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Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why capitalism fuels national conflicts in former Soviet Asia

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Fighting erupted on Sept. 27, 2020, between the former Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. So far, 360 people have been killed in the fighting, including at least 47 civilians. An earlier war between the two countries in the early 1990s cost 30,000 lives.

The intervention of Turkey's right-wing government, a member of the U.S.-dominated NATO military alliance, and the interests of Western oil and gas profiteers are factors in the bloodshed. The government of neighboring Iran, as well as communist and workers' parties of the region, have called for an immediate ceasefire, warning of the potential for a wider war in the region.

*This article, originally published in the April/May 1990 issue of *Liberation! A Journal of Revolutionary Marxism*, explains how the restoration of capitalism in the former*

Soviet Union led to the breakdown of solidarity between peoples and made the region prey for imperialist intrigue. It was written in the last months of the Soviet Union, when the Gorbachev administration was dismantling socialism there.

The tragic bloodshed in the Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is being used for yet another barrage of anti-communist propaganda in the U.S. news media. Look, they say, socialism hasn't ended national discrimination and hatred between peoples. The Soviet Union, the world's oldest socialist state, is no more than a continuation of the czarist empire, with Russians ruling over and oppressing other peoples. Its collapse is inevitable.

This "analysis" completely avoids two big questions. One is, why, in the nearly 70 years since the Soviet Union was formed, has nothing like this happened before? After all, under the czars, national uprisings, bloody massacres and ethnic fighting were routine events. The other is, what effect has the Gorbachev program of capitalist-style economic reforms had on relationships between nationalities in the Soviet Union?

To find the answers to these questions, a little historical examination is in order.

In 1922, when the Soviet Union came into being on the ruins of the "prisonhouse of nations" that was the old Russian empire, it inherited a terrible legacy of inequality and hatred between nationalities.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the czars and Russian and Western merchants and capitalists had plundered and exploited the peoples of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia much as European colonialists plundered Africa and India, and with similar results. In Central Asia (now the Soviet republics of Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia and Uzbekistan), illiteracy was universal, disease was endemic and nearly half of all children died before the age of four.

And, like the British in India, the czars pitted people against people — Tajiks against Uzbeks, Kirghiz against Kazakhs, Armenians against Azerbaijanis, Georgians against Abkhazians, and Russians against all the others. One czarist order read: “If the Bashkirs or Kirghiz show an inclination to rebel, they are to be played off against one another and the Russian army spared.”

Describing how life had been in his town before the revolution, an Uzbek farmer told a U.S. writer: “The past was a stairway of years carpeted by pain. The Uzbeks feared to go along the streets of the Arabs; the Tajiks carried sticks when they went through the Uzbek quarter.” (Corliss Lamont, “The Peoples of the Soviet Union,” 1944)

The coming of capitalist industry to some areas only worsened national hatreds. In the 1870s, vast oil reserves drew Western capital to Azerbaijan, and by 1900 that region accounted for at least 50 percent of the world’s oil output. Over 60,000 workers from more than 30 nationalities labored to produce that oil in the city of Baku, which one visitor described as “hell on earth.”

They worked long hours for low pay in dangerous conditions and slept in overcrowded shantytowns without sewers or running water. Thousands died in pogroms and interethnic fighting incited by the oil companies, landlords and the czar’s agents to keep the workers divided.



Isaak Brodsky's "The Execution of the Twenty-Six Baku Commissars" depicts the British massacre of the Baku Commune's multinational leadership in July 1918.

Bolshevik Revolution

But in 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution established a workers' government in Russia, ethnic hatred did not stop the ruling classes of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from joining together in an anti-communist Transcaucasian Federation backed by Britain, France and the United States. To stop the spread of revolutionary ideas among the people, this regime massacred thousands of soldiers returning home from World War I. Then, in 1918, Britain and Turkey invaded the area, and the right-wing coalition split along national lines. One-quarter of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh was killed that year in fighting between the capitalist governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Events in Baku

But in Baku itself, events took a very different turn. There, in spite of discrimination and inequality and competition over jobs, common exploitation had laid a basis for class solidarity, and Lenin's Bolshevik Party had built a base among the city's multinational working class. In 1904, a communist-led strike in the Baku oil fields won Russia's first collective bargaining agreement. And in November 1917, led by the Bolsheviks, the workers of Baku seized power in what was to become the Baku Commune.

In April 1918, the Baku Council of People's Commissars, whose leaders included the Armenian Stepan Shaumian, the Azerbaijani Mashad Azizbekov and the Georgian A.S. Djaparadze, nationalized the city's banks, oil industry, fisheries and shipping fleet and seized the mansions of the rich to house the poor. It increased wages, cut rents and implemented an eight-hour day and free universal education.

In July 1918, the Commune was overthrown in a right-wing coup backed by British troops. Shaumian, Azizbekov, Djaparadze and 23 other people's commissars were executed.

On April 28, 1920, after two bloody years of White Terror, a new workers' insurrection restored Soviet power in Baku and an Azerbaijan Soviet republic was proclaimed. Within a year, Soviet republics were established in Armenia and Georgia as well. On December 20, 1922, they joined with Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to form the USSR.

The ending of discrimination and national oppression was a priority of the new socialist state. At Lenin's initiative, the Soviet government adopted a revolutionary political system that guaranteed political empowerment to the formerly oppressed nationalities. A system of national republics was established, each with its own schools, courts, legislature and equal representation in the Council of Nationalities,

one of the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. Each also had the legal right to secede from the Union. Within the national republics, now 15 in all, there were 38 smaller autonomous republics, regions and areas, which also had control over their internal affairs but lacked the right to secede.

Soviet achievements

Soviet power transformed life in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Illiteracy was abolished, and schools, universities, hospitals and power stations were built for the first time. Life expectancy, under 35 years before the revolution, more than doubled. School systems were set up and books and newspapers were published in over 100 languages, some of which had never before been written down. In the republics of Central Asia, where it was once said, "It is easier to find an oasis in the desert than a literate man" (and a literate woman was unknown), there are today more doctors and college graduates per capita than in West Germany or Britain. Uzbekistan alone has over 30,000 scientific workers, one-third of whom are women.

By 1940, Azerbaijan's industrial output had risen to 18 times what it had been before the revolution while more than 1,300 large industrial enterprises had been built in the Central Asian republics. Today, Uzbekistan, which the czars had reduced to a cotton plantation for Russian industry, manufactures farm machinery and airplanes.

These material gains were accompanied by a profound social revolution. Lands of the rich were seized by the poor, and women were freed from the horrors of child marriage, the bride price and the veil. This was done not just by law but by what author Fanina Halle described as "a mass movement which swept Central Asia like a tempest. ... Poor women tore the veils from the heads of the rich ... and either set fire to them ... or altered them to clothing for the poor in sewing rooms specially established for the purpose."

In 1929, in “Red Star in Samarkand,” Anna Louise Strong wrote about meeting the president of Soviet Uzbekistan, Akhunbabay, a former farm laborer who felt that “the participation of the farmhands in governmental activities was the most important fact” of Soviet power. When Halle visited Uzbekistan a few years later, she met the republic’s vice president, Deshakhan Abidova, an Uzbek woman who as a child in pre-Soviet times had been sold to a 65-year-old moneylender as a fourth wife. Abidova described herself to Halle as “one of those cooks of whom Lenin said that they must learn to govern the state.”

In her 1936 book, “Women of the Soviet East,” Halle wrote about how Baku had changed in Soviet times: “Some of the women who are studying in this club [the Palace of Emancipated Turkish Womanhood] … the majority of them of working-class origin, are already living in the fine new workers’ colonies and garden suburbs laid out in several areas outside town. They have broad, concrete-paved streets, water laid on, drainage and playgrounds for the children. … Here, Turkish [Azerbaijani] families live peaceably next to Armenians and Russians, and the children are brought up together.”

An Armenian told her that “formerly I never made the acquaintance of Turks and took care to avoid them. But what a difference in the last 15 years! Nowadays the Turkish children smile at me with as much friendliness as Armenian children [and] women are sitting here side by side with men.” Halle also noted that 18,000 Azerbaijani women were then working in the republic’s oil industry, which would have been inconceivable before the revolution.

Such accomplishments were possible because the Soviet state was committed to not only raise the living standards of all Soviet peoples but to promote genuine equality between them. In the words of the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, “The elimination of actual national inequality is not an easy process … but eliminated it must be at all costs!”

Affirmative action

In practice, this meant that even at the height of the devastating civil war and foreign invasion that followed the revolution, Lenin's government sent massive material aid, including whole factories, from Russia to those areas whose growth had been strangled under czarist rule. Thousands of Russian Bolsheviks went to work in the Caucasus and Central Asia while thousands of young Asians were trained in the factories of Moscow and Leningrad. In 1918, the Soviet government spent 50 million rubles on irrigation in Central Asia. (It is instructive to compare the industrialization of the Soviet East, which benefited the workers and peasants, with the flight of textile companies to the U.S. South in the same period, which was done to break unions and drive down wages. Today, many of these U.S. companies have moved on to exploit even lower-paid workers in Latin America and East Asia.)

This Leninist policy of "economic affirmative action" continued into the 1980s and made possible such wonders as the Kara-Kum Canal in Turkmenia and the Lake Sevan reclamation project in Armenia. It is now [1990] being drastically cut by the Gorbachev regime in the name of "economic efficiency" and "self-financing." The 1986 cancellation of a long-planned project to use Siberian river water for irrigation in Kazakhstan is an example of this.

The Soviet state also carried out preferential training of women and men of once-oppressed nationalities to occupy all positions in government and industry. Before the revolution, for example, Azerbaijanis had been restricted to unskilled jobs in their own country's oil industry. By the 1930s, Soviet-trained Azerbaijani engineers and scientists were helping to start oil and gas industries in other Soviet republics. This policy too is under attack by Gorbachev.

The progress made by the Soviet Asian republics under socialism, although stunning when contrasted with the poverty in nearby countries like India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey that are still enslaved by the world capitalist market, did not erase the gap

between them and the European Soviet republics. It did, however, create among their people genuine enthusiasm for the socialist system and real confidence that socialist planning and cooperation would lead to a better life for all. It was not “Stalinist repression” but sincere belief in a common communist future that united the nationalities of the USSR during the unbelievable hardships of World War II, when the Soviet Asian republics played a critical role in the battle of production that defeated the Nazi war machine.

Affirmative Action and the raising of the economic and cultural level of the national republics did not fully eradicate national antagonisms, but they did take away their material base. Right-wing nationalism could not get a foothold because it ran counter to the interests of the formerly oppressed regions. The centrally planned economy and the Leninist tradition of putting the development of the national republics over any narrow concept of “economic efficiency” was to their great advantage, despite some shortcomings in practice.

In the 1980s, when U.S. “experts” were predicting that Soviet intervention in Afghanistan would provoke a “Muslim revolt” in Soviet Central Asia, visitors to that region (including this writer) found popular support for Soviet aid to the Afghan Revolution. People identified the U.S.-backed Afghan contras with the British-backed feudal basmachis who had fought against socialism in Central Asia in the 1920s.

Perestroika brings friction

But today, the spirit of socialist solidarity is being sacrificed by the Gorbachev regime on the altar of “self-financing,” “market pricing” and “cost accountability.” No longer are all-Union funds and resources being used to help those republics whose economies are more backward. Large capital projects, still needed in the less-developed areas, are being cut back or cancelled, and industries considered “inefficient” are being shut down.

Unemployment is now being tolerated and in Soviet Asia it has grown rapidly. (According to a report in the New York Times of March 2, 1990, "In Azerbaijan, the jobless rate is at 27.6 percent, in Tajikistan 25.7 percent and in Uzbekistan, 22.8 percent. In all, three million workers are officially reported as jobless.")

Instead of cooperation for the benefit of all and central allocation of resources on the basis of need, republics are now in competition with one another, and those that are more dependent on agriculture and raw materials are falling behind those that are more urban and industrial. The gap between regions that had been steadily narrowing under central planning is now being widened.

Also, Gorbachev's encouragement of private farming and parasitic cooperatives has rapidly increased social differentiation and worsened unemployment in the more agricultural republics, where many had hoped for a transition to state farming instead.

It is no coincidence that the Gorbachev leadership saw fit to undemocratically force the removal of Communist Party Secretaries Geidar Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Dinmukhamad Kunayev of Kazakhstan, the only Turkic-speaking members of the Politburo. (Turkic-speaking peoples are the majority in the Caucasus and Central Asia.) At the 27th Party Congress, Kunayev had spoken out against cuts in central government investment in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

It is the Gorbachev regime's retreat from socialist planning and cooperation, its revival of competition between individuals and republics, that has reawakened old national hatreds. This in turn has played right into the hands of the CIA and those inside the USSR who would like to see capitalism restored. No wonder Gorbachev's program has been so proudly hailed by the Wall Street Journal and the Bush administration.

Far from refuting Marxism, the fighting in the Soviet Middle East and Central Asia is

a tragic confirmation of the Marxist view that inequality is the source of hatred between peoples and that private ownership and economic competition breed inequality.

The lesson of Nagorno-Karabakh and Baku and Dushanbe and the Fergana Valley is that the Soviet Union must urgently change course away from perestroika and back toward socialist central planning, economic cooperation and equality among regions and individuals. What the Soviet Union needs is not less socialism but more.

