Budding Nationalism in the Black Garden;

Nagorno Karabakh and the Role of Conflict in Developing Azerbaijani National Identity

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Introduction

As the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the world rejoiced at the end of history. The Communist block which had been the greatest barrier to the spread of liberalism, democracy, and globalization was gone. Modernization theory held that with the spread of global capitalism and trade, the rising middle classes would find prosperity and peace which had been impossible under the weight of history and ideology. Democracy was viewed as the vessel which would end repression and despotism and bring (western) civilization to new parts of the world. In short, optimism was high for the prospect of a peaceful, democratic world finally being realized. However, this has not been the case.

After the initial period of optimism, across the board all the states which emerged from the Soviet Bloc have seen democratic backsliding to various degrees.¹ While in some nations such as Poland and Hungary, this backslide has been undertaken under the guise of populist nationalist movements to create “illiberal democracies”, which have the institutional hallmarks of democratic regimes but lack the essential qualities of open society and freedom of expression. Far more common however have been the trends echoed in states such as Russia, Belarus, and Turkmenistan, where former Soviet strongmen have reasserted their authority over the state and imposed authoritarian structures, reviving the clientaisitic systems which characterized Soviet rule. Many theories abound about why this backsliding has occurred, and there are sharp divisions in scholarship as to the causal factors which have contributed to the return of Soviet era politics. In some cases scholars cite the uncertainty which surrounded the implementation of a democratic political capitalist economic system on a territory with no history of such institutions; people didn’t know what democracy would look like and didn’t trust it. Others cite the role of regional conflict in eroding support of young democracies which lack the institutionalized support of the people while struggling to deal with a national crisis. Some

¹ This is in line with the declining strength of democracy across the world. Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz. “Democracy Under Siege.” Freedom House, 2021.
scholars even claim that the region is destined to always find itself entrenched in authoritarianism because “that's just how things are there”.

While these arguments can be used to describe the elements of political culture in nearly every Post-Soviet state, nowhere are they more profoundly debated than in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has been called by a number of scholars “the most ethnically diverse territory in the world”, were East and West, Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, join and clash together.\(^2\) Centuries of colonial rule by Persians, Turks, and Russians have coalesced into an incredibly diverse community in which a wide range of ethnic groups have made their homes. Ranging from Iranian Azeri, Turkic Nackchevians, Christian Armenians, and Caucasian Russians, the country offers a wide variety of perspectives, customs, and beliefs. The country has also seen heightened global attention in recent years for another reason; a war with Armenia which has lasted since the early 1990’s over the autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh. With thousands of people dead since the start, and over a million people displaced from their homes, the conflict has had a significant effect on the development of political and national culture in both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This paper is interested in analyzing the role of Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev and his father and former President Haydar Aliyev in the conflict and the ways in which the two have co-opted Azerbaijan’s nationalist movement into a base of support for their regime and the war. The paper will first explore the early formative years of Azerbaijani nationalism under the colonial rule of the Russian Empire, and its decline under the Soviet Union, demonstrating that Azerbaijan was home to a diverse ethnic and national community in which the influences of Europe and Asia pulled the nation’s national identity in divergent ways, and how successful the Soviet’s were at depoliticizing the young nationalist movement into a stable society of censorship and control. The paper will then analyze the effects that fall of the Soviet Union had

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on the creation of a new nation, and investigate why the declining influence of Russia led to the instigation of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh. Using this framework I then intend to demonstrate why the newly formed democratic government of Azerbaijan was totally incapable of handling the massive challenges which faced the nation, leading to a backslide into Authoritarianism and the return of Soviet era leader Haydar Aliyev as the country’s savior and president. The final thrust of the paper will analyze how Haydar and his son Ilham have made the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh the key issue of Azerbaijan’s national identity and have inherently generated support for their authoritarian regimes utilizing the nationalistic fervor that the war generated, while clamping down on instances of dissent from within the nation.

My aim is to argue that the war in Nagorno Karabakh has resulted in the accelerated concentration of Azerbaijani national identity around patriotic support for the Aliyev family, predicated on a victim narrative in which Azerbaijan was subject to comprehensive national humiliation and loss of territory after their defeat at the hands of Armenia in the first Nagorno Karabakh war in 1994. By co-opting this patriotic fervor into support for the government, the Aliyev family has essentially made their authoritarian regime’s legitimacy predicated on the nation’s resistance to Armenia, and support for the “Patriotic War” which erupted in September of 2020. Through emphasizing the righteous role of Azerbaijan in the conflict, and constantly reminding the Azerbaijani people of the importance of Nagorno Karabakh in their own history and identity, Haydar and Ilham Aliyev have established themselves as the standard bearers of Azerbaijani nationalism and reinforced the narrative that they are the only ones capable of leading Azerbaijan through crisis.

Impenalism to Nationalism
Azerbaijani nationalism has its roots in the 1850’s, arising from the political and socio-economic conditions in the Russian Empire. Following Russia’s seizure of the territory of Azerbaijan from Iran in the early 1800’s, Azerbaijan was placed under military rule until the 1840’s, when Russia
established a civil imperial administration in which Russian law and values prevailed as the dominant rule of law. The non-Christian population was deemed unequal under law, and the native Azeri-Turkic population was made into second class citizens of the empire. Muslim’s were barred from legal discourse, and traditional legal and religious courts led by qadi (judges) were co-opted by the Russian administration to become apparatus of Russian control over the “wild” Muslim population.

The second-class nature of the Turks in the empire was also felt economically; there was a clear class divide between the native Azeri Turks and their colonial counterparts. As it is today, Azerbaijan’s largest industry in the late 19th century was its oil and gas industry, and under the Russians this trade was tightly restricted to certain classes and ethnic groups. Azerbaijan was the largest exporter of oil in the whole empire, and many entrepreneurs flooded Baku in the latter half of the 1800's looking to make a fortune by exploiting the region's natural resources. While the majority of these hopeful businessmen came from Russia, a substantial portion came from outside the empire. This included Alfred and Robert Noble of the Noble Company, which between 1873 and 1888 became the largest oil company in the region and one of the largest in the world. Entrance to the Oil and Gas Institute was barred for anyone who did not speak Russian, and there was a clear favoritism at play with the administrators clearly preferring Russian and Christian entrepreneurs. While the Russian’s inserted themselves at the top of the economic landscape, they also made room for other Christian groups, most significantly the Armenian population which littered the Caucasus. The Armenians gradually took over the merchant class in the urban areas of Azerbaijan such as Baku and Ganja, elevating themselves to a higher socio-economic class than the Azeri-Turks. These cities were

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3 Aldstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 18
4 Ibid, 18, 41
5 Ibid, 36
6 Ibid, 21
7 Ibid, 37
home to an “international proletariat” in which the upper classes were all made of foreign investors and workers coming to Azerbaijan to get rich. Thus by the 1870’s the Azeri-Turkic population found themselves second or even third class citizens in a territory they had historically called home.

The nationalist movement which began to emerge in Azerbaijan beginning in the late 1850’s addressed many of the issues which faced Azeri-Turks under colonial rule. However, the movement hit significant roadblocks in its early years due to the near impossible nature of consolidating a singular Azerbaijani ethnic identity. This issue was most clearly evident in the lack of a codified Azerbaijani language under which Azerbaijani nationalists could unite. For many Azeri, Turkic was the de facto language of choice, and thus for them a national identity divorced from their Turkic identity was unthinkable. However for others, especially the social elite who had gone to Europe to receive an education before returning to their native country, this Turkic identity was marred by a barbaric and uncivilized culture, and the rising Azerbaijani national identity needed to embrace the modern elements of European society. An independent Azerbaijani language was an important vessel for this vision of Azerbaijan. A host of nationalist literature exploded in the 1890’s, all intent on answering questions such as “who are we?” and “what are our values?”.

Azerbaijani nationalism followed this trend into the 20th century, and can be clearly delineated between two groups stemming from the early nationalist period; the Azarijilar, and the Turkchular. The Azarijilar were made up of Russian educated and urban figures who wanted Azerbaijan to embrace an independent identity based on enlightenment ideals which placed secularism, women’s rights, and education at the forefront of Azerbaijani society. Their most

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9 Ibid, 551
11 Ahmadoghlu . “Secular Nationalist Revolution”, 553
famous published editorial *Molla Nasreddin* was a satirical publication which between 1906 and 1930 pushed the narrative of an enlightened secular Azerbaijani identity which shed the "backwards east" in favor of the "progressive west". The cartoons for which it was most famous for often reference the restrictive role of religion on society (figure 1), the unequal and derogatory nature of Islamic Turks' treatment of women (figure 2), and social issues in the Empire such as the clash between Azeri and Armenians (figure 3). In their social work, figures such as Hasan Melikov Zardabi promoted the creation of secular schools which taught in vernacular Azerbaijani and in creating newspapers which brought news to Azeri in the "mother tongue". For the Azarijilar, the model of a European nation state was clearly the model they were trying to emulate.

On the other side were the Turkchular, for whom religion and history played a much more dominant role in the ideal structure of society, leading them to favor an approach which would see Azerbaijan ally itself closely with the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. The romantic ideals of Pan-Turkism through which common cultural values between the Azeri and Turks could be found was the basis for cultural and national assimilation in the eyes of these nationalists. As with the Azarijilar, language was of primary importance of the Turkchular, and they favored the continued use of Ottoman Turkish as the national language, with their primary publication *Hayat* (Life) only being published in that dialect. Interestingly, while the Turkchular strongly held that religion had a dominant role in governance, their religious differences with Turkey did not provide a significant issue in their nationalist drive. Azeri-Turks are predominantly Shi’a as a result of their Iranian background, while the Turks were devout Sunni, however this difference did not come between the two groups. Instead, the pressure of Russian imperialism

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12 Jersild. “Rethinking Russia from Zardob”, 503
14 Ahmadoglu. “Secular Nationalist Revolution”, 551
15 Jersild. “Rethinking Russia from Zardob”, 503
15 Ahmadoglu. “Secular Nationalist Revolution”, 553
created a broader Islamic unifying identity which was able to overcome the religious difference on the back of cultural and linguistic similarities.\textsuperscript{16}

The juxtaposition of Azerbaijani identity is beautifully represented in Kruban Said’s book \textit{Ali and Nino}; a romance novel set in Baku during the first World War. Kurban Said is a pseudonym for an unknown anonymous author, yet despite its ambiguous origin the novel perfectly captures the push-pull of identity which rocked Azerbaijan at the time. The young Muslim aristocratic Ali’s love affair with the Christian Georgian Princess Nino clearly demonstrates the identity crisis which was enveloping Azerbaijan at the end of the colonial period, unsure whether it should fall back on its cultural and religious history, or embrace modern European values and integration. For example, when Ali confides to Nino that he prefers to retain his identity as a “reactionary Asiatic”, she replies “Ali Khan, you are stupid. Thank God we are in Europe. If we were in Asia they would have made me wear the veil ages ago, and you couldn’t see me.”\textsuperscript{17} Ali is not convinced by this argument, as to him Azerbaijan’s asiatic identity encompasses everything about his home that he loves. While Europe is a place of “Forests…and liberal ideals,” Asia is the land of “desert and warriors,” and Ali knows where his own identity lies.\textsuperscript{18} Despite these polar views, the book demonstrates that Azerbaijan is a piece of both worlds and Ali’s death at the end is a stark reminder that Azerbaijan will need to find a compromise between its conflicting identities if it is to survive.

The Russian empire collapsed in 1917, and with that Azerbaijan achieved independence, making it the world’s first democratic Islamic state. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was clearly a result of the nationalistic forces from the colonial period. The Musavat party which came to power in 1918 promoted several agendas, including universal women’s suffrage (which Azerbaijan achieved before the United States), promoting native Azerbaijani as

\textsuperscript{16} Aldstadt, \textit{The Azerbaijani Turks}, 70
\textsuperscript{17} Kurban Said, Jenia Graman, and Paul Theroux. \textit{Ali and Nino}. (London: Vintage, 1937). 15
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 104
the official language of the state, and ensuring equality under the law for native Azerbaijani.\textsuperscript{19}

However the government struggled under the pressure of organizing a new state, and a mix of internal power struggles, territory disputes with Armenia, and political pressure from the rising Bolshevik party prevented the Musavat government from implementing the necessary social and economic reforms needed to keep the state operating efficiently.\textsuperscript{20} When Soviet forces descended on Baku in April of 1920, they met limited resistance and captured the center of the country quickly, reimposing Russian rule in the form of the Soviet Union, and ending Azerbaijani nationalistic discourse for decades.

**National Identity in the Soviet Union**

The Soviet Union’s takeover of Azerbaijan was disastrous for the country’s budding national identity. It saw the national history of Azerbaijan taken out of the hands of native figures and amalgamated into a tool for Soviet control of the region. The Musavat party had been a basket case of a government, and while many people hoped that the return of Russian rule would see a return to some normalcy in everyday life, these hopes were quickly dashed.\textsuperscript{21}

Initially the Soviets seemed to desire a return to the non-national status quo which had characterized the region under the Russian empire, creating a Transcaucasus Federation which combined Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan into one conglomerate administration.\textsuperscript{22} This coincided with attempts by Moscow to denationalize the populace, most specifically through control of the language. Beginning in the late 1920’s, a series of “alphabet reform” programs were introduced to vernacular Azerbaijan, in effect switching the written language from the Latin alphabet into Cyrillic. Officially this change was done because “the Russian alphabet has many advantages in comparison with Latin… This is the alphabet of the greatest geniuses of

\textsuperscript{19}Aldstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 65
\textsuperscript{20}Ahmadoglu. “Secular Nationalist Revolution”, 560
\textsuperscript{22}Aldstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 119
mankind- Lenin and Stalin. The Russian alphabet is the script of the richest and most expressive language…” However for Azeri, the change essentially made the existing literature written in Azerbaijani (mostly nationalist discourse) unavailable to younger generations. The change was also done in order to further isolate Azerbaijan from Turkey, who professed an overt anti-Soviet perspective. Thus the early years of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan are characterized by attempts to denationalize the population and put questions of ethnic differences to rest.

These attempts were ended in 1936, when the prevalence of “historical conditions” allowed for the breakup of the Transcaucasus Federation. Fearful that the newly formed party government in Azerbaijan was not loyal to Moscow, Stalin instigated a national purge, and beginning in 1936 the “bourgeois nationalists” of Azerbaijan were killed or sent to Siberia. These were generally cultural nationalist elites such as former politicians, writers, and educators identified by the party as nationalist figures, in particular those who stressed Azerbaijan’s connection to the Turkic world. This was an irrevocable blow to the development of Azerbaijani national identity, and nationalism was put to rest in the country until the 1960’s, when official Soviet policy demanded that each nation in the U.S.S.R. have its own national history which placed each nation in history according to Marxist principles. The volume that emerged was published without footnotes or references, and conceived as Azerbaijan being the “Little Brother” of Russia, and credited the Soviet Union for saving Azerbaijan from the villainous bourgeois capitalist Musavat party. More extraordinary however was the rehabilitation of dead national figures as national heroes, most of whom had been killed during the Soviet purges in

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23 Świętochowski, Russia and Azerbaijan, 128
24 Aldstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, 124
25 Świętochowski, Russia and Azerbaijan, 120
26 Aldstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, 125
27 Ibid, 125
28 Świętochowski, Russia and Azerbaijan, 126
29 Aldstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, 172-173
30 Ibid, 173
the 1930’s. These figures were selectively picked in order to rebrand them along party ideological lines, and had been “discovered” to be loyal Leninists after their deaths. Of the figures selected, Yusuf Vezirov, a contributor to Molla Nasreddin, and Rulla Akhundov, an activist for the wider adoption of vernacular Azerbaijani, were notable figures to be selected. Them and others were found to have actually been fervent supporters of Russian language and culture, with allusions to their executions at the hands of the Soviets neatly excluded.\textsuperscript{31}

Inevitably however, the monopoly over local nationalism slipped out of reach for the Soviet Union, and Azerbaijani discourse about national identity began slowly to reemerge beginning in the mid 1970’s, but carefully and quietly. Rather than returning to the issues of ethnic divisions which characterized the formative years of Azerbaijani nationalism, the emerging national discourse focused on independence and resistance to foreign occupation which had a legacy embedded in Azeri nationalism.\textsuperscript{32} In the context of occupation and repression, Azerbaijani national identity found unity in its desire to subvert the authority of the “other”. This movement found its home most prominently in historical fiction literature and poems which were becoming subject to less strict censorship guidelines, where authors could subtly subvert the censor’s guidelines by alluding to a cultural history unfamiliar to foreign readers.\textsuperscript{33} A subtle example of this subversion can be found in poems published in the Azerbaijan magazine in the late 1970’s, where authors such as Kemala and Baloghlan Shifizade used code words to get their meanings across. In poems referencing “Homeland”, the official Soviet term “vatan” was deployed in contrast to “yurt”, which is the Turkic word for the same. In these cases, “yurt” was used to denote the ancient history and homeland of Azerbaijan, drawing direct connections to the people’s relationship to the land, their history, and

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid, 171
\textsuperscript{32}Aldstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, 188
\textsuperscript{33}Shouleh Vatanabadi, “Past, Present, Future, and Postcolonial Discourse in Modern Azerbaijani Literature,” World Literature Today 70, no. 3 (1996), 494
Turkey; meanwhile “vatan” referred to the long history of occupation where the people’s history and country was not their own.\textsuperscript{34}

More overt were the historical fiction novels published by authors such as Sabir Ahmaldi, Akram Eilisli, and Kurban Said, in which Azerbaijani resistance to invading imperial powers aiming to keep national culture and history alive for future generations was a popular medium.\textsuperscript{35} While Soviet censors were lenient with allowing stories like these to be published, they had two strict rules. First there could be no allusions to resistance to Russian conquest, but resistance to Persian and Ottoman invaders was allowed. Second, suggestions of well-educated and competent women figures were censored by the Soviets, in an attempt to maintain the narrative that Azeri women were “pre enlightened, backwards, and passive”.\textsuperscript{36} These stories were instrumental in the survival of Azerbaijan’s national history, as they allowed Azeri who only knew the Cyrillic form of the language to access a piece of their past unavailable to them until that point.\textsuperscript{37}

If the Soviet Union desired to stay in control of Azerbaijan, then they did a very poor job keeping the territory integrated after 1969. Under Soviet strongman and Politburo advisor Haydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan society was modernizing, but at an uneven pace. The oil industry remained the most lucrative business in the country, however many Azerbaijani were barred from entry into the field by the administrative structures imposed by the Center, which restricted teaching in Baku’s Oil and Gas Institute to Russian speakers. \textsuperscript{38} This was highly problematic because although the Russian language had been promoted by officials including Aliyev as a “second mother tongue”, stressing its value as an international language, few Azeri were actually fluent, in 1979 less than 30% of Azerbaijani spoke Russian.\textsuperscript{39} The majority of educated

\textsuperscript{34}Aldstadt, \textit{The Azerbaijani Turks}, 189
\textsuperscript{35}Vatanabadi, “Past, Present, Future, and Postcolonial Discourse”, 493
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid, 495
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid, 495
\textsuperscript{38}Aldstadt, \textit{The Azerbaijani Turks}, 186
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid,187
university students in Baku spoke and studied in vernacular Azerbaijani (70%), and the oil industry became dominated by Russians and Armenians, just as it was under the Russian Empire.\textsuperscript{40}

Despite the drawbacks of foreign occupied rule, Azerbaijan did see one positive aspect from its Soviet occupation. From 1920 to 1988, there was almost no significant ethnic conflict in the country, a dramatic difference from the chaos which had enveloped the country in 1917.\textsuperscript{41} While the intense censorship and control of society which characterized Soviet rule was a nuisance which might result in decapitation, many Azerbaijani found it preferable to the uncertainty that independence offered, and the unresolved issues about a consolidated national and ethnic identity that a democratic regime might bring to the forefront.\textsuperscript{42} The nature of Soviet rule, repressive as it was, effectively de-politicized the Azerbaijani population to a degree that for many the legitimacy of the regime was secure in their minds so long as their daily lives were uninterrupted.\textsuperscript{43} However in early 1988, the lives of nearly every Azerbaijani was interrupted when a conflict in the small eastern territory of Nagorno Karabakh arrived at the gates of Baku. While not the only factor in its collapse, this crisis essentially spelled the death of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan.

The Origin of Crisis

Nagorno Karabakh translates to “Mountainous Karabakh”, and denotes a 1,700 square mile territory in west Azerbaijan. While the region has received heightened attention since 1994 when Armenia forcibly took control of Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijan, conflict in the territory is not a new phenomenon. More rural than the oil rich east of Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh was poorly integrated into the Russian empire, and a definitive cultural and ethnic identity did

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid, 186
\textsuperscript{41}Svante E. Cornell, “Democratization Falters in Azerbaijan.” \textit{Journal of Democracy} 12, no. 2 (2001), 120
\textsuperscript{43}Świętochowski, \textit{Russia and Azerbaijan}, 233
not materialize prior to 1917. When Azerbaijan and Armenia declared themselves independent states in 1917, the status of the territory was a point of contention between the two nations, as both Armenians and Azerbaijani represented a significant portion of the region’s population. For the Azeri, the presence of the city of Susha was enough to claim sovereignty over the territory, as this city has the historical legacy as the cultural home of the Azeri Turks. On the other side Armenia was concerned with the status of the ethnic Armenians who had come to dominate the region as the most populous ethnic group. The conflict between the two young states has been portrayed as one of the primary causes of state collapse and Soviet takeover in 1920, as the respective provincial governments became so embroiled in the conflict they neglected domestic issues such as organizing the economy and quelling domestic social unrest.

Unresolved by the time the Soviet Union took control of Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh was given the special status as an “Ethnic Reservation”, and placed under the control of the Azerbaijan Soviet government. Like most of the Soviet Union, issues of ethnic identity were put on hold for the most part, until 1987 when the liberalizing reforms of Perestroika and Glasnost reopened the issue for debate. In February 1988 the ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh staged a referendum to re-associate the territory with Armenia, reigniting the dormant conflict. Thousands of Azerbaijani living in Nagorno Karabakh departed east soon thereafter, “encouraged” by their Armenian neighbors, flooding east Azerbaijan with homeless displaced people fleeing to the government that they hoped would alleviate the situation. With so many displaced and angry people, it did not take long for things to get out of hand, as occurred in late February 1988 when gangs of Azeri in the city of Sumagait located north of Baku rioted, killing

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44Aldstadt, *The Azerbajiani Turks*, 130
Thomas De Waal, “The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict in Its Fourth Decade.” CPES Working Document, (September 2, 2021.) 1
46Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 79
between 40 and 100 local Armenians, who almost universally had no connection to the events occurring in Nagorno Karabakh.\textsuperscript{48} The situation only worsened in January of 1990, when the massive number of refugees camped outside of Baku took up arms and attacked the Armenian population of the city, leading to the entire Armenian population of 300,000 to flee or be killed by the rampaging refugees.\textsuperscript{49}

The crisis was compounded by the incompetence of the Soviet Center to properly administrate the explosive conflict. Gorbachev took personal interest in the issue yet was incredibly indecisive; between 1988 and 1990 the region went from being administered by Azerbaijan, then was allowed a short period of direct rule, however after the referendum to integrate into Armenia was rejected by Moscow it was returned to Azerbaijan’s jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{50} The coup de grace came in late January 1990, when in response to the massacre of Armenians in Baku, Moscow sent in a substantial military force to subdue a riot which had already ended. The events of “Black January” spelt the end of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan. Local Azerbaijani who protested the Soviet military occupation were slaughtered, leading to some 200 people being killed by Soviet forces over the course of the short occupation.\textsuperscript{51} Following this disaster, Azerbaijani nationalists began calling for independence from the Soviet Union, and there was widespread belief that the nation should be in charge of mediating its own crisis’ without foreign interference.\textsuperscript{52}

Back in Nagorno Karabakh, the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control. While in 1988 intercommunal violence was extremely rare, by 1990 things had dramatically changed. Brutal attacks occurred within small towns as Armenian and Azeri began attacking each other for perceived offenses, and civil society dissolved into violent chaos. This dramatic escalation is

\textsuperscript{48}Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 83  
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid, 83  
\textsuperscript{50}De Waal, \textit{Black Garden}, 30  
\textsuperscript{51}Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 84  
\textsuperscript{52}Ibid, 49
in part due to two factors. The first is that the large number of Soviet troops which had been stationed in the territory as peacekeepers began deserting their posts as the U.S.S.R. came crashing down around them. Desperate to get home with as much cash as possible given the dire economic circumstances, soldiers began selling their arms to locals with no questions asked.53 While up until this point a handgun was considered a rarity to be treasured and what little conflict had existed consisted of extensive brawling, now locals patrolled their neighborhoods armed with Kalashnikov’s, RPGs, and even armored vehicles, which they used to attack anyone thought to belong to the other group.54 This was complicated by the difficulty inherent in telling Azeri and Armenians apart, as the distinction could often not be made until they spoke, leading to undoubted instances of inter-ethnic violence.55

The other factor which led to escalation of violence was the local Azerbaijani officials reluctance to interfere in the ethnic conflict, as they were unsure of their official status and the political quagmire in Baku meant the national authorities refused to give them any direct instructions.56 A particularly gruesome account from Thomas Goltz’s Azerbaijan Diaries recounts his visit to a small village in Nagorno Karabakh with Azerbaijani officials following the brutal killing of an Azerbaijani family living in the village in 1991. Upon arrival the Azeri officials took pictures of the incident and interviewed some locals, learning quite definitively that the perpetrators of the crime were the Armenian family who lived directly across the street. While the Armenian father and his sons did housework in front of their house in full view of the Azeri officials, the officers contented themselves with taking pictures of the damage, then returning to the safety of their base without making any effort to prevent either the Armenians from carrying out another attack, or to prevent a retaliatory attack by the surviving Azeri.57 Since Azerbaijan

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53Ibid, 77
54Goltz, Azerbaijan Diary, 77
55De Waal, Black Garden, 35
56Goltz, Azerbaijan Diary, 78
57Ibid, 78-79
officially had jurisdiction over the territory, the inability to stem the violence severely degraded the legitimacy of Azerbaijani officials in the area and made local desires for change all the more prominent.

These factors combined to give Armenia the justification needed to launch an invasion of the territory and assert Armenian sovereignty. Claiming that the Azerbaijani were renewing the historic pogrom against the Armenians stemming from the Armenian Genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1915, Armenia declared war on Azerbaijan in December 1991 with the backing of most of the international community. Without the support of Russian troops who had maintained order in the region for nearly 70 years, Azerbaijan faced a struggle to survive from nearly its first day as an independent nation.

**Independence**

The first years of independence were extremely difficult for the Republic of Azerbaijan. The country was significantly weakened by Armenia’s expanding aggression, internal power struggle and collapse of the economy. Irresponsible activity of the Popular Front government brought Azerbaijan to the verge of collapse. - Official History of Azerbaijan. Website of the President of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan’s return to independence in August of 1991 thus began with a whimper rather than a bang. The Communist Party of Azerbaijan made attempts to maintain their role of authority, however without the backing of the Center in Moscow their legitimacy was tenuous, particularly after the events of “Black January”. While many people were skeptical about the prospects of independence and democratization, there was a general sentiment that Moscow had failed in making good its promises and things could not be worse if Azerbaijan was left to its own devices. At a gathering at Freedom Square in Baku on August 30 1991, soon to be President Abulfez Aliev declared: “The Center has a new name, and that is Russia- and Russia has as little right to interfere in our affairs as the Center had under Gorbachev or Stalin!

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58 Official History of Azerbaijan”. Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan. 3
sentiment widely shared by the massive crowd gathered, and indicative that the wider population had grown tired of the imposition of foreign authority.\(^{59}\)

The new government which immediately formed was led by former Soviet Chairman of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov, and did not long survive the host of issues which cropped up as the Center’s authority deserted Azerbaijan. Still relying on the last vestiges of legitimacy left over from his Soviet Era appointment, Mutalibov was an unpopular candidate, and his electoral victory which established him as the president of the new state in September of 1991 relied heavily on him being the only candidate for election.\(^{60}\) While the new president had immediately dissolved the Communist party and declared himself a nationalist from the start, his government’s legitimacy was questionable in the eyes of Azerbaijanis who until now had lived in a single party state led by the same figure. To complicate the issue further for Mutalibov, the Armenian armed forces were making significant progress in Nagorno Karabakh culminating in the capture of Shusha, forcing more Azeri to flee east and establishing Mutalibov’s reputation in the eyes of Azerbaijani nationalists as an incompetent leader. Under pressure from the Popular Front led by Abulfez Aliev, Mutalibov was forced to tender his resignation in March of 1992, opening the door for a real democratic election.\(^{61}\)

The election of 1992 was the first and only fair and free democratic election in Azerbaijan’s history.\(^{62}\) It also exposed the greatest challenge to Azerbaijan’s consolidation of a national identity, and democracy as an institution in Azerbaijan: the unresolved issues of Azerbaijan’s deeply divided ethnic and cultural divisions. Having taken up the mantle of premiere Azerbaijani nationalists, the Popular Front soundly won the election and Abulfez Aliev, known as “Elchibey,' was elected as president. Like almost all of his cabinet, Elchibey came from Nakhchivan and arrived armed with a firm notion of what independent Azerbaijan should

\(^{59}\)Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 49
\(^{60}\)Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 56
\(^{61}\)Cornell, “Democratization Falters in Azerbaijan.”, 118
\(^{62}\)Ibid, 119
strive to be. Looking to Europe for inspiration, Elchibey hoped to create a trans-Caucasus union of friendship between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, though he was firm in his belief that Nagorno Karabakh would remain Azerbaijani territory. Echoing the logic which established Nakhchivan as Azeri territory, Elchibey believed that “Armenians have been living in Azerbaijan for centuries, as full citizens of the state… Let them continue to live here as equal citizens… but they must obey the laws of the state”.

Despite the peaceful and promising prospects offered by the Popular Front, the honeymoon period was short lived, and public opinion rapidly turned against Azerbaijan’s first democratic government. Elchibey’s desire for a unified Caucasus quickly vanished as the Popular Front was presented with several issues which proved insurmountable for the developing democratic government. Some were self-inflicted wounds, such as Elchibey’s desire to create common alliances with Turkey and Iran. While the cultural and historic linkages to Iran and Turkey made these possible alliances a matter of course, it also meant that the dream of a trans-Caucasus union would remain unrealized. Armenia assumed that Azerbaijan was renewing the historic Turkic pogrom against Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh, and increased their military operations in the territory. The already unorganized Azeri forces continued to be pushed back, and lacking a strong unifying national agenda, the crisis quickly drained support for the Popular Front. In a trend echoed in many Post-Soviet States including Georgia and even Russia, the rapid political liberalization into a young democracy combined with an intense regional conflict created circumstances in which democracy could not survive.

This democratic collapse was aided by the fundamental lack of a consolidated national identity. As mentioned, Elchibey’s cabinet was entirely made up of Nakhchivan officials, and

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63 Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 59
64 Ibid, 63
65 Cornell, “Democratization Falters”, 130
66 Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 356
67 Cornell, “Democratization Falters”, 119
favored a national agenda which favored closer ties to Turkey and an antagonistic relationship with Russia and the rest of Europe.\textsuperscript{68} Nakhchivan’s isolated position from the rest of Azerbaijan had led to a greater reliance on Turkey and Iran, unlike the cosmopolitan and Euro-integrated Baku and Ganja.\textsuperscript{69} Yet ironically it was oil deals with European companies such as BP and Russian Lukoil which kept the regime afloat.\textsuperscript{70} By 1993 however, the Popular Front was not very popular, and protests demanding stabilizing change began cropping up across the country, most notably in Ganja where an Azeri colonel Surat Huseynov began rallying support behind his fame as one of the only successful Azeri commanders in the Nagorno Karabakh war.\textsuperscript{71} In just two years of independence, the lack of pluralism in the government coupled with the disastrous conflict and rising economic hardships had thoroughly disenchanted Azerbaijani people with the prospect of democracy.\textsuperscript{72} Facing the prospect of the nation tearing itself to pieces, Elchibey called out of retirement the only person who had successfully led Azerbaijan through crisis in the past: former Chairman of Soviet Azerbaijan and Politburo advisor Haydar Aliyev.

Like so many national leaders who have emerged out of the Soviet Union since 1991 including Viktor Orban of Hungary, Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, Haydar Aliyev can best be understood as an opportunist who was malleable to whatever the current situation demanded in order to maintain a grip on power. While this brand of \textit{Realpolitik} can be viewed as the character of a national leader willing to push boundaries to keep the nation together, a more cynical reading belies the intent of a quasi-populist leader who leveraged the national crisis which Azerbaijan was encountering to entrench his authority as the de-facto national leader. It is difficult to pin down a specific ideology which can define him, as

\textsuperscript{68} Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 29
\textsuperscript{69} Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Bahodir Sidikiv. “Barth, Yeraz, and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Inventing a New Sub-Ethnic Identity.” In \textit{Representations on the Margins of Europe: Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States}, (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2008), 307
\textsuperscript{70} Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 356
\textsuperscript{71} Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 365
\textsuperscript{72} Cornell, “Democratization Falters”, 121
his position seemingly changed to accommodate whatever the perceived road to success would be. This malleability allowed one of the most famous figures in all of the former Soviet Union to return to Baku from his retirement in Nakhchivan rebranded as a nationalist leader who would bring back stability to Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{73} His success in this endeavor has left behind his legacy as the savior of the nation and the standard bearer of Azerbaijani nationalism. Like the ethnic makeup of the nation, its leader did not lack diversity of opinions.

Unsurprisingly, the return of Aliyev spelt the end of the democratically elected Popular Front. The chief goal of Aliyev's return to Baku was to stop the now armed and advancing rebel force under Surat which was making its way from Ganja to Baku. In spite the media reports which alleged Aliyev and the government was doing everything in their power to subdue the rebel leader, the force continued to advance, and in June 1993 Elchibey vanished for a short period, leading to Aliyev going to parliament and demanding that he assume the powers of the Presidency in Elchibey's absence.\textsuperscript{74} The absentee President soon reappeared, and Aliyev revoked his assumption of power, but it was clear he had the support of both the government and the people, and Elchibey quickly resigned his post and abdicated power. Aliyev resoundingly won the hastily organized election in which ballot stuffing and voter intimidation were reported, made peace with Surat, and went about stabilizing the economy by signing lucrative oil deals with many western companies.\textsuperscript{75}

While the national savior had seemingly delivered the needs of his nation, there are questionable circumstances which surround his ascent to power worthy of further analysis. Aliyev's abrupt shift from fervent Soviet supporter to nationalist hero is suspect, and during his retirement in Nakhchivan he was already apparently attempting to co-opt the nationalist movement away from the Popular Front: flying the Azerbaijani flag while it was still banned by

\textsuperscript{73}Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 65, 72
\textsuperscript{74}Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 385
\textsuperscript{75}De Waal, *Black Garden*, 260, 263
Soviet authorities, banning Soviet holidays in favor of local traditions, and promoting the Azerbijani language over Russian.\textsuperscript{76} The former KGB agent had been a fervent supporter of Russian as a “second mother tongue” during his time in charge of the Republic in the 1970’s and as a Politburo member had been avid in his efforts to further incorporate Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{77} Yet as the unofficial leader of Nakhchivan he fully embraced a role as a nationalistic agitator.

Even more suspicious however is the sequence of events which led to the resolution of the Ganja crisis and the disarming of the rebels under Surat. After Elchibey had fled and Aliyev had assumed Presidential power, Surat’s forces were quickly demobilized and the crisis averted. While the Baku press had reported an army marching on Baku, the actual number of armed troops numbered less than one hundred, and lacked any significant armor or weapons besides the discarded arms of former Soviet troops.\textsuperscript{78} Thus rather than the Popular Front being driven out by an overwhelming force, realistically no one was actually willing to fight for the state under Elchibey’s leadership. The democratically elected government lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the Azerbaijani people. Further doubt can be shed on the genuine nature of Aliyev’s rise when one considers that the bait used to tame Surat was the post of Prime Minister offered by Aliyev as he was forming his cabinet. There is no verifiable evidence that Surat was working with Aliyev to depose the Popular Front government, however in 1994 personal differences with Aliyev led to Surat being exiled and welcomed in Russia as a hero, leading one to the conclusion that Surat was at the least supported by Russia if not also Aliyev.\textsuperscript{79} Regardless, as one Popular Front official remarked as he watched the government subsumed by Aliyev: “The

\textsuperscript{76}Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 72
\textsuperscript{77}Aldstadt, \textit{The Azerbaijani Turks}, 187
\textsuperscript{78}Goltz, \textit{Azerbaijan Diary}, 365
\textsuperscript{79}Surat was extradited back to Azerbaijan in 1997, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but was eventually pardoned by Ilham Aliyev in 2004. Cornell, “Democratization Falters”,119. De Waal, \textit{Black Garden}, 263
Ganja affair means the end of rule of law in Azerbaijan. Power is no longer achieved through political parties (and the democratic process) but by creating armed groups.\textsuperscript{80}

**Autocratic Revival**

But national leader Heydar Aliyev’s returning to power in 1993 marked a turning point in the situation… It was Heydar Aliyev’s salvation mission that allowed to preserve the state independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The national leader’s tenure as president from 1993 to 2003 went down in Azerbaijan’s history as a period of fundamental reforms.- Official History of Azerbaijan. Website of the President of Azerbaijan\textsuperscript{61}

The speed and scope with which Haydar Aliyev was able to reestablish and legitimize his rule of Azerbaijan is remarkable, yet despite his voracious capacity to rebuild clientelistic networks and harness international support for his regime, it was extraneous factors which played the largest role in his consolidation of power. First however the incredible challenges which Aliyev faced when he returned to power should be referenced, as his ascent was by no means assured even when he took over the presidency in June of 1993. Both the political instability and economic hardships which had plagued the Popular Front remained significant hurdles, and reemerging ethnic divisions in Azerbaijani society threatened to tear the country in half.

Aliyev’s first steps upon subsuming power was to differentiate himself from the Popular Front government which had preceded him, and to emphasize himself as a familiar figure to Azerbaijanis. This began the very night he assumed control, as state television channels began broadcasting both his recent parliamentary speeches, but also footage which celebrated his leadership in the 1970’s and 80’s.\textsuperscript{82} Despite the legacy of his Soviet ties, Aliyev had not been an unpopular leader, and crucial to his reestablishment was reminding people that under his rule Azerbaijan had been a stable society in which ethnic fractionalization and devastating conflict

\textsuperscript{80}Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 390
\textsuperscript{81}“Official History of Azerbaijan”. Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan. 4
\textsuperscript{82}Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 388
had not been a part of daily life. Important in this effort however was the need to separate Aliyev’s legitimacy as a national leader from Russian influence. The notion that Aliyev’s return meant a return to Russian subservience was not an uncommon perspective, and thwarting this narrative was clearly a central component of Aliyev’s policy plan. This policy is most clearly evident in his economic reforms, and specifically his instrumentalization of Azerbaijan’s most valuable resource: oil. While Russian gas company Lukoil was allowed a 10% stake in the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), far greater shares were given to Western companies such as BP and Amoco.83 This decision falls in line with Aliyev’s desire to “turn to the West” in an effort to disassociate with Russia, and to prevent the stationing of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh, which was completely under Armenian control.84

Domestically, Aliyev was also faced with the difficult task of consolidating the fractured ethnic groups of Azerbaijan into a comprehensive national identity so as to avoid a national implosion. Thus far this paper has presented a diametric image of Azerbaijani ethnic identity, with the positions of pan-Turkic, Euro-skeptic, and Islamic nationalists juxtaposed with Progressive, Euro-integrated, independence favoring Azerbaijani nationalists. While this remains a useful framework for conceptualizing the deep divide in Azerbaijani nationalism, it is a simplification of what was actually an ethnic community populated with a variety of different groups each with their own perspectives on the national issue falling within a sliding scale between the two diametrically opposed sides. Each of these groups, including Bakiners, Ganjiners, Nakhichevaners, Shekiners, and also non Azerbaijani ethnic groups such as Kurds, Tats, and Talyshs, and the native Armenian diaspora population known as Yeraz, had their own unique ethnic identities defined by unique diacritical factors, making consolidation into one national identity a difficult prospect.85 It was these diacritical factors which constituted one of the

83De Waal, *Black Garden*, 264
84Ibid, 265
85Diacritical- Features of identity which are unsubstantiated and incidental, but can unpredictably be used as a symbol for a collective group or ethnic identity.
significant challenges to the Popular Front government, as its monoethnic Nakhichevan makeup both alienated non-represented ethnic groups, and gave the regime a pan-Turkic identity inherent in its Nakichevian background and not representative of the desires of the Euro-integrated population in Baku and other cities. 86 With such a marginal representation in the government, it is not surprising that many Azerbaijani looked longingly back on the clientelistic Soviet model of governance, in which sub-ethnic groups could have their needs addressed through direct systems of patronage.87

Aliyev was well aware of the danger which the ethnic divisions in the country meant for the state’s survival, and he had learned the lesson which had consumed the previous government. Aliyev faced the same challenge that the Popular Front had; he lacked allies in other regions which were necessary to control the state and legitimize the government. To solve this issue, Aliyev resorted to the only strategy which had seen success in the past: he reinstituted a clientelistic system of governance. Admittedly this was less dramatic than the clientelistic system of the Soviet Union, and essentially consisted of Aliyev diversifying his cabinet, elevating officials from Baku, Ganja, and even Nagorno Karabakh to prominent cabinet positions.88 In effect this served both to demonstrate that the new government was not beholden to any one ethnic group, while also establishing patronage systems which directly contributed to state building. As Russian historian John Willerton notes: (Aliyev’s ascendance represented) “[a] solution grounded in the reestablishment of discipline within the party, and state”.89 Thus Aliyev proved himself capable of tackling some of the significant challenges which had capsized the previous democratic government, yet his victory was not complete. Although the volatile

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86 Darieva, Kaschuba, and Sidikiv, “Barth, Yeraz, and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, 304-305, 312
87 Ibid, 310
88 Ibid, 310
89 This quote is actually misrepresented, Willerton made the remark in reference to Aliyevs rise to power in 1969, however it is equally applicable to the situation in 1993/94, as pointed out by Svante Cornell in *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (2015)
ethnic differences had been subdued, the various ethnic groups lacked a consolidated national identity. Azerbaijan was a state of many ethnicities, but there was uncertainty about who Azerbaijani actually were, and without a unifying objective, it seemed like internal divisions would continue to immobilize the capacity of the state for years to come. This would prove to be the greatest challenge of the Aliyev regime, yet the solution which presented itself was not directly the result of any policy introduced by Aliyev, but rather came in the form of the humiliating military defeat at the hands of Armenia in Nagorno Karabakh.

Concentration of Identity

Armenia’s declaration of war in December of 1991 created a crisis which caused the capitulation of the Popular Front government, yet its actions during the course of the conflict sowed the seeds of its own defeat nearly 30 years later. At the time however, Armenia seemed poised for a comprehensive victory, and had significant international support for its role in the conflict. Armenia’s position was predicated on the renewal of genocide against the Armenian diaspora by the Ottoman Turks, who between 1915 and 1916 systematically murdered between 600,000 to 1.5 million ethnic Armenians living inside the Ottoman empire.90 The cultural similarities and friendly relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey made Azerbaijan the natural heirs of the Turkic mission to eliminate the Armenian population. Following the failure of the 1988 referendum to bring Nagorno Karabakh under the auspices of Armenia, and the subsequent escalation of violence in the region, Armenian forces advanced into Nagorno Karabakh beginning in early 1992, citing the need to protect ethnic Armenians from Turkic aggression. Taking advantage of the political chaos which had engulfed Baku at the time, Armenian forces made massive territorial gains without encountering particularly stiff resistance through the autumn of 1993.91 Given that some estimates say that the modern ethnic composition of Nagorno Karabakh is around 95% Armenian, there seems to be significant

91 Cornell, Azerbaijan Since Independence, 87
evidence that Armenia was justified in its invasion and desire to control the region.\textsuperscript{92} However Armenia’s expansionist aims made this point moot; by the summer of 1993 Armenia had advanced into Azerbaijani sovereign and uncontested territory, seriously degrading the legitimacy of their argument that the conflict was a defensive war for Armenia, a narrative which until then had garnered support from the United States and most of Europe. \textsuperscript{93}

Armenia’s capture of the southwestern regions of Azerbaijan which surrounds Nagorno Karabakh changed both the tide and the narrative of the conflict. The cities of Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Jebrail were all predominantly Azerbaijani cities which sat on the country’s southern border with Iran, however by late August 1993 all were controlled by Armenian forces, and Azerbaijan was overwhelmed by a refugee crisis which saw nearly 700,000 Azerbaijani flee east.\textsuperscript{94} The effects of this mass migration were not quick to dissipate, it was estimated that in 2009 Azerbaijan had the largest population percentage of refugees anywhere on Earth, with 1 in 10 people considered a “displaced person”. \textsuperscript{95} While the international community was sympathetic to Armenia’s desire to protect its ethnic population especially in the context of genocidal history, the forced removal of 700,000 people for the protection of Nagorno Karabakh’s Armenian population of 140,000 went too far.\textsuperscript{96} This led to an international softening towards Azerbaijan, and in early 1994 Aliyev successfully guaranteed Azerbaijan’s acceptance into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Utilizing this newfound international legitimacy, Aliyev was able to leverage the support of international actors, most substantially Russia, and with the help of Moscow a ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was implemented on May 16th 1994.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{93}Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 90-91
\textsuperscript{94}Ibid 88
\textsuperscript{95}Ibid 128
\textsuperscript{96}Ibid 90
\textsuperscript{97}Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 89
The ceasefire allowed Armenia to keep control of the regions in Nagorno Karabakh which it had managed to capture, including the city of Susha, however the uncontested Azerbaijani territory which had been seized was returned. It also established a demilitarized zone between the loosely defined borders of the two states. However, unlike the DMZ in Korea which stretches several kilometers, in some parts of Nagorno Karabakh the line which separated the two countries’ hostile armed forces was less than 100 feet. Thus even before the renewal of the conflict in 2020, small isolated instances of violence were not uncommon, with a 4 day significant escalation occurring in 2016. Despite the official ceasefire, from the start of 2015 to the beginning of 2020 alone over 200 service members were killed on each side.

The ceasefire of 1994 marked a crucial turning point both in the conflict and in the consolidation of national identity in Azerbaijan. Armenia’s comprehensive military victory gave the country control over Nagorno Karabakh, but also solidified that country’s position as the national enemy of Azerbaijan, and nothing brings people together like a common enemy. Prior to 1993, many people in Azerbaijan were disconnected from the conflict. Particularly in Baku, support for the war was low as it was widely known that by that point Nagorno Karabakh was predominantly ethnically Armenian, and Azerbaijan’s claim to the territory was predicated on historic cultural ties. To people who wanted a return to a non-chaotic normal life, the status of a faraway place with a distant connection was not of paramount importance. However as the Armenian claim of fighting a defensive war was gradually proved false, and coupled with the humiliating ease with which the Armenian forces were able to penetrate and defeat the Azeri army leading to a flood of refugees who began to overwhelm civil society in Baku, gradual support for the state and Aliyev’s presidency began to emerge in Azerbaijan society, and transcended the ethnic barriers which had divided Azerbaijan’s society for its entire history.

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99 This does not include the people killed in the 2016 escalation. Ibid
100 Cornell, “Democratization Falters”, 125
101 Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, 90-93
The narrative that Armenia’s captured territories in Nagorno Karabakh constituted illegally occupied territory gained significant credence, especially as the credibility of Armenia’s narrative evaporated. It could therefore be speculated that had Armenia constrained its military operations to within the borders of Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijan might have capitulated to both domestic and international pressure to end the war. Instead the Nagorno Karabakh conflict accelerated the concentration of Azerbaijani national identity, and provided Azerbaijani nationalists with an agenda and an enemy.

Thus by the summer of 1994, Azerbaijani public opinion had collectively swung in favor of conflict with Armenia in the face of national humiliation, and Haydar Aliyev was quick to capitalize. While he was consolidating his power in the government by redrafting a constitution in 1995 which severely enhanced presidential power, Aliyev also took great steps to strengthen his power and support in the eyes of the Azerbaijani people. Aliyev hoped to establish a lasting support base utilizing his perceived role as a benevolent autocrat who had saved the nation from destruction. With the economic and political situation in Baku somewhat stabilized, Aliyev desperately needed another crisis from which he could save Azerbaijan and establish his further legitimacy as the only man capable of ruling the country. Correcting the national humiliation imparted on the country by Armenia was just the crisis needed. Thus despite several internationally organized peace negotiations, progress was limited, and a 2001 settlement which nearly resolved the situation collapsed under pressure from Azerbaijan. Haydar Aliyev would settle for victory, nothing else.

This narrative was abruptly halted however by his death in 2003 from cardiac arrest, collapsing on stage while giving a national address and dying several weeks later. While questions of succession were heated, especially within Aliyev’s New Azerbaijan party,

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102 Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 399
103 De Waal, *Black Garden*, 278
104 Ibid, 285
eventually it was his son Ilham Aliyev who took over as the nation’s president after a hastily organized election in October of 2003.\textsuperscript{105} According to the OSCE, the young Aliyev would have likely won in a fair election, however election reviewers stated that the election heavily favored the ruling party, and Ilham’s 76.8% of the vote was achieved through ballot stuffing and voter intimidation tactics.\textsuperscript{106} It seems that even people within the party did not trust Ilham to carry the same gravitas as his father, and worried that he would not capitalize on his father’s fame as the national savior, as Ilham lacked both an established base of support and a concrete policy plan.\textsuperscript{107} Ilham would prove in time not just to be the equal of his father in these issues, but to totally surpass him.

Ilham Aliyev immediately struck an even harsher line on the issue of Nagorno Karabakh, stating that it was his mission to bring about the “liberation” of the lost territories.\textsuperscript{108} While this only deepened the hostile relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it also served to unify the Azerbaijani populace around their new leader. By making the national humiliation the central issue of his presidency, and therefore the central issue facing all of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev has both successfully taken up the role of standard bearer of Azerbaijani national identity from his father and created unified national support for the conflict, and by extension, his presidency.

The rallying cry which has effectively derived popular support and guided the regime is a simple one.

\textbf{“Karabakh is Azerbaijan!”}

Aliyev’s methodology, which has given him the stewardship of Azerbaijani national identity, consists of three components. First is the cultural and historic ties which the regime continues to promote that tie Azerbaijan’s Turkic identity to Nagorno Karabakh, establishing it as a historically Turkic enclave. The most obvious attempts at this have been propaganda which

\textsuperscript{105}Ibid, 285
\textsuperscript{106}Ibid, 286
\textsuperscript{107}Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 110
\textsuperscript{108}De Waal, \textit{Black Garden}, 288
celebrates historical figures and traditions that directly tie Azerbaijan to Nagorno Karabakh, and specifically Susha, which is alleged to be the historic cultural capital of the entire Turkic world. Of particular value in these efforts has been the abundant use of social media by the state, which allows it to reach a wider audience with its messaging. Nearly 50% of Azerbaijan’s population used social media in 2020, making it a particularly useful vessel for the state to use in its promotion of its war aims. Posts like those in Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 are meant to pointedly remind Azerbaijani nationals of where they come from and what the lost territory means to the nation, presenting it as a significant cultural, historical, and material loss. Publicizing instances of Armenia’s destructive capability such as figure 7 is meant both to generate anger towards the occupiers, and create fear that renewals of Armenian aggression could lead to further damage closer to home. This in turn serves to situate Aliyev’s government as the gatekeepers of Azerbaijani nationalism, since this message of loss is meant to resonate with not only the people native to the territory which was seized, but also to the wider Azerbaijani population. A good Azerbaijani nationalist is one who is angered and humiliated by the loss of these cultural lands, and wholeheartedly supports the government’s agenda to return it and prevent further damage.

The second component which reinforces Azerbaijan’s righteous role in the conflict and inherently generates support for the government’s hawkish policies is the rhetoric of “occupation” and “liberation” in reference to Armenia’s control of Nagorno Karabakh. In every public appearance in which Nagorno Karabakh is referenced (quite frequently), Aliyev has pounded home the narrative that Nagorno Karabakh is an illegally occupied territory, and that

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109 This claim has been highly politicized, and given the ambiguous nature of Azerbaijani national identity is subject to debate. While Azerbaijani officials claim that the ancient structures which dot Susha’s landscape are historical Azeri cultural sites, there are also a number of old Christian churches in the city which speak to a more integrated or even Armenian dominant society. More credible is Susha’s claim to be the “cradle of Azerbaijani music”, as several prominent Azerbaijani musicians were born in the city such as Jabbar Garyaghdiglu, and Gurban Pirimov. Ruslan Rehimov, “Shusha, More than Just a City for Azerbaijanis.” Anadolu Agency, November 8, 2020.
Azerbaijan must right this historic injustice if the nation is to be a “normal country”. During the 2018 “Day of National Solidarity” speech Aliyev stated:

We are faced with such a fateful task as the liberation of our lands occupied as a result of Armenian military aggression. Azerbaijan pursues a consistent and purposeful policy towards restoring its violated territorial integrity.

This statement is eerily similar to one made by Haydar Aliyev at a Euro-Atlantic NATO partnership council in 1999:

As you know, the Republic of Azerbaijan was subjected to an aggression from the Republic of Armenia, As a result of this aggression twenty percent of territories of our republic have been occupied by Armenian military forces, more than one million of our citizens have been ousted from their native lands and live in refugee camps under the hardest circumstances.

By emphasizing the alleged illegal nature of Armenia’s control of the territory, and amalgamating this afront with the forced seizure of sovereign Azerbaijani territory, Aliyev established a legitimate claim on Nagorno Karabakh in the eyes of the Azerbaijani people, and created a national agenda predicated on correcting this historic injustice. This was especially evident following the breakout of conflict in September of 2020, which Aliyev dubbed “The Patriotic War”. While the initial public support for the conflict was not overwhelming, due in part to the lightning speed at which the war broke out, it did not take long for the Azerbaijani people to begin expressing significant support for the war and their leader. The support was bolstered due to messages of victory which were posted on Twitter almost daily as Azerbaijani forces made significant progress into Nagorno Karabakh, “liberating” cities daily (see Figures 8 and 9). Azerbaijani nationalists were constantly reminded that they were supporting the righteous side, as liberation was cast in the light of national justice.

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110 Cornell, “Democratization Falters”, 112
The final component which characterizes Azerbaijani nationalism and Aliev's control over that identity is the deliberate characterization of Armenian nationalists as dangerous enemies of Azerbaijan, and the emphasis of violence and resistance towards them. Despite frequent and loud protestations to the international community that Azerbaijan actively desires a peaceful resolution to the conflict, instances of violence between the two countries have frequently been celebrated by Azerbaijan's government, and Aliyev has made it clear in his rhetoric that violence towards Armenians is a patriotic action. This is best shown by an incident which occurred in 2004 during a NATO joint exercise program in Buda Hungary which involved Armenia and Azerbaijan. While details have been conflated by both sides national media, essentially Azeri Lieutenant Ramil Safarov entered the barracks of his Armenian counterpart one night and brutally murdered him with an axe, nearly decapitating his sleeping victim.\textsuperscript{114} While the Hungarian court gave him a life sentence in 2006, he was eventually extradited back to Azerbaijan in 2012, where Aliyev personally greeted him as a national hero, and his image and story were shown in a patriotic light in the national media.\textsuperscript{115} Elmira Suleymanova, Azerbaijan's Commissioner for Human Rights was quoted in 2013 saying: “Ramil Safarov should become an example of patriotism for the Azerbaijani youth”.\textsuperscript{116} With Safarov as one example, it would seem that the younger generations of Azerbaijani are more susceptible to this hostile nationalism.

Inherent in this messaging is that Armenia is getting its just deserves for its aggressive actions historically against Azerbaijan. This particular point was one hammered home by Aliyev in his victory address to the nation on November 10th 2020 after the signing of a ceasefire deal which ended the “Patriotic War”. In reference to the actual signing of the treaty, Aliyev said:

\begin{quote}
I think that everyone should be held accountable for what they do…. Respect themselves and their country. [Armenian Prime Minister] Pashinyan will sign it one way or another. We have forced him to do that. But he will sign it in a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114}De Waal, \textit{Black Garden}, 304
\textsuperscript{115}Ibid, 305
\textsuperscript{116}“Ramil Safarov is the National Hero of Azerbaijan” Safarov.org, n.d.
confined place, in a locked-up room, far from the cameras, in a cowardly and treacherous manner. He is not signing it of his own free will. He is signing it under pressure by the iron fist!\textsuperscript{117}

The insinuation is clearly that Armenia and Pashinyan himself were the responsible party for the conflict, and that now that country must pay for its mistakes. Aliyev goes on to make it clear why Armenia was defeated so handily: “We have become even more united, even more robust, we said ‘enough is enough’, we will not tolerate this occupation any longer. We said that we would drive the enemy out of our lands!”\textsuperscript{118} According to Aliyev the victory was not just to the benefit of those people who were driven from their ancestral lands by Armenians, but for all Azerbaijan who had suffered under the weight of national humiliation for three decades. Bringing those Azerbaijani who have felt the harshest impact of the conflict is not just the correction of a historical misdeed, but a core component of Azerbaijani state identity (See Figures 10 and 11). For Karabakh to be Azerbaijan, all of Azerbaijan needed to be unified behind Karabakh, and Ilham Aliyev.

\textbf{Public Perception and the People of Karabakh}

Nationalism is of course not one sided; for Aliyev to be a successful standard bearer of national identity the people must accept his narrative and follow his lead. To what degree has he been successful? Given the openly authoritarian nature of Aliyev’s Azerbaijan, the answer to this question is uncertain. I hope that future researchers will be able to explore this question fully, however with the current available resources it is nearly impossible to make a substantive conclusion. Azerbaijan is currently one of the most repressive countries in the world, and freedom of expression is nearly nonexistent. Instrumental in this has been Azerbaijan’s lack of a free press in which alternate narratives could arise; in 2009 Azerbaijan ranked 150th out of 173 countries in press freedom, in 2021 it ranked 167th.\textsuperscript{119} Journalists and public protestors are

\textsuperscript{117}“Ilham Aliyev Addressed the Nation”. Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan. 10 November, 2020
\textsuperscript{118}Ibid
\textsuperscript{119}Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 119
frequently imprisoned by the regime for speaking out, and thus the President lacks any serious legitimate opposition through which dissent could concentrate.\textsuperscript{120}

Despite the openly Authoritarian nature of the government, there is evidence that a significant proportion of the population supports Aliyev and his goals. Election results in Azerbaijan are not trusted as legitimate figures of support, with OSCE calling the most recent 2018 election not free or fair, stating that there was: "widespread disregard for mandatory procedures, a lack of transparency, and numerous serious irregularities, including ballot box stuffing".\textsuperscript{121} Aliyev allegedly won 87\% of the vote with 75\% turnout. While these numbers are undoubtedly inflated, Aliyev’s victory is probably not a hoax. Independent studies into previous elections have shown that while Aliyev’s reported votes in the elections of 2008 and 2013 were subject to similar “irregularities”, the number of votes cast for Aliyev still gave him the majority needed for victory, but far lower than the respective 89\% and 84\% reported in those years.\textsuperscript{122}

While it could be assumed that many of Aliyev’s supporters have similar feelings on the issue of Nagorno Karabakh, it should be noted that there are other reasons which an Azerbaijani citizen might support Aliyev’s rule. Aliyev has been remarkably successful at balancing international relations, and has made Azerbaijan’s independence an issue of significant importance. Until 2020, Azerbaijan balanced its relationship between the three largest international powers in the region: Turkey, Russia, and the United States. While Aliyev has friendly relationships with each country, he has also managed to avoid falling under the influence of any one side, ensuring that both the state and his government are independent and uninfluenced by foreign sway. Given Azerbaijan’s history with colonialism and foreign rule, the perception of independence is crucial to Aliyev’s legitimacy. One interesting example of this

\textsuperscript{120}Synovitz. "Nagorno-Karabakh War Transforms Legacy."
\textsuperscript{121}Nailia Bagirova, and Margarita Antidze. "Azeri President's Supporters Heckle as Observers Declare Election Unfair." Reuters. April 12, 2018.
\textsuperscript{122}Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 123
independent drive was Aliyev’s vocal support for the various “colored revolutions” which occurred in many post-Soviet countries, in which massive protests dislodged the various Soviet era leaders from their continued control of the country, such as Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. This is particularly interesting since Aliyev himself comes from a similar background, but by supporting the revolutions he attempted to demonstrate his break with both the past and political reliance on Russia.

The more tangible reason for popular support of Aliyev is the economic boom which he has overseen during the course of his presidency. Oil deals signed by Haydar Aliyev finally came to fruition in 2006 when the BTC pipeline made Azerbaijan one of the major oil suppliers for Europe, and created a massive economic spike. From 2005 to 2008 Azerbaijan’s national GDP rose from $1.3 billion to $35 billion, making it the world’s fastest growing economy at the time, and far outpacing any other post-Soviet country. At the same time, both the military and economic capability gap between Armenia and Azerbaijan slowly widened, with the modern GDP gap being unbreachable for Armenia. This was clearly evident during the 2020 war, in which Azerbaijani troops were better trained, equipped, and more lethal than the Armenian forces (while also committing substantially more war crimes). Thus Aliyev’s legitimacy is due in part to the unprecedented economic growth which has significantly raised standards of living, especially compared to that of the enemy Armenia. This level of stability is exactly what Azerbaijani desired when the Soviet Union collapsed, and despite undemocratic and repressive methods, Aliyev has delivered on this desire.

Finally, I would like to have a brief discussion of the people actually living in Nagorno Karabakh and their perception of their own national identity. Since 1988 Nagorno Karabakh has

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123 Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, 115
124 De Waal, *Black Garden*, 292
125 Armenia’s 2021 GDP was $12.65 billion compared to Azerbaijan’s $42.5 billion
undergone a highly militarized transformation, and thus even during the long ceasefire which “froze” the conflict for 30 years, the people living in Nagorno Karabakh remained in a status of conflict. In their article “Who is Entitled to ‘Earn Sovereignty’? Legitimacy and Regime Support in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh” Elkie Berg and Martin Molder point out that a political community requires uncontested territory, and that the pervasive conflict conditions in Nagorno Karabakh have made the internal issue of self-determination impossible because of the uncertain relationship the region has with Azerbaijan and Armenia.\textsuperscript{127} As the objects of a national conflict, the people inside of Nagorno Karabakh have found themselves isolated from the political and national communities of the two states, with all aspects of their economic and social life being directly tied to the conflict. While the predominantly ethnic Armenian population had relied on Armenia for protection and security, the threat posed by Azerbaijan meant that people could not safely assume that they had been fully integrated into Armenia. The possibility of a rapid change in authority meant that any progress made at consolidating a political and national identity was always tenuous. When that change did occur in the fall of 2020, it left people unsure of what their identity was and what would happen next.\textsuperscript{128}

This dynamic has historically resulted in distrust of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, as the people living in Nagorno Karabakh feel that they have been made tools of the various governments in the pursuit of their own national goals. An Azerbaijani refugee from Nagorno Karabakh fleeing his destroyed home in 1994 said in an interview: “We had little before, but now nothing… but the clothes on our backs”.\textsuperscript{129} The overwhelming sentiment of those Azeri who were forced to leave was that they had been sold out by Baku as a political ploy, and this touches at the most important aspect of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Nagorno Karabakh is a national conflict, not an ethnic one. Nagorno Karabakh is not a conflict which is the result of an

\textsuperscript{127}Berg and Molder “Sovereignty” 532-534  
\textsuperscript{128}Ghosts of Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan’s Tense Ceasefire. YouTube, 2021.  
\textsuperscript{129}Goltz, Azerbaijan Diary, 400
ancient historical rivalry between two groups (Armenians and Turks), but has its modern roots in political and socioeconomic divisions which were revived when Russian power in the territory was decreasing and national movements began to emerge. National identity is as much about “who one is” as it is about “who one is not,” and it is unsurprising that Armenians and Azerbaijani became the nationalist “other” group, as resistance and conflict towards that “other” became a natural part in the development of secular national identity. Essentially neither group trusted the other to guarantee their security, which predicted the rise of nationalism and the resulting conflict, despite the two groups sharing a history of living side by side for hundreds of years. Thus the desire of each group for absolute security in the face of rising nationalism has resulted in mutual insecurity between the two groups. The presence of a polarizing “other” group is an instrumental tool in the hands of a Populist Authoritarian leader such as Aliyev, hence why his co-optation of the war as the core issue of Azerbaijan’s national movement has been so successful.

Conclusion

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh offers a tragic yet unique opportunity to delve into questions of sovereignty, identity, and the future of democracy in the Post-Soviet space and beyond. The notion that Nagorno Karabakh represented a “frozen conflict” is wholly inaccurate, as even when shots were not being fired, the conflict had a substantial presence in both the lives of those directly experiencing it, and in the national discourses and agendas of the states involved. This paper goes so far as to argue that it was this very conflict which was supposedly frozen and unresolvable which has led to the rise of an entrenched Authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan; in which the national humiliation suffered at the hands of the Armenians in the first war in Nagorno Karabakh is regularly deployed as a symbol of legitimation for the nations saviors: the Aliyev family. A conflict which can so comprehensively capture and project the identity of a nation cannot be called frozen.
This conflict and the character of Aliyev’s current regime offer further questions for those interested in the future of democracy as both a system of government and as a set of institutions in the post-Soviet space. While Aliyev’s regime is openly and unapologetically Authoritarian, it retains some democratic institutions and functions, even if they are not legitimate and functional. The presence of elections and oppositional parties means that Aliyev is not wholly against democracy, but he favors a democracy in which he always wins. This of course begs the question: how long will Aliyev stay in power and how will a power transition be accomplished? It should be noted that democratic transitions from authoritarian rule have happened in recent history, in which a liberal minded Autocrat presides over the creation of a middle class and further social and economic development, which eventually results in more liberal policies.\textsuperscript{130} This was certainly the model which Haydar Aliyev publicly expressed as his plan for Azerbaijan, with the notion that he would oversee the stabilization of the country as only he could, and would eventually cede to a democratic regime when it was clear the transition would not tear the state apart, as happened in 1993. In a speech made to the United States Congress in 1997 Aliyev said:

Some people think we should be able to establish democracy in a short time, but that's impossible. Azerbaijan is a young nation and democracy is a new concept. The U.S. has been advancing on the path of democracy for a long time - more than 200 years. You've achieved a lot, but you're still working on it. Democracy is not an apple you buy at the market and bring back home.\textsuperscript{131}

Ilham Aliyev has taken a significantly stronger hold of the country than his father ever managed, and the prevailing conflict with Armenia in which no end is in sight has only further entrenched his autocratic position. While Azerbaijan achieved a concrete victory in the 2020 war

\textsuperscript{130} This has generally been most successful in Southeast Asia. Cornell, \textit{Azerbaijan Since Independence}, 123
\textsuperscript{131}Haydar Aliyev, "Open Forum sponsored by the US-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC)”. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. July 30 1997
with Armenia and reclaimed much of its lost territory, the conflict is not resolved. In fact since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reports have circulated that the Azerbaijani armed forces have pushed further into Armenian controlled territory, and captured the city of Fahrduk in Nagorno Karabakh, having cut off the power for citizens living in freezing winter conditions for several days.\textsuperscript{132} Since the war has become the key to Aliyev’s legitimacy in Azerbaijan, it can be speculated that Aliyev’s policy towards the war going forward is indicative of his plans for the future of Azerbaijan. If the conflict continues and remains a significant aspect in Azerbaijan’s political discourse, it could be that Aliyev desires to remain in power well into the future, with the war playing a central role in his legitimacy. So long as the war remains a crucial component in his legitimacy, the potential for a significant and terrible escalation remains a possibility.

\textsuperscript{132}“Armenia, Azerbaijan Leaders to Hold Talks amid Renewed Tensions.” Al Jazeera, March 31, 2022.
Image Appendix
The traditional religious classes try to scale the wall the old-fashioned way, left, whereas the secular reformers manage to effortlessly approach European culture (lady, center) through learning, right.

Figure 1 (Molla Nasreddin, translation by Christopher Keller)
While the 12-year-old Muslim girl is married off to an older man, left, the 12-year-old Jewish girl attends school.

Figure 2 (Molla Nasreddin, translation by Christopher Keller)
The illustration pokes fun at the long-standing enmity between Armenians and Azeris. The bald man is Azeri and the man with hair Armenian. Apart from this small detail they are more alike than either would care to admit, as is often the case between sworn enemies.
Figure 4 (Azerbaijan Official Twitter)

Historic photo of the great #Azerbaijanji singer #KhanShushinski w/the iconic flower of our #Karabakh- #KhariBuibul which now becomes a symbol of #VictoriusAzerbaijanHeroes! #Azarbaycan #Shusha

Figure 5 (Azerbaijan Official Twitter)

Azerbaijan 🇦🇿 🌻 @Azerbaijan · Sep 17, 2019
Founder of #Azerbaijan/i written music & author of 1st opera in the East, Uzeyir #Hajibayov was born on this day in 1885 in #Shusha city of 🇦🇿. He created a new musical genre, merging traditional 🇦🇿 #music & European classical opera. His traditions continue today & enrich 🌍 music.
Cradle of our #Karabakh, cultural capital of #Azerbaijan - #Shusha city has been declared Cultural capital of the Turkic World for 2023 at a meeting of the Permanent Council of Ministers of Culture of @turksoyorg member states held in Bursa, #Türkiye.

Figure 6 (Azerbaijan Official Twitter)
Bread Museum in the #occupied city of #Aghdam was one of the rare museums & considered second in 🌍 & first of USSR. Archaeological finds of grain were unique exhibits in the museum. Bread Museum was destroyed by the #Armenia/n armed forces after occupation. #CulturalHeritage
Ilham Aliyev @presidentaz · Oct 28, 2020
Victorious Armed Forces of Azerbaijan have liberated from occupation Birinji Agali, Ikinji Agali, Uchunju Agali and Zerneli villages of Zengilan, Mandili village of Fuzuli, Gazanzemi, Khanabulag, Jullu, Gushchular and Garaaghaj villages of Jabrayil,

Show this thread

Azerbaijan Retweeted
Ilham Aliyev @presidentaz · Oct 28, 2020
Giyasl, Edilje and Giljjan villages of Gubadlii. Long live Azerbaijan’s Armed Forces! Karabakh is Azerbaijan!

Show this thread

Azerbaijan Retweeted
Ilham Aliyev @presidentaz · Oct 26, 2020
Victorious Armed Forces of Azerbaijan have liberated from occupation Birinci Alibeyli, Ikinci Alibeyli, Reben and Yenikend villages of Zengilan, Govshudlu, Sofulu, Dag Mashanli, Kurdler, Hovuslu and Chelebiler villages of Jabrayil,

Show this thread

Figure 8 (Official Twitter of Ilham Aliyev)
8 may, 1992-ci ilda işğal olunan #Qarabağlın gözü, #Şuşamız, 2020-ci ilin noyabr ayının 8-da azad edildi!
Qürurumuzun içimize sighmadiğı bu tarixi anları bize baxış etdiyiniz üçün Sizə minnətdarıq, cənab Ali Baş Komandan və onun rəhbərlək etdiyi 🇦🇿 Ordusu!

#QarabağAzerbaycandır!

Figure 9 (Official Twitter of Azerbaijan)
TODAY THE PEOPLE OF AZERBAIJAN AND ITS GOVERNMENT UNEQUIVOCALLY STAND GUARD OVER THE NATIONAL INTERESTS.

As President, I will defend the national values and our state independence to the very end.
The powerful Azerbaijan of today is capable of handling every undertaking. There is a political will and economic prowess, our people are mobilized, and national solidarity is there.

We are rightfully proud of being the citizens of a victorious state. We are proud of our army, people, and youth that brought us this joy, and we will always take pride in them. We have returned to Karabakh and East Zangezur and will live here eternally on our historical lands.

Figure 11 (Official Twitter of Ilham Aliyev)
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Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan https://president.az/en


