

HISTORY, SUBVERSION AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT IN THE SOVIET UNION.¹

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During the last years of the Soviet Union, a low-intensity conflict erupted between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict began in February 1988, shortly after the Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh called for unification with the Armenian SSR. It escalated dramatically within weeks in the wake of the anti-Armenian pogrom in Sumgait, Azerbaijan. From this time until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were unofficially in an effective state of war against both Baku and Moscow. The massacre at Sumgait, and subsequent pogroms in other Azerbaijani cities, such as Baku and Kirovabad brought back to the Armenians painful historical memories of genocide, massacre and deportation. These historical memories were then used to legitimize the formation of Armenian volunteer units to defend Karabagh.

Sumgait essentially nullified a tacit social contract between the Armenian people and the Soviet government, in which Armenian loyalty to the Soviet State was exchanged for Soviet guarantees of the physical safety of Armenians. This understanding was based on a reading of history formulated by the Soviet State and articulated by Soviet Armenian intellectuals, in which Russia/USSR appeared as the only credible force capable of preventing the destruction of the Armenian people. After Sumgait, the “grand narrative” of Armenian history was reinterpreted by intellectuals, and increasingly by the population at large, which led to a fundamental rethinking of Armenia’s position within the Soviet Union. Both the social contract and the armed resistance that resulted from its nullification were conditioned in large measure by the instrumental use of Armenian history.

History and Armed Response

One focal point of public discussion was the nineteenth century Armenian liberation movement, which developed in both the Ottoman and Russian Empires. The romanticized image of the nineteenth century liberation movement freedom fighter, known as a fedayee, was appropriated by those engaged in the current armed struggle.² Although the Communist Party was hesitant to promote symbols and images associated with a nationalist past in Armenia, the image of the Armenian freedom fighter did not carry an anti-Soviet or anti-Russian connotation, as did the image of the basmachi in Central Asia, and was allowed to uneasily coexist alongside more ideologically pure figures. Instead, for Armenian communists, the fedayee could be viewed as a symbol of a noble but unsuccessful revolt against Turkish oppression. This could be ideologically reconciled with Soviet power in Armenia by arguing that the vision of a safe and secure Armenia only came to fruition under the banner of communism. Mention of national independence for Armenia was conveniently missing from the Soviet narrative.

The formation of armed units of volunteers in Armenia and Karabagh in spring 1988 took place as a reaction to Sumgait. As soon as people overcame their shock at the turn of events in Azerbaijan, they became aware of the need to prevent future massacres. There was a feeling among many people that Soviet central authorities were unwilling or unable to prevent violence against Armenians and that the dangerous step of arming themselves was a better alternative than facing death at the hands of the Azerbaijani Turks. Recalling past victimization and the lack of organized resistance during the 1915 genocide in the Ottoman Empire, Armenians opted for self-defense. One volunteer drew a direct connection between the 1915 genocide and the events in Azerbaijan. He stated that when he was a child

and learned about the genocide, he promised himself that were an analogous situation ever to develop, he would be morally obliged to pick up arms to defend his people and prevent a repetition of history. To him, as well as many others, the pogrom in Sumgait and atrocities elsewhere in Azerbaijan were indeed analogous to the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks.

In the beginning of this spontaneous mobilization, the armed groups that sprung up throughout Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were unorganized, ill equipped, poorly trained, and illegal under Soviet law. The nucleus of these units was the many Armenian veterans of the Soviet Armed Forces and particularly veterans of the war in Afghanistan. Although not tied together by any central command structure, they followed a fairly consistent pattern of development. A local leader would usually organize between ten and twenty of his friends and acquaintances into a unit, known as a *jogat*, or company. They would undergo rudimentary military training, if they had had none previously, before heading off to border regions of Armenia and Karabagh to protect the local civilian populations from attack.

As the armed units were being formed in 1988, there was a simultaneous increase in the prominence of historical symbolism. Banners, pins, buttons, audiocassettes of pre-Soviet patriotic and revolutionary songs, and photographs of the turn-of-the-century Armenian freedom fighters were produced and sold in abundance. The main venue for the sale and distribution of these items was the regular mass meetings that had been taking place since February 1988. These items appeared on the market quickly because they did not require either sophisticated technology to produce nor much intellectual effort. People with access to photo processing paper or those with access to local facilities, which manufactured the ubiquitous Soviet pins and buttons, could produce thousands of copies of an item without too much difficulty. The appearance of such items seems to have been spontaneous and not part of any larger, preplanned agenda.

Whatever the provenance of these photographs and pins, the reproduction and distribution of paraphernalia with historical motifs was greeted with enthusiasm from the public and soon entered into wider distribution.

Photographs of *fedayees* were displayed in many homes and sales were particularly brisk at Erevan State University. The fact that these items made their way into shops and stores owned and operated by the state could be an indication of the inability or unwillingness of the state to police its own employees, or of the existence of alternative networks of distribution; although most likely it was the result of a combination of these and other factors.

Literacy and Resistance

Mass-circulation newspapers were an important vehicle for the transmission of information and ideas. Among the new ideas being circulated throughout Armenian society were those related to history and its impact on current developments. Armenians traced many of the problems then confronting their country back to history, including but not limited to the Karabagh conflict. For example, it was common knowledge among Armenians that the borders of the Armenian SSR were the result of the 1920 Sovietization of Armenia. What most Soviet Armenians had not learned in school, but seemed to know anyway, was that the Sovietization of Armenia was not the result of an expressed desire of the Armenian working class to become communist as previously taught, but in fact was made possible through an alliance of Bolsheviks and Kemalist Turks. This “revelation,” which historians in the diaspora had known about for years, led to questions regarding the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Armenia.

Articles on history appeared even in the most seemingly unlikely of newspapers, such as *Dzayn Orinats* [Voice of Law], the official organ of the Armenian lawyers association. Many of these articles were explicit as to the importance of learning from the lessons of the liberation movement. For example, in an article which appeared in *Dzayn Orinats* (28 November 1990) dedicated to the activities of a revolutionary intellectual and freedom fighter, the editor noted: “Today, as the Republic of Armenia, under its own flag, moves towards free existence, we must bring forth from the fog of forgetfulness all those who lived and fought for Free Armenia.” Even more explicit was the series of articles published in October 1989 in *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* [Soviet Armenia], entitled “Life Dedicated to the Liberation of the Fatherland,” which highlighted the activities of five prominent *fedayees*. The editor opened the

series by stressing the importance of the past. Referring to the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s and the resulting self-defense battles, he wrote, “The people continued the struggle for the right to exist. The fundamental strength of that struggle was the *fedayees*. Each fact of their bright lives and of the struggle must become the property of us all, must aid in the work of providing patriotic education to the current generation.” This emphasis on the didactic use of historical knowledge would be stressed repeatedly by historians and non-historians alike as a tool to accomplish a shifting political agenda. Initially, history was used to confront Moscow and Baku over Karabagh, but eventually it turned into a tool for state building, as Armenians gradually moved towards the reestablishment of an independent republic.

Within months of the beginning of the Karabagh conflict, the press was running almost daily articles about the *fedayees* and the liberation movement. Public interest in the liberation movement remained high throughout the 1988-1991 period and continued into the post-Soviet period. Many articles were factual, with little or no commentary, appearing to let history speak for itself. But the very act of publishing these articles was sending a powerful message of resistance that did not need commentary for Soviet Armenian readers. They were accustomed to reading between the lines and drawing their own conclusions without the help of the state or its appointed guardians.

Historians and the Search for a Usable Past

As time passed and Soviet control over Armenia continued to weaken, historians began to prepare monographs, as an up-surge in publishing historical literature related to the liberation movement took place. Large print-runs of works on the liberation movement, featuring photographs of armed freedom fighters, were especially prized by volunteers and their supporters. The images of *fedayees*, sporting mustaches and beards, and equipped with bandoleers and rifles were used as models for the volunteers. Historians began to argue that although the liberation movement ultimately proved unsuccessful, for reasons external more than internal to the movement, it nonetheless demonstrated that Armenians could stand up for themselves and should do so again.

This example of defiance of state authority was one that resonated among the volunteers. For example, according to historians the southern region of the country only remained within the borders of Soviet Armenia because of the military efforts of Garegin Nzhdeh, who resisted Soviet and Azerbaijani attempts to incorporate the region into Soviet Azerbaijan, sparing it the fate of Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh. The lesson drawn was one of defense for the preservation of Armenian land, no matter the odds.

History as Validation

Intellectual and public criticism of Soviet historians became more pronounced as the falsifications of Soviet historiography were exposed, but the situation was complex, as there were few historians who had not made accommodations to the Soviet state. Even more complicated was the fact that just as historians had falsified history in the past, many of these same historians were denouncing the Soviet system and engaging in revisionism. But in the confusing twilight days of Soviet power in Armenia, events moved quickly and opinions and attitudes shifted accordingly.

The received tradition of the liberation movement provided a very strong sense of validation to those engaged in the armed struggle. Long forgotten military and patriotic songs, some dating from the Middle Ages, were collected and published by the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the Armenian SSR Academy of Sciences, in the volume *Armenian Popular Military Songs*. The editor of this volume of songs argued:

the praise and glorification of patriotic and gallant individuals is an artistic means of reflecting reality, which was widely practiced both in the old as well as in the new military songs. Traditions have continued, and in each historical period have been reflected according to demand in each ethno-historical environment.

The meaning behind this quote was evident to most readers. It was intended to demonstrate that the continuity of the Armenian military tradition over many centuries was established through the medium of martial ballads, thus linking past and present in an unending continuum.

The Soviet authorities in Erevan, however, did not accept this historical revisionism, or rather the undoing of Soviet revisionism, without a fight. From the beginning of the movement, until about mid-1990, when the communists were removed from power in Armenia, operatives of the KGB would present themselves at the archives on a weekly basis, seeking information on researchers and their topics. They would photocopy the sign-in log and question the directors and their staffs at length about what each researcher was engaged in. They also warned the staffs not to allow people access to documents on the liberation movement, among other topics. Initially, fear of state reprisals acted as a strong incentive for archive officials to accommodate the KGB, but gradually fear was replaced by disdain as political events of such unprecedented proportions overshadowed any potential threat emanating from the archives. The staffs of the archives eventually ignored these threats and provided access to researchers.

A more routine and less ominous example was provided by the case of the above-mentioned book on military songs. The text was heavily edited by the censor at the publishing house of the Armenian Academy of Sciences. The censor emphasized in a secret report to the Armenian Communist Party Central Committee's Section on Scientific and Educational Institutions:

in response to your question, we announce that after receiving at the publisher's the book manuscript of "Military Songs of the Armenian People," edited by A. S. Ghaziyani, it has been reviewed several times, and serious changes have been inserted into its structure, especially in the introductory article... The introductory essay was edited down, shortened and turned from 184 pages to 71 pages.

The report continues, stating that "the analyses of songs dedicated to unit commanders Dro, Nzhdeh, Gevorg Chaush and others have been removed. In the notes of the book, primary sources on the publication of military songs during the Soviet era were cited." Gradually, however, as private publishing houses were established and the state monopoly was broken, it grew easier to publish works independently and the censor was circumvented.¹

Another way around the censor was the use of diaspora sources. At the beginning of the democratic movement in Armenia, there were thousands of diaspora Armenian students studying in educational institutions, mostly in Erevan. These students were provided with a free education by the Soviet government, and many Armenians from places as far away as India, Syria, Lebanon, Argentina, France and the US took advantage of this opportunity to live and study in their homeland. The students received a free education, while the Soviet government was able to showcase the supposed achievements of socialism in Soviet Armenia. The intent was that these students would return to their countries of residence upon completion of their education and act as promoters of Soviet interests in the diaspora.

Many of these students brought with them historical works banned in Soviet Armenia but readily available in the Diaspora. They shared these items with their Soviet Armenian colleagues, and a brisk trade in books soon developed. Fairly often, these works would find their way to the used bookstores of Erevan, where historians and others without direct access to such material would immediately purchase them. One second-hand bookstore manager requested certain titles from me prior to a trip to the US in 1990, while many historian colleagues at Erevan State University would compile lists of books that they had heard about but not actually seen.

Reissues of works long known in the Armenian diaspora but banned in the homeland were also published. Most prominent was *Hay heghapokhakani mē hishataknerē*, the multi-volume memoirs of Ruben Ter-Minasyan, a legendary fighter and prolific author, who was responsible for many of the operations that took place on the disputed territory of Nakhichevan during the period of the first independent republic (1918-1920). They were published without added editorial content, allowing the words of Ruben to speak for themselves:

those names which I have remembered and those which I have forgotten represent that generation, with its sacrifice, its revolutionary fervor, its moral rectitude, which was born only once in our lifetime and which the world did not see a second time.

These memoirs provided examples of the *fedayee* ethos, spanning many decades from the 1890s until the 1920s; of particular interest was his description of the duties and responsibilities of a freedom fighter. Ruben Pasha's activities in the Armenian liberation movement were frequently cited by activists as examples to be emulated in the current struggle. The volunteers identified with the *fedayees* and used them as models, both inwardly in terms of the ideals of the *fedayees*, and outwardly in terms of appearance and public persona. Some of the fighters themselves adopted the *noms de guerre* of famous *fedayees*, while many others swore an oath to defend their land until death, thus emulating the turn of the century slogan of the *fedayees*, "Freedom or Death."

Throughout the 1988-1991 period, the volunteer movement grew from a collection of disparate and uncoordinated units, each pursuing whatever course it thought best, into a more cohesive and disciplined nucleus of the future national army. These illegal armed formations had grown into powerful symbols of popular resistance and were viewed by the population as the only real guarantor of Armenian physical inviolability. Part of the success in transforming these companies into proper military units was due to their sense of professional and national responsibility. In turn, this responsibility was based on an understanding and appreciation of their received history, which initially was passed on orally from generation to generation during the Soviet period, and later, through the efforts of historians and other intellectuals. The lessons of history that were passed on to the volunteers were that without their sacrifice, the future of the Armenian nation could not be assured. There were numerous historical precedents to justify such attitudes, and almost every volunteer had heard stories from the genocide about how the Armenian male population was drafted into the Ottoman Army and then disarmed, leaving the women, children and elderly without the means of self-defense.

A particular perception of history, especially modern Armenian history, led large segments of the Armenian population of the Armenian SSR and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region to collectively conclude after the massacre at Sumgait that armed struggle was a necessary action to prevent the repetition of deportation and massacre. Some observers

have argued that it would have been impossible for the Armenians to defeat the Azerbaijanis without outside assistance, but this does not take into account certain intangible aspects such as motivation. One of the reasons for Armenian battlefield victories in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the higher level of morale and motivation among the Armenian troops.

The esprit de corps among those engaged in armed struggle was due in part to their conviction that they were pursuing a just cause, legitimized by Armenian history. Historical memory of relations with Turks and Azerbaijanis led them to conclude that taking up arms was an alternative to the repetition of a history, which included deportation, massacre and genocide.

Historical memory of the Armenian liberation movement served another, possibly more important, purpose. The liberation movement symbolized Armenian self-reliance. It was one of the first instances in the modern history of the Armenians of relying on their own resources and not waiting for outside intervention to alleviate their situation. Although it had ended in defeat, it nonetheless was held responsible for saving countless Armenian lives and preventing the destruction of the entire nation during the genocide. This historical lesson of self-reliance was applied in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, and resulted in an armed resistance movement that contributed to the overthrow of Soviet power in Armenia. Although Soviet power was removed from Armenia through the democratic practice of free elections, nonetheless, the presence of armed volunteers ready to protect the Armenians' newly won freedoms acted as a powerful symbolic force. The volunteers also served to delegitimize Soviet power in Armenia. The fact that the Armenian population found it necessary to defend themselves in the absence of credible protection from their own Soviet government struck a heavily blow at the credibility of the regime. This credibility was even further undermined by the unwillingness or inability of the Soviet government to prevent the formation of such units. The success of these units further enhanced their image among the population, with a corresponding decrease in respect for the power of the central government.

The justification of Armenian inclusion in the Soviet Union, namely physical

inviolability, was shattered by the events in Sumgait, Baku and elsewhere. With the decision to take up arms and organize self-defense units came the re-appraisal of Armenia's place in the Soviet Union. Memories of an oppressive Ottoman regime, which armed and trained Kurdish bandits, who then attacked Armenians, were easily revived and applied to the current situation. The Soviet regime in Armenia never recovered its legitimacy, and as discussion continued unabated, the inexorable process of de-Sovietization, even while Armenia was still technically part of the Soviet Union, moved ahead.

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Endnotes.

1. This essay is part of a larger project entitled "The Re-appropriation of the Past: History and Politics in Soviet Armenia, 1988-1991," which explores the role of historical narratives in the de-legitimization of Soviet power in Armenia during glasnost. It is based on extensive fieldwork as well as archival research and interviews.
2. The word *fedayee* is derived from the Turkish/Persian, and means one who sacrifices himself for a cause, and contains overtones of devotion and dedication.
3. Tatevosyan, editor of *Garun*, claimed that the Armenian censor would often work with him so that articles would be acceptable for publication. He often had meetings with the censor in order to ascertain what degree of change would be required for an important article to be printed.