

The Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict (1988-present)

Background and Context

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1 Artsakh is the historical name of the 10th province of Mets Hayk (Greater Armenia), an ancient state in the Armenian Highlands. Historically, Artsakh included the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the term is currently widely used by Armenians to refer to Nagorno-Karabakh. In February 2017, the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was officially renamed the 'Republic of Artsakh' in the new constitution adopted by its Armenian population.

2 These clashes are mostly known as Armenian-Tatar clashes or massacres, as the ethnonym 'Azerbaijani' was first introduced in the 1939 USSR Census. Before that, the sources and literature, as well as the censuses, referred to Turkic-speaking Muslims of the South Caucasus by different terms, such as 'Muslims', 'Turks' and 'Caucasian Tatars'.

3 Further examples include, but are not limited to, the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, as well as the Transnistrian conflicts.

The Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh¹ conflict is one of the longest-standing and most violent conflicts to take place on the territory of the former USSR. Over the years, it has claimed thousands of lives in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and displaced over a million people, with Azerbaijanis fleeing Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding regions, and Armenians fleeing their residences in Azerbaijan and, more recently, Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict is often said to have started in the 1980s, but its origins can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1905 and 1920 there were inter-ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in different areas of the South Caucasus, first during the Tsarist period (1905-1907), and again during the short-lived existence of the first Armenian and Azerbaijani Republics (1918-1920).² After the subsequent establishment of Soviet rule, borders in the South Caucasus were redrawn in accordance with Soviet nationality policy, which also assigned varying degrees of autonomy to different ethnic groups and created ethnically different enclaves within national republics. Thus in 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh with its majority Armenian population was handed over to Azerbaijan and granted the status of "Autonomous Oblast" within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR). The oblast was called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). As the processes leading to the collapse of the USSR later proved, this Soviet nationality policy had great potential for conflict.³

The modern conflict began in 1988, when the ethnic Armenian residents of the NKAO, encouraged by Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, demanded the transfer of the oblast from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia.

During the Soviet period, the demography of the oblast had changed, with a decline in the number of Armenians and an increase in the number of Azerbaijanis. Armenians also reported discrimination against them by Azerbaijani authorities (New York Times, 1977). Thus, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh perceived *perestroika* as an opportunity to legally express their wish to unite with the Armenian SSR in early 1988. At the same time, a widespread "Karabakh movement" was launched in the Armenian SSR in support of Karabakh Armenians. This movement also called for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

In response to these developments, organised pogroms of Armenians took place in the city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan on 27-29 February 1988. Some scholars contend that the Sumgait pogroms awakened memories of the 1915 Armenian Genocide (Abrahamian, 2006;

Marutyan, 2009).⁴ These memories, it is argued, helped Armenians to think beyond paradigms of the Soviet present and to break the influence of Soviet propaganda, and became the basis for revolutionary transformations leading to Armenia's independence (Marutyan, 2009). In this way, the issues of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian Genocide were closely intertwined and later became the cornerstones for the construction of the Armenian nation-state.⁵ At the same time, Nagorno-Karabakh was a defining feature for Azerbaijan's nation building, as the territorial integrity of what constituted Soviet Azerbaijan was crucial for the independent Republic of Azerbaijan.

Thus the stage was set for the first modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which eventually became a two-sided military conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was on its way. Azerbaijan announced its independence on August 30, 1991. In response to this, Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians adopted a declaration on September 2 announcing the establishment of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR). The situation rapidly escalated into a full-scale war. Azerbaijani armed forces started an almost non-stop shelling of the Armenian settlements of Nagorno-Karabakh, while Armenians of the region, along with volunteers from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, started arming themselves and forming self-defence groups. One of the most tragic events of the first Karabakh war is considered the Khojaly/Khojalu massacre in February 1992, where hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians were shot dead, captured or became refugees (De Waal, 2013). The revenge was the massacre of Armenian civilians of Maragha village in April of the same year.

The war lasted two years, from 1992 to 1994, and ended in a fragile ceasefire brokered by Russia in May 1994. The former NKAO, along with its seven adjacent districts on the territory of Azerbaijan, came under the control of Armenian forces.

After the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, a de-facto Armenian state was established on the territory of the former NKAO. The unrecognised Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR), later renamed the Republic of Artsakh, with its capital in Stepanakert, had national symbols, legislative, executive and judicial branches of power, as well as an army.

The ceasefire formally remained in force until September 2020, though there were intermittent skirmishes, clashes, and ceasefire violations throughout these years along the Karabakh line of contact, but particularly along the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border, even though there was a peace process under the OSCE Minsk group, co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation and the United States. The most intense fighting during this period happened in April 2016 and lasted for four days, leaving both sides with hundreds of casualties.

The region descended into full-fledged warfare once again with an Azerbaijani attack on 27 September 2020. This was the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which lasted 44 days and ended on 9 November with a Russia-brokered ceasefire and a trilateral announcement by the Prime Minister of Armenia and the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia.

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The 1915 Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and its memory is the main source of collective trauma for Armenians. As it has never been recognised by the perpetrator, Turkey, Armenians feel constantly under that same threat. The issue of Karabakh has been closely linked to the genocide: in the Armenian perception and narrative, Azerbaijanis are related to Turks, and are even called "Turks" in vernacular Armenian. Moreover, the current Azerbaijani state is allied with Turkey, and massacres of Armenians took place in Baku in 1918 and in Shushi, Karabakh, in 1920. Thus Armenians collectively consider that both Turkey and Azerbaijan want there to be no Armenia or Armenians between their two Turkic nations.

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Adopted on 23 August 1990, Armenia's Declaration of Independence expresses the united will of the people in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, thus establishing the independent state on behalf of both groups. It has a special provision, stating that "[t]he Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia."

Self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and adjacent districts after the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Author: Evan Centanni, Political Geography Now, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://www.polgeonow.com/2018/01/artsakh-name-change-nagorno-karabakh.html>, accessed 14 February 2024.



Under the terms of the ceasefire, Azerbaijan regained control over the seven districts around Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as a significant portion of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. In accordance with the announcement, Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed to what remained of the de facto Republic of Artsakh to protect its civilian Armenian population and the Lachin corridor, the only route connecting the Republic to Armenia and the rest of the world. The 9 November announcement stated that the peacekeepers would stay in Artsakh for five years. However, on 12 December 2022, the Azerbaijani Government launched a blockade of the Lachin corridor under the guise of environmental protests. During the period of the blockade, there were numerous statements by different international organisations warning of the possibility of a genocide (International Association of Genocide Scholars, 2022; Lemkin Institute, 2023).

Artsakh remained under siege for the following nine months until 19 September 2023, when Azerbaijani forces attacked its remaining territory under what was announced as an “anti-terrorist operation”. The operation lasted 24 hours and resulted in the full capitulation of local Armenian defence forces. Five days later, Baku opened the Lachin corridor, allowing the surviving Armenians to flee to Armenia. As a result, over 100,000 – or nearly its entire Armenian population at the time – were forcibly displaced from their homes and remain so to this day.

It should be noted that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a defining master narrative for Armenia as well as for Azerbaijan. Not only does it touch upon every aspect of life in Armenia, from international relations to strategic alliances, security and militarisation to basic commodity prices, demography, economics and social welfare, but it also affects

almost every family: many have lost family members in the wars. Therefore, socio-politically it is extremely sensitive and needs a carefully designed and well thought through pedagogical approach for teaching the topic in a multiperspective manner.

From the very beginning of the conflict, peaceful life on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan was disrupted. Even after the 1994 ceasefire, border regions were never peaceful places, particularly in the north-east of Armenia in Tavush province. Throughout the entire period of the relative peace, from 1994 until now, the villages along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in Tavush were never considered to be secure. The villagers could not cultivate most of their land, there were reported cases of livestock damage or border-crossing, residents were kidnapped from their homes, and from time to time there were shootings. The lesson plan developed by the Armenian teachers using the example of the village of Movses in Tavush illustrates how the war disrupts and affects every aspect of life on the border in a conflict zone.

Students will greatly benefit from looking at the conflict from the perspective of the periphery and not the centre, from the perspective of someone who lives in one of the most conflict-affected places. It will allow us to have not only the official, top-down, political, and ideological perspective on the conflict, but also to look at it from the perspective of the most vulnerable. In turn, this will develop students' critical thinking skills, as well as their ability to utilise different sources to better understand an issue or a situation.

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