

The Home They Lost

Refugees from Armenia to Azerbaijan

Maxime Gauin

The plight of the ethnic-Azerbaijanis expelled from the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic during the last years of the USSR was never forgotten by the Republic of Azerbaijan. But since the end of 2022, this issue has taken on new importance in official speeches. This is particularly visible in the visit of the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, to the administrative building of the Western Azerbaijan Community in December 2022—his second visit since its unveiling in 2010. Quite logically, this happened after Azerbaijan’s military and diplomatic victory in the Second Karabakh War, the signing of the Shusha Declaration that reinforced the Turkish-Azerbaijani military alliance in 2021, and the defeat of Armenian units that were trying to plant mines along and adjacent to the non-delineated border with Azerbaijan in September 2022.

Nonetheless, the painful memory of this expulsion also must be understood in its historical depth, namely, the fact that such expulsions had already taken place four times in the twentieth century (1905, 1918-1921, 1948-1953, and 1987-1991) *before* the onset of the First Karabakh War and its resulting flow of internally displaced persons from Karabakh into other parts of Azerbaijan.

Historical Background

The first instance dates back to 1905. In the context of Russia’s defeat in its war against Japan and various internal difficulties, agents of Russian Tsar Nicholas II (with or without orders from St. Petersburg—it is an open question) deliberately provoked clashes between ethnic-Azerbaijanis and ethnic-Armenians across the South Caucasus (i.e., on parts of the territory of present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). These agents were aware that the Armenian side had larger weapons stockpiles, mostly because of the organized presence of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which was created

Maxime Gauin is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. He previously served as Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) in Ankara. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

in Tbilisi in 1890. Moreover, the Armenian community had more military experience as a whole, as few Muslims spent their military service in the Russian imperial army within fighting units. The result was that the Azerbaijanis suffered the biggest part of the losses: 158 villages were plundered and/or destroyed by the ARF, largely in what is now the territory of Armenia, but also in Karabakh, mostly around Shusha. Furthermore, in Baku, there were 600 deaths, including 400 Azerbaijanis and 200 Armenians.

However, the scope of the violence increased in 1918-1921, due to the Dashnak-ruled Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) and the self-proclaimed “Mountain Republic” of ARF leader Garegin Nzhdeh (January-July 1921). On 8 April 1920, Lord George Curzon, the British Foreign Secretary, told the following to the president of the Delegation of the Armenian Republic, Avetis Aharonian, and the president of the Armenian National Delegation, Boghos Nubar:

Your three chiefs, Dro [Drastamat Kanayan], Harnazasp, and [Abraham] Kulkhandanian are the ringleaders of the bands which have destroyed Tartar [i.e., ethnic-Azerbaijani] villages and have staged massacres in Zangezur, Surrnalu, Etchmiadzin, and Zangibasar. This is intolerable.

Lord Curzon’s comments were quoted by Aharonian himself in his diary, and then later published by the Dashnak party in the *Armenian Review*. Moreover, *Le Temps*, the mouthpiece of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs at that time, estimated that the number of Muslims killed between the spring and summer of 1920 to be in the tens of thousands (this figure does not include those expelled to Türkiye or Azerbaijan in the same period). Jean Schlicklin, a correspondent for *Le Petit Parisien*, described the actions of the Armenian government in 1920 as follows: “the systematic plan of extermination of the Muslim populations was savagely carried out.”

Nzhdeh as well as Antranik Ozanian, the commander of the Western Armenian Division, did not behave differently in Zangezur in 1918-1919, and then in 1921. For instance, a note written by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June 1919 counted 40 villages as having been destroyed by Antranik’s men. The result was that the ethnic-Azerbaijani population, estimated to have been 71,000 persons (i.e., 51 percent of the total population in the region) was reduced to 4,400 (6 percent) by the time the first Soviet census was conducted in 1926.

Herein lies the first element of continuity with today’s situation, as Nzhdeh is widely celebrated as a national hero by many Armenians. If, by chance, one was to confront an Armenian who still justifies his public extolment despite being embarrassed by Nzhdeh’s collaboration with the Nazis, Nzhdeh’s actions in Zangezur would likely be put forward as the reason for his continued place in the Armenian historical pantheon. And this is not an exception: both Drastamat “Dro” Kanayan and Antranik are also celebrated as national heroes. In December 2019, when *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* expressed some uneasiness concerning Nzhdeh’s involvement in the Third Reich’s war effort, it was suggested that he be replaced as the first twentieth century national hero by, of all people, Antranik.

A second element is the fact that between 1948 and 1953, Stalin ordered the deportation of more than 100,000 ethnic-Azerbaijanis from Armenia—the third expulsion. Even as late as 1970, a Marshal of the Soviet Union of ethnic-Armenian origin born in Ganja, Hovhannes “Ivan” Bagramyan, who is commonly considered a hero in Armenia and in the diaspora, continued to justify the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, and Stalin’s policies in general (i.e., well after his death).

The Last Expulsion (1987-1991)

The very first ethnic-Azerbaijanis refugees arrived from Armenia to Azerbaijan in 1986, but due to the expulsions from Meghri and Kafan, this became a flow of several hundreds of refugees by the end of 1987. The deportations increased to around 4,000 persons between 25 January and 23 February 1988 (i.e., before the bloody events in Sumgait). These were a series of violent events provoked by the Armenian mafia and by elements of the Communist Party and were used to distract from the expulsions and assassinations of ethnic-Azerbaijanis occurring contemporaneously in Armenia. One Armenian, Eduard Grigoryan, was sentenced to twelve years in prison by the Soviet authorities for his leading role in the killings (26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis). This was a remarkably lenient sentence, especially considering the standards of the USSR judicial system at the time, whereby no murderer convicted of more than three killings escaped the imposition of a death sentence.

Distorted and lacking-of-context news about Sumgait were constantly used to justify a rise in violence during 1988. Regardless, in 2015, Armenian journalist Mane Papyan revealed that,

since March 1988, there were attacks on Azerbaijani houses, as well as beating and robbery cases including at the workplaces. Azerbaijanis were easy to find on the local market since they comprised a large group of marketplace traders. There were cases when Armenians beat the Azerbaijani marketplace traders and stole their produce, such as fur or chicken. All those cases were registered by the [Soviet ethnic-Armenian] prosecutor [of Vanadzor, Grigori Shahverdyan] and his staff.

Additionally, according to these same documents, 11 ethnic-Azerbaijanis were assassinated in this small district just in November 1988. Violence was far from limited to this district. On 7 June 1988, 86 houses inhabited by ethnic-Azerbaijanis were destroyed in the city of Masis, located between Yerevan and the Turkish border. In Yerevan itself, the assaults started as early February 1988. The threats became systematic in April 1988, according to the testimony of Zaur Sadigbayli, an Armenia-born ethnic-Azerbaijani, who gives the figure of 217 violent deaths among the ethnic-Azerbaijanis of Armenia between 1987 and 1989.

In its 5 January 1989 edition, *Le Monde* reported on the forcible evacuation of Armenia’s ethnic-Azerbaijani villages and their fears. The article quoted an Armenian worker at a sovkhos (a Soviet state-owned farm) as saying “with aggressiveness,” that “they [the ethnic-Azerbaijanis] were here for three hundred years, [while] we were [here] for three thousand years. The Turks have left. They will not be back.” It is important to remember

that the Russian state estimated in 1900 that 1 million out of the 1.3 million ethnic-Armenians living throughout Transcaucasia at the time had either been resettled in the region recently or were descendants of those who had been resettled there from Iran and Anatolia since 1828—i.e., since the region came under the full control of the empire.

The final stage of ethnic cleansing ended where it started. On 8 August 1991, the population of the last ethnic-Azerbaijani village in Armenia, Nuvadi, in the district of Meghri, was expelled. The next day, the ARF assassinated seven Azerbaijani policemen in Karabakh and then, on the very next day, Valery Grigoriyan, an Armenian negotiator suspected of “weakness,” was killed—all these crimes were perpetrated with the aim of preventing the signing of an agreement securing the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast within Azerbaijan in exchange for maintaining its autonomy.

In sum, according to the registers of the Azerbaijan State Committee for Refugees, 196,845 ethnic-Azerbaijanis and Kurds took refuge in Azerbaijan (note that this number does not include, for example, those who immediately found private accommodation in Baku). The “Report on the Humanitarian Situation of the Refugees and Displaced Persons in Armenia and Azerbaijan,” presented by British MP David Atkinson to the Council of Europe in February 1995, using documents from the United Nations, gives the figure of “228,840 Azeris who fled Armenia” (this figure would seem to also include the Kurdish refugees). At that time, the population of Azerbaijan was around 7 million—including more than 650,000 internally displaced persons from Karabakh.

The obsession of the Armenian authorities with “racial” and religious “purity” did not stop here. Virtually all Doukhobors and Molokans—religious heresies that arose from the Russian Orthodox Church—were also expelled from Armenia to Russia between 1991 and 2007. Armenia’s Jewish population also decreased dramatically, from 5,000 in 1989 to a few dozen today due. This can largely be attributed to a particularly strident form of Armenian antisemitism.

The Refugees and the Peace Process with Armenia

Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, stated in October 2022:

There should be an internationally visible conversation between representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan about the rights and security of Armenians in the republic. The fact that we agree to separate the issue of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations from the solution of Karabakh Armenians’ problems doesn’t mean that we agree to remove from the agenda the issue of security and rights of Armenians in Karabakh.

The fact that Pashinyan speaks about “security and rights” of ethnic-Armenians is not shocking. The following month, Aliyev explained:

We are ready to talk about this with the Armenians living in Karabakh, but not with people like [Ruben] Vardanyan, sent by Moscow, who lined his pockets with billions stolen from the Russian people. He was sent there from Moscow with a very clear agenda.

Since this statement was made, Vardanyan was forced to resign from his position as “State Minister” of the self-proclaimed secessionist entity. As a result, the remaining red line for Baku is any reference to the status of this entity—implicitly or explicitly, in practice or in theory. That is, anything reminiscent of the pre-1991 situation, or from Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin (1878), which refers to the “safety” of the Anatolian Armenians, a seemingly harmless formulation, but one that has been used by Armenian nationalists to claim some sort of right of foreign intervention.

Consider, in this context, a statement made by Aliyev on 9 March 2023 on the issue of the Karabakh’s Armenians:

Azerbaijan is a country with a high level of religious and ethnic tolerance, where representatives of different ethnic groups and different confessions live in peace and dignity. So, I’m sure that the life of Armenians who live in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan will be much better than it was during the times of occupation.

With the foregoing in mind, is it not the case that the aims of the Armenian government ought to dictate that Pashinyan should take a conciliatory position on the issue of the return of ethnic-Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia—for instance, with a reconciliatory or at least tension-reducing statement on ethnic tolerance and equality in Armenia? Indeed, his credibility on the subject of minority rights could be only undermined in the case of his refusal to admit the injustice inflicted upon the Muslim (mostly ethnic-Azerbaijani) minority in Armenia, which was entirely ethnically cleansed between 1987 and 1991. Of course, the specific modalities need to be discussed—and the refugees themselves are aware of Armenia’s economic situation in both 1988 and today; but dismissing the legitimate demands of people that were expelled, often by physical violence, as “territorial claims” would be the opposite of a wise choice. It would also not help the ethnic-Armenians residing in that part of Karabakh currently within the Russian peacekeeping zone. On the contrary, at least the beginning of the opening of a dialogue between Yerevan and the ethnic-Azerbaijani refugee community would surely be considered by Baku to be a demonstration of goodwill. It would indicate that, while the political veneration (and statues) of Nzhdeh, Antranik, Dro, and others still remain, the Armenian perspective is changing. This, in turn, could only contribute to the ongoing peace process. Moreover, it would be perceived positively in Türkiye, where numerous Muslim refugees from Armenia fled in 1918-1920.

In this regard, a precedent might enlighten the importance of the issue. The People’s Republic of Bulgaria systematically persecuted its Turkish and Pomak minorities in 1984-1989, expelling those who resisted the official policy of forcible assimilation. After the collapse of the communist regime, this population was allowed to return, and eventually, in January 2012, the Bulgarian parliament adopted a resolution condemning this policy. The reaction of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was as follows:

We welcome the adoption yesterday [11 January 2012] by the National Assembly of our neighbor, friend, and ally, the Republic of Bulgaria, of a declaration condemning the forced assimilation policy implemented by the totalitarian regime against the Muslims of Bulgaria, including the ‘revival process’ which has been recorded in history as a crime against humanity.

It would be too optimistic to expect an identical settling of the issue in the Armenian context, at least in any foreseeable future; but the example of Bulgaria highlights how a Turkic state welcomes official and radical positive change of policy toward a previously persecuted ethnic minority.

The Art to Present Your Case

To defend the rights of the refugees from Armenia, the Azerbaijani side should take into consideration two factors. First, Yerevan ought to clearly announce that the implementation of the right of the refugees to return is purely about individual rights and nothing else, in order to make this policy acceptable to the Armenian public. In other words, Pashinyan has to deprive his revengeful, Kremlin-linked opposition of any serious appearance of the argument about the myth that “Baku wants the Zangezur.” It is important to underline that those who need to be convinced about the fate of the refugees are not primarily states belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Turkic States, or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation: the battle for public opinion is a battle for *Western* public opinion.

Here, it is necessary to deprive the fanatic elements of the Armenian diaspora from any appearance of argument about the imaginary territorial claims of Baku. On 23 February 2023 *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* published the following:

As if that were not enough, Mr. Aliyev invented another plan to completely take over Armenia’s territory, proclaiming it ‘Western Azerbaijan.’ Indeed, Mr. Aliyev, trying to rewrite history, concocted a theory that the current territory of Armenia had been part of ‘historic Azerbaijan,’ and that was enough reason for Baku to take over Armenia. It is trying actively to add to its landmass, also eyeing Iran’s Azerbaijan province.

The barely implicit call for an Armenian-Iranian front is self-explanatory. Extremism will persist, but the Azerbaijani side must be able to clearly demonstrate that such claims are false. As a result, the West would find itself in a better position to understand what the issue actually is.

In this regard, it must be emphasized that Baku’s references to “Western Azerbaijan” are purely historical ones (the Erivan Khanate had a population comprised of 80 percent Muslims in 1828) and an understandable reply to the pseudo-historical “arguments” of the Armenian side—nothing more. A conference that took place at Azerbaijan’s University of Languages in December 2022 is a good example of what is needed. Expelled Azerbaijanis told the audience (including representatives of Western embassies) about their childhood, the place where they were born, and the suffering they experienced from being deprived of any possibility to return to where they grew up. Other speakers, including the author of this IDD Analytic Policy Brief, presented the historical and legal aspects of the problem. Also in December 2022, Ulviyya Zulfikar, spokesperson of the Refugees’ Association, clearly stated to the Azerbaijani television channel CBC that their claims were all about their individual rights and excluded territorial claims.

It is important to conclude with a statement from the last ethnic-Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia. On the thirtieth anniversary of their expulsion, they stated:

In accordance with your call, the residents of Nuvadi village also want to return to their native lands on the principle of peaceful coexistence. This is our legal and historical right. All human rights documents fully affirm our right to return.