

War on Karabakh: Between Stories and the Truth

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I recently read an article “Ambivalence to Things *Armenian* in Middle Eastern Studies and the War on Artsakh in 2020” by Bedros Der Matossian, an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, published by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.[\[1\]](#) Undoubtedly, there are several interesting points in the article. The author’s arguments about the evolution of Armenian studies and the state of Armenian historiography in the Middle East from the point of view of *area studies* are particularly interesting. However, there are a number of points in the article with which I disagree and which, in my opinion, contradict historical facts. I would like to express my opinion and thoughts on these issues.

The author writes: “On July 5, 1921, as part of his imperial policy of ‘divide and conquer,’ Joseph Stalin decided to assign Karabagh to Soviet Azerbaijan as a semi-autonomous region, defying the will of the majority of the population to be integrated into the newly formed Soviet Republic of Armenia.”[\[2\]](#) As a researcher who has worked with the corresponding archive documents, I can say that Der Matossian is incorrect. Firstly, who was Joseph Stalin in 1921? In those years, he held the post of People’s Commissar of Nationalities and could not determine on his own any such imperial policy of “divide and conquer.” Secondly, and even more importantly, it is clear from Der Matossian’s words that allegedly before 5 July 1921, Nagorno-Karabakh was part of Armenia, and on 5 July, Stalin arrived at a meeting of the Caucasian Bureau and handed it over to Azerbaijan. However historical facts and archival documents prove that the Nagorno-Karabakh region (NKA0) has never been part of any declared Armenian state, which includes both the First Armenian Republic (1918-1920)

and Soviet Armenia (1920-1991). After the Red Army occupied Azerbaijan on April 28, 1920, Armenians intensified their claims to the mountainous part of Karabakh. At this time, on July 10, 1920, the prominent Caucasus Bolsheviks Nariman Narimanov (Azeri), Budu Mdivani (Georgian), Anastas Mikoian (Armenian), Victor Naneishvili (Georgian), and members of the council of war of the 11th Red Army Iakov Vesnik, Mikhail Levandovskii, and Boris Mikhailov wrote a letter to Moscow – to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks): “We consider it our duty to convey our unanimous view on the matter of Zangezur and Karabagh. The point is that the talks with Armenia tend to adopt an interim decision, which is contrary to the interests of revolution in the Caucasus. Note that under the Musavat government [1918-1920], Karabagh was an integral part of Azerbaijan.”^[3]

Why do Armenian historians, including Der Matossian, pin the inclusion of the Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan on Stalin? Firstly, this accusation is related to the first open discussions of Stalin’s crimes during the breakdown of the USSR. During this time, Armenians had the opportunity, as did many other nationalities in the Soviet Union, to present themselves as victims of the Stalin regime not only on an individual level, but also on a national one. Against this backdrop, they alleged that Stalin was also guilty of wronging Armenians by giving Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Seemingly, the Armenian researchers who have spoken of *Stalin’s fabrication* in recent years have not seen Protocols No. 11 and 12 of the plenums of the Caucasus Bureau held on 4-5 July 1921.^[4] They repeat the thesis that Stalin gave Karabakh to Azerbaijan, a thesis invented by Armenian historians 30-35 years ago, solely because of the political dispute over the region since the late 1980s. For example, they write that at a meeting chaired by Stalin, Nagorno-Karabakh was taken from Armenia and given to Azerbaijan. After all, Stalin was not a member of the Caucasus Bureau, he did not have the right to vote in its plenums or to make proposals. How could he lead a meeting of

an organization if he was not a member? The plenum did not *transfer*, but rather *retained* the Mountainous region of Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan as it had been under the first Azerbaijani republic.

Why did Stalin come to Tbilisi in early July 1921? – At that time, Stalin was vacationing in the northern Caucasian city of Nalchik. His sudden visit to Tbilisi was not related to the discussion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Moscow was dissatisfied with the chairman of the Georgian Revolutionary Committee, Filipp Makharadze, who at the time was trying to assert independence from the Bolshevik Central Committee. Hence, Stalin came to Tbilisi to replace him with the more obedient Budu Mdivani. As soon as the plenum of the Caucasus Bureau ended on July 7, this issue was brought to the attention of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, and the change was implemented. In other words, Stalin's *sudden* visit to Tbilisi had nothing to do with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.^[5]

Additionally, while Nagorno-Karabakh was placed in Soviet Azerbaijan, in 1923, the region was made an autonomous oblast within Azerbaijan because of its large Armenian population. This right was not given to the twice as many Azerbaijanis who lived compactly in Soviet Armenia.

Professor Der Matossian writes that, “in the succeeding six decades, Armenians of the region suffered continuous discrimination, displacement, and economic underdevelopment by successive Azerbaijani governments.”^[6] First of all, the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state. Not only the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh suffered from the restriction of national rights and freedoms on the basis of communist ideology, but also all national Soviet republics, including the Azerbaijani and Armenian Soviet republics.

Secondly, there were 5 subjects with the status of an autonomous region in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist

Republic. The official status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region within Azerbaijan exceeded the rights of those similar 5 autonomous regions within Russia. For example, the administrative-territorial structure of Nagorno-Karabakh could not be changed without the consent of the regional council. However, the aforementioned similar autonomous entities did not have such a right.

In reply to Der Matossian's claim that "Armenians of the region suffered continuous ... economic underdevelopment by successive Azerbaijani governments,"^[7] we can say that, in general, the Soviet Union was an economically backward country.^[8] But in Soviet conditions, the economic situation of Nagorno-Karabakh was not lower than the average Soviet indicators. It was higher than the average economic indicators of Azerbaijan and Armenia.^[9] For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, industry occupied a leading place in the economy of the region. Over these two decades, its production volume more than tripled. The food industry, light industry, and mechanical engineering, which together accounted for more than 80% of industrial production in the late 80s, were developed with particular intensity. This indicator was twice as high as that of other regions of Azerbaijan. Let us consider, for example, the comparative indicators of the social development of the NKA0 before the 1988 event. The provision of hospital beds for 10 thousand people in Azerbaijan was 97,7, in Armenia 86,2, and in Nagorno-Karabakh was 101,7; the provision of medical personnel per 10 thousand people was 93,5, 93,5, and 122,7, respectively; the number of clubs per 10 thousand people 5,3, 8, and 15, respectively; The number of movie installations per 10 thousand people 3, 2,9, and 11,2, respectively; housing stock per inhabitant (sq.m.) 10,9, 13,7, and 14,6, respectively.^[10]

According to Der Matossian, "after Stalin's death in 1953, the Armenians of Karabakh began to voice their discontent, once

more demanding unification with Armenia or Russia.”^[11] This process did not begin after Stalin’s death, but after the criticism of the cult of Stalin’s personality with Khrushchev’s Secret Speech in 1956. The petition that Professor Der Matossian considers to be sent in 1963 was most likely sent to Nikita Khrushchev by Armenians of Karabakh not in 1963, but in 1961.

The content of the template text of the petition was as follows: “To comrade Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev. We, the residents of the village of _____ of the Hadrut district of Nagorno-Karabakh, look forward to the day of the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. This is our dream. We are confident that our dear, beloved Nikita Khrushchev and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union will do this.”^[12] Instructions were received from Yerevan to Nagorno-Karabakh on the need to include in the petition text a proposal to join the region to the RSFSR if it was not permitted to join Armenia.^[13] However, despite concerns of the Azerbaijani leadership about the petition drive, Khrushchev’s visit to Armenia in May 1961 passed without any consequences for Azerbaijan.

Another similar appeal was sent not in 1967 as Der Matossian mistakenly believes, but in 1966, to the government of Soviet Armenia and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Except Armenians of Karabakh, representatives of the intelligentsia, scientists and cultural figures of Armenia sent a request to the Central Committee of the CPSU addressed to the XXIII Congress of the CPSU, which took place from 29 March to 6 April 1966, asking for the incorporation of Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia. On 30 September 1966, Anton Kochinyan, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, and Badal Muradyan, Chairman of the Government of the Armenian SSR, sent a joint letter to Soviet leadership:

In our opinion, it would be expedient to consider and resolve

positively the issue of the transfer of Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian SSR. In the event of the transfer, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic could maintain its autonomy within the Armenian SSR on the territory of which it would be located. However, if the return of Nakhchivan to the Armenian SSR is associated with a certain difficulty at this stage, there is no difficulty in the return of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and this can be done painlessly. There is no reason to be wary of an undesirable reaction to a possible threat, as it is not a question of tearing off any part of the territory of the Azerbaijani SSR, but of uniting the Armenian population of the national autonomous oblast with an allied republic of the same people.^[14]

In a letter sent to Moscow, the two men stated the political, legal, economic and cultural justifications for the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and expressed confidence that this would further strengthen the friendship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. However, these official Armenian attempts at inclusion in the 1960s did not yield results.

The author writes that “their [Armenians of NK] demands were met by a series of pogroms that took place in Sumgait, Kirovabad, and Baku that were orchestrated by the Azerbaijani government.”^[15] But where is the first bloodshed? On 22 February 1988, bloody events broke out in the Askeran district of the NKA0. That day, armed persons of Armenian nationality opened fire and killed two Azerbaijanis.^[16] The first unrest in Sumgait began on 26 February with the appearance in the city of Azerbaijani refugees from the Kafan district of the Armenian SSR and with the spread of rumors about atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis in Armenia.^[17] Riots then began in Sumgait on 28 February. Only 10 km from the city there were units of the Soviet Army and the Ministry of the Interior. However, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov was not allowed by the army to intervene in the city.

There were 32 victims of the Sumgait pogrom. These included 26 persons of Armenian nationality and 6 Azerbaijanis. This is of course a great tragedy. But among the rioters there was one citizen of Armenian nationality, Eduard Grigoryan, who very harshly killed Armenians.^[18]

The most interesting thing in the article is that the author believes in the *victory* of Nagorno-Karabakh with a population of 150 thousand people over Azerbaijan with a population of 8 million people and large economic resources and tries to convince others of this. He adds that “in 1994, the Karabakh Defense Army captured seven districts surrounding the republic with the aim of creating a buffer zone.”^[19] The fact is that the territories that Der Matossian called a “buffer zone” were 4-5 times larger than the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh. So that the newly formed, still unrecognized *republic* occupied a territory 4-5 times larger than its original territory, which they first called this “occupied territory”, then “buffer zone” for security, and then “liberated” territory.^[20] During these *liberation* battles in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, the village of Khojaly with a population of 7 thousand people (Azerbaijanis) was completely destroyed. As for its inhabitants, on the night of 25 to 26 February 1992 in Khojaly, more than 613 people, including 63 children, 106 women, 70 elderly people were killed in the attack. In addition, 1275 people were taken hostage by the Armenian attackers, more than 500 people were wounded, and 150 people disappeared without a trace.^[21]

Der Matossian wants to create the impression that Azerbaijani territories were occupied by *the Karabakh Liberation Army*. Of course, this is not the case. The Azerbaijani territories were directly occupied by the armed forces of the Armenian Republic with the explicit and secret support and participation of the Russian Federation because Russia saw the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as a means of maintaining control over Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the region. During three decades of occupation,

Armenia not only demonstrated its “readiness to the return seven districts,” but also even refused to return five of them. [\[22\]](#)

Concerning the forty-four-day war in 2020, Professor Der Matossian writes that “on September 27, 2020, in the midst of a devastating global pandemic, Azerbaijan, aided by Turkey and jihadist militants from northern Syria, attacked the Republic of Karabagh.” [\[23\]](#)

Der Matossian is unhappy that during the war the international academic community, including The Middle East Studies Association, mostly remained silent and did not condemn the war. Yes, MESA’s attitude is correct. But MESA should have condemned the original invasion when Armenian Armed Forces with the help of Russia occupied the territory of Azerbaijan, territory recognized by the United Nation and the OSCE as Azerbaijani. [\[24\]](#)

This conflict, which lasted for more than 30 years, cost both sides 35 thousand lives. In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled their homes and places of residence. The scale of the ruins is immeasurable. In my opinion, now we need to look forward, not backward. It is necessary to look for ways to a lasting and sustainable peace so that this peace ensures the security, development and prosperity of both the Armenian people and the Azerbaijani people, as well as the region as a whole.

Notes and references:

[\[1\]](#) Matossian, Bedross Der. “Ambivalence to Things Armenian in Middle Eastern Studies and the War on Artsakh in 2020.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 3 (August 2022): 530–34.

[\[2\]](#) Ibid, 531.

[\[3\]](#) Letter from Narimanov, Mdivani, Mikoian, Naneishvili,

Vesnik, Levandovskii, and Mikhailov to CC RCP (B), 10 July 1920, Archive of Political Documents of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan (APDPARA), f. 1, r. 44, vol. 118, p. 25.

[4] See: *Minutes no. 11 of the evening meeting of the Plenum of the Caucasus Bureau, CC RCP (B)*, 4 July 1921, Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RSASPH), f. 64, r. 1, vol. 1, p. 118; *Minutes no. 11 of the evening meeting of the Plenum of the Caucasus Bureau, CC RCP (B)*, 4 July 1921, RSASPH, f. 64, r. 1, vol. 1, p. 114; *Minutes no. 12 of the meeting of the Plenum of the Caucasus Bureau, CC RCP (B)*, 5 July 1921, RSASPH, f. 64, r. 1, vol. 1, p. 122).

[5] For more details see: Jamil Hasanli. *The Sovietization of Azerbaijan: The South Caucasus in the Triangle of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, 1920-1922*. The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2018, pp. 117-157.

[6] Matossian, "Ambivalence," 531.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See: Vladislav M. Zubok. *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*. Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 16-27.

[9] See.: Экономика горного Края. Беседа корреспондента «Азеринформ» с заместителем председателя Совета Министров Азербайджанской ССР, председателем Госплана республики А.Муталибовым // Газ. «Бакинский рабочий» № 45. 23 февраля 1988 г., Таблица сравнительных показателей социального развития НКАО. // Газ. «Бакинский рабочий», 11 марта 1988 г.

[10] See: Зияд Самедзаде. *Нагорный Карабах: неизвестная правда*. Баку. 1995; *Экономика Нагорного Карабаха в советский период*. //

<https://karabakh.center/d/page18326968.html> Постановление; ЦК КПСС и Совета Министров СССР «О мерах по ускорению социально-экономического развития Нагорно-Карабахской автономной области

Азербайджанской ССР в 1988–1995 годах». «Советский Карабах», 29 марта 1988 г.

[11] Matossian, “Ambivalence,” 531.

[12] A petition Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh to Nikita Khrushchev, 24 June 1962, Russian State Archive Modern History (RSAMH), f. 5, r. 31, v. 172, p. 37.

[13] Ibid, 40.

[14] *Letter from Anton Kochinyan and Badal Muradyan to the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CPSU*, 30 September 1966, National Archive of the Republic of Armenia (NARA), f. 1, r. 46, r. 65-a, pp. 8-9.

[15] Matossian, “Ambivalence,” 531.

[16] *Telegram of the deputy of the Nagorno-Karabakh Regional Council Suren Grigoryan to the Central Committee of the CPSU Michael Gorbachev dated 23 February 1988*, RSAMH, f. 2, r. 5, v. 641, p. 7.

[17] Chronicle of events in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region from 11 February to 21 May 1988. // APDPARA, f. 1, r. 83, vol. 205, p. 5; Олег Кусов. Первые беженцы гибнущего СССР. // Вестник Кавказа, <https://vestikavkaza.ru/analytics/pervye-bezency-gibnusego-sss-r.html>

[18] The report of the government commission was heard at a meeting of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. 7 May 1988. Protocol No. 74. // APDPARA, f. 1, r. 83, vol. 59, p. 34; Report of the Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan on the causes that led to the tragic events in Sumgait on 27-29 February 1988. Minutes No. 74 of the meeting of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. 7 May 1988. // APDPARA, f. 1, r. 83, vol. 59, p. 52.

[19] Matossian, "Ambivalence," 532.

[20] Роберт Кочарян. Жизнь и свобода. Автобиография экс-президента Армении и Карабаха. М., 2019, с.6, 156; Серж Саргсян. Хотим победоносную армию – не должны иметь слабохарактерных, безнравственных руководителей. // <https://www.panorama.am/ru/news/2023/01/28/>; Освобожденные территории являются неотъемлемой частью Нагорного Карабаха // <https://arka.am/ru/news/politics/9567/>;

Александр Минасян. Где бьется территориальный нерв войны в Нагорном Карабахе. // <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3088513.html>

[21] See: "Nowhere To Hide For Azeri Refugees", *The Guardian*, 2 September 1993; "The Face Of A Massacre", *Newsweek*, 16 March 1992; "Massacre By Armenians", *The New York Times*, 3 March 1992; Thomas Goltz, "Armenian Soldiers Massacre Hundreds Of Fleeing Families", *The Sunday Times*, 1 March 1992; "Corpses Litter Hills In Karabakh", *The Times*, 2 March 1992; Jill Smolowe, "Massacre In Khojaly", *Time*, 16 March 1992, "Nagorno-Karabakh Victims Buried In Azerbaijani Town", *The Washington Post*, 28 February 1992.

[22] Matossian, "Ambivalence," 532.

[23] Ibid.

[24] The United Nations Security Council adopted four resolutions on the occupation: on 30 April 1993, the UN Security Council adopted [resolution 822 by UN Security Council](#), demanding "the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from the district of Kalbajar and other recently occupied districts of Azerbaijan"; on 29 July 1993, the Security Council adopted [resolution 853 by the UN Security Council](#), "demanding the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of occupation forces involved in the conflict from the district of Aghdam and all other recently occupied districts of the Republic of Azerbaijan; on 14 October 1993, the UN SC Security Council passed the resolution 874, calling

on the parties “to abstain from any hostile acts and any interference or invasion, which could lead to escalation of the conflict and undermine peace and security in the region”; on 11 November 1993, the UN Security Council passed resolution 884, demanding an “immediate cease fire and end to hostilities, unilateral withdrawal of occupation forces from the district of Zangelan and the city of Horadiz and withdrawal of occupation forces from other districts of Azerbaijan, captured recently.” – which Armenia has had not fulfilled any of them for 27 years. See: Resolution 822 (1993) adopted by the Security Council at its 3205th meeting, on 30 April 1993. // <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165604>; Resolution 853 (1993) adopted by the Security Council at its 3259th meeting, on 29 July 1993.// <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/170257#:~:text=Condemns%20the%20seizure%20of%20the,and%20complete%20withdrawal%20of%20the>; Resolution 874 (1993) adopted by the Security Council at its 3292nd meeting, on 14 October 1993.// <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/174420>; Resolution 884 (1993) adopted by the Security Council at its 3313th meeting, on 12 November 1993. // <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/176731#record-files-collapse-header>