

THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF RETROSPECTIVE ETHNO-GEOPOLITICS

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Why Karabakh? Why has this small patch of land been a bone of contention in the Caucasus for so long (since the 19th century)?

The answers, not infrequently placed in political and ethnic contexts, are numerous:

- Historical memory of the various Caucasian nationalities about alleged ethnic insults;
- Antagonistic ethnopolitical contradictions due to the absence of ethnic complementarity among the main local ethnic groups;
- The clash between two major postulates of international law: the territorial integrity of states and the right of nations to self-determination;
- Territorial claims that develop into aggression;

- The geopolitically conditioned continuous conflict caused by the neo-imperial intentions of the main players on the world political scene;
- The opposing interests of the ethnic elites and clans that started the conflict in the first place to gain their own political and economic advantages, etc.

The list is much longer than that, but the questions and answers should not be taken for abstract theorizing; an adequate description of the nature and genesis of the Karabakh conflict affects, in the most direct way, whether it can be resolved at all. Everything that politicians and academics have said so far about the conflict can be reduced to several paradigms: historical, civilizational, ethnopolitical, and geopolitical.

Since the first three have been extensively covered in the academic literature, I selected the geopolitical context of the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict as the centerpiece of the present article. This analysis should not:

- First, be limited to the recent events and concentrate on the geopolitical collisions among the actors of current international politics;
- Second, be described in the terms of classical geopolitics (the regional context calls for internal and applied geopolitics);

- Third, ignore the ethnic (ethnopolitical) element invariably present in the seats of geopolitical tension of the so-called discontinuous belt of the Eurasian continent (to which the Caucasus belongs).

This explains why my analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict concentrates on retrospective ethnic geopolitics.

Ethno-Geopolitics: Is it a Paradigm of the 21st Century?

It is no great exaggeration to say that in the late 20th century the triad of geopolitics, ethnopolitics, and security served as the cornerstone of the most important approaches of political science to the world political processes unfolding before our eyes. Each of the categories taken separately looks at the highly varied and wide scope of the world political process through the prism of its dominant paradigm. Early in the 21st century the gap between the fairly complicated reality of international politics still in the process of formation and its basically mono-dimensional scholarly interpretation became too wide to be further ignored. This jolted the academic and political communities into the realization that they needed new, interdisciplinary approaches. The geopolitics/security combination and the varied interpretations of these terms have been extensively studied while many other possible combinations of the concepts described above have escaped equally close academic attention.

The above explains why the present author has already substantiated the need to bring a new poly-paradigmatic category—ethnopolitical security—into academic circulation to be used in relevant research programs.¹ Its usefulness, however, is of a limited nature: the paradigm related to the correlation between ethnopolitical factors and processes and the degree to which the vitally important interests of the key security entities are protected is necessarily limited to the present. The paradigm reaches its potential if the development trends in the sphere of ethnopolitical security are prolonged—this can be described as the paradigm's tremendous advantage. It is obvious, at the same time, that the paradigm leaves the genesis of these processes and their relation to the historical reality of any specific ethnic, territorial, or political expanse outside the framework of study.

This suggests a combination of two categories—ethnopolitics and geopolitics. In the 19th century, Friedrich Ratzel, the founding father of classical geopolitics, offered one of his key theses in his *Political Geography*, which so far has not been comprehensively understood. He wrote that the state emerged as an organism tied to a certain strip of land while its characteristics develop from the Volk (people) and the soil.² The one-sided geopolitical approach betrayed itself in pushing aside Ratzel's characteristics of the Volk for the sake of possible connections between politics and geographical factors.

¹ See: K. Allakhverdiev, "Ethnopolitical Dimension of National Security and Globalization Challenges," *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 1 (5), 2007, pp. 39-53; idem, "National Development Strategy and Ethnopolitical Security in the Age of Globalization," *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2008, pp. 14-31.

² See: A. Dugin, "Osnovy geopolitiki," available at [<http://www.arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/geopol1.htm#1>].

In the 20th century geopolitics, which gained wide popularity and acceptance, created the illusion that science had finally found the master key to all the enigmas of human history. As it drew to its end the 20th century suddenly demonstrated the very limited nature of the world's already firmly established geopolitical ideas when triumphant ethnic nationalism began tearing up its laws and schemes. The new reality called for the "characteristics of the Volk" that, in turn, encouraged ethnopolitical approaches. On the other hand, it turned out that the old geopolitical approaches were still very much alive, which suggested a hybrid in the form of a new paradigm—ethno-geopolitics.

It came into circulation in the 1990s through the efforts of the Russian theoreticians of Eurasianism. According to S. Smirnov, ethno-geopolitics is the sum-total of conceptions, criteria, models, and scholarly methods that allow one or several ethnic entities to join the structure of world civilization in the best possible way (within the limits of selected criteria) to address their political tasks.³ The author, however, failed to disclose which concepts, models, and methods help ethnic groups to blend into world civilization. The Russian academic community is discussing all sorts of interpretations of ethno-geopolitics in the context of statehood,⁴ security,⁵ etc. Russian academics have reached the classification stage. R. Amburtsev, for example, offers the following categories: *the proto-ethno-geopolitical paradigm* (N. Katkov's justification of "imperial ideology," D. Milyutin's strategic ideas, L. Tikhomirov's ideas about the state, P. Semenov-Tian-Shanskiy's conception of the most powerful territorial domains); *the ethno-geospatial paradigm* (works by L. Mechnikov and development of the conception of geographic determinism, historical works by S. Soloviev, and V. Lamanskiy and the conception of the three worlds of the Asian-European continent); and *the ethno-geopolitical paradigm* (N. Danilevskiy's ideology of pan-Slavism, K. Leontiev's infatuation with Byzantine legacy, P. Savitskiy's Eurasianism, and L. Gumilev's conception of ethnogenesis).⁶ In the West this paradigm remains practically unclaimed.

I am convinced that we have just reached the stage when the content of ethno-geopolitics can be more or less fully comprehended. On the whole, it deals with the subject range created by the ethnopolitical approach to the geopolitical expanse. In other words, the paradigm proceeds from the idea that the state, interpreted by geopolitics as a biological organism, does not stem directly from the geographic environment. Rather it is a result of the interaction between the ethnosocial organism and various territorial levels of the geo-expanse.

The above suggests that ethno-geopolitics as a scientific paradigm can study the historically determined ethnic forms in which the planet's geopolitical arrangement is manifested and within which the worldwide expanse becomes a subject.

Karabakh, the Geopolitical "Center" of the Central Caucasus

Much has been written about the Caucasus and its problems; a large number of academic works deal with its geopolitical identity. The most general approach reveals two large groups of such works.

³ See: S.N. Smirnov, "Kazachestvo i geopolitika," available at [<http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/books/volume/36311.htm>].

⁴ See: P.V. Chernov, *Rossia: etnopoliticheskie osnovy gosudarstvennosti*, Vostochnaia literature Publishers of RAS, Moscow, 1999.

⁵ See: V.A. Semenov, *Etnogeopoliticheskie aspekty bezopasnosti Rossii*, RAGS Rus, Moscow, 1998.

⁶ See: R.A. Amburtsev, "Etnopoliticheskaia paradigma v rossiiskoy geopoliticheskoy mysli," available at [http://politreg.pu.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=37].

The first deals with the Caucasus' geopolitical identity; the second poses the question of whether the Caucasus has independent geopolitics, or, in other words, is it an object or a subject of geopolitical impact? This question permits a dual answer: "The Caucasus is a single geopolitical system, the stability of which can be ensured only through political unity of all its peoples. This unity existed within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—today we should look for new forms of and new roads toward political integration."⁷

At the same time, the very idea of the Caucasian geopolitical organism demands that we should identify its key zone. Political realities and ethnopolitical preferences push those in search of the "center" across the entire region. One of the latest attempts of this sort was made by prominent Russian researcher of ethnopolitics R. Abdulatipov, who in his letter to the organizers of regional scientific conference Daghestan on Contemporary Geopolitics of Russia (25 September, 2008) wrote: "Those who rule Daghestan dominate the Caucasus."⁸

To clarify the issue let us turn to the works of the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) which offer a novel approach to the geopolitical structures of Eurasia as a whole and the Caucasian region in particular:

- Central Eurasia with its three sub-regions (Central Asia, the Central Caucasus, and Central Europe) is the natural center of the Eurasian continent;
- The Central Caucasus is the key zone of Central Eurasia;
- The Central Caucasus is the key zone of the Caucasian geopolitical organism that consists of three parts—the Northern Caucasus (the Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation), the Central Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia), and the Southern Caucasus (the parts of Turkey bordering on Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia [the Southwestern Caucasus] and the northwestern ostan of Iran [the Southeastern Caucasus]).⁹

The logic of the above suggests that since the Central Caucasus is the "heartland" of the Greater Caucasus, the center of the Central Caucasus should be found in a certain area between its three component parts (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) as three independent entities of the system of international relations. This is a fairly vast space with several core zones. I am convinced that Karabakh is one, and the most important, of the core zones. As a geo-expanse Karabakh has at least three very important features.

- First, it is the center of the Central Caucasus and is relatively isolated from the rest of it by its natural and geographic conditions.
- Second, the nature of the core offers strategic control over the region's perimeter. In more or less recent military-political history the geopolitical importance of Karabakh came to the fore during the famous march of Iranian Shah Aga Muhammad Qajar to the Caucasus in 1795-1796. Having failed, after two attempts to capture Karabakh and Shusha, its center, the shah eventually lost all his conquests (most of the Azeri lands and a large part of Georgia along with Tbilisi), which had cost a multitude of lives.
- Third, at all times the military-strategic potential of structuring the political expanse attracted regional actors wishing to capture the "central spot." This is best illustrated by the Kurek-

⁷ L.S. Ruban, "Geopoliticheskaia situatsia na Kavkaze," IREX. *Polemika* electronic journal, Issue 8, available at [www.irex.ru/press/pub/polemika/08/rub1].

⁸ See: *Regionalny tsentr etnopoliticheskikh issledovaniy priglashaet k uchastii v konferentsii "Daghestan v sovremennoy geopolitike Rossii,"* available at [http://www.riadagestan.ru/news/2008/09/11/71484/], 11 September, 2008.

⁹ See: E. Ismailov, V. Papava, *The Central Caucasus: Essays on Geopolitical Economy*, CA&CC Press, Stockholm, 2006, p. 12; E. Ismailov, "Central Eurasia: Its Geopolitical Function in the 21st Century," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (50), 2008, pp. 7-8.

chai Peace Treaty of 1805 between the Russian Empire and the Karabakh Khanate that ushered in the period of Russia's domination over the larger part of the Central Caucasian region.

Besides the geostrategic, historical, and military-political arguments there are also sociocultural, ethnological, and political factors that I leave for other researchers to investigate. On the whole, they will undoubtedly be in line with one of the main theses of this work, namely, that Karabakh is one of the geopolitical cores of the Central Caucasus. Those who captured and held it also held the keys to the region.

One may ask with good reason: where is the ethnic component proper, without which it would be impossible to discuss the suggested ethno-geopolitical approach and the absence of which would have deprived the article of its meaning? It should be said that any idea and any doctrine can be pushed to the extremes. Ethno-geopolitics has had its share of this affliction: certain authors have driven the idea to absurdity by following the slogan "Ethno-geopolitics: Back to the Caves!"¹⁰ to the letter. I regret to say that the ordinary people and even certain academics entertain the idea that the remains of pre-historic humans found all over the world belong to the ancestors of those who now live in these areas. This means that contemporary Italians inherited their features from the Grimaldians; the Germans from the Neanderthals, the French from the Cro-Magnons, and the Georgians from the Udabno-pithecs. This nationalization of sorts of pre-historic people is developing into incontestable proof of the right of any given nation to a given territory.

This is the case of replacement of one science (paleoanthropology) with another (ethnology) with the good prospect of wide ethnopolitical generalizations. It seems, however, that in the context of the retrospective ethno-geopolitical approach it is much more important to find out how the geopolitical status and the parameters of any given region shape historical, political, and economic specifics and, on the whole, the destinies of the local nation.

In this way, combining the geopolitical and ethnopolitical into one paradigm allows us to retreat from the myth about the mental incompatibility of the Azeri and Armenian people and concentrate on the deep-seated geopolitical relations that dominate the Karabakh sub-region. For several centuries their ethnopolitical manifestations have been transforming Karabakh into an area of ethnic confrontation. The description of Karabakh as an ethno-geopolitical crossroads of sorts largely explains the energy and bitterness of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the first and the longest of the post-Soviet conflicts.

Ethno-Geopolitical Aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict as Seen from the 18th-Early 20th Centuries

The Armenian-Azeri conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh goes back to three main reckoning points of the past that can be described as follows:

- the late 1980s—*narrow ethnopolitical interpretation of the problem*;
- between 1918 and 1923—*broad ethnopolitical interpretation*;

¹⁰ N.Ya. Chuksin, "Etnogeopolitika: nazad, v peshchery?" available at [http://zhurnal.lib.ru/c/chuksin_n_j/ethnogeo_1.shtml].

- the Russo-Iranian war of 1826-1828 and the period immediately after it when the first large wave of Armenian migrants from Persia and the Ottoman Empire reached the Caucasus—*ethno-historical interpretation*.

The former two periods are relatively clear from the chronological and conceptual point of view while the third (ethno-historical) interpretation calls for clarification. The very limited interest in ethnic history does not promise a real outburst of scholarly publications anytime soon. So far the studies of the basic conceptions of interconnection of the people's environment and its history have not yet become systemic. It is not enough and hardly promising in the scholarly-methodological respect to simply register the fact of such an interconnection. The living space (Lebensraum) and history of any nation are formed not only by the endogenous factors of the given territory but also by the exogenous, and often, dominating influence of the neighboring territories.

This means that the history of the conflict in the Karabakh geopolitical (not ethnopolitical) core should be related to an earlier period, namely, to the 18th century when three empires (the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian) clashed for domination in the Caucasus. Russian geopolitical thought regarded the Caucasus as the only corridor-expanse through which the empire could reach its natural geopolitical limits. The appetites befitted those of a great power: "With the ice of the Arctic Ocean behind it, with the right flank abutting on the semi-closed Baltic Sea and the German and Austrian possessions, and the left flank ending at the barely navigable parts of the Pacific the Great Power had not three, as was commonly believed here, but one front. Turned to the south it stretched from the mouth of the Danube to Kamchatka. The front's center looked at the deserts of Mongolia and Eastern Turkestan which means that while *moving to the south* we should not have pressed along the entire front but moved forward in flanks, mainly the right flank, closest to the center of state power. *By advancing in this way across the Black Sea and the Caucasus to the Mediterranean and across Central Asia to the Persian Gulf* we stood a chance of reaching the greatest of the world's trade routes—the Suez."¹¹

This means that it was not enough to conquer Russia—it had to be developed. Back in the 1780s G. Potemkin, head commander of the Russian troops in the Caucasus, was nurturing the project of so-called Greater Albania, to be realized first in Karabakh and Irevan. In 1787 the local Christian potentates (the Albanian meliks of Karabakh), together with Georgian czar Irakli II and Russian military under Colonel Burnashov, organized a crusade of sorts against Karabakh. The joint forces reached Ganja where they had to stop because of the unfolding Russian-Turkey War of 1787-1791.

It was some time later that Russia realized its geopolitical designs in the course of the Russo-Iranian War of 1804-1813 when the Azeri khanates received the first systemic blow in the form of the Kurekchai Treaty of 1805, which made Russia patron of the Karabakh Khanate. The treaty (patterned on the Treaty of Georgievsk of 1801 with Georgia) led to a chain of similar agreements with the other Azeri khanates.

It should be clearly stated that in this (and all other wars in the Caucasus, for this matter) Russia pursued its own geopolitical aims. The Kurekchai Treaty, for example, ignored all the ethnopolitical issues (related to the Christian Albanian population, to say nothing of the local Armenians). In fact, the documents (Russian documents included) contain no mention of any requests from the Armenian population. Nothing is said about Nagorno-Karabakh as a special historical and ethnographic region. This means that in the early 19th century there was neither Armenian, nor Nagorno-Karabakh, nor any other ethnopolitical questions. The only outstanding question was formulated as the "Karabakh knot," a key to sustainable political control over the Caucasus. How did this question develop into an ethnopolitical question?

¹¹ E.A. Vandam, *Geopolitika i geostrategia*, Moscow, 2002, pp. 30-31.

The answer is found in the military-political situation as it had developed by the first quarter of the 19th century in the Caucasus. It differed radically from that of the previous century. Russia learned the lessons of its geopolitical defeat of the 1730s when it lost everything that Peter the Great had acquired in his time mainly because it lacked a reliable ethno-confessional basis. The military command of the Muslim part of the Caucasian Territory, which Russia regarded as expedient, did not guarantee that the local people would side with Russia in the event of military clashes with the traditional rivals (the Ottoman Empire and Iran). In fact the Great Game, Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the leading powers for domination in Central Asia and India, was looming in the horizon. This called for a reliable rear and a springboard that, in turn, demanded radical ethno-demographic changes in the potential confrontation zones. In other words, in the 19th century Russia's active geopolitics called for matching ethnopolitics to achieve the desirable ethno-demographic context in the key zones of the already conquered territories. The Russian Empire was actually doing very much the same throughout the 19th century everywhere: in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, the Northern Caucasus, and Abkhazia), Malorossia, the Crimea, and Central Asia. The Russian authorities relied on the classical formula: they deported the locals and brought in compact groups of different confessions and different ethnic affiliation from the empire's inner regions and from abroad.

In the Caucasus Russia first tested the new instrument of its ethno-geopolitics in the "central point," Karabakh. The Russia administration ordered the Description of the Karabakh Province according to which 1,559 (8.4 percent) of the 18,563 families registered by the Russian administration in 1823 in Karabakh belonged to the Christian population of the melikstvos. One can surmise that by that time the Russians had already been working on improving the results. This was done in the course of the Russo-Iranian War of 1826-1828: in 1828-1830, 40 thousand Armenians from Iran and 84,600 Armenians from Turkey were moved to the Elizavetpol (Ganja) and Irevan gubernias, of which Karabakh was part.¹² Nicholas I's decree of 21 March, 1828, which said in part: "The Erivan and Nakhchivan khanates, which were joined to Russia, should be called the Armenian region in future in all documents,"¹³ signified that Russia was set on changing the ethno-geopolitical map of the Caucasus and had made the first toponymic change, replete with political implications.

Those who tend to reduce the Karabakh conflict to the Armenians' intention to seize the land of their neighbors are obviously oversimplifying the situation. Such intentions do exist,¹⁴ which means that the historical mythologemes (memory) of a small nation might feed national ideas, genuine or false ethnonational interests, aims, and programs. Ethnopolitical complications in the Caucasus invariably cropped up if and when the national ideas coincided with the axis of the geopolitical "beam" of one of the world centers of power.

The Armenians' future was sealed: the geopolitical expansion of Russian autocracy in the 18th and 19th centuries made them an ethnopolitical factor, a sort of informational and ideological underpinning of a new balance of forces in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, as well as in the Greater Middle East. This was probably what Nikolai Trubetskoy had in mind when he wrote that the Armenians would forever remain Russia-oriented no matter who ruled it.¹⁵

It would be wrong to think that the so-called Armenian question was a uniquely Caucasian phenomenon. For many centuries Russia moved in the main directions of its continental geopolitics under the same messianic slogan: protection of Orthodox Christians and Russians:

¹² See: N.N. Shavrov, *Novaia ugroza russkomu delu v Zakavkazie. Predstoiashchaia rasprodazha Mugani inorodtsam*, Elm Publishers, Baku, 1990, pp. 63-65 (reprint from the St. Petersburg edition of 1911).

¹³ State Central Historical Archives of the Russian Federation, rec. gr. 880, inv. 5, f. 389, sheets 18rev.

¹⁴ This is testified by the program documents of the Dashnaksutiun Party: "A united Armenia should include the Armenian lands mentioned in the Treaty of Sèvres as well as the Nakhchivan, Akhalkalaki, and Karabakh regions" (*Program of the Armenian Revolutionary Dashnaksutiun Federation*, Erevan, 1992, p. 18).

¹⁵ See: N.S. Trubetskoy, "O narodakh Kavkaza," available at [http://www.irs-az.com/archive/gen/n7/n7_9.htm].

- The Kazan Khanate in the 16th century and the Bukhara, Khiva, Kokand, and other Central Asian khanates in the 19th century were conquered to liberate the Russian slaves;
- The so-called reunification of Ukraine and Russia in the 17th century and joining Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia in the late 18th century were aimed at delivering the Slavs from Polish oppression;
- The Caspian march of Peter the Great in 1722-1723, when he conquered the western Caspian coast up to Gilan in Iran, was undertaken to protect the interests and safety of Russian merchants;
- The Crimean War of 1853-1856 was waged to ensure the safety of Russian pilgrims to the Palestinian holy places;
- The Balkan War of 1877-1878 liberated the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire, etc.

This list, which illustrates the information and ideological justification of Russia's practical geopolitics, can be extended into 20th century. Here, however, I deem it necessary to concentrate on the specifics of Russia's ethno-geopolitics in the Caucasus. There were two important points.

- First, "to a certain extent the Armenian question was an international issue;"¹⁶ it was never tied to short-term interests but was a permanent factor of Russia's geopolitics.
- Second, by the early 20th century the preferences of all sorts (administrative, career, territorial, financial, etc.) that the czarist authorities extended to the local Armenian population had radically changed Caucasian geohistory—within a short period of time the nation, most of whom descended from migrants, came to the fore economically and politically.

The above suggests that the period between the latter half of the 18th and early 20th centuries can be divided into two shorter periods.

- At the first stage, which can be described as *geopolitical* and was completed by the late 1820s, the Russian Empire mastered the Caucasus geopolitically. This explains why at first the Nagorno-Karabakh knot displayed no endogenous (ethnonational) factors.
- The second, *ethno-geopolitical*, stage, which began in 1828 and ended together with the end of the Russian Empire, can be described as an absolutely new stage when the Karabakh conflict betrayed itself and unfolded and when the task of becoming entrenched in the Caucasus and geopolitical expansion made it necessary to deliberately fan the so far non-existent ethnic tension. In fact, the cause and effect of the Karabakh conflict—the "explosive ethnopolitical filling" of a key zone—can be described as Russia's response to the sum-total of military-political circumstances in the Caucasus and the entire Near and Middle East.

The Ethno-Geopolitical Aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the 20th Century

The main stages of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the 20th century are well known:

- The war for Karabakh of 1918-1920 between the newly formed states—the Ararat (Armenian) Republic and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic—which appeared after the Russian Empire fell apart;

¹⁶ See: N.S. Trubetskoy, "O narodakh Kavkaza," available at [http://www.irs-az.com/archive/gen/n7/n7_9.htm].

- The bitter political struggle and struggle inside the Communist party over the region when Soviet power was established in the Caucasus. It ended with the formation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR) within Azerbaijan in 1923;
- Latent competition that had been going on unabated throughout the entire life of the Soviet Union; in the late 1980s it developed into an open political and armed confrontation.

These facts are well known yet their interpretations widely vary. There are certain questions that refuse to fit into a simple scheme: in the 1920s the Bolsheviks made a historical error by refusing to settle the issue in favor of either Armenia or Azerbaijan. Let's try to sort things out.

Early in the 1920s there were two plans of state-territorial arrangements and unification of the Soviet republics: Stalin's plan under which the republics should have become parts of the R.S.F.S.R. as its autonomous units and Lenin's plan of a Union state. In December 1922 it was Lenin's plan that was realized. Historians put a full stop here and move onto the next chapter called The Soviet Union in 1922-1991, leaving several questions behind.

- *Question No. 1:* Why did Stalin and other prominent party functionaries accept, without serious discussion, conferences, etc., the plan suggested by a seriously ill leader who for some time had been isolated from the party?
- *Question No. 2:* Why did Stalin never return to his plan of administrative arrangement when his personal grip on the country was firm enough? By the 1930s the Soviet state was a union for purely formal reasons. In fact, it was a rigidly centralized and vertically arranged unitary state. Stalin was obviously aware of the danger of having 15 Union republics and scores of autonomies scattered across the country. This was a delayed action bomb.

The answer to these questions can be found in the ideological convictions of Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, as well as of other repressed top Bolshevik functionaries who had survived and were looking ahead to the "worldwide triumph of Communism," the road to which lay through the "fire of worldwide revolution." It was hardly possible and politically incorrect to integrate these countries the revolution had removed from world capitalism into the "socialist brotherhood" by making them part of the Russian Federation. The situation called for a much more attractive ideological wrapping to make the loss of sovereignty at least formally acceptable as a result of a victorious revolution worldwide.

It seems that Stalin and his cronies easily dropped and never revived the project of the autonomies (expect to deal with domestic political problems) because the alternative was much more consistent from the point of view of Marxism and much more ethno-geopolitically universal as a formula of world restructuring. From the very beginning the Soviet project was intended as a global ethno-geopolitical one within which "unification of all countries and peoples on the class basis" as the world historical mission of communism could have been carried out. This means that the inner political rationality of ethnic state-building was sacrificed to the global ethno-geopolitical future. This is confirmed by the experience of national state-building in the 1920s-1930s in Central Asia: the territories included in the R.S.F.S.R. as autonomous republics (Kazakhstan and Kirghizia) and the Turkestan S.S.R. became Union republics: the Uzbek and Turkmen republics (1924), the Tajik republic (1929), and the Kazakh and Kirghiz republics (1936).

It should be said here that the ethno-geopolitical administration inside the country in the sphere of national state-building took extremely ugly forms. Ethnopolitical mines were scattered across the country depending on how the Center assessed the regions' reliability. Different ethnic groups received different types of autonomies: ethnic (some of the ethnic groups, the Ossets for example, were granted two autonomies), religious (Ajaria), territorial (Nakhchivan), ethno-territorial (Daghestan), and political (the autonomous unit of the Volga Germans).

This highly arbitrary national-state arrangement suggests a logical question: Why did Nagorno-Karabakh remain part of Azerbaijan in the 1920s and later and was never transferred to the Armenian S.S.R.? Everyone knows that in the Russian Empire, during Soviet power, and in the post-Soviet period the Armenian diaspora and the Armenian lobby of Russia were and remain highly influential. In 1921-1923 the Azeris represented by one person (Nariman Narimanov) were outnumbered by Armenians in the corridors of power. It seems unlikely that he could single-handedly tip the balance and persuade the top Bolshevik leaders (Stalin, Orjonikidze, Enukidze, Mirzoian, and others) to stick to the status quo. It is even less probable that the Transcaucasian Territorial Committee of ARCP(B) heeded the geographic, economic, and demographic arguments and references to historical injustice to accept a compromise that would leave Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. The answer should be sought in several ethno-geopolitical possibilities.

- *Scenario No. 1.* Nagorno-Karabakh would not become an autonomous unit but rather part of the administrative-territorial division of Azerbaijan. This alternative was rejected because it deprived the Center of its chance to the imperial resource of all times: “Divide and rule.” In the case of Azerbaijan, which bordered on Muslim states (Turkey and Iran), it was especially important.
- *Scenario No. 2.* The mountainous part of Karabakh could have been transferred to Armenia, but Stalin and even the Armenian Bolsheviks in the top echelons of power (Anastas Mikoian) were well aware that Armenian control over Karabakh might produce highly negative and hard to predict results, such as an upsurge in ethno-nationalism and destabilization of the military-political situation in the region and around it.
- *Scenario No. 3.* Nagorno-Karabakh could remain within Azerbaijan as a national autonomy. The ethno-geopolitical advantages were obvious: the problem would be frozen from the ethno-political and institutional viewpoints; by the same token, both republics would be “bridled.” From that time on, throughout the entire stretch of Soviet history, Azerbaijan feared that the decision might be revised while Armenia hoped that it would be revised.
- Scenario No. 3 was performed with certain modifications: on the one hand, the region, a single unit in the natural-geographic, economic, and cultural respects, was, somewhat artificially, divided into lower (valley) and upper (mountainous) parts. On the other hand, the center moved away from its original intention to grant ethnic autonomy for the sake of the ethno-territorial principle. On 7 July, 1923, when the area finally acquired its administrative status, the planned “Armenian National Region” was abandoned for the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region.¹⁷

The next 65 years demonstrated that the decree had triggered a tug of war between the two republics.¹⁸ There are any number of facts that testify that in this type of political struggle the “referees” from the Center were with the Armenians:

- the Nakhchivan area was rapidly developing into an enclave when in 1921 the Transcaucasian Central Executive Committee transferred the Azeri-populated Zangezour uezd¹⁹ and, some time later, in 1929, the Megri District of the Zangilan uezd of the Azerbaijan S.S.R. to Armenia;

¹⁷ Decree of the Azerbaijanian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets “On Institution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region,” 7 July, 1923 (see: *K istorii obrazovaniia Nagorno-Karabakhskoy avtonomnoy oblasti Azerbaidzhanskoy SSSR. 1918-1925. Dokumenty i materialy*, Azerneshr, Baku, 1989, pp. 152-153).

¹⁸ Armenian authors, too, point to the geopolitical roots of the conflict (see: L. Chorbajian, P. Donabedian, C. Muftafian, *The Caucasian Knot. The History and Geo-politics of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Zed Press, London, New Jersey, 1994).

¹⁹ See: M. Ismaylov, E. Tokarzhovski, *Pravda i domysly. Konflikt v Nagornom Karabakhe*, Baku, 1990, p. 28.

- nearly half a million Azeris who lived in compact groups in Armenia were deprived of even cultural autonomy;
- Numerous small territorial concessions to the neighbors gradually bled Azerbaijan white;²⁰
- In 1948-1953, between 150 and 200 thousand Azeris were forced to move from Armenia to the inland regions of Azerbaijan to make Armenia a monoethnic republic.²¹

Nagorno-Karabakh was rapidly becoming “more Armenian,” etc.

In this way, the ethnic stratification of the Caucasus started by the Russian Empire was given a new lease of life and new instruments of political pressure under Soviet power: united ethnosocial organisms were divided into political entities; a process that can be described as ethnic registration was carried out with the aim of establishing a hierarchy of state and quasi-state structures while administrative borders remained flexible, etc. The transborder settlement pattern of ethnic groups was distorted by the network of administrative borders superimposed on it. This created a powerful conflict potential in the ethnically patchy and politically differentiated region. The resultant geostructure of the Caucasus did not emerge by chance: it was tuned to the domestic and foreign tasks of Soviet ethno-geopolitics. This is confirmed by prominent student of the Caucasus S.E. Cornell who believes that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is part of global Eurasian geopolitics.²² To my mind restructuring of the Caucasian geo-expanse began in Karabakh through a process that exploited the ethnoterritorial possibilities presented by the ethnoterritorial factor and the numerous preferences employed to create a desirable ethnopolitical and geopolitical situation.

C o n c l u s i o n

The 250-year-long struggle for Karabakh (1748-1998) can be divided into several major periods each with a sum-total of geopolitical, regional, inter-state, social, and ethnic relations of its own expressed in corresponding paradigms.

- The *first stage* (1747-1827)—70 years of geopolitical struggle for Karabakh between the main regional actors of the time: the Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian empires. At that time, the ethnic factor in the Caucasus, and Karabakh as its part, was of secondary importance, overshadowed by geopolitical expediency.
- The *second stage* (1828-1917)—90 years of Russia’s imperial ethno-geopolitics. The Russian Empire strove to change the ethnic map of the Caucasus, to make it a toehold and a corridor to be used in the Great Game unfolding in the Eurasian expanse. The course toward forced change of the ethnic composition of the population of a given territory became state policy in the key zones of the Caucasus, of which Karabakh was one. Collapse of the Russian Empire did not stop the process. It intensified it and developed into an armed struggle (1918-1920).

²⁰ Between 1920 and 1991 the territory of Azerbaijan shrank from the 114 thousand sq. km it had as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic to 86.6 thousand sq. km.

²¹ See: Postanovlenie Soveta Ministrov SSSR No. 4083 ot 23 dekabria 1947 goda “O pereselenii kolkhoznikov i drugogo azerbajjanskogo naselenia iz Armianskoy SSR v Kura-Araksinskuiu nizmennost Azerbaidzhanskoy SSR,” TsCI MID AR Archives; Postanovlenie Soveta Ministrov SSSR No. 754 ot 10 marta 1948 goda “O meropriatiakh po pereseleniiu kolkhoznikov i drugogo azerbaidzhanskogo naselenia iz Armianskoy SSR v Kura-Araksinskuiu nizmennost Azerbaidzhanskoy SSR,” TsCI MID AR Archives.

²² See: S.E. Cornell, “Nagorno-Karabakh in Eurasian Geopolitics,” in: *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Uppsala University, 1999, pp. 142-148.

- The *third stage* (1920-1990)—70 years of Soviet ethno-geopolitics. The Communist Party, which had the country under its thumb, used ethnopolitical processes (and ethnoterritorial disputes in particular) as an instrument of political control in all parts of the vast country. The mounting systemic stagnation, however, deprived the Soviet country of any prospects; the geopolitical component of its ethno-geopolitics was gradually losing its relevance, thus bringing to the fore the ethnopolitical sides of the numerous contradictions. By a quirk of fate, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, one of the first projects of Soviet socialist and national politics, became the first step toward the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the beginning of the end.

The death of the Soviet Union buried the hopes of those who counted on the “crawling annexation” of Azeri territory and opened the road to the use of force. Nagorno-Karabakh became de facto part of Armenia (its quasi-statehood can dupe no one) as a result of aggression.²³

A retrospective analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has revealed three stages: geopolitical, ethno-geopolitical, and ethnopolitical. It should be said that the third one, which dominates today, does not exclude the possibility of all the other stages. More than that: the leading world and regional powers are deliberately fanning and exploiting ethnic conflicts (as well as ethnopolitical factors as a whole) to achieve their geopolitical aims: this will not bury ethno-geopolitics in the near future.

²³ In 1993 the U.N. Security Council adopted four resolutions that called for the cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of the occupying forces from the territories of the Azerbaijan Republic (see: Resolutions of the U.N. Security Council No. 822 of 22 April; No. 853 of 30 July; No. 874 of 23 September, No. 844 of 12 November).