

NAGORNO-KARABAKH PROBLEM: CLAIMS, COUNTERCLAIMS AND IMPASSE

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Abstract

Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) problem, inherited from the Soviet Union, has caused huge political, economic and social devastations to both independent Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1991. Though the dispute over the ownership of the NK region became known with a long bloody war between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the end of the 1980s, the problem itself goes as far back as in the 19th century and closely linked to many other territorial issues in the Caucasus region. One of the purposes of the Soviet Nationalities policies, alongside creating a homogenous Soviet socialist society, was to end nationalistic antagonisms and border disputes among the nationals of the USSR. Let alone eradicating those ethnic lines, Soviet System with its nationalities and modernization policies became main sources of conflicts in the Union in the long term. The NK issue represented one of the stark examples of it. As one would expect, when Gorbachev initiated glasnost and perestroika policies to save the crumbling Soviet state, they became main catalysts to re-ignite the NK issue. Finally, because of Gorbachev's and overall Soviet systems' inability and unwillingness to apply the Constitution, the NK region was separated from Azerbaijan and de facto joined to Armenia by force. The reason for inception of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the end of the 1980s was the Armenian claims that Azerbaijan had for decades left the Armenians in Azerbaijan including within the NK region deliberately

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underdeveloped in their economic, social and cultural progressions. This would then have caused, from the Armenian point of view, the disappearance of Armenian people from their own lands. However, these Armenian views on the NK region show a number of discrepancies when real reasons and scales of territorial, economic and demographic changes in the region are considered.

Key Words: *Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Caucasus, Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev*

INTRODUCTION

The break up of the Soviet Union has stimulated a large number of concern over national identities, state borders and then political and economic stability within almost any newly independent states of the former Soviet territories. Most cases have shown that those concerns have resulted in intra-communal violence and inter-state military conflicts. Azerbaijan is one of those states, which has experienced the same problems caused by the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) dispute with the weakening and later the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As known from the examples of the dissolution of the empires in the past, emergence of new independent states often led to the rise of old, forgotten or suppressed political, economic, cultural and territorial claims among intra-state communities and inter-state relations.¹ The NK region, an Armenian populated enclave within the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan, has remained a basic reason for an intra-state communal dispute during the late Soviet period and an inter-state regional conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia since they have both gained their independence in 1991. More than this, the dispute has not only been a problem between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it has also turned into a means to influence newly emerged geopolitical region of the Southern Caucasus. This new region is not an isolated territory, but it has strong links, such as ethnic, cultural, religious similarities and geographic proximity, with the other surrounding regions of the Northern Caucasus, the Russian Federation, the Caspian Basin and Central Asia, Middle East and Turkey

The basic argument between these two communities in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, is about who is going to control the Armenian populated NK autonomous region. Both communities and states claim that this land is their own historical patrimony, and should be in their state borders. Azerbaijan and Armenia, as the

¹ Sue Davis & Steven O. Sabol, "The Importance of Being Ethnic: Minorities in Post-Soviet States-The Case of Russians in Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.26, No.3, 1998, p.475; Rogers Brubaker, "Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples: Historical and Comparative Perspectives," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.18, No.2, April 1995, pp.189-218

two former Soviet Republics (the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic - AzSSR and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic - ArSSR), fought over the NK region from 1987 to 1994 in the forms of first communal clashes and then full scale of war. Despite the fact that both states agreed on a cease-fire on the conflict in May 1994, the outcomes of the war such as political turmoil, territorial losses and mass displacements, have continued to be the most important negative psychological and material results for Azerbaijan for more than a decade. As a result of the war over the NK region with Armenia, Azerbaijan has lost the entire NK region and 7 more surrounding districts of Lachin, Kelbajar, Agdam, Gabrail, Fizuli, Khubadly and Zangilan to Armenia. All these occupations of the Azerbaijani territories have created about a million displaced Azerbaijanis who have been living in miserable conditions in Azerbaijan since the early 1990s. Armenia, though not the same scale, has had to accept displaced Armenians left Azerbaijan during the course of the conflict. The NK dispute has been tried to be resolved through a number of organizational (Minsk group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe - OSCE) and state level initiatives (e.g. American and French governments). Yet, despite a number of initiatives, conferences and high-level meetings, resolution of the NK dispute has stalled particularly on what the final status of the region would be. As the sides could not agree on the status issue, the other problems, such as the return of the displaced people and withdrawal of the Armenian troops from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, have remained uncertain.

The NK dispute as the subject matter of this study obviously represents a number of internal, regional and international dimensions in strategic, economic and societal terms. There is no doubt that role of the Minsk Group of the OSCE, Russian, Turkish and American policies in the region and the energy pipelines from Caspian Region via the South Caucasus region are of great relevance to development course of the NK dispute since early 1990s. As this study aims at delving into the NK problem within the frameworks of the claims and counterclaims of Azerbaijani and Armenian sides on the issue, examination of the rest of the aspects of the dispute, mentioned above, is obviously impossible within the limited boundaries of this work. The reason for limiting the NK issue within such a narrow discussion is because, although many have been concentrated on the conditions of peace and talked about various aspects of the resolution of the problem, they have often missed, and even forgotten, the ultimate point of how and why this conflict occurred. Hence, the key objective of this research is both to shed new lights on the subject and to remind the people who are either policy makers or researchers on the NK issue of the past claims of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed region. In parallel to the objective of this study, the research is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with the relevance of the Soviet nationality policy and

Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* within two sub-sections to the development course of the NK problem. In the second part, which is split into 3 sub-sections, respectively examines Azerbaijani and Armenian parties' own views on the territorial division of NK, the economic deprivation and demographic changes on the Armenian people of the region within Azerbaijan.

1. Key Determinant Factors of the NK Conflict

1.1. Soviet Nationality Policy and its Failure

The NK problem was not a new issue for the Soviet Union when it was in the process of establishment in the 1920s. The problem was taken over from the previous ruler, the tsarist Russia, of the entire South Caucasus region. In fact, the Soviet Union was built almost on the territories of the tsarist Russian Empire, which had been described as "the prisonhouse of nations."² As the Soviet Union was the ultimate responsible side for the creation of the NK region and, to a great extent, the formation of national identities in the post-Russian Empire territories in the South Caucasus, this part of the study aims only to overview Soviet nationalities policy and its outcomes.

Marxist-Leninist ideology believed that the true internationalism of socialism would eliminate the national antagonisms that had plagued different peoples in the past. Lenin himself proposed a post-revolutionary compromise based on the maximization of the national, political and cultural autonomy for the nationalities. This was assumed to be a federation dominated by the Communist Parties. The logic of the Soviet Union, for Lenin, should have been based on a federation formed by a voluntary association of the sovereign states on a contractual basis for the achievement of a common purpose.³ In line with this thinking, ethnic nationalities of the former tsarist Empire were subjected to three interrelated political and administrative policy applications by the Bolsheviks on 30 December 1922, at the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and in April 1923, at the Twelfth Congress of the Russian Communist Party: first, the establishment of separate ethno-territorial republics to be based on ethnic unity within a Soviet state such as Ukraine, Belarus, Transcaucasus in Southern Caucasus, and various autonomous regions inside these republics; second, the creation of Communist Party for each republics so as to back up the national-territorial principle; third, the application of *korenizatsiia* (nativization or indigenization) program. The main purpose of *korenizatsiia* policy was cultural and language

² Gregory Gleason, *Federalism and Nationalism: The Struggle for Republican Rights in the USSR*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p.19

³ Stephen Kux, *Soviet Federalism: A Comparative Perspective*, Occasional Paper Series, Institute for East-West Security Studies, 1990, No.18, p.27

development of the nations, and the recruitment of non-Russian cadres into the working class, the trade unions, the state bureaucracy and the Communist Parties.⁴

The establishment of the USSR seemed to have been, as Pipes put it, “a compromise between doctrine and reality: an attempt to reconcile the Bolsheviks strivings for absolute unity and centralisation of all power in the hands of the party, with the recognition of the empirical fact that nationalism did survive the collapse of the old order.”⁵ Even though in theory the Soviet Federation was based on the perception of a shared sovereignty, in practice, however, the centre usurped most of the power and exercised a strict control over the republics. National aspirations were subordinated to the imperatives of socialist construction. The slogan of self-determination remained as a political tool during the period of revolution to get support from the suppressed nationalities of the previous tsarist Empire. In fact, the basic goal of the Soviet nationalities policy was not different from any other similar multiethnic states. The Soviet State first tried to secure its territorial integrity and internal stability by suppressing various nationalities and, especially separatist movements. Second, it saw the process of modernisation in the imposition of a standardised, uniform, centrally sustained culture on all minority groups. Hence the focal point of Soviet nationality policy was to realise the mobilisation of ethnic groups and/or nations to achieve Soviet-type of modernisation, while preserving internal stability in a multinational state harbouring profound ethnic divisions and hostilities.⁶

Although each nationality maintained its own republic and autonomous district having their own national language, culture and cadres in the local administrations due to the policy of nativization during the 1920s, Stalinist revolution in the 1930s did not reconcile itself to the notion of federalism of Lenin, and left little political autonomy to the peripheries. The consolidation of Bolshevik rule over Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia during the period of 1920-21 in the South Caucasus region, already intensified the debate over the structure of the state. The establishment of the Transcaucasian Federation was because of the economic reasons and border disputes among those three republics. Soviet Federal system allowed the central government in Moscow to use the authority over the formation of new subordinate units, internal boundaries, international relations, state security, education and so on. What left for the republics

⁴ George Liber, “Korenizatsiia: Restructuring Soviet Nationality Policy in the 1920s,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.14, No.1, January 1991, p.16

⁵ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union, Communism and Nationalism: 1917-1923*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p.296

⁶ Victor Zaslavsky, “Success and Collapse: Traditional Soviet Nationality Policy, In Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras (Ed.), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.32

were their own constitution, communist party organisations, flags, legal codes and power over light industry.⁷ As a result of Stalinist 'autonomisation' policy, state sovereignties from the independent socialist republics were withdrawn and given only limited autonomous status. In accordance with Stalinist policies, Russian workers and specialists were encouraged to migrate to the less developed regions so as to improve the economy and to educate indigenous peoples because minority nationalism was considered as a threat to the collectivization policy.⁸ In the long term, however, spreading urbanisation, industrialisation and education caused the strengthening of the national identities. The increase of the educational opportunities in the less developed republics led to the emergence of a substantial native intelligentsia, and they saw little reason for responsible positions in their locality to be filled by outsiders. Emerging local political elites started to question their limited control over local appointment and investment decisions. During the Stalinist period, the Soviet state became much more centralised and ruled by force with a unitary ideology. Stalinist nationality and territorial solutions in the system had, therefore, presented a dilemma in the Soviet system that was far from providing a peaceful solution to the nationalities question.

As a result of less control from the centre, during the Khrushchev era, limited political autonomy resulted in the strengthening of local elites. Even in the South Caucasus region and Central Asia, local ethnic mafias gained control of the economy and political patronage system. The main purpose behind the appointment of Aliyev, Shevardnadze and Demirciyan in Azerbaijani, Georgian and Armenian Soviet Republics, respectively, to the posts of Communist Party First Secretaries were to contain nationalism as well as ending the corruption and favouritism.⁹ Yet, the central and local contradictory developments in the Soviet Union (for instance linguistic Russification and assimilation all over the Union) gave rise to a variety of nationalist responses in the 1960s and 70s. Demonstrations of the Crimean Tatars who had been deported by Stalin, Karabakh Armenians' protest being within the AzSSR and Georgian opposition to the removal of Georgian as official language in 1978 can be given as examples of the assertions of the nationalities problems. The Soviet leadership, at the end of the 1980s, would finally admit the fact that they had

⁷ Richard Pipes, (1954), op cit., p.296

⁸ Graham Smith, "Nationalities Policy from Lenin to Gorbachev," in Graham Smith (Ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union*, (London: Longman, 1993), pp.5-7

⁹ Suny, R.G., "Transcaucasia: Cultural Cohesion and Ethnic Revival in a Multiethnic Society," in Lubomyr Hajda & Mark Beissinger (Ed.), *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1990), pp.229-230

underestimated the forces of nationalism and separatism which had remained hidden deep within the Soviet system.¹⁰

As a result, the Soviet Union was in many ways similar to any other empires in a way that it attempted to realise modernisation through economic development program that included communication and interaction, repression and reproduction of cultural practices. All of these then made nationality in the Union much more lucid and nationalism the strongest manifestation of rejected aspirations.¹¹ It is true that on the one hand, the Soviet state did not much to meet the ambitions of established nations, but on the other it made it possible the formation and creation of some nations who represented previously just a clan identity.¹² It was the Soviet rule of encouraging cultural development, introducing mass education and establishing of local native governments and legislative systems that had helped first the formation and then the strengthening Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian national identities in the South Caucasus region. In other words, the objective of creating a 'Soviet man' through the Soviet socialist economic and social development policies led to the emergence and growth of Armenian and Azerbaijani national consciousness and nationalism. As Moscow often used the Soviet federal system for its political benefits, it then made it possible a constant animosity between minorities and dominant nationals. Conflict over the Armenian enclave of the NK region within the AzSSR between Azerbaijanis and Armenians is one of those examples that it has remained one of the most important elements for the growth of both Azerbaijani and Armenian nationalism within the USSR. Therefore, Soviet system and its policies did not help demolish the barriers between ethnicity and nation. The Soviet federal system did not go beyond the creation of a political hierarchy of ethnic groups based on pseudo-scientific arguments of subdividing all the peoples of the USSR into the most developed peoples, underdeveloped nations and ethnic groups of lower order.¹³

1.2. *Glasnost*, *Perestroika* and Inability of the Centre to Contain the Problem

Initiation of the *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) policies in the USSR by the Communist Party First Secretary, Gorbachev, in the middle of 1980s, aimed at economic, political and social transformation of the Soviet Union. Yet these

¹⁰ Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.35

¹¹ Ibid., p.130

¹² Margot Light, "Russia and Transcaucasia," in John F.R. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg and Richard Schofield (Ed.), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp.38-39

¹³ Mikhailovic Khazanov, *After the USSR: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, (London: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p.18

new policies of openness and restructuring by the Centre brought about the end of the Union because of their unleashing effect of the already existed but hidden nationalistic and territorial enmities in the Soviet system outlined in the previous section. The NK region within the AzSSR and Armenian demand for annexing it to the ArSSR not only became one of the most important catalysts in the process of the collapse of the USSR, but also have remained an ever-lasting dispute having influenced political, social and economic lives of the two independent states, Azerbaijan and Armenia, in the post-independence period.

The socialist system, for Gorbachev, was no longer able to solve the declined economic productivity and social problems of the Soviet people. The remedy of this decline was seen in the transformation of the Socialist economic system to the liberal economy. Soon it was understood that economic liberalization could not be succeeded without political reforms. It was assumed that political reforms would have, on the one hand, strengthened the socialist system, on the other hand, it would give a huge bust for socio-economic transformation of the Soviet society. For Gorbachev, therefore, political reforms were for the further advancement and strengthening of the socialism.¹⁴ The wind of liberalisation in the USSR in the late 1980s, however, became the biggest threat for the future of multinational Soviet state and Soviet socialism. As Suny put it correctly, "The more a state becomes democratic, the less it can maintain inequitable imperial relationships within itself."¹⁵ This was axiomatic in the case of the Soviet Union in late 1980s. The new political developments provided a suitable environment for various Union Republics and small ethnic groups to struggle openly against both the centre and hosting republics. This meant that the centre's attempt at a revolution from above did not work and nationalities had their own competing interests and aspirations.¹⁶ In the Baltic republics, for instance, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania constituted an open, direct and unambiguous political challenge to the legitimacy of the USSR in the Baltic region. The dispute over the NKAR (Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region) between AzSSR and ArSSR appeared as one of the most important factors which influenced both political struggles within and between the two Union republics and the direction of the liberalisation policies of Gorbachev.

Loosening center-periphery links within the USSR with the introduction of *glasnost* led to the ignition of the already hidden, deep-rooted confrontation between AzSSR

¹⁴ Mikhael Gorbachev, *Gorbachev: On My Country and the World*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 2000)

¹⁵ Ronald G. Suny, "State, Civil Society and Ethnic Cultural Consolidation in the USSR: Roots of the National Question," in Alexander Dallin & Gail W. Lapidus (Ed.), *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), p.352

¹⁶ Graham Smith, (1993), *op cit.*, p.1

and ArSSR republics over the Armenian populated NKAR. The conflict over the western part of Azerbaijan, where the NKAR is situated and separated with a tiny Lachin land corridor from the ArSSR, began in the summer of 1987. The NK Armenians with a petition asked the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to correct a 'historical mistake' made in 1921 when the Bolsheviks had transferred the NKAR to Azerbaijan, and urged the annexation of it back to the ArSSR.¹⁷ When Supreme Soviet of the USSR rejected the Armenian demand for unification, a mass protest began in February 1988 in Yerevan, the capital of ArSSR, and in the NKAR in the forms of street demonstrations, industrial strikes and school boycotts. These demonstrations led to simultaneous outbreaks of ethnic violence in both ArSSR and AzSSR. The outrageous communal violence between the Azerbaijanis and Armenian minority took place in the industrial city of Sumgait, an Azerbaijani city populated overwhelmingly by the deported Azerbaijani-Turks from ArSSR between 1948 and 1950.¹⁸ Already existing, but previously covered, hatreds between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians increased the tension with the new displaced people in the city. During the course of the communal fighting in Sumgait, 31 ethnic Armenians were killed according to the official announcement, while the unofficial death toll of the Armenians were believed to be up to 200, and the rest of the Armenians were deported from the city. It is argued in this communal clashes the Azerbaijani government encouraged the killings, and did little to prevent the violence.¹⁹ The reaction of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to the events in Sumgait was to send Soviet troops to the city.

By mass demonstrations and strikes, Armenians tried to take advantage of the new political and economic liberalization policies in the USSR. It is because Armenian leaders assumed that Gorbachev would have resolved the problem on behalf of themselves in the spirit of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.²⁰ Gorbachev did not see, however, the Armenian demonstrations and claims on the NKAR as a struggle for democracy. On

¹⁷ Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*, (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1992), pp.195-196; Peter Rutland, "Ermenistan'da Demokrasi ve Milliyetçilik," *Avrasya Dosyası*, Sonbahar, 1995-96, Cilt:2, Sayı:4, s.11

¹⁸ According to the Azerbaijani sources, the Azerbaijanis, from the places of Goyce, Zengezur, Vedi, Zengibasar and Dereleyez in ArSSR were forced to flee by the Soviet Government in 1947 onwards. Between 1948 to 1950, 100 thousand Azerbaijanis left ArSSR and placed in AzSSR, see "Deportasia: Azerbaycanlıların Ermenistan Arazisindeki Tarihi-Etnik Torpaglarından Deportasiyasi", *Azerbaycan Ansiklopediyası*, (Baki: Nesriyyat-Poligrafiya Birliyi, 1998), s.210

¹⁹ Peter Rutland, (1995-96), op cit., p.13; David Rieff, "Nagomo-Karabakh: Case Study in Ethnic Strife," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1997, pp.118-119

²⁰ Peter Rutland, (1995-96), op cit., pp.12-13; Nora Dudwick, "Armenia: The Nation Awakens," in Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras (Ed.), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.277

the contrary, the initial reaction of the centre to the Armenian demands was to consider it as a mass movement against *glasnost*, and thus tried to stop before it became an example for the rest of the Union Republics for secession. In consistent with this thinking, the centre condemned the Armenian claims and declared it would not change the status of the NKAR within the AzSSR.²¹ Gorbachev thought that the tension could have been eased if he had replaced the Communist Party first secretaries in both AzSSR and ArSSR. Yet, this political move did not bring any solution to the dispute as, in mid-June 1988, the Armenian Supreme Soviet, with the support of Arutiunian, the newly appointed Communist Party First Secretary of ArSSR, adopted a resolution in which the transfer of the NKAR to ArSSR was insisted. On the other hand, the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet did not accept the Armenian demand on NKAR by arguing that the latest decision of the Armenian Supreme Soviet was opposed to the Leninist principle of the preservation of the territorial integrity of any Union Republics.²²

In consistent with the AzSSR's demand, the USSR Supreme Soviet decided that the NKAR should be under AzSSR according to the Article 78 of the latest USSR Constitution of 1977, which pointed out the fact that no one can change the border of a republic without that hosting Republic's acquiescence. The same article of the Soviet Constitution also imposed on the Republics as saying that "the boundaries between Union Republics may be altered by mutual agreement of the Republics concerned, subject to ratification by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."²³ The USSR Supreme Soviet only agreed to strengthen the autonomous status of NKAR on the condition of remaining within AzSSR in 1988. Moreover, in contrast to the Union Republics, an autonomous *oblast* (region) such as NK has neither constitution nor the right of secession. However, Armenians refused to accept the decision taken by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, and soon the Supreme Soviet of the NKAR in a joint session with the Supreme Soviet of the ArSSR declared its secession from the AzSSR in July 1988, calling the new formation 'United Armenian Republic'. Armenians defended the joining of the NK region into the ArSSR according to Article 70 of the Soviet Constitution, which, in theory, accepted the 'free self-determination of nations.'²⁴ Armenian reasoning for the secession of the NK region from AzSSR cannot be seen as relevant to the Article 70 of the Soviet Constitution on two grounds. First, Article 78 of the Soviet Constitution showed the legal way of the possible future border changes and territorial exchanges between the Union Republics on the

²¹ Peter Rutland, (1995-96), op cit., p.13

²² Audrey L. Altstadt (1992), op cit., p.197

²³ The Constitution of the USSR, 1977, in David Lane, *State and Politics in the USSR*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp.346-378

²⁴ Ibid.

condition of voluntary basis. On the other hand, however, the term of “free self-determination of nations” in the Article 70 of the same Constitution was only explanatory phrase of how the USSR had been established in the 1920s. “Free self-determination of nations” in the Article 70 referred to the already long past process of the participation of Armenian, or any other nation as Union Republics, into the USSR, but not to possible future developments pertaining to the self-determination of any minority group or nation. Second, as Cornell correctly stressed, people/nation and minority cannot be taken into the same category in legal terms. It is because Armenians in Azerbaijan can be seen as a national minority, but not a nation in legal terms, since they, the Armenian nation, already had their own state, the Armenian Republic and/or the ArSSR. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognised clearly the fact that minorities have the right “to enjoy their common culture, to profess their own religion, or to use their common language.” In line with this, in legal terms, the right to self-determination of the Armenians in Azerbaijan can consist of “internal self-determination” by which they can effectively take part in political, social, economic and cultural life within the Azerbaijani society without threatening the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan.²⁵

Under the pressures exerted by the ongoing communal clashes and mass deportation of the peoples from one republic to another, the USSR Supreme Soviet decided to solve the issue of NKAR by strengthening its own control in the region. For this purpose, the USSR Supreme Soviet established a special form of administration, the *Volskii* Commission, for the NKAR in January 1989. Taking the NKAR under the control the *Volskii* Commission meant that the region was separated from the AzSSR and put under the direct rule of the USSR Supreme Soviet. Although the USSR Supreme Soviet argued that it had consulted with the communist parties and state organs in both AzSSR and ArSSR before the establishment of the *Volskii* Commission, the AzCP expressed the fact that they had not been consulted on that Commission and considered it as a unilateral act of the centre. The decree of the USSR Supreme Soviet on the establishment of the *Volskii* Commission reiterated that the NKAR was a part of AzSSR, but a special administration directed by Moscow weakened the sovereignty of AzSSR over the NKAR, and now it was one of the possibilities that the NK region would have been transferred to the ArSSR. Such a decision of separating the NK region and putting it under the *Volskii* Commission also suggested that the USSR Supreme Soviet did not directly refuse the Armenian demands over the NKAR. Most important of all was the fact that, with the

²⁵ Stephen Cornell, “Undeclared War: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Reconsidered,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol:20, No:4, Fall 1997, pp.20-21

establishment of the *Volskii* Commission and its outlined purpose of separating a region from a Union Republic, the USSR Supreme Soviet seemed to have no longer been a high authority able to apply the Soviet Constitution.

The formation of a special Commission did not stop the conflicts. Quite the contrary, it further intensified the clashes between the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians. For instance, the new wave of communal clashes between the two communities in Baku on 13-14 January 1990 left 160 ethnic Armenians death and many more wounded.²⁶ The reaction of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet was to suppress the violence by sending approximately eleven thousands of Soviet army, navy and KGB troops to both AzSSR and ArSSR.²⁷ Soviet Army declared state of emergency in the NKAR, and imposed curfews in the Azerbaijani cities of Baku, Ganje and some other population centers, where the reaction of the Azerbaijani people to the development within the NKAR had allegedly reached to the point of attempting to overthrow the Soviet power in the AzSSR. For Gorbachev, the move of the Soviet army to Baku was to stop further worsening the situation between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians which had already resulted in the deportation of the Armenians from the city. The quarrelling and divisions between the central government in AzSSR and Azerbaijani nationalists, for Gorbachev, paralyzed their ability to act and to maintain control of the situation. Under these situations, according to Gorbachev's account, entrance of the Soviet troops into Baku was tried to be stopped by the Azerbaijani nationalists' gunfire and provocations. Soviet military intervention, or what the Azerbaijanis call it 'invasion' and 'Black January,' on 20 January 1990, resulted in 83 Azerbaijanis and 14 Soviet military personnel death, the detention of forty-three leading Azerbaijani nationalists and the closure of their offices, and the replacement of Vezirov, the AzCP first Secretary, with Muttalibov.²⁸

Gorbachev also tried to stop the Armenian side from their claims over the NKAR. In order to maintain the status quo on the NK conflict, Gorbachev used military power over the Armenians as well. Soviet forces of internal ministry were used to suppress strikes in ArSSR in July and December 1988 during which Airikian, an Armenian nationalist, was deported and, approximately 5 thousands Armenian demonstrators opposing to the declared curfew were detained.²⁹ In fact, as far as the degree of Soviet military reaction to the both republics are compared, intervention to ArSSR remained soft. It is because the majority of the forces sent by Moscow to the ArSSR were composed of ethnic Armenians who had become reluctant to use force against the

²⁶ Peter Rutland (1995-95), op cit., p.24

²⁷ Mikhael Gorbachev (2000), op cit., p.96

²⁸ Ibid., pp.96-97; Audrey L. Altstadt (1992), op cit., p.216

²⁹ Peter Rutland (1995-96), op cit., p.15

fellow Armenians. Also, Armenians, both the nationalists and communists, knew the fact that the USSR would soon be dissolved, and during the period of transition Armenian nationalists had given priority to the secession of the NKAR from AzSSR, and did not increase their pressure on the Armenian communists and Gorbachev for the independence of the ArSSR from the USSR. Moreover, both the nationalists and communists in Armenia believed that after the dissolution of the USSR they would need the Russian support on the NK region and other issues in the region against Azerbaijan and Turkey.³⁰ Another reason why the Soviet intervention/invasion to the AzSSR was so bloody was because, until the 'Black January,' the entire Azerbaijani population in ArSSR had already been expelled. Yet, this reason would be wrong because, until the Soviet Army intervened in Azerbaijan on 20 January, there were not any Armenians in Baku as well. If the reasoning of the use of the Soviet troops were to stop the violence in Baku between Azerbaijanis and Armenian minority, it should have been used couple of weeks before the communal clashes broke out in the city, while the Soviet authorities had already known the example of Sumgait. As Rutland correctly observed, the Armenian communists and nationalists acted together on the NK issue and the Armenian populated Soviet troops in ArSSR made it easier for them. In the AzSSR, however, the Azerbaijani nationalists, who were against both the Armenians and the way and methods of the local communists' conduction of the NK conflict, became the prime target for the Soviet forces. In fact, the main objective of the Soviet troops was not to stop the ethnic violence in Baku, but to dissolve the fledgling nationalist movement (the Azerbaijani Popular Front) in the AzSSR.³¹ Before the 'Black January,' in his meeting with the Azerbaijani nationalist leader, Elchibey, in January 1990, Primakov warned him that their demand for democratic election in AzSSR would lead to the dissolution of the USSR.³² In fact, the Azerbaijani nationalists aimed at keeping the NKAR inside AzSSR and were only against the way the local communists were handling the NK conflict. The Azerbaijani nationalists gathered around the Azerbaijani Popular Front did not ask any demand for the independence of the AzSSR from the USSR or an election for that purpose. The main, and perhaps the only purpose of Gorbachev by sending military troops to Azerbaijan was to dissolve the further strengthening of the democratic, nationalist and western oriented Azerbaijan Popular Front. In the other part of the USSR there was clear and open challenge to the very existence of the USSR. For instance, in Lithuania, one of the

³⁰ Ibid., pp.14-16

³¹ M. Turgut Demirtepe & Sedat Laçiner, "The Role of Karabakh Issue in Restoration of Azerbaijani Nationalism", *Journal of Administrative Sciences*, Vol:1 No:3, 2004, p.201-202

³² Nazım Cafersoy, *Elçibey Dönemi Azerbaycan Dış Politikası: Bir Bağımsızlık Mücadelesinin Diplomatik Öyküsü*, (Ankara: ASAM, 2001), p.24

Baltic States, a Popular Front had already renounced the reunification of the country with the USSR and declared independence. Why then the Soviet army was not sent to interfere or crash the Popular Front in Lithuania was because the entire Western World were behind Lithuania.³³ Additionally, Gorbachev sent troops to Azerbaijan to support the local communists and used “Western misinformation” and fears of a “resurgent Islam” as his excuses during the crisis of Iraq in 1990.³⁴

The NK dispute between the AzSSR and ArSSR turned into a war in the course of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the USSR. Gorbachev and the long lasted Soviet system could not remove the problem from the memories of the peoples in these two republics. After the NK region was put under the control of a special commission, *Volskii*, in fact it was the last act of the Soviet state on the issue. From then on, the fate of the disputed region was going to be determined by the political and military abilities of the conflicting parties within their own countries and towards outside world. From Azerbaijan’s point of view, Gorbachev obviously failed to apply the Soviet constitution and favoured the aggressor (Armenia) in the NK conflict as Azerbaijan had to bear the stigma of the lost 20 per cent of its territory and over a million displaced Azerbaijanis. Would Gorbachev have done better in the NK issue? The answer of this question is perhaps yes if Gorbachev had shown enough strength and courage to apply the Soviet Constitution.

2. Reflections of the Past to Shape the Future

2.1. Debate over History and Territorial Division

Both the Azerbaijani and Armenian historians have put forward their own exclusive national claims on historical and religious monuments in NK, and externally imposed territorial divisions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the region.³⁵

In order to justify their own position on the disputed territory, both the Azerbaijani and Armenian historians have worked on the history of NK. In line with the Soviet construction of the history of the Caucasus region, the Armenian and Azerbaijani philologists and paleographers have clashed over the disappeared Caucasian Albanian (distinct from the Albanians in the Balkans today) civilization. Both sides have tried to

³³ Interview with Ebulfez Elchibey, *Azadliq*, 24 Ağustos 1990.

³⁴ Audrey L. Altstadt (1992), op cit., pp.217-219

³⁵ For these claims, see, Suleyman Aliyarli, “Nagorno-Karabakh: The Claims and the Truth,” in Bahdiyev Vahabzadeh (Ed.), *Dignity: Struggle of a Nation for Identity, Independence and Territorial Integrity*, (Baku: Azerbaijan Publishing House, 1999), pp.12-23; Arif Abbasov (et al), *Karabakh*, (Baku: XXXI-YNE, 1999); Hratch Tchilingirian, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Transition and Elite”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol:18, No:4, 1999, pp.435-461; Levon Chorbajian (et al.), *The Caucasian Knot: The History and Geopolitics of Nagorno-Karabakh*, (London: Zed Books, 1994)

convince 'international community' that they are the real successor of the past in the NK region. According to the Soviet historian, Trever, Albanians was one of the three ethnic groups in the Caucasus. Majority of these Albanians were thought to be assimilated by the Islam and later by the Turks. A small number of these Albanians in the NK region remained under the influence of Armenians and later by the Armenian Christians.³⁶ From the Azerbaijani point of view, the NK region was part of the Azerbaijani feudal states, which were later converted to Islam and Turkish language by first Arab and then by the Turks. The NK region was later used by the tsarist Russia to place the Armenians migrated from the rival empires of Iran and Turkey. Until then, according to the Azerbaijani historians, 73.8 per cent of the population of the NK region were Muslim Azerbaijanis.³⁷ On the other hand, for the Armenian historians, the Albanians in the NK region was influenced and converted to Christianity by the Armenians. Thus, throughout history, according to H.Tchilingirian, the Albanian Church was fully absorbed by the Armenian Church and became known as the Armenian Catholicosate of Albanians or Aghwank which survived until the midst of the 19th century. When the Arabs and Turks invasion started in the 7th and 11th centuries respectively, the NK region, which remained in the western part of the Albania, had already been largely assimilated by the Armenians.³⁸

The Azerbaijanis having relied on their own historical accounts of the remnants of ancient Arabic and Islamic inscriptions, mosques and tombstones in the region have seen NK as a land where their culture and nationalism flourished. They have seen the Armenian population of the region was a recent event as a result of tsarist Russian policy towards the region. In addition to this, the Azerbaijanis have put forward their argument as saying that NK is the centre of Azerbaijani civilization because the region has produced numerous Azerbaijani artists, composers, poets and other literary figures.³⁹ Not strangely, similar kinds of claims have been made by the Armenian historians as saying that the NK region belongs to themselves as it has hosted numerous vestiges of the ancient Armenian monuments, religious buildings, churches and monasteries.⁴⁰

Leaving complex and often biased ancient historical accounts of the sides over the NK region aside, there needs to be concentrated on the territorial developments in the later periods. Indeed, during the tsarist Russian and Soviet periods, similar to many empires in the past, ethno-territorial frontiers in the South Caucasus were ill defined.

³⁶ Bahdiyar Vahabzadeh (1999), op cit., p.16

³⁷ Ibid., pp.16-18

³⁸ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), op cit., pp.436-437

³⁹ Arif Abbasov (et al) (1999), op cit., p.5, p.50

⁴⁰ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), pp.436-437; Levon Chorbajian (et al.) (1994), p.13

The Soviet territorial division in the 1920s that established the borders of Azerbaijan within the USSR left many ethnic groups such as Armenians, Lezgins, Georgians, Avars, Kurds and so on to live in Azerbaijan. Many Azerbaijanis were also left within the neighboring territories outside of the AzSSR in Armenia, Georgia and Dagestan Republic within the Russian Federation.⁴¹ Ethno-territorial matters have shown such a level of complexity in the entire Caucasus region that even almost all small ethnic groups are left divided with the end of the USSR. For instance, after Azerbaijan gained its independence from the USSR, ethnic minority group of Lezgins are also divided between Azerbaijan and the Dagestan Republic of the Russian Federation. Under such territorial divisions, regardless of the ethnic populations of the related regions, as Light also observed, ethnic disputes among the nationalities of the Caucasus were more frequently directed against rival national groups than against Russians.⁴²

Since the break-up of the USSR, these ethnic minorities have shown their dissatisfactions in various ways, mainly having blamed the tsarist and then the Soviet policy of territorial enforcement. The Armenian minority in the NK and Nakhichevan regions in Azerbaijan, like the Armenians in the Republic of Armenia, believe that they were betrayed by the Soviet State by leaving these two territories within the borders of the AzSSR. For the Armenians, these two regions had remained as their ancestral lands for centuries and belonged to them until the Soviet government changed the status quo when these territories were given to the Azerbaijanis as a sign of 'good will' towards Turkey with the treaties of Moscow and Kars between the Bolsheviks and Turks in 1921.⁴³ Against these Armenian points, the Azerbaijanis claim that before the Soviet rule was established in Armenia in the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks in Moscow and local Azerbaijani communists in Baku promised to give the NK region to the Armenians in return for the establishment of the Soviet rule in the region. For this aim, for instance, the Azerbaijani communist leader Nerimanov promised on 1 December 1920 that if they had accepted the Soviet rule, he would have given the Azerbaijani territories of Nakhichevan, Zengezur and Karabakh to the Armenians. After long discussions between local Azerbaijani and Armenian communists within the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party including the Bolsheviks from Moscow, Zengezur was given to the Armenians, while Nakhichevan and NK regions left within the AzSSR with autonomous status.⁴⁴ Indeed, this new territorial formations did satisfy neither the

⁴¹ Rasim Musabeyov, "Azerbaycan'daki Etnik Azınlıklar", *Avrasya Dosyası*, İlkbahar 2001, Cilt :7, Sayı:1, s.177-178; Araz Aslanlı, "Tarihten Günümüze Karabağ Sorunu", *Avrasya Dosyası*, İlkbahar 2001, Cilt:7, Sayı:1, s.393-399

⁴² Margot Light (1996), op cit., p.37

⁴³ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), op cit., pp.436-441

⁴⁴ Araz Aslanlı (2001), op cit., pp.397-398

Azerbaijani nor the Armenian sides. As seen that, in addition to the NK region, the other regions, Nakhichevan and Zangezur, have remained disputed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Azerbaijani side, for instance, claims that Zangezur region, currently an Armenian territory between Nakhichevan and mainland Azerbaijan, is one of the historical Azerbaijani regions. It was given to Armenia in order to separate the mainland Azerbaijan from Nakhichevan and more importantly to cut off the contacts between Azerbaijan and Turkey. This is considered as a familiar Russian policy of divide and rule on the territories where it has colonized.⁴⁵ Armenians have accused the Azerbaijani authorities that they had forced the once Armenian majority in Nakhichevan region to emigrate from the region throughout the Soviet period and had been applying the same policy on the NK Armenians. For this reason, after the independence in 1991, the Armenians appealed to the Russian State Duma as the legal successor of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (RussianSSR) and asked that the Russian Federation should annul the 'illegal and illegitimate' treaty of 1921 signed between the Bolsheviks and Turkey about the guarantor status of the Nakhichevan region. If not met their demands, they also warned that the friendly relations and trust between Armenia and Russia would be hindered otherwise.⁴⁶ As this suggests, having captured the entire NK region and 7 more Azerbaijani districts outside NK in the war until 1994, Armenian side relying on similar kind of historical arguments has tried to change the territorial status of the Nakhichevan region. If there had not been the Kars Treaty between the Bolsheviks and Turkey in 1921, which puts Turkey and Soviet Union as the two guarantor states on the territorial status and borders of the Nakhichevan region, there would have been another war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. No doubt would the Armenian side have invaded Nakhichevan region with Russian support and the silence of 'international community' as seen in the case of the NK war, if Turkey had not reacted strongly.

2.2. Arguments on Economic Deprivation

The territorial separation of NK region from Armenia is not seen just the delimitation of a particular land, but suppression, alienation and exploitation of the Armenian minority by the Azerbaijani authorities.

In economic field, the Armenians have claimed that they had been discriminated by the Azerbaijani officials for years in the forms of denial of their career opportunities, allocation of economic resources to the Armenian populated areas in the NK region. By doing these, the Armenian side has been convinced that the Azerbaijanis had sought to

⁴⁵ İsmail Musayev, "Bir Daha Zengezur'un Ermenistan'a Verilmesi Hakkında," *Azadlıq*, 28 Ekim 1999.

⁴⁶ Liz Fuller, "The Nakhichevan Armenians Appeal to Russia to Annul Key Treaty", *RFE/RL*, 17 Mart 2000

assimilate and expel them from Azerbaijan. In line with this argument, the Armenians have claimed that the NK region's industrial growth raised only 14.8 fold, while Azerbaijan, Armenia and USSR, respectively, realized 40, 221, and 113-fold overall industrial growth from 1913 to 1973. The trend of leaving the Armenian populated areas underdeveloped in the NK region, for Armenians, had continued until the end of the 1980s. Between 1945 and 1965, only two factories were built in the NK region. Also, relying on the figures of the year 1986, Armenians have argued that they got 181 rubles as investment per person, while the rest of Azerbaijan got 473 rubles. Limitations on housing and constructions, transportation and communication facilities, lack of funds for protecting Armenian cultural heritage as well as hindering the functioning of the Armenian Church until the end of the USSR were deliberately applied policies of the Azerbaijani authorities that all of which left a socio-economically underdeveloped NK region.⁴⁷ Having based on the above convictions, the Armenian side has argued that many ethnic Armenians had already left the Nakhichevan region and the number of Armenian population was significantly declined in the NK region. Under these outcomes, Armenia has seen its right to be in a 'United Armenia' with the NK region. Accordingly, for them there is no reason to believe that reincorporation of the NK region with Azerbaijan would make any difference for the improvement of their life there.

On the other side of the spectrum, however, according to the Azerbaijani authorities, those Armenian claims above are unacceptable, and their arguments on the economic, social and cultural alienation of the NK Armenians by the Azerbaijanis have been used to cover their real goal of separating the region from Azerbaijan to create a greater Armenian state. For the Azerbaijanis, in fact, economic and social development of the NK region has been much better in comparison with those of the other parts of Azerbaijan. Also, the NK region had been in economic, social and cultural connections and cooperation with the other regions in the country. In the areas of silk production, the NK region, particularly Hankendi (Stepanakert), the capital of the NK region, was so productive that the region was sending more than 100 tons of silk to the other part of the USSR. In other areas, for instance, annual consumptions of meat, milk, butter and so on per person in the NK region were much higher than those of the other big cities of Ali Bayramli, Sumgait and Kirovabad in Azerbaijan. In addition to these, infrastructures of railways, electricity, gas pipelines were in better condition for the benefit of the Armenian people in the region, especially in Hankendi. In medical sector, while the Armenians in the region got 122.7 medical personnel for every 10 thousand

⁴⁷ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), op cit., p.443, pp.458-459; Ronald G. Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.194

people, this number was 93.5 for overall the AzSSR level. Nine socio-economic indicators, including numbers of hospital beds and doctors per capita, libraries, childcare facilities and living space, NK region was in better condition than that of the rest of Azerbaijan. In the construction sector, the NK region, as the Soviet government had itself admitted, was 1.4 times better than that of the rest of Azerbaijan.⁴⁸ In response to the Armenian claims, an Azerbaijani scholar, Aliyarli, argues that in reality the NK region was fed by the goods produced in the other parts of Azerbaijan. For instance, Baku and Gence, the two most industrialised cities in Azerbaijan, had provided 60 million rubles, while Sheki and Arazboyu regions had done so with 16.5 million rubles for the NK region. More than that, 76.5 per cent of overall volumes of the goods that were the equivalent of 100 million roubles, transported to the NK region were provided from the other parts of the AzSSR. On the other hand, however, the volume of the goods came from ArSSR to the NK region remained 1.5 million rubles during the Soviet period. Also, the NK Armenians took the advantage of goods coming from other parts of Azerbaijan and sold them to the other Union republics.⁴⁹ In addition to these, according to another Azerbaijani scholar, Abdullayev, the Armenians were already in key economic and political position within the AzSSR. For instance, 29 deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the AzSSR were made of Armenians. Besides, 61 Armenians worked in various key positions within the Central Committee of the AzCP, and thousands of them had been employed in the Cabinet Ministry of the AzSSR, State Planning Committee, City Party Committees, National Security as well as Ministry of Internal Affairs. The same kind of acceptance and prosperity that the Armenians enjoyed in the areas of economic, social and political life in the AzSSR, had not been given to the Azerbaijanis who had inhabited in ArSSR.⁵⁰

As far as the Armenian claims about the lower level of economic conditions in the NK region for their brethrens are concerned, it was in fact similar to the overall economic deprivation in all around the Soviet territories. At least, economic situation of the NK region was not worse than that of the rest of the Azerbaijani territories and Armenian Republic. In fact, during the Soviet period, national income growth in AzSSR was in 15th place among the 15 Union republics. In industrial labour productivity Armenia and Azerbaijan were in the 12th place which was well below the USSR average, and

⁴⁸ Asker Abdullayev, *Daglig Garabag: Esassiz Iddialar, Hadiseler, Facialar*, (Baki: Mutercim, 2001), s.78-79; Audrey L. Aldstadt, "O Patria Mia: National Conflict in Mountainous Karabagh," in Duncan, W.R and Holman, G.P. (Ed.), *Ethnic Nationalism and Regional Conflict*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp.115-116

⁴⁹ Bahdiyar Vahabzadeh (1999), p.13

⁵⁰ Asker Abdullayev (2001), op cit., p.80

Georgia finished in 9th place.⁵¹ In fact, economic situation of the NK region was more or less similar to that of the rest of AzSSR. Already, both Azerbaijan and Armenia, similar to the Central Asian Soviet republics, had experienced with a low level of productivity, negligence of the environment and many other problems of mismanagement under the Soviet system for decades. Even during the Soviet times and before the ethnic conflict started in late 1980s, the NK region got more money per capita than the larger and more populous Nakhichevan in AzSSR.⁵² Therefore, economic difficulties in AzSSR were a problem which had been experienced by all Union republics including ArSSR and NK region as well. In fact, one of the major reasons of the collapse of the USSR was the economic inefficiency and stagnation of the Soviet system.

2.3. Demographic Change without Consent?

The other dispute over the NK region and the reasoning for going into a war is that the Azerbaijani authorities had pursued a deliberate de-Armenization policy aiming at changing the demographic characteristics of the regions in the AzSSR at the expense of the Armenian minorities. However, this argument against Azerbaijan is also as disputed as the claims seen in the two previous sections.

The NK and Nakhichevan regions, for the Armenians, were both deliberately tied to Azerbaijan by the Soviet authorities, without having considered the presence of an Armenian ethnic majority in those two regions. For them, from 1920s onwards, previous demographic structure had been altered successfully by the Azerbaijani authorities in the Nakhichevan region, where Armenians have now remained few, while they were once made of the majority of the population.⁵³ Indeed, according to the statistics, in the Nakhichevan region of Azerbaijan, the Armenian population were composed of 40 per cent of the total people of 135 thousands in 1914. The proportion of the Armenians in this region reduced to 3 per cent in the 1970s of the total 233.000 people. Also, according to the 1989 Soviet census, the Armenian population was even almost halved from 3,406 in 1979 to 1,858 in 1989 (0.6 per cent of the population), while the Azerbaijani population increased to 95.5 percent of the total. For the NK region, Armenians argue that as a result of Azerbaijan's policy of Turkisation, the Armenian population regularly declined in favour of the Azerbaijanis in the region. For instance, while the total number of the Armenians were 170.000 in 1914, this number changed to 117.000 in 1926, 110.000 in 1959, 121.100 in 1970 and 123.100 in 1979. According to the census in 1989, the total number of Armenians increased a total of 145.000, of whom

⁵¹ Ronald G. Suny (1990), *op cit.*, p.229

⁵² Audrey L. Altstadt (1994), *op cit.*, pp.116-117

⁵³ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), *op cit.*, pp.440-441

the Azerbaijanis were composed of 40.632 people.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the Armenians urged that they did not want the same to happen to the NK region as the Nakhichevan region has demographically turned into an Azerbaijani territory. The Armenian authorities both in Hankendi and Yerevan believe that their occupation of entire NK territories as well as 7 Azerbaijani territorial districts outside the NK region is in fact their natural right to stop further 'Turkification' of the Armenian homelands.⁵⁵

Although the demographic changes in the NK and Nakhichevan regions occurred at the expense of the Armenian population during the Soviet period, it seems doubtful to see that they were direct consequences of a deliberate Azerbaijani policy of de-Armenisation. The reduction of the Armenian population in these regions, in fact, requires one to look at the issue with a broader perspective within the Soviet system. Despite the fact that the application of the Soviet policy of "acculturation, bilingualism and assimilation" to create a unique 'Soviet people' was in place, as a result of economic development programs and *korenizatsiia*, Union republics in the South Caucasus, including AzSSR, had gradually become much more demographically, politically and culturally homogenous communities by the 1960s.⁵⁶ In Azerbaijan, for instance, from 1913 to 1980, the percentage of the Azerbaijani population living in rural and urban areas dramatically changed. While 24 and 76 per cent Azerbaijanis were living in the urban and rural areas in 1913, respectively, this difference levelled between 1966 and 1971, and later this trend changed to 53 percent in urban areas and 47 percent in rural areas.⁵⁷ This demographic mobilisation trend clearly suggests that Azerbaijanis filled the cities in the 1960s and 1970s and demanded and even occupied more posts in the Socialist economic, political and administrative life in the AzSSR.

In addition, as demographic trends among the South Caucasus republics indicated in the USSR from 1959 to 1989, the natural growth of the Azerbaijani population was 131.0 per cent, while the increase of the Armenian and Georgian populations remained 66.0 and 48.0 per cent respectively. These ratios already tell that the Azerbaijani ethnic dominance in the AzSSR showed a much higher natural increase than those of the other two South Caucasian republics as a result of migration to cities, high birth rate among the Azerbaijanis and out migration of the Armenians and other ethnic groups.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Nora Dudwick, "Armenia: Paradise Regained or Lost?," in Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras (Ed.), *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.484; George Joffe, "Nationalities and Borders in Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus," in John F.R. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg and Richard Schofield (Ed.), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, (London: UCL Press, 1996), p.25

⁵⁵ Hratch Tchilingirian (1999), op cit., p.456

⁵⁶ Ronald G. Suny (1990), op cit., pp.234-235

⁵⁷ V. Mehta, *Soviet Economy: Development of Azerbaijan*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982), p.12

⁵⁸ Ronald G. Suny (1990), op cit., pp.234-235

Due to the high birth rate and migration to the cities among the Azerbaijani-Turks in the AzSSR, the Azerbaijani-Turks had made up of almost 83 per cent of the Republic's population by 1989.

Another important reason for the decline of the Armenian population in Azerbaijan is that relatively few of the Azerbaijani-Turks migrated from the AzSSR. The number of Armenians in Azerbaijan declined by 19.4 per cent between 1970 and 1989, from 484,000 to 390,000.⁵⁹ The decline of the Armenian population in Azerbaijan may be explained by some other reasons as well. The most ethnically homogenous republic in the USSR was ArSSR with 93.3 per cent Armenians. However, only 66.6 per cent of the Soviet Armenians lived in the ArSSR, and millions more in outside the Soviet Union and within the other republics of the USSR. Although the percentage of Soviet Armenians living in the ArSSR has raised since 1959, Armenians have always been a sort of people who were and still are least likely to live in their own Union Republic as they have always maintained their traditional pattern of migration and adaptation of other cultures. For example, more than half of the highly educated Armenian specialists in the ArSSR moved to the other Union republics during the USSR. In contrast to the Azerbaijani Muslims in the USSR, Armenians, who left the AzSSR, always had less prejudice to marry with non-Armenian Christians.⁶⁰ These suggest that reduction of the Armenian population in NK, Nakhichevan and elsewhere in the AzSSR cannot be explained by Azerbaijan's economic, cultural and linguistic policies of the exclusion of the Armenian minority in the country. Accordingly, it can be clearly said that there were various political, economic, social and cultural reasons within the broader Soviet system why demographic changes had happened in the NK region at the expense of Armenians in the AzSSR.

Conclusions

A number of policy applications and strategic concerns of the USSR had shaped the territorial borders, economic structures and ethnic compositions of only the NK region, but also the entire areas closely linked to the two major national groups, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, in the South Caucasus. The current dispute over the NK region between Azerbaijan and Armenia have been deeply influenced, and built, by both parties' own clashing visions over territorial, economic and demographic history of the region. These complex and often conflicted historical accounts over the real patrimony of the region are in fact not new. Territorial divisions and mobilization of the native people of the entire Caucasus from one place to another were and are still common

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.235

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.238

currencies of the region in a different time and conditions. The NK region is not an exception in that sense.

Leninist assumption that realisation of the socialist system could eliminate national antagonisms did not work in the case of the Soviet experiment. Despite the fact that the Soviet system of federalism envisaged a shared sovereignty, central government in Moscow hold most of the power within its own grips in the name of creating a common 'Soviet man.' The promise of national self-determination to nations remained only as a slogan in order to manage to secure borders of the Soviet state established over the territories of tsarist Empire. The Soviet system of strict control over the Union republics allowed the centre to suppress already existed disputes among a number of nationalities during the previous Empire. However, the process of imposed modernisation and Russification in language and education helped the nationalities and smaller ethnic nationals to maintain, even some cases to gain, and increase, their national consciousness. As stressed in this work, although Soviet system of federalism and nationalities policies provided the Soviet leaders with having an internal stability, they, on the other hand, made it possible among the ethno-nationals to maintain their divisions and enmities towards each other within their own specific regions. For instance, one of the most important reasons of the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federation in 1936 after having 14 years of Soviet experience was border disputes among Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

Not strangely, similar kind of disputes came into appearance when Gorbachev initiated his *glasnost* policy in the second half of the 1980s. The NK issue, the disputed history of which goes back to the tsarist period, was one of those conflicts between the two main nationalities, Azerbaijan and Armenia, of the USSR that re-emerged in 1987 under the wind of liberalisation policies within the Union. The initiation of *glasnost* and *perestroika* by Gorbachev provided a perfect opportunity for various Union republics to revive their old claims in the forms of independence and national identity at the expense of each other. Hence, instead of being remedy, they further weakened the Soviet system. In other words, the initiation of *glasnost* and *perestroika* that were assumed to rescue economically and socially stagnated USSR became main catalysts in the course of the dissolution of the Union. First communal clashes and then war between AzSSR and ArSSR over the NK region represented a perfect example for the failure of not only the Soviet nationalities policy but also the Gorbachev's new policies of liberalisation. In fact, it was after all the Soviet system itself, which could not stop the dispute between AzSSR and ArSSR over the NK region turning into an all-out war having influenced political, economic and social structures of the region after the dissolution of the USSR. In the conflict, it was observed that Central government in Moscow was no longer able to maintain the unity of the USSR even though it applied

the use of force. Sending thousands of Soviet troops against the Azerbaijani and Armenian demonstrators and political activists and killing dozens of civilians in the AzSSR did not lead the conflicting sides to refrain from their own demands over the NK region. On the legal ground, the USSR authorities from top to bottom appeared to have no longer been able to apply the Soviet constitution. Not to mention the fact that autonomous regions did not have any right to secede from the hosting Republic, Article 78 of the Soviet Constitution clearly stated that any territorial and border changes between Union republics may take place on the conditions of the consents of the Union republics concerned and the approval of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. The Supreme Soviet's policy of putting the NK region under the direct rule of the *Volskii* Commission outside the control of the AzSSR was against the very essence of the Soviet Constitution.

Beyond the failure of the Soviet nationalities policies and Gorbachev's serious mistakes, current dispute over the NK region, as it was in the past, has evolved around exclusive claims of the parties for the real ownership of that particular territory. As seen in this study, main arguments that Armenian side put forward have been concentrated around the accusations that under Azerbaijani rule Armenian language, culture and economy had been deliberately deprived of having developed and flourished. For them, AzSSR authorities during the Soviet period had suppressed and discriminated Armenian minorities and communities in Azerbaijan so as to change demographic structure of the country as a whole, particularly in the Nakhichevan and NK regions, in support of Azerbaijani-Turks. In fact according to Armenian views, de-Armenisation of the Nakhichevan region by Azerbaijan was completed successfully, and so this could not be allowed to happen in the NK region. Therefore they argue that their political and military actions against Azerbaijan and retaking the NK region under Armenian control is a rightful, just and legal act that stopped the disappearance of Armenian people of NK forever as it happened in the Nakhichevan region.

From Azerbaijani point of view all Armenian claims above are false. For them, first of all the Azerbaijani-Turks have always been the native people of the NK region until Armenians were brought to the region by Russia in the tsarist and Soviet periods. Also, for the Azerbaijani side, the matters happened during the Soviet period that the Armenians put forward on the NK issue were equally harmful and disturbing for all Azerbaijanis themselves as they were for the Armenian minority under almost two hundred years of the Russian rule in the region. As a matter of fact, one hundred years earlier Yerevan had a Muslim majority, while in the early years of Soviet rule Tbilisi and Baku were largely Russian and Armenian cities. As the Soviet Union entered its

seventh decade, these cities had become in the full ethnic sense.⁶¹ On other matters, for instances, in terms of a number of economic, social and medical indicators the NK Armenians' situation was much better than that of the rest of Azerbaijan during the Soviet period. On the issue of the demographic decline of the Armenian population in Azerbaijan, as mentioned in this study there are a number of economic, cultural and social reasons that developed largely outside the choice of the AzSSR. This can, in fact, be better explained if one considers the fact that even the percentage of the Russian population in all of the South Caucasus republics of the USSR had steadily fallen: 5.6 per cent in Azerbaijan since 1970, 6.3 per cent in Georgia since 1959 and 1.6 per cent in Armenia since 1979.⁶² It is very much clear from all these facts summarised here and displayed in this study that the Armenian authorities used various economic and social difficulties that the NK Armenians faced in the AzSSR as a political cover-up in order to separate the region from Azerbaijan.

⁶¹ Ranold G. Suny (1990), *op cit*, p.239

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.234-235