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Understanding a world area in crisis: thoughts on the recent clashes in Nagorno Karabakh

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If rising rates of covid-19 infection continue to dominate the news in Europe, since the end of September with the outbreak of heavy clashes between Azerbaijan and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh one might suppose that the pandemic has receded into the background. Not at all! My friends in Şemkir, close to Gence (Azerbaijan's second largest city with a population of about 300 thousand), are in quarantine. The roads to Gence are closed for this reason. My friends have many relatives in Gence, which has been hit repeatedly by long-range missiles, resulting in numerous deaths and the destruction of dozens of houses.[1] I was concerned about the people I know from my research in the early 2000s. On the evening of 18 October my friends in Şemkir heard the explosions, were sleepless the whole night, but could not go anywhere because of the quarantine. Telephone reassurances from their nearest and dearest brought some reassurance, but fear (especially among children and women) was palpable.

During the last three weeks I have been trying to follow international as well as Turkish and Azerbaijani media coverage. Reliable data are scarce. Azerbaijani sources and the international press have documented the damage to civilians and settlements, but so have the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh. The capital of the self-proclaimed autonomous enclave Stepanakert has been hit many times, resulting in dramatic accounts by international journalists of having constantly to flee into bunkers. Gence, by contrast, is a rather wealthy city lacking in bunkers. Neither side admits to shelling civilians. Azerbaijani military forces claim to have been fighting primarily in the south of Karabakh and to having recaptured significant territories surrounding Nagorno Karabakh which had been occupied by Armenian forces.

What is the background to this fighting?

In *Caucasus Paradigms*, a book which Bruce Grant and I edited in 2007, scholars from many

fields and countries illuminated the rich and complicated history and culture of this region. Foregrounding this complexity was, we argued, always preferable to mono-causal explanations for cooperation or conflict. Nagorno Karabakh is a region to which both ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians lay claim as being traditionally and culturally theirs. In the South Caucasus generally, as in Turkey and Iran, Armenians and Muslim Turkic peoples (Azeris among them) have long been among the major population groups. As historian Şahin Mustafayev recapitulates "for centuries Azerbaijanis and Armenians did not just live side by side. They lived on a single territory, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, sharing joys and sorrows among themselves".[2] Historical constructions of cooperation and coexistence clash with nationalistic exclusivist narratives of belonging and territorial identity. Developments since a cease fire was agreed in 1994 (which has been continuously broken by both sides) suggest that the exclusivist nationalist imagination has been fed culturally, politically and militarily in both countries. Deficiencies in the rule of law and political legitimation in both countries could often be covered over by the call to defend one's own people and their 'right to self-determination'.

I have been working with Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian scholars of various generations for twenty years. It has never been easy to find a common language to overcome nationalistic sensibilities and highlight commonalities. Suffering due to flight, loss of home and territory and the struggle to survive, have given rise to amazingly similar experiences across ethnic, national and religious boundaries. A focus on pain made it possible for me to cooperate with Armenian colleagues and compare the fate of Armenian and Azerbaijani refugees (see Yalçın-Heckmann and Baghdasaryan 2008, Yalçın-Heckmann and Shahnazaryan 2010). But both in Armenia and Azerbaijan a new generation has grown up that has no memory of co-existence and commonalities between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Young people have been exposed to nationalist rhetoric in many educational and political texts and public discourse. When violence flared up again recently, I have been deeply saddened to hear my own former colleagues accuse the other side of being 'terrorists', 'hordes', and 'inhuman aggressors'.[3]

When the language of the military forces is so contagious, one wonders how the region will ever again attain the 'peaceful coexistence' specified by Mustafayev (ibid.). Intellectuals have an obligation to keep a critical mind towards the war rhetoric and to offer ways of communication and empathy with the 'Other'. Efforts to mobilize international support by labelling the other side 'terrorists' are not helpful. They can only distract the observer from recognizing the complexity of this region as a world area, in the midst of Eurasia. In a recent book titled *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary poetics in the Caucasus*, Leah Feldman (2018) analyzes 'the connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships' between artists, poets and writers of the Russian, Ottoman and Persian Empires, whose combined work forged this region into a world area. The early 20th century was no less conflictual and contested than the contemporary era. It is worth remembering and reminding one another of the temporal,

spatial and intellectual connectedness throughout the Caucasus.

References

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Notes

[1] See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/17/casualties-after-armenian-attack-targets-ganja-live-updates and https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54581628, accessed 18 October 2020.

[2] Mustafayev, Şahin, http://science.gov.az/news/open/14564# published on 12 October 2020, accessed on 18 October 2020.

[3] I have been informed by my former students about the "war of words" in social media, where apparently many academics take part. Personal communication with several Azerbaijani colleagues confirms this observation.