation give up these lands to Armenia without all the fighting?"' I replied angrily: "Napoleon invaded Russia and millions died: why did you fight him? Hitler marched on Moscow and millions died: why didn't you capitulate?"' While Shurnasi was still in hospital, Shusha was abandoned by the bickering Azerbaijani forces. The next day the Armenians entered the city without resistance.

In February 1992, Armenian forces committed the worst massacre of the war, when they occupied the town of Khojali, the site of Karabakh's only airport. Hundreds of civilians and a few armed fighters fled. As they headed towards the Azerbaijani border they came under attack from Armenian forces. Hundreds of civilians were killed, including women and children. Throughout the war, the Armenians had a unified and efficient military command, united by their ideology of national struggle. Azerbaijani politics, by contrast, was riddled with infighting and the military suffered from factionalism. Some commanders were fighting to resist the Armenians, others because war meant profit. The various battalions competed, bickering about their share of resources. Many abandoned their positions ahead of the Armenian offensives. By the time Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliyev, father of the current president, sued for peace, Armenia had occupied Karabakh and seven adjoining Azerbaijani provinces.

Agdam was once a bustling centre for wine and agriculture and a thriving black market hub. Now it looks like a post-apocalypse movie set. The roads have been reclaimed by nature, and the few remaining patches of asphalt indicate where to find a path through thickets of shrubs and wild plants. Traces of its former elegance remain in the high arched windows of the public theatre or the destroyed façade of the city hall. Above the Muzei Khleba, the Soviet-era bread museum, its mosaic still showing a woman carrying a basket of grapes and a man in an astrakhan hat playing a lute, is the minaret of the 19th-century mosque – which, in an act of petty cultural revenge, was used as a barn after the city's capture in the first war.

The destruction of Agdam was different from that of cities like Aleppo, Mosul or Mogadishu: it was thorough, systematic and neat. At first, I couldn't help but admire the marksmanship of the artillerymen, how evenly they had distributed their shells. You didn't see one standing building next to one reduced to rubble. Only later did I learn that there had been no major fighting in Agdam: when Armenian forces reached its outskirts the disorganised Azerbaijani fighters defending it fled, taking the civilian inhabitants with them. The destruction took place years later, the work of a termite army of looters. Roofs, rafters, window frames, doors, pipes and wires were removed and sold, mainly in Iran, leaving only the walls.

From Agdam, Armenian troops moved on to occupy Fizuli, Jabrayil and Qubadli, consolidating their defensive lines in the foothills below Karabakh. The occupied provinces became a region of dead cities and an obstacle to achieving peace. The first president of independent Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, considered a war hero but also a realist, tried to reach a compromise, offering to give the provinces back to Azerbaijan in return for autonomous status for Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1997 an agreement was reached with Azerbaijan. But before it could be signed, Ter-Petrosyan was forced out of office by members of his own government with the backing of the army, which was unhappy with the deal and thought it could get better terms. The next president, Robert Kocharyan, was more of a hardliner and refused to surrender the occupied provinces. For the Armenians, there was no way of legalising the status of the occupied regions, and they didn't have the population required to settle the area. Yet they held on to this large stretch of empty territory and wouldn't give it back. As one Azerbaijani analyst said, it was like a suitcase without a handle: too precious to give away and too cumbersome to carry around.

A proposal for a peace settlement, known as the Madrid Principles, was finally put forward in 2007. Armenia would return all occupied territories and Nagorno-Karabakh would be granted an interim status with guarantees of security and self-governance, along with a referendum on independence at a later date. A land corridor would link the region to Armenia and internally displaced people would be given the right to return to their homes.

But the settlement was never enacted. Gamaghelyan, the Armenian academic, said that two developments in Armenia precluded any movement towards peace. 'The first was that a winner's discourse had replaced the narrative of victimhood. There was a belief that we were indestructible and could defeat anyone. More wars would mean more victory, and we would keep winning because we were fighting for our historic lands, while the Azerbaijanis lost because they had no conviction: they knew the land was not theirs.' This view was entrenched by the insistence that Armenia was the first Christian nation, with a right to the territory that went back to 301 ad. The second factor was the belief that Azerbaijan – with the backing of its patron, Turkey – was an existential threat: a genocidal neighbour plotting Armenia's destruction. 'It was a dangerous combination,' Gamaghelyan said. 'Calls for normalisation were shut down because we couldn't negotiate with genocidaires.'

In the meantime, Azerbaijan set itself against Armenia, to the extent of denying the genocide of 1915. At a time when Turkey itself was at last taking steps to acknowledge this part of its history – decriminalising discussion of the genocide, allowing books to be published addressing all aspects of the late Ottoman period, holding commemorations in Istanbul and Ankara – it was in Azerbaijan that denialism flourished. More recently, however, Turkey returned to a denialist position, which helped, as Gamaghelyan told me, 'to confirm the Armenian nationalist narrative

that Azerbaijan and Turkey were one and the same. Armenians feared that both countries were once again bent on their annihilation.’

When Nikol Pashinyan came to power in Armenia in 2018 on the back of a pro-democracy and anti-corruption movement, there were hopes that relations might be normalised. Like Ter-Petrosyan twenty years earlier, he was a realist who wanted peace. Azerbaijan was initially conciliatory and sought to ease tensions by pulling its army away from the border and scaling down its rhetoric, suggesting that it was serious about negotiations. But after a couple of months in office, Pashinyan changed his stance. Talk about normalisation wasn’t popular. People in government interpreted the Azerbaijani overtures as a sign of weakness and saw this as a moment to push harder. ‘It was a major miscalculation,’ Gamaghelyan argues, ‘and eventually they paid the price. They didn’t seriously believe there would be another war.’

During a border clash in July 2020 a prominent Azerbaijani general was killed. ‘The next day, planning for the war began,’ a government-affiliated Azerbaijani military analyst told me. ‘Military units were put on high alert and all leave was cancelled. It was obvious something was going to happen.’ Another sign was the stepping up of joint military exercises with Turkey. ‘Unlike previous exercises, these were not limited to a single region but took place all over Azerbaijan, with a large number of Turkish soldier and officers taking part. No one would tell you the exact figure, but taking into account the geography of the exercises, one can confidently guess that there were several thousand Turkish personnel involved.’

In the early hours of 27 September, while the world was busy dealing with the pandemic, Azerbaijani forces launched an artillery and rocket barrage along the whole frontline, from the Iranian border in the south to the Kalbajar mountains in the north. A few hours later, ground forces began their attack. The Azerbaijani army, though bigger and better equipped than the Armenian, made little progress in the first week. The Armenian networks of fortification – fields of barbed wire, extensive lines of trenches, tank traps and minefields – were in some places impossible to breach. Thermal imaging cameras and long-range snipers made infiltration by special forces difficult. Footage released by the Armenian ministry of defence showed columns of Azerbaijani tanks and armoured vehicles being destroyed by rockets.

‘The war was very hard,’ an Azerbaijani officer I met near Agdam said. ‘The hardest thing was sitting in a trench with bombs and mortars falling around you when you have no idea where they’re coming from. The young conscripts look to you as their commanding officer and ask what they’re supposed to do. The only war I had fought until then was *Call of Duty* on my laptop. But you have to reassure them because they’re your soldiers.’ He pulled a little black address book from his pocket and said that half his friends from the military academy had been killed or injured.

In this conventional war with static fortified lines, the balance of power was tilted in Azerbaijan’s favour by its Turkish-supplied drones. Their black and white footage showed soldiers milling around a tank or an artillery position – followed by an explosion, a thick cloud of dust and scattered black dots across the scene. ‘The Russians, Americans and Israelis all have successful drone programmes, but what happened in this war changed the idea of the battlefield,’ the Azerbaijani military analyst said. The expansion of drone use in the region has largely been credited to Selçuk Bayraktar, Erdoğan’s engineer son-in-law. ‘We never could have imagined the

new doctrine. At least ten UAVs were flying over one sector of the front, from small soldier-operated quadcopters to larger armed drones.’ He suggested that without the drones the war wouldn’t have ended so soon, and many more Azerbaijani lives would have been lost.

In the war’s second week, Azerbaijani forces broke through defences in the south. Advancing fast, they captured the town of Jabrayil before splitting into two groups, one pushing east and the other north towards Fizuli and Agdam. Spearheading these attacks were special units known as Svodnye Gruppy, made up of personnel from the army, interior ministry and border force. ‘Among them were veterans of the first Karabagh war, who knew the geography,’ the analyst said. ‘They could be on the spot a week before their presence was noticed.’ Many of them had received training from American, German or Turkish special forces instructors and had attended military academies in China or Turkey.

One of them was Javid Hasanov, who wasn’t permitted to talk about his deployment even to close family members. His unit fought on the Fizuli front, hilly terrain in the south. ‘During the night, de-mining teams would clear a path through before the soldiers advanced and attacked,’ he said. ‘The first lines of defence were the hardest to break. The Armenians had strong positions with concrete bunkers on high ground, and their soldiers, some very young, continued fighting to the end. There was chaos. Once we broke through and reached Fizuli things were easier. When you’re fighting in the forests or streets you don’t need to dig trenches.’

After twelve days of fighting, Hasanov’s unit was reassigned to the assault on Shusha. This would be the decisive battle in the war. With only one easy approach to the city, along the ridge, ‘Shusha is like a castle surrounded by cliffs,’ Hasanov said. ‘It is impossible to seize without tanks, heavy artillery and fighter jets. We had no air assistance because if we used drones the Armenians would know we were coming.’ So he and his men, under the command of a U.S.-trained colonel known as Black Eagle, split into smaller groups to reduce the damage if some of them were caught. They climbed the cliffs and marched through the forest to attack from five different positions. ‘The Armenians didn’t know where to concentrate their forces. There was panic, and the battle was intense. There were soldiers on both sides who had no ammunition left, and a lot of corpses near the entrance to Shusha.’

A rocket struck Hasanov’s position. ‘We knew the sound of mortars, and we knew how to avoid them, but this shelling was silent. All I saw was the explosion and I felt it throwing me back. Some of my comrades were martyred, and many severely wounded.’ Still under fire, his fellow soldiers worked to evacuate the casualties. They thought Hasanov was dead, and laid him under a tarpaulin waiting for darkness to fall. ‘When I came to my senses, blood was coming from my mouth, ears, even from my eyes,’ he said. ‘I had lost part of my ear, I had severe pain in my arm and knee, and I couldn’t speak.’ He saw a dead soldier beside him and heard the rain hit the plastic sheet covering his face. ‘I thought I had died and had gone to hell. My punishment was to hear the rain but still be impossibly thirsty. What terrible thing had I done that caused them to deny me water?’ He must have made a sound because a medic arrived, removed the tarpaulin and shouted: ‘Hasanov is alive!’ They gave him morphine and the next day they walked with him for eighteen hours to reach safety.

Two days later, Shusha was captured. Although Azerbaijani forces were never able to penetrate large stretches of the frontline, the loss of Shusha and the severing of the Lachin corridor,

connecting Karabakh to Armenia, caused the Armenians to accept a Russian-brokered ceasefire. Armenian forces withdrew from the occupied provinces, and Russian peacekeepers took positions along the new demarcation lines to protect the Lachin corridor.

From the beginning, Azerbaijani state media claimed that Armenia started the war with the aim of capturing more territory and that Azerbaijan was merely responding to its aggression. The Armenian narrative fluctuated between wild claims that Azerbaijani forces would soon be crushed and hyperbolic warnings of joint Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression, stirring fears of a 'new genocide'. Both sides resorted to disinformation as well as old-style propaganda. They used social media to spread false news of victories and heavy casualties inflicted on the enemy, while denying that they themselves were bombarding civilian areas and using cluster munitions. Both sides mobilised Twitter trolls to harass foreign journalists and local peace activists who contradicted the official narrative.

But battlefield lies are difficult to sustain in the age of geolocation. Reports that rockets had been fired on civilians in the Azerbaijani towns of Ganja and Barda, and on Armenians in Stepanakert and Shusha, were quickly corroborated by digital investigators and journalists. News surfaced that Syrian mercenaries, recruited by Turkey, had been shipped to Karabakh. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey vehemently denied these claims, insisting that they were part of an Armenian disinformation campaign. But independent researchers managed to geolocate videos shot by the Syrians as they shouted 'Allahu Akbar' from the back of white Toyota pick-up trucks, or posed in front of Armenian signposts in Karabakh.

Azerbaijan had used mercenaries in the first war, including Chechens, Afghans and freelancing Ukrainians and Belarusians from the former Soviet army. But that was thirty years ago, when their own military was in disarray. Since then Azerbaijan has spent billions on armaments and building a professional army. So why did it need a few hundred undisciplined foreign fighters with questionable motives, no knowledge of the terrain or language and no regard for civilian life? One reason may be that the government was worried about the potential number of casualties. But casualties were inevitable: by the end of the war, five hundred Syrian mercenaries had been killed compared to nearly three thousand Azerbaijanis. Was the damage inflicted on Azerbaijan's reputation by the recruitment of mercenaries worth it? It's possible that Turkey wanted the war against Armenia so it could fine-tune its methods of drone and mercenary deployment, a strategy that had proved effective in northern Syria against the Kurds and in Libya in the fight against General Haftar.

Aspecial forces soldier led us through the snow-covered ruins of Qubadli. Next to a Second World War monument, three abandoned sniper rifle cases lay in a trench, along with sleeping bags and torn rucksacks. Red Cross convoys, escorted by Russian, Azerbaijani and Armenian personnel, were criss-crossing the former battlefields searching for the remains of soldiers. The wreckage of the recent war was being cleared. Most of the shattered equipment had been removed before limited access was allowed to journalists. Some of it was sent to Baku, where a park complete with replica trenches, barbed wire and mock underground bunkers houses the new Military Trophy Museum. Inside dimly lit rooms, mannequins with terrified expressions dressed in Armenian army uniforms stare at visitors. The Azerbaijani artists who were commissioned to make models of 'the enemy' said that in order to make them more authentic they had added

‘characteristic features’: hooked noses, low foreheads, bushy beards and unibrows – a racist 19th-century stereotype of the wild Caucasian.

At the opening, President Aliyev gave a speech in front of a display of parts stripped from Armenian armoured vehicles in which he stated that Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan. The slogan ‘Karabakh is Azerbaijan’ appears on car window stickers and the walls of buildings. Azerbaijani politicians seem to be repeating the mistakes of the Armenians after the first war, trumpeting their victory and claiming that not only Karabakh but other parts of Armenia belong to Azerbaijan. A constructive dialogue seems a long way off, with the small but active anti-war movement in both countries drowned out by jingoistic rhetoric, a decade of talk of inter-communal reconciliation forgotten. Reconciliation is hardly possible while Armenian prisoners of war are still being held – and, some claim, tortured – in Azerbaijani prisons.

The Murovdağ mountains in Kalbajar province are a snow-covered range to the north of Karabakh. Soldiers keeping warm around campfires advised us not to turn off the car engine because at this altitude the shortage of oxygen can make it hard to start again. A red signpost warned of landmines. In the first war thousands of Azerbaijani civilians trekked through this pass, fleeing the Armenian advance. The landscape unfolds on the other side of the mountains: rivers cutting through ravines and forests of willow and birch. Below lies one of the anomalies of the latest war, the ninth-century Armenian monastery of Dadivank, which now finds itself on the Azerbaijan side of the ceasefire line. When Armenian troops withdrew from the region, the bishop took all the monastery’s historic artefacts to Armenia – crosses, manuscripts and even the bells – but left behind six of his monks.

Father Gabriel Sargsyan stood in the courtyard to welcome a group of visiting Azerbaijani journalists. He spoke accented English and flawless Arabic, learned in Cairo and perfected in Baghdad, and put on an excellent performance: he led his guests into the candlelit chapel, where a group of monks were reciting biblical verses, and then whisked them out to explain the history of the monastery like a professional tour guide. He showed the group a slab of stone with ancient inscriptions. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but it’s Armenian and dates to the first century.’ A unit of armed Russian peacekeepers was there to ensure that this encounter between Armenians and Azerbaijanis was amicable. In this and the previous war, both Muslim and Christian graves were vandalised; mosques were turned into barns and churches desecrated. The Russians, conscious of the capacity of both sides for cultural destruction, had built their camp in the monastery courtyard to keep an eye on it.

The war in Karabakh brought the two former imperial powers, Russia and Turkey, back to the South Caucasus, and gave them huge leverage on the combatant nations. More than ever before, Armenia is dependent on Russian protection, in the form of peacekeeping forces and military aid. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, relies on Turkish military and diplomatic support, without which the war wouldn’t have reached its end so swiftly. ‘Russian involvement was inevitable,’ the Azerbaijani military analyst said. ‘They are not trusted in Azerbaijan because since the first war they have been on Armenia’s side. But we have to be realistic. There is no scenario in which a war in the Caucasus could take place without Russian involvement. This is the cost to Azerbaijan and we have to live with it.’

Gamaghelyan compared the Russian presence here to the role it took in the early 1990s after the war between South Ossetia and Georgia, where peacekeepers were deployed and policies enacted to increase Russian influence over the region. 'Armenia can't attack Azerbaijan any time soon, and Russia won't allow Azerbaijan to dominate,' he said. 'So the next war won't benefit either Armenia or Azerbaijan.' He thinks a new war is inevitable, unless Azerbaijan tones down its belligerent rhetoric and returns Armenian prisoners of war. Only then would Armenia be prepared to talk. Gamaghelyan is now based in the U.S., where he is trying to encourage dialogue between the two countries with online webinars. 'I'm very pessimistic right now,' he said.