

# The Galtung Triangle and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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## Abstract

*The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the longest - standing conflicts in the former Soviet Union. Despite numerous attempts by mediating parties and direct talks between the governments of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, the conflict remains unresolved. In this paper, I will try to analyze the general causes of the conflict within the framework of Johan Galtung's conflict triangle. After giving a brief description of the Galtung conflict triangle and short asymmetry and symmetry analysis, I will examine the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict using the model's three axes – structural, cultural (social constructs) and behavioral (direct violence). The paper will investigate the nature and dynamics of the conflict in chronological order, starting from 1988 and ending with the signing of the cease-fire agreement in 1994. Hence, the purpose of this paper is limited to the three theoretical aspects of Johan Galtung's conflict triangle and does not include the conflict's detailed history and its post-ceasefire developments. This study aims to increase understanding of the cultural and structural causes of interethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1988-1994.*

**Keywords:** *South Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, conflict resolution, frozen conflicts, ethnic and territorial conflicts, Johan Galtung*

## The Galtung Conflict Triangle

The term “Galtung conflict triangle” or “the violence triangle” refers to a theoretical model developed by the Norwegian researcher Johan Galtung, who analyzed the causes of violence in three phases: before violence, during violence, and after violence. Galtung lists various types of violence that could roughly be classified in three categories: direct violence (behavioral), cultural violence (social constructs) and

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structural violence. Each of these categories represents individual angles of the violence triangle, which Galtung argues has “built-in vicious cycles.” He separates these categories into visible and invisible ones (Figure 1):



**Figure-1<sup>1</sup> - The Galtung Conflict Triangle**

According to Galtung:

*The visible effects of direct violence are known: the killed, the wounded, the displaced, the material damage, all increasingly hitting the civilians. But the invisible effects may be even more vicious: direct violence reinforces structural and cultural violence.<sup>2</sup>*

Galtung claims that although the cultural and structural aspects of the conflict are invisible, they in fact play the most important role during the prevention and rehabilitation stages of a conflict. He states that it is “cultural and structural violence [that] cause direct violence, using violent actors who revolt against the structures and using the culture to legitimize their use of violence as instruments...The direct violence may be the lesser evil, at least in the longer term, than the structural and cultural damage wrought.”<sup>3</sup>

*Asymmetric vs. Symmetric*

Before analyzing the behavioral, cultural and structural aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict, it is important to examine the nature of the conflict itself:

<sup>1</sup> Source: Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy. Available online at <http://them.polylog.org/5/fgj-en.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Johan Galtung, *Violence, War, and Their Impact: On Visible and Invisible Effects of Violence*, (Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy 5, 2004). Also available online at <http://them.polylog.org/5/fgj-en.htm>. More comprehensive study is available at <http://www.transcend.org/TRRECBAS.HTM>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

whether there is an asymmetric or symmetric relationship between the warring parties in the conflict.

The NK conflict has both asymmetric and symmetric aspects. The initial conflict, which began during the final stages of the Soviet Union, involved two communities living in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR): the majority (Azerbaijanis residing in the AzSSR) and the minority (Armenians in the Autonomous Oblast (region) within the AzSSR).

Since the conflict emerged during the Soviet Union, and both Armenia and Azerbaijan were a part of that Union, the NK conflict had in fact a multilayer asymmetry. In addition to the asymmetry between the NK Armenians and the central government of AzSSR, there was the central government in Moscow that had direct control over both the republics and the autonomous regions within these constituent republics. For example, in 1987, NK Armenians sent a petition to Moscow requesting unification with the Armenian SSR (ArSSR). Gorbachev's ethnically Armenian adviser Abel Aganbegyan and numerous prominent Armenian intellectuals also had openly supported this initiative.<sup>4</sup>

As a characteristic of an asymmetric conflict, the initial stage of the NK conflict was not about a particular issue or interest, but it was about the very structure of the relationship between the NK Armenian minority in AzSSR and the majority represented by the Azerbaijani central government. According to Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse:

*[T]he structure is such that the top dog always wins, the underdog loses. The only way to resolve the conflict is to change the structure, but this can never be in the interests of the top dog. So there are no win-win outcomes, and the third party has to join forces with the underdog to bring about a resolution.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, (NY: New York University Press, 2003), p. 288-289

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, (Cambridge, UK: Policy Press, 1999), p. 12

If the above statement is applied to the NK conflict, the “top dog” would be the Azerbaijani central government, or the majority, and the “underdog” would be the Armenian minority in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). The structural changes that the NK Armenians demanded and were unacceptable to the Azerbaijani central government - in particular separating from AzSSR and joining ArSSR - made the outcome of the conflict a zero-sum game. To achieve the desired outcome, the NK Armenians joined forces with the third party, in this case ArSSR – later the Republic of Armenia.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a seemingly asymmetric conflict became symmetric, with the involvement of the Republic of Armenia. Thus the NK conflict is not only a minority vs. majority conflict, but also a conflict between two states: the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

## **Three Axes of the Galtung Triangle**

### ***Structural Violence***

The current boundaries of the NK region came into existence only in 1923. The leadership of the newly established Soviet Union carved out the territories primarily populated by Armenians within Azerbaijan and created an autonomous region called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). By doing so, the Soviet government hoped to resolve ethnic and territorial disputes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It was done to satisfy both Azerbaijanis, who opposed any transfer of this territory to another republic, and the Armenians, who demanded unification of Armenia and the NK region.

This strategy proved to be successful for only about seventy-five years. On February 20, 1988, in the midst of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the local Soviet of the NKAO adopted a resolution demanding the transfer of the NKAO from AzSSR to ArSSR. This event had a shocking effect in Azerbaijan. Although the resolution itself did

not have any legal basis and was nothing but a request, it nonetheless was a controversial step aimed to alter the status quo.

*Essentially, the local Armenian parliamentary deputies wanted the map of the Soviet Union redrawn and to see their region leave Soviet Azerbaijan and join Soviet Armenia...By calling on Moscow to change the country's internal borders, the Karabakh Armenian were, in effect, making politics from below...<sup>6</sup>*

Protests in the NKAO were followed by a demonstration in Armenia, which openly supported the separatist aspirations of the NK Armenians. Several rallies were held in the Armenian capital of Yerevan demanding the unification of NKAO with Armenia. Finally on June 15, 1988 the Supreme Soviet of Armenian SSR passed a resolution supporting the decision of the NKAO authorities' request to transfer the NKAO to ArSSR. The decision of the Supreme Soviet of Armenian SSR was interpreted as direct interference in Azerbaijan's internal affairs with the intention to annex the NKAO and undermine the territorial integrity of AzSSR.

In July 1988, the USSR Supreme Soviet confirmed the previous decision on retaining NKAO within Azerbaijan SSR on the basis of Article 78 of the USSR constitution, "which prevents territorial changes without the agreement of the republics concerned."<sup>7</sup> However, Moscow also temporarily transferred the NKAO to the jurisdiction of the USSR central government in January 1989, a move that was seen in Azerbaijan as the first step in undermining its right to the province.

*To Azerbaijan, all Russia seemed to believe the Armenian accusations. Although the USSR government was forced by its own constitution to retain the NKAR [Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region] inside Azerbaijan, Russian sentiments were such that many in Baku feared Moscow would find a pretext to hand over to Armenia land that Azeris consider their patrimony for the creation of a 'Greater Armenia.'<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> De Waal, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Audrey L. Altstadt, "Ethnic Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh," in eds. Leokadia Drobizheva, Rose Gottemoeller, Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Lee Walker, *Ethnic Conflict in the Post-Soviet World*, (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 231

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232

Moscow returned the jurisdiction of the NKAO back to Azerbaijan in November 1989, but it was too late. Clashes between the two communities had already taken place and the first influx of refugees from Armenia and Azerbaijan fed more fuel into an already growing interethnic fire between the respective republics. On August 30, 1991, Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union and few months later abolished the autonomous status of the NKAO. Armenia declared its independence on September 23, 1991. Meanwhile, the NK Armenians (without consent of the NK Azerbaijanis) announced their separation from Azerbaijan in January 1992.

The structural changes that took place during this period were, and still remain, important for the parties involved. Azerbaijan and Armenia were recognized by the United Nations on March 2, 1992 within the boundaries of their predecessor Soviet Republics, which meant that the NKAO was recognized as an integral part of the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, none of the UN member states, including the Republic of Armenia, has recognized the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result of hostilities between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, however, Armenia and the NK Armenians came to control about 16 percent of Azerbaijan's territories, a bulk of which is located outside the former NKAO.

### ***Cultural Violence / Social Construct: Myths and History***

Despite the fact that for centuries Armenians and Turkic people (the majority of Azerbaijanis are of Turkic origin) lived in peace side by side, the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were marked with serious acts of brutality, ethnic cleansing and massacres on both sides.

During World War I intercommunal violence reached its peak. The forced relocation and massacre of Armenians in 1915 in Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire has been the most important event in the collective memory of the Armenian people. Armenians refer to the events as a “genocide” and put the death toll as high as 1.5

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<sup>9</sup> For more data on UN member states visit [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)

million people, while the Turkish government rejects such accusations and claims the number of dead was around 300 thousand, blaming intercommunal clashes. These events have lived on in the popular memories of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but especially among Armenians, for whom the events of 1915 constituted a part of their national identity.

Being an Armenian, particularly for those in the Armenian Diaspora who played a crucial role in logistic and military support for NK Armenians during the conflict<sup>10</sup>, meant “being a survivor of genocide, and therefore a member of a community of sufferers.”<sup>11</sup>

*[The] mentality of victimhood, which was an important part of Armenian national identity for centuries...once again was ingrained as the central element of Armenian collective consciousness – at least until 1970s when a new wave of Armenian radicalism arose in the diaspora, and 1988 when the [Karabakh] movement exploded in Soviet Armenia.*<sup>12</sup>

Although Armenians in Armenia or in the NKAO lived under different circumstances, these myths came forth once the Soviet system that suppressed interethnic violence collapsed. As Yamskov asserts:

*Mutual perceptions and ethnic relations are more likely to be favorable when ethnic groups share a similar ideology or religion, or when both groups oppose the same enemy or ideology. However, mutual relations will be neutral or negative in the absence of these factors.*<sup>13</sup>

For some time the principles of communism served as a “common ideology” for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis and ethnic tensions were managed and avoided. But when Gorbachev initiated *perestroika* and *glasnost*, he unintentionally shook the very source of the system that kept all ethnic groups intact. And it was during this period when old myths and perceptions resurfaced again. While Azerbaijanis were reminded of 1918-

<sup>10</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Delicate Balance,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No 1, (January 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Razmik Panossian, “The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Autumn 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> A.N. Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 5, (October, 1991).

20s when Armenians tried to “steal” their lands, Armenians were alarmed against possible extermination.

*After the eruption of the [Karabakh] movement in 1988, the Armenian demand for [Karabakh] is woven into the discourse, highlighting the threat of ‘another genocide’ if Armenians do not defend themselves against both Azerbaijan and Turkey.<sup>14</sup>*

Hence, myths, stereotypes and historical prejudices were an inseparable part of the NK conflict and an important part of cultural violence.

### ***Behavioral (Direct) Violence***

Was it possible for Armenians and Azerbaijanis to avoid bloodshed? Or was the gap between both societies so wide that it could not have been avoided? The answers to these questions lay in the behavioral and social aspects of the conflict.

By the late 1980s, intercommunal tensions between the two societies brought along hitherto suppressed nationalistic views in both countries. Azerbaijanis and Armenians, who have lived side by side in peace for more than seventy years, found themselves in a very difficult situation. More than 200,000 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia and some 300,000 Armenians residing in Azerbaijan fled their respective countries. Terrifying stories told by the fleeing refugees increased antagonism and enmity in both republics.

The first blood in the NK conflict was shed on February 22, 1988, when a crowd of young Azerbaijani men marched from Aghdam, Azerbaijani city outside NKAO, towards Stepanakert/Khankendi to protest the NK Armenians’ demand to separate from Azerbaijan. They were met by a group of armed Armenian villagers around the village of Askeran in NKAO. As a result of the fight that took place at Askeran, two Azerbaijani

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<sup>14</sup> Yamskov.

men, aged 23 and 16 years old, were killed. These were the first victims of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.<sup>15</sup>

By February 27 1988, five days after the first deadly incident in Askeran, violence was reported in several cities of Azerbaijan. But the majority of Azerbaijanis were still unaware of the Askeran killings. It was a statement by the Soviet military prosecutor Alexander Katusev that “put a match to a tinderbox” and triggered the escalation of the conflict. Katusev spoke on Azerbaijan’s national television and radio stations and confirmed the death of two Azerbaijani men in Askeran.<sup>16</sup>

The next day, several hundred angry men filled the streets of Sumgait, a major industrial city in Azerbaijan where many refugees from Armenia found refuge. Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia, who were scattered throughout Azerbaijan, were “the raw material for the demonstrations.”<sup>17</sup> A mob of angry men broke out from the demonstrators and formed small groups that started to smash windows, burn cars and attack Armenians in the city.

As a result of the Sumgait events, 26 Armenian and 6 Azerbaijanis died and many were wounded. Although most of the 14,000 Armenians living in Sumgait<sup>18</sup> left the city unhurt, the scale and unexpected nature of the Sumgait events left an emotional mark among many Armenians and ordinary Azerbaijanis. The Azerbaijani government later claimed that several dozen of these refugees were used by the Soviet secret service (KGB) to commit pogroms against Armenians<sup>19</sup> in order to destabilize the region and increase the republics’ dependence on Moscow.

While Sumgait was remembered among Armenians as the most brutal incident of intercommunal atrocities, it was Khojali massacre that shocked and devastated

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<sup>15</sup> De Waal, p. 15

<sup>16</sup> De Waal, p. 33

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>19</sup> Adil Baguirov, “Myths Related to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *Azerbaijan International Magazine*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, (Spring 1998).

Azerbaijanis. Before February 26, 1992, Khojali was a little known town in the NKAO, one of the few predominantly Azerbaijani-populated towns in the region. It also had a strategic importance as home to the region's main airport. On the night of February 25-26, Armenian forces raided the town with help of the 366<sup>th</sup> former Soviet Regiment. Most of the victims in Khojali were civilians who could not escape. According to the Azerbaijani sources, some 613 people were killed (among them, 63 children, 106 women, and 70 elderly people), 487 people were wounded (including 76 children) and some 1275 people were taken hostage.<sup>20</sup>

The Sumgait pogroms and Khojali massacre were the two major incidents that had a behavioral aspect (direct violence). While massacres by Armenians and their demands for unification with Armenia caused Azerbaijanis to believe that the Armenians posed a direct threat to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, pogroms in Azerbaijan resulted in increasing fear by Armenians that their national identity would be in danger if the NKAO remained within Azerbaijan.

## **Conclusion**

The Galtung triangle with its three axes - behavioral, structural and cultural- is proven to be a useful model for analyzing the root causes and basic nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Each angle in the triangle has shown how different the perceptions of the parties are and what are the general causes of the conflict for one or the other party. Although some of these perceptions had been formed during the conflict itself, there were times when previously formed myths and social constructs played a far more important role.

The structural aspect of the NK conflict involves the issue of territorial integrity versus the right for self-determination - two seemingly contradicting concepts that need to be reconciled in order to resolve the conflict. The former has dominated Azerbaijani thinking, since a threat to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity was real and the possibility of

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<sup>20</sup> For more on Khojali massacre see <http://www.diaspora-az.com/genosid.htm>

the NKAO joining Armenia was unacceptable for Azerbaijan. For the Armenian side, on the other hand, the unification of the NKAO with Armenia was in part an attempt to change “the structure” or the status quo and in part a social construct, which is to say, the perception that if Armenians were left within Azerbaijan, they would be exterminated.

During the conflict’s early stages cultural violence on both sides played an important role. In particular, the events of 1915, the notion of being a ‘survival nation’ on the verge of ‘another genocide’ were instrumental in mobilizing Armenian forces in and outside of NK. To a lesser extent Azerbaijanis used historical events to justify their attacks on Armenians as well.

As far as the behavioral aspect of the triangle is concerned, here again we see different triggers. For Azerbaijanis the influx of refugees from Armenia, the killing of two Azerbaijani men in Askeran and the Khojali massacre were the major events that escalated the conflict. Whereas for Armenians the trigger was the “Sumgait pogroms” which led Armenians to believe that their national identity was in danger and that they had to fight in order to survive.