I DIE SLOWLY EVERY DAY

A REPORT FROM INSIDE NAGORNO-KARABAKH

2nd Edition: Revised and updated
with two new chapters in 2024

This version is adapted for
online publication

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A report from inside Nagorno-Karabakh

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"If someone says it's raining and another person says it's dry, it's not your job to quote them both. Your job is to look out the window and find out which is true."

– Jonathan Foster, on conflict journalism

Content

For the sake of simplicity, the places mentioned in this book are referred to by either their Armenian or their generally agreed name, unless it is an Azerbaijani quote. For example, we use Lachin instead of Berdzor and Khojaly instead of Ivanyan, as these are the conventional names. There is no international standard for which names to use.

The politics of nomenclature are like much else in the conflict: incredibly infected. When Armenian names are used, I ascribe no value to them. This book was written after a reporting trip to Armenia and the then Armenian-speaking Nagorno-Karabakh, so it feels more natural for me to use Armenian place names where I can.

The only place in the region that has an international and neutral name is Nagorno-Karabakh. In general, the prefix Nagorno is generally not used in neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan. The region is known formally as Artsakh in Armenian and only Karabakh in Azerbaijani. The latter is, however, commonly used in Armenia, although gesture rhetorics has meant that the colloquial use of Artsakh has become increasingly common.

Here is a list of some of the larger places that have different names in Armenian and Azerbaijani:

Armenian name	**Azerbaijani name**
Artsakh	Karabakh
Askeran	Asgeran
Berdzor	Lachin
Ivanyan	Khojaly
Karvachar	Kalbajar
Martakert	Agdara
Martuni	Khojavend
Noragyugh	Tezebina
Shushi	Shusha
Stepanakert	Khankendi
Vank	Vangli

A few words about the book

It's March 2024, and three years have passed since the trip to Nagorno-Karabakh that I made in March 2021. Most of the book was written soon after the trip in 2021. This means that it describes a time shortly following the war in 2020. That part of the text, including the prologue, has been revised with amendments, corrections and sometimes necessary additions of relevance to 2024.

The book was originally published in Swedish in February 2023, even though the draft was completed almost a year before. But just as the book was due for publication, the war in Ukraine broke out. Russian's invasion of its neighbour dominated media flows and due to fears that the story from Nagorno-Karabakh would be eclipsed by the much larger war, the launch of the book was put on hold.

The first part of the book, which makes up three quarters of the total, must therefore be read as a testimony from a time of unease about what was to happen. The war, which raged between 27 September 2020 and 9 or 10 November 2020 – depending on when you deem the ceasefire agreement to have come into effect – shook the region to its core. The stories in this book describe the months after the truce. No one knew what the future of Nagorno-Karabakh would be like. It would turn out to be just the beginning of a long, drawn-out, painful end for the Armenian population.

Since writing the book, I've gone back to Armenia several

times and each time I've seen fewer and fewer foreign journalists and sensed a looming disaster. The beginning of the final disaster came with the blocking of the humanitarian corridor – the so-called Lachin Corridor – to Nagorno-Karabakh. For almost ten months, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh tried to make the world listen to the fate that faced them. When the blockade intensified in the summer of 2023 to the extent that no humanitarian aid, not even that provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), was allowed in, the threat of starvation was suddenly all too real.

It seemed as if Azerbaijan's strategy was working. The Baku regime underlined that the international community recognises Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan, and that any actions against the Armenians take place within the country's territorial boundaries. Despite a provisional order, which was later reaffirmed, by the International Court of Justice in the Hague instructing Azerbaijan to "guarantee unimpeded movement"[1] , the blockade continued. Azerbaijan found the decisions to be worded in such a way as gave them just cause, which the international community refuted. The UN-backed peace talks that had been underway since the war of the 1990s were all but forgotten and the view of completing what the 2020 war had started proved to dominate the Azerbaijani strategy. The decisive strike occurred on 19–20 September 2023, when Azerbaijan finally launched what the government called its "anti-terror operation". After almost ten months of blockade, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh could mount little resistance, and shortly after the local rulers had signed an agreement to disband the army, the exodus began. In the space of one week, upwards of 100,000 Armenians fled in fear from the Azerbaijani army.

It is from the border with Nagorno-Karabakh and during the critical week in September 2023 that the second part of the book picks up the story. In two newly written chapters, the reader is taken to the days that, at least in effect, brought the story of Nagorno-Karabakh as we have known it to an end.

Prologue

We received an interesting email about one of your articles.

I get a knot in my stomach when the notification from Martin Schibbye pops up on my screen. He's the editor of the digital journal Blankspot, for which I have been writing for the past few years. It's May 2021. Summer has come early this year and the birds are singing in the suburban Stockholm. While my steps lead me towards the metro, it strikes my confrontation-averse soul that I've made the wrong career choice, and definitely the wrong conflict to write about. Why can't I just let it be?

On the screen are the first words that the Azerbaijani ambassador Zaur Ahmadov has written:

Firstly, the article is misleading in several respects.

"Misleading." I sigh. Because I know where this is heading. Ambassador develops his line of reasoning.

The text distorts the background of the earlier conflict and omits to Armenia's occupation of approximately 20% of the internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan, including the former Nagorno-Karabakh and seven bordering districts.

The email goes on to criticise most of the facts concerning

an analysis I've written on Armenian prisoners of war, who, with the ceasefire far behind them, have still not been released. It ends by laying out Azerbaijan's view of future peace talks.

Sweden, which has been a member of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and its Minsk Group since the start and currently chairs the OSCE, can play a constructive role now in the post-conflict phase, especially by promoting a treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan that could pave the way for regional prosperity and growth.

I shoot off a message to Martin suggesting that a reply to the ambassador would not be worth the effort, but offering to write a response if his email is to be published. There isn't much more to say other than to repeat what I've already written: that the Azerbaijani government is selectively ignoring obvious facts to suit its purpose.

The knot in my stomach refuses to unravel. The content of the ambassador's email is uncontroversial and standard but the fact that an Azerbaijani government representative has taken the time to write to me tells me that I'm no longer just observing the war; I'm in the middle of it. It's proof that the ambassador considers me a player to reckon with.

Does Zaur Ahmadov have a point, perhaps? What does disinterested journalism mean in this conflict?

It's not so easy. For every claim about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, there's a diametrically different counter-claim from the other side. The polarisation is so deep that only a few assertions are seen as neutral. This creates confusion when the writer is in a vulnerable position. The lack of shared truths or explanations that both sides can agree to means that everything a journalist writes will come under fire from

either the one side or the other.

The manipulation of information works as a kind of immune system. The ante for taking on the conflict is upped when the journalist has to navigate labyrinthine arguments, and often gets lost. In consequence, many of those covering the conflict go into reverse instead of stepping on the gas. Covering the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is as much confusion journalism as it is conflict journalism. It is as much an emotional journey through one's own self-doubt as it is an obsession with reaching out – with making it through the labyrinth to understand the conflict.

The first time I went to Nagorno-Karabakh was in 2016, and I've almost returned every year since, initially as a tourist and more lately as a journalist, until it was no longer possible. Travelling to Nagorno-Karabakh through Armenia without having applied for a permit from the Azerbaijani authorities is considered an illegal act in Azerbaijan and puts you at risk of being branded a persona non grata. The effect of being thus outlawed is also a kind of declaration of incompetence. You are stripped of your right to operate as a journalist in Azerbaijan, a fate that will be used against you as an argument that your journalism lacks credibility.

As I made ready to travel to write this book, I was not yet blacklisted, but neither did I formally apply for a travel permit from Azerbaijan's foreign office. I considered it, yes, but after consulting my Armenian fixer, Nvard Melkonyan, I agreed that it would be unwise. Other journalists who have applied have generally not received a reply. In fact, one colleague said that all it did was alert Azerbaijan to his intentions; shortly after he left, his name was duly published on the Azerbaijani foreign office website.

I came up against a different problem.

A couple of weeks after the ambassador's comment, our

correspondence continued. We began to converse in private messages. I explained to him that I wanted to go to Azerbaijan to cover the conflict from that side, too. He was in favour of my plans and added that "it would help you to be balanced in your reporting". He even offered a way around the problem of my having gone to Nagorno-Karabakh without an Azerbaijani permit: to sign a letter. In exchange, he would "arrange all the local contacts".

The letter he asked me to sign reads thus:

Herewith, I undersigned, reaffirm my full respect to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders, inter alia, the laws and regulations of the Republic of Azerbaijan. My entry to the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan from the territory of Armenia without authorization as stipulated by the national legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan was not intentional and I was unaware about the consequences of this visit. This visit shall not give a meaning of my disrespect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

I attest that my unauthorized visit to Azerbaijan in no way aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

I'm asking from the relevant authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan to take my afore-mentioned statement into account.

An apology. In signing, I'd be confessing to a crime and asking for a pardon. After a couple of weeks thinking it over, I replied that it should not be considered a crime for a journalist to cover the conflict from the other side. Azerbaijan's policy

seems to deter journalists from reporting on the conflict from inside Nagorno-Karabakh; it seems designed to force journalists to take sides.

I refused to sign the apology out of sheer principle. A dictatorship cannot be allowed to compel journalists to beg forgiveness for doing their job. I understand the counter-arguments, that signing the letter would be a necessary evil that allowed me to continue reporting in a sensitive context and in an authoritarian state. There were two paths to take here: to sign the letter and go on a trip arranged by the dictatorship, or to do what I eventually opted to do. Each alternative opens and closes different doors. In my case, one door was closed to Azerbaijan but another was opened to being freely able to scrutinise the authoritarian regime – what is also what I've done. The Azerbaijani caviar diplomacy[2], as Azerbaijan's lobbying method is called, is however, a book in itself, and I will only be mentioning it in passing.

In reply, the ambassador explained that journalists can easily apply for a permit from the embassy before departure and that no one is ever refused.

No one is ever refused? I suppose the reasoning is that a lack of response logically precludes a refusal. But I gave it try. I opened an anonymous email account that I repeatedly used to contact the Azerbaijani foreign office with for a month, making myself out to be a freelance journalist wanting to apply for a permit. As expected, no reply was forthcoming.

The consequence of my refusal is clear. The first official Azerbaijani act was to prohibit me from entering the country, and if I continued to "cooperate with the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh", as the legal wording has it[3], I could be prosecuted. I am declared a persona non grata. Just what "cooperating with the Armenians" means is never explained.

Journalistically, the travel ban prevents me from making a similar trip to Azerbaijan – a trip that I want to make

and that from a journalistic perspective would have been important for the book. On the other hand, the ambassador's reaction speaks volumes about the country. They don't want journalists reporting on both sides of the conflict without apparently having to side with one of them. The rationale is a dictatorship's. After all, Azerbaijan is considered one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists and has long been on the Reporters Without Borders' list of the least free countries.[4]

My trips to Nagorno-Karabakh have brought me to the epicentre of the conflict, on both a physical and psychological plane. Over the years, I have visited places and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh from where the previous Azerbaijani residents had been forced to flee, and I've met Armenian families who have suffered horrendous war crimes. The traumas of war are very much alive and coming face to face with them is heartbreaking.

When I get the message about the ambassador's comments from Martin Schibbye, it is three months since my reporting trip to Nagorno-Karabakh. I knew that this particular trip would be considered particularly sensitive. It had taken place just a couple of months after the end of the war on 10 November 2020, and the circumstances were completely different to those of my previous trips.

The Armenians have lost control of the border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, and by 2021, it's the Russian peacekeepers that decide over all passage into and out of the area. Reporters Without Borders have accused them of stopping virtually all foreign journalists.[5] Why I of all people was allowed in I have no idea, but the fact that I managed to was considered by many to be unique. Maybe I had the right contacts? Or did the Russians think me harmless? I don't know.

Whatever, it turns out that since my trip, no foreign

journalist has been allowed into the region. In that sense my trip to Nagorno-Karabakh was unique. Up until September 2023, when Nagorno-Karabakh was de facto ethnically cleansed of Armenians[6], reporting was confined to a handful of Armenian journalists with first hand experience. This book is therefore, in some sense a final independent testimony from an Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh.

The latest war is proof that a peaceful resolution to the conflict has been totally unmanageable. Engaged peace activists on both sides have bemoaned the state of affairs and told me that it isn't even worth trying to continue the talks now. Shortly before my return home in April 2021, a victory park, "Military Trophy Park," in Baku was opened that has been accused by Western actors of having deeply Armenophobic overtones; derisive effigies of Armenians and the helmets of dead soldiers are arrayed there for visitors to mock and films of children with pretend weapons defiling the effigies flourish on social media. The International Court of Justice has ordered Azerbaijan to shut it down. The ruling was made in response to a twin lawsuit in the court between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[7]

Until the ambassador's reply to me in May 2021, I was able to slip under the radar. I was allowed to make mistakes, to say the wrong things to the wrong people, and was forgiven minor factual errors or heavy-handed analyses. Suddenly my probation was terminated and the gravity of things caught up with me.

I make one final attempt and contact a potential interviewee working for the Azerbaijani regime. I am passed his details by an acquaintance, who informs me that they converse. When he finds out my name, his response is slow in coming, and when it does, it says:

You are persona non grata. I can not talk to you.

"RECOGNIZE ARTSAKH". *Photographer Areg Balayan painted this rocket found near Martuni, adding the tag "Recognize Artsakh"..*

PART 1

March 19 to April 10, 2021

Chapter 1 – ”Hand over your papers”

The road winds down the mountain pass and the snow-capped peaks recede into the distance. The landscape mellows into early spring. The cherry trees are in bloom and the delicate petals are so white, it looks like the mountainsides are covered in cotton wool.

A wolf runs across the road and I have to slam on the breaks. The scrawny animals are a common sight in the Armenian mountains at this time of year, as they are hungry after the winter when the grass turns green and the farmers release their livestock.

I depress the clutch, change gear – again – and curse the potholes. It was the same thing last time I came. When the snow and ice melt, the thaw takes with it parts of the Armenian roads.

My jaws are clenched so much, it hurts. I know that I must be on the ball when I reach the first border control. It's March 2021, and it has only been a few months since the end of the war. Nvard is in the passenger seat. For the entire four-hour drive from the Armenian capital of Yerevan she has kept telling me that she has a good gut feeling: "It's fine. We'll get in." But it would be dishonest to say that I'm not a bag of nerves.

A couple of days before boarding the plane from Sweden to Armenia, an unverified list was leaked of journalists who – despite having their papers in order – were denied entrance

to Nagorno-Karabakh. Some one hundred names were on it. There are posts from disappointed and frustrated journalists on social media who have been sent packing by the Russian peacekeepers. And if I am to believe the hearsay, no foreign journalist has been allowed in for almost two months.

But we are well-primed. Before leaving, the photographer Areg Balayan and I agreed that he should go ahead of me to prepare the Russians for my arrival. An editor of a football magazine in Sweden has written a letter that has been cackhandedly translated into Russian – and for a month, Nvard has made her name known to Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian bureaucrats with her daily telephone calls. In the boot there's even a bulletproof vest and protective headgear; something that the martial law that still formally applies in the region requires foreign journalists to wear.

The sandbags that have been stacked into low walls around the military checkpoint appear. An Armenian and Russian flag announce that we have arrived.

My heart is racing. A man in full combat gear steps into the road.

"Here we go," I say to Nvard.

"Let me do the talking," she replies. "Smile at them and don't say anything if you don't have to."

The border guard holds up a gloved hand, gesturing us to pull over. On his breast is a Russian flag and the Cyrillic letters "МС", indicating that he's part of the peacekeeping command.

"Out!" he barks in Russian. "Hand over your papers!"

He passes them to a colleague, who without meeting our eyes or saying a word, turns on his heel and disappears into a bunker.

"What are you doing here?" asks the man who has just told me to stop the car.

Nvard darts around the car before I have time to reply.

"He's a journalist," she tells the guard. "You should have

been informed of our arrival."

He turns his head to look at her.

"We only allow in people with Russian and Armenian citizenship," he says brusquely.

"Take a look in your records. They said in Yerevan that they'd call you."

He grins. I don't know how to interpret it. Is he messing with us? This is where the attempted forays of other journalists' into Nagorno-Karabakh have come to a dead end. It is exactly this situation that they have witnessed. But he doesn't send us back the way we came, yet.

"Open the boot!"

The border guard slings his rifle to one side, the better to get at our things. We open our bags and rummage through my underwear. We look at the bulletproof vest and point out that it's too big for me – but it will have to do.

The man with the papers comes stooping out of the bunker.

"I hope you bring good news," Nvard calls to him as he strides purposefully towards us.

"Drive on, everything is in order."

I leap into the car. We've made it through the first and most important border control. But we still have a dozen or so Russian military checkpoints to pass before we reach the Nagorno-Karabakh capital of Stepanakert.

The mood in the car soon switches from relief at possibly having made it, to disquiet. The road, once tranquil and calm, penetrates deeper into a war-torn Nagorno-Karabakh. Through the windows of the white rental car, we see the devastation that the war has caused.

A blown-up bridge restricts a river-crossing to a detour along an old Soviet road in a four-wheel drive. Shop windows have been shattered and houses have been burned to the

ground leaving charred stumps and the remains of facades. Houses in which once lived families. A village that we pass through has been turned into a military checkpoint; a Russian flag now hangs from the school to indicate that it's now the local headquarters of the peacekeeping command.

As the car crawls between the checkpoints, it has been four months since the war ended and a ceasefire signed. In addition to the at least 6,500 servicemen killed[8], there are still – in 2021 – between 30,000 and 40,000 displaced. The figures have not been confirmed and the official death toll has been criticised for being on the conservative side. Hundreds of civilians died on both sides and bodies are reportedly, in 2021, still being found. And come 2024, Azerbaijan has not returned all its Armenian prisoners of war.

In 2021, the number of confirmed prisoners of war was around 60, but rumour puts that figure closer to two hundred. In that Azerbaijan refutes their status as prisoners of war.[9] At the same time, Human Rights Watch describes how prisoners of war are being tortured and denied contact with the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC).[10]

The enmity between the peoples – Armenians and Azerbaijanis – can be traced back a over hundred years. It reached its peak after the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman empire – today's Turkey – between 1915 and 1917, at which time Armenia was divided into an eastern and western part, the former under the rule of the Russian tsar and the latter of the Ottoman emperor. There in the western part, almost one and a half million Armenians were killed and even more driven out of their land; many of them sought refuge in Europe and the Middle East, but a significant number chose instead to escape to what is today's Armenia.[11]

When the Russian tsar was forced to abdicate in March 1917 and Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks took control in their

November coup, the new regime signed a treaty with Germany in the spring of the following year that pulled Russia out of the First World War. The treaty also meant that Russia had to cede large areas of territory, not least the South Caucasus. Once the Communist October revolution in Saint Petersburg in November 1917 had overthrown the tsar, the Russian empire collapsed, leaving the three dominant ethnic groups of Armenians, Georgians and Azerbaijanis free to declare a shared but short-lived state, out of the ashes of which arose the first Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani states in modern times. The Armenian refugees took up arms against the Ottomans in the west and the newly formed Turkic Azerbaijan in the east, who were making territorial claims on the Armenian-dominated Nagorno-Karabakh.

According to the contemporary census, Armenians constituted over ninety percent of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijanis a little under ten, the remainder being largely Kurds. However, the region was considered as culturally and historically important to the newly formed Azerbaijan as it was to Armenia and over time, the powerful city of Shushi, or Shusha in Azerbaijani, came to be regarded as the cradle of Azerbaijani culture. Much of Azerbaijan's historiography is the product of Soviet and post-Soviet times and is regarded as one of the most (in)famous examples of historical revisionism.[12] That said, the cultural significance of the area to Azerbaijan must not be undervalued.

Nearly every town and village has both an Armenian and Azerbaijani name, and the dispute over what the places are called remains extremely infected to this day.

Nagorno-Karabakh lies where the Armenian mountain plateau meets the Azerbaijani steppes. The name Karabakh derives from the Turkish Kara, meaning "black" and bakh, the Persian word for "garden". Nagorno was added when Russia conquered the region around the turn of the 1800s, and

means “highland”. Together they form “The Black Mountain Garden” or simply “The Black Garden”. In Azerbaijan, it is more common to say just Karabakh while in Armenia, that name co-exists equally in public parlance with the official name Artsakh. It is unusual to add the "Nagorno", which is mainly used formally in diplomatic circles and abroad.

Back to 1920. The battles that ensued over Nagorno-Karabakh when the infant countries staked out their borders were bloody and protracted. Ethnic fighting led to the displacement of Armenians and their mass-slaughter in Shushi[13], and the subsequent persecution of Azerbaijanis in parts of Armenia. When the Soviet Union re-conquered the new Transcaucasian states in the autumn of 1920, the bloodshed ceased. As Lenin’s armies marched back into the South Caucasus, the Armenians reluctantly lay down their arms and the Communist politburo decided to formally sign over Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The transfer, however, was never made.

Instead, Nagorno-Karabakh remained part of Azerbaijan. When Josef Stalin took over the Soviet helm, he formed the autonomous republic of Nagorno-Karabakh inside the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, a move that was seen by many as a manifestation of his “divide and rule” strategy. During the Soviet era, it had a local parliament and considerable autonomy, but the courts, army and state bureaucracy were controlled from the Azerbaijan SSR capital of Baku.

The sensitivity of the Nagorno-Karabakh question never waned in the 70 years that the region was part of the Soviet Union. To the great Armenian diaspora, many of whom had roots in Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh was seen as part of a “Greater Armenia” stretching from West Armenia in today’s eastern Turkey; moreover, Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians maintained closer cultural ties with Yerevan than Baku.

The first serious demands to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia SSR instead of Azerbaijan SSR were made on the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian genocide. On 24 April 1965, the memorial day of the Armenian genocide during the First World War, hundreds of thousands of Armenian demonstrators gathered in Yerevan to demand not only acknowledgement of the genocide but also the region's reunion with Armenia SSR.

In September 1966, the Armenian Communist party formally requested that Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan be, as they saw it, reunited with Armenia SSR, but they were snubbed by the Kremlin. As a result of Armenian demands for reunification, the first violent clashes erupted between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Stepanakert barely two years later.

As the collapse of the Soviet Union approached following the oil crisis of the 1970s and the end of Cold War rearmament in the 1980s, the nationalist elements burgeoned. Realising that the demographic proportions in Nagorno-Karabakh risked eventually spawning ever stronger separatist ambitions, the central powers in Baku developed a new strategy. They launched a campaign to boost the Azerbaijani minority in Nagorno-Karabakh, the population of which in the early 1970s was approximately 80 per cent Armenian and 18 per cent Azerbaijani. Twenty years down the line, the ratio was more like 75 per cent to 23, although towns such as Shushi and the village of Khojaly that had an Azerbaijani majority.

On the 20th of February 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament held a vote on its transfer to Armenia from Azerbaijan. The result? 110 votes for and 17 against. The Baku government duly declared the vote null and void and violence erupted. Ethnic clashes broke out in the region between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and in Sumgait,

Azerbaijan's third largest city, pogroms were directed against Armenians that eventually spread to Kirovabad (now Ganja) and Baku.

The persecutions in Azerbaijan that took place between 1988 and 1990 elicited hostility in Armenia towards the Azerbaijani minority, and reports of grievous hate crimes against Azerbaijanis became increasingly common. In Nagorno-Karabakh, a thriving militant nationalist movement grew into what some historians refer to as the first powerful dissident movement in the Soviet Union – even before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 – underpinned by a foreign Armenian diaspora with links to nationalist parties and their militant offshoots.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan were politically so remote from each other that war was inevitable. Both peoples revivified their claims of 70 years ago on Nagorno-Karabakh and the war that followed in the coming years resulted in the countries' Armenian and Azerbaijani populations changing places and Nagorno-Karabakh becoming drained of its Azerbaijani communities.

The Armenian side won the war in 1994, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh consolidating their independence from Azerbaijan by establishing the "Republic of Artsakh", which rests on the principle of self-determination, according to them enshrined in international law. For its part, Azerbaijan asserted its right to territorial integrity, which the international community also accepted. The UN Security Council declared in four resolutions in the early 1990s[14] that Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan, and that the conflict was to be resolved through peace negotiations. However, the Security Council never invoked the charter that gives the UN the right to deploy its troops, and left future talks in the hands of the OSCE via the newly established Minsk Group.[15] The peace negotiations, which effectively no longer apply, assert that

the region's final status is not yet settled.

This brings us to the vague status that prevailed until September 2023. Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous ethno-Armenian republic inside Azerbaijan's territorial borders, but given the lack of a treaty, its definitive status has not yet been determined. At the time of my trip in 2021, Nagorno-Karabakh had its own parliament, court system and army, and no economic or bilateral ties to Azerbaijan. But the proposals for a peace settlement, the Madrid Principles from 2007[16], updated in 2009, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, say that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh shall be given the right to vote on self-determination within an "interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance". While the parties have given their approval to the principles, they have not been able to agree on their implementation. One of the sticking points is the date of a referendum and the form it is to take. The principles have therefore not been put into effect. After the 2020 war, they have fallen into such obscurity that by 2022 Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin were declaring the Minsk Group "dead".[17]

With the ceasefire of 1994, it became clear that just short of a million people had been forcefully displaced or felt forced to flee, of whom some 600,000 to 720,000 were Azerbaijani and 300,000 to 500,000 Armenian. Roughly 60,000 people died and the areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh were turned into a string of Armenian military buffer zones filled with ruined and razed Azerbaijani villages. These buffer zones have been in the centre of stalling peace talks.[18]

Both sides have been accused of committing serious war crimes, but the allegations have been largely ignored or denied, which has left a gaping, festering wound that has refused to heal and that has dominated the political rhetoric. Even though this is found in Armenian textbooks,

it is above all the case in Azerbaijan, where over the years the demonisation of the Armenian enemy has been inflated out of all proportion.[19] The institutionalisation of denigrating anti-Armenian tropes permeates its schools, the hateful propaganda in the children's books eliciting the censure of the Council of Europe[20] and drawing criticism from the EU parliament[21] on several occasions.

The official stance, which has been spelled out by Ilham Aliyev in countless speeches and by various government sources, is that the Armenian genocide of 1915–1917 is nothing but Armenian propaganda intended to give the country global political leverage. Normally, such interpretations are called conspiracies; in Azerbaijan, however, it is the official truth. The idea of an Armenian lobby that spreads lies is promulgated in the public arena to explain the mismatch between the international community's view of history and Azerbaijan's. Azerbaijani historical revisionism is widely condemned by independent scholars. Modern Azerbaijani scholarship is rooted in the Stalin era, and Josef Stalin needed reasons for expanding the Union into Azerbaijani Iran. The purpose of the permitted historiography was therefore, in part, to legitimise an Azerbaijani territorial overreach.

When the 2020 war broke out on 27 September, it was with all this history in its baggage. Since the formation of Azerbaijan in 1991, the Karabakh question has dominated its politics and the idea of reclaiming the region has been a rallying cry for Aliyev. At the same time, Azerbaijan has sunk like a stone in democracy ratings and press freedom indices, and is considered one of the world's most repressive countries that quashes the most rudimentary of press freedoms. In the view of the US human rights organisation Freedom House in 2024[22], it surpassed Belarus as Europe's least democratic

country.

However, affirmation of the frustration felt in Azerbaijan over the failure of the peace talks to repatriate the region has meant that support for a military solution has dominated the public discourse.

Meanwhile, many Armenians are asking how it is that the country's past and present governments have not managed to broker peace with Azerbaijan in 25 years?

While Armenia has remained a relatively impoverished and isolated Transcaucasian country, oil revenues in Azerbaijan have enabled it to build up its military muscle to way beyond that of Armenia's. In some years, the import of war materiel from countries such as Israel, Turkey and Russia alone has matched the Armenia's entire GDP. Paradoxically, Armenia's per capita GDP has overtaken that of Azerbaijan, which, despite its vast fossil fuel revenues, has failed to keep the standard of living in the country in step with its wealth.

Azerbaijan's obvious military superiority notwithstanding, the rhetoric coming from Armenian politicians has been based on an idea that the country's military capacity and the people's innate bellicosity are much stronger than Azerbaijan's. In the most nationalistic writings, it is "in the Armenian blood" to be a soldier. The homages to and glorification of the war heroes from the 1990s have been effective in taking the sting out of all criticism levelled towards the militarisation of society. And the ruling elites of Armenia have, somewhat simplified, been marked by ingrained corruption that up until the "velvet revolution" of 2018 had been growing deeper by the year.

The incentive to establish a lasting peace was and is stronger in Armenia. While control over Nagorno-Karabakh was still in Armenian hands, there was no reason to attack a constantly reinforced Azerbaijan. Even though it has not been established by a court of international law that Azerbaijan

launched the attacks on Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, there is plenty of consensus among journalists and pundits that it was indeed Azerbaijan that dropped the first bombs. There is even fairly unambiguous evidence that the country had been preparing the invasion for some time. Moreover Ilham Aliyev has called it a "life-long mission" to retake Karabakh.[23]

The war in 2020 ended 44 days later. The Armenians lost the military buffer zones that they had controlled since the beginning of the 1990s, and Azerbaijan seized a third of Nagorno-Karabakh's territory and the surrounding "buffer

zone", including the corridor leading to Armenia. Most part, the Hadrut Region, of Nagorno-Karabakh that thus fell under Azerbaijani rule had historically been populated by Armenians, and traces of Armenian settlement can be found dating back over a thousand years. The purging of Armenians from the subsumed areas prompted a warning from the umbrella organisation Genocide Watch[24] that if the invasion continued, the risk of genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh would be very real indeed.

A couple of days after the alert flagged by Genocide Watch,

LACHIN CORRIDOR. *This five kilometer stretch of territory was the only lifeline for the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh.*

a ceasefire agreement was signed on 9 November by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia clearly declaring Armenia the defeated party.[25] Russia managed to secure a five-year mandate with a clause to extend its remit to monitor the ceasefire. The agreement tasked Russia with deploying 1,960 peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh with a two-fold mission: to protect the Armenian population and to police the only route, the so called Lachin Corridor, from Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh capital of Stepanakert.

It is along that road that I am now making my way.

The car bounces over yet another pothole. Stepanakert is approaching, but first we must pass the town of Shushi, which fell into Azerbaijani hands a couple of months ago. The imposing cliffs on which the town rests can be seen in the distance. The rocks shoot up from the ground, forming a plateau at the top from which one can look out over all of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A river runs to the right of the car. Meltwater has found its way down from the almost three-thousand metre high peaks visible on the horizon. Every year, they bring new life to the valleys, which are starting to spring. The mountain air might still be cold and fresh, but the rays of the sun bring warmth.

There is a mechanical digger in the distance that is busy building an access route to a small hydroelectric power station right next to the road. People are shouting in Azerbaijani to each other and a road-worker gives instructions to the man raising and lowering the bucket, pointing with his arm to where the soil is to be dumped.

"I thought they were Armenians at first," Nvard says in a whisper. "All the times I've driven along this road. I never dreamed I'd see this..."

She sits beside me, silently looking out of the window.

We approach the power station and a sign saying "AzerEnergy" appears, a reminder of Azerbaijan's intention to repopulate Shushi, or Shusha as they say, without delay. I slow down as we pass by it, twenty or so metres away. We're getting closer to the last Russian military checkpoint, but I want to make time to watch the builders by the digger. The power plant didn't exist a couple of months ago, and for many people the idea of Azerbaijani builders working next to the road was an impossible one to entertain. Aliyev's ostentatious building projects, in which the Italian company Ansaldo Energia[26] has won huge contracts to quickly abet Azerbaijan's ambitions to repopulate the reclaimed cities, are many. In another project, the Turkish ultranationalist, and to some EU countries officially terrorist, organisation the Grey Wolves has been tasked with building a new school in Shushi.[27] The Grey Wolves' school project is seemingly dead in the water, but this is not because Azerbaijan considers it a radical organisation, but because the Aliyev regime is unwilling to run foul of the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose financial cronies were awarded the contract instead. But it's one thing to read about the projects, quite another to see them, as it were, in the flesh.

The Russian flag announces that we have arrived at the crossing. To the right, the road continues on up to Shushi and to the left, it winds down from the heights to Stepanakert. A new sign bearing the word "ŞUŞA" in big red letters appears. The Turkish and Azerbaijani soldiers are standing a stone's throw away and a cluster of Azerbaijani construction workers are within earshot of everything the Russian guard says. When the fog is thick, people sometimes take to throwing rocks and things at passing cars. It makes it easier for the culprits to hide from the peacekeeping troops.

The Russian has a scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face so that only his cold blue eyes are visible. Behind him, one of the Azerbaijani builders waves at us. He's wearing jeans and a yellow hoodie with some flaking motto on the front. I wave back. The border guard looks at me and shakes his head, his eyes seething with fury.

"No! We do not do that here!" the solider barks. "No interaction. Understood?"

I adopt a grave expression and nod. This is the last checkpoint and if I want to pass it, I'd best toe the line. The waving man grins teasingly. He has heard my reprimand. He raises his hand again, but this time he doesn't wave, he flips me the middle finger: "Fuck you!"

The only thing between me and my tormenter is the Russian with his ice-cold eyes.

The soldier nods and hands me my passport back. At last, we're in the Armenian remains of Nagorno-Karabakh. We stop the car on a rise a little away to look out over Stepanakert. Shushi is behind us and the Azerbaijani and Russian flags are still visible. A gentle mountain breeze wafts in. The sun is setting. The clouds have settled low over the distant peaks and the lights of the city shimmer peacefully. The population of Nagorno-Karabakh's capital, some 70,000 souls, has slowly but surely started to return to restart their lives after the war.

Baku is 200 km away. We're 200 km from the cluster bombs and war crimes. The city is being prepared for the summer's festivities and in a couple of months, four European cup matches will be held there, and before them Baku's annual Formula 1 tournament. The thought of the joys of summer on the well-polished streets feels very remote.

Nvard has finally found a signal and calls photographer Areg.

"We made it," she tells him.

"How?" he replies.

"I have no idea, but we're here. When can we meet up?"
"I'll see you at the hotel tonight. This calls for a celebration!"

The sunlight filters through the red awnings hanging over one corner of the main market. The elderly and often somewhat rotund women with rough hands witness a life of physical labour. They stand behind tables and stalls loaded with the season's fruit and vegetables. There's a smell of fresh herbs and the voices of vivid conversations drift between the buildings.

The market has changed little from before. The same bustle, the same people. Housewives purchasing their wares for the evening. Everyone seems to know each other. Men cluster on plastic chairs playing chess in a café and vendors sweep up vegetable scraps off the ground. Even the smells are the same. The fresh herbs for which Nagorno-Karabakh is famed have recently become harvestable, and some women are hacking away at them with great, rugged knives, spreading their scent. They stir the chopped herbs in metal bowls with their hands, mixing them with olive oil and spices. You can tell that they are accustomed to making the local speciality jingalev hats, a kind of flatbread stuffed with fresh greens and lightly fried on a griddle.

An unobservant person might miss the plywood boards covering some of the market buildings. In early 2020, Amnesty International reported that an Azerbaijani cluster bomb had hit the market. What's remarkable is that were no military targets nearby, but the bomb caused a huge amount of damage that has not yet been repaired.

Hidden behind the corner, behind the boards, are the traces. A collapsed roof. Shattered shop windows. On the other side of the market, grenade shrapnel has left pockmarks in the walls. The unaccustomed eye might not see it, or cannot trace it – but Areg, who covered the war first hand,

has told how to follow the traces to the shrapnel's epicentre.

"Look," he says, pointing. "You can see where the bomb fell."

Sections of the building's facade have been blown away and a crater in the ground has been inexpertly repaired with soil. The shrapnel has peppered other facades down the alley, the closer to the impact site, the denser the scars. Fifty metres away, a shop still needs to replace its windows, through which the bits of shrapnel penetrated at such speed that they barely left cracks.

Areg is a war veteran from the four-day war of April 2016. This was the first military confrontation with Azerbaijan since the 1994 ceasefire agreement and the first indication of Azerbaijan's military capacity. In many eyes, the war, which resulted in a hundred or so deaths and the ceding of two Armenian villages to Azerbaijan, was an attempt by Azerbaijan to parade its martial superiority. Then, as now, Russia brokered a fragile ceasefire, which held until 2020.

When the war broke out in 2020, Areg went to stay in Stepanakert for the full 44 days. His photographs and observations from the 2020 war were picked up in Armenia and elsewhere. He knows every stone in Nagorno-Karabakh, where he spent part of his childhood, and his intimacy is evident through his camera lens.

While we order jingalev hats, the woman baking them says she stayed in Stepanakert during most of the war. She's in her sixties, and while she kneads the dough with her powerful thumbs, turns it over, and kneads it harder, she stares down at the table with intense eyes.

"I stayed for as long as I could in Stepanakert," she says. "Someone had to stay behind to cook for the soldiers, our children, who were fighting. But most people here at the market left. I don't hold it against them. Because my family nagged at me. They wanted me to go, too."

She flattens the kneaded bread, pours oil over it and fills

it with herbs.

"Even after they bombed the market I stayed. I came back, but it was getting emptier and emptier. Let me tell you something. After each ceasefire agreement it just got worse. So when it came to the third ceasefire, I left – by which time there were no civilians left here."

Four attempts at a ceasefire were made during the war, none of which lasted longer than a few hours. Each side accused the other of breaking them, and like everything in this war, no court has ever established the guilty party.

She folds the bread. Her voice is monotonous when she speaks.

"My son died at the siege of Shushi on one of the final days... He left behind my daughter-in-law, who was pregnant. She gave birth to their baby not so long ago and now... if I'm to be completely frank... that's what's keeping me going. What else is there here? My grandchild means that at least part of my son is still here."

After having fried the bread, she tears it in two and gives half to me and half to Areg. Areg makes to pay but she shakes her head and refuses the accept the note. He insists, but she turns her back. He sees that her will is stronger than his and he gives up.

"She was one of the few who stayed behind throughout the war," says Areg. "When the bombs weren't falling, her bread stall was one of the few places where those of us who worked during the war could eat. None of those who remained accepted payment. When she went, much of the hope went with her... You kind of understood that the war would be lost when one after the other of these fantastic people went to Armenia."

We walk out of the market, slowly chewing our herb-bread.

"Sure, the market was bombed," Areg says, "and nearly everyone fled because it was pretty much uninhabitable

here. But what set the people here in Artsakh apart was that no one stole anything. No shops were looted. Even during the war, when the bombing had stopped, we helped to each other clear up as much as we could, as quickly as we could. Maybe it was a way of keeping ourselves sane?"

He laughs at the absurdity and smiles.

"Feel free to put that in your book!"

From the capital of Yerevan, you can see the majestic Mount Ararat gaze down upon the city, its north and south peaks just across the border to Turkey. The north peak is over 5,000 metres high, its southern counterpart slightly lower. Colloquially, the peaks are said to symbolise Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and have been nicknamed Masis and Sis in reference to the "mother" of the Armenian language, the one peak being the big and the other peak the little.

Even though Nagorno-Karabakh has its own parliament, military and courts, the relationship of dependency that the state has with Yerevan is unmissable. Until the 2020 war, many of those who did their military service in Armenia were redeployed to Nagorno-Karabakh, and politically, many of the parties are the same in both parliaments; in fact, most people living in Nagorno-Karabakh are under no illusions that their parliament is completely independent of Armenia's.

Having said that, there are differences. The local dialect in Nagorno-Karabakh is considered by many in Armenia to be peculiar and quite heavily influenced by Russian. Some complain that no one understands them when they visit the cosmopolitan Yerevan, and in Nagorno-Karabakh, people are keen to point out their distinctiveness from the less war-hardened Armenia. Many of the domestic debates in Armenia struggle to reach all the way to Nagorno-Karabakh, where they stand uncomprehendingly on the sidelines looking on and shaking their heads.

This is particularly apparent in the recent democratic developments in Armenia, where a revolution in April 2018 – the Velvet Revolution – saw the then prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and his relatively new centre-liberal party Civil Contract, stop the then president Serzh Sargsyan from castling himself into the prime minister's corner in an attempt to circumvent the provisions of the constitution.

Nikol Pashinyan won the following election with a landslide that secured him a two-thirds parliamentary majority and gave him free rein to carry through liberal and democratic reforms that earned the praise of Europe. However, the balance between having a rapid pace of implementation, delivering results and not angering a corrupt system proved something of an obstacle and when the reforms reached the courts, they were blocked. The bureaucratic positions were – and are still – occupied by people with ties to the former government. Similarly, rumours began to spread that the relationship between Pashinyan and the army was breaking down for the same reason.

In the summer of 2019, Nikol Pashinyan took a trip to Nagorno-Karabakh, much to the chagrin of the Baku government, who regarded the Prime Minister's visit as an illegal crossing into Azerbaijan. And if that was not enough, Pashinyan held two speeches, one in Shushi and one in Stepanakert, in which he declared that "Artsakh is Armenia".[28] Experts who have been following the conflict for any length of time sighed audibly, fearing that such a provocation would legitimise a military attack by Azerbaijan against the breakaway state; the sad truth is that Azerbaijan would probably have found another *casus belli* sooner or later.

When the reform train hit the buffers in the winter of 2019 and 2020, discontent with Nikol Pashinyan started to emerge. In Armenia, a growing chorus of voices took to denouncing him as more of a populist than a pragmatist and

he was widely taken to be an all-mouth-and-no-trousers kind of man. His supporters argued that he had not even been in charge for two years and reforming a country that scraped the bottom of the corruption index is not something that can be done overnight.

In the lead up to the summer of 2020, rumours that Pashinyan had not patched up his relationship with the army and legal system intensified, which first manifested itself at an ordeal by fire, when fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the north-east of the country.[29] This was the first time ever that a proper military conflict was fought on Armenian soil. Previous clashes had been confined to Nagorno-Karabakh, which the international community considered a territory of Azerbaijan.

When the countries reached a ceasefire, it was greeted in Azerbaijan by major protests, initially disguised as discontent with Azerbaijan's handling of the corona pandemic, during which many people had lost their jobs without compensation. Soon, however, the protests turned into warmongering demonstrations calling on the government to retake Nagorno-Karabakh from what they saw as separatist Armenian movements.[30]

In August, accounts of troop movements in Azerbaijan started to surface from investigative journalists. There were claims that Turkey was hiring Syrian mercenaries[31] to act as "peacekeepers" and Turkish F-16s were flown to the Azerbaijani town of Ganja on the pretext of taking part in military exercises[32].

When the war broke out on 27 September 2020, there were compelling indications that it was Azerbaijan that dropped the first bombs on Nagorno-Karabakh, a fact that Ilham Aliyev later admitted. By that point, a couple of thousand Syrian mercenaries had been recruited by Turkey, and the Azerbaijani army was very quick to mobilise to the front line.

Azerbaijan denies the existence of the Syrians.

In Armenia, the friction between Pashinyan and the army ground on as the country entered a state of emergency. The dilemma it faced was that any war fought from Nagorno-Karabakh would, in terms of international law, necessarily entail an invasion of Azerbaijan. So the war was fought instead through Nagorno-Karabakh's own army with materiel, volunteers and expertise pretty much overtly supplied by Armenia.

When the war came to an end 44 days later, conspiracy theories that Pashinyan and the army had been at loggerheads gathered momentum. Both sides were accused of not acting in Armenia's best interests and many people still maintain that owing to its political posturing and loyalty to the former government, the army took part in machinations to punish the pro-reform Pashinyan government by withdrawing troops earlier than they had to. The truth of this allegation, however, has not been established.

Once the war ended, discontent with Pashinyan proliferated so much that he was compelled to call a snap election in June 2021. Politicians from the previous governments banded together and the former prime minister and president Robert Kocharyan was swiftly sifted out as the opposition's top candidate. Kocharyan was in government from 1998 to 2008 but made his name from the Karabakh war of 1991–1994, in which as a military man and son of Stepanakert he was considered a highly qualified participant. Back then he was president of Nagorno-Karabakh and his ties to Russian oligarchs and Kremlin contacts were picked out by the opposition as being crucial to future peace talks.

However, Kocharyan suffered a major defeat in the June 2021 election and despite the military losses, Pashinyan secured a parliamentary majority, albeit a much smaller one than he enjoyed in 2018. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the people

reacted by seeking to depose the local president Arayik Harutyunyan, who was considered too close to Pashinyan, further souring relations between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia has still not superseded Armenia as cultural centre, but when the locals gaze upon Ararat's north and south peaks and reflect on the relationship between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh that they symbolise, they do so now with a degree of circumspection.

As I stroll down one of the main streets in Stepanakert and look through a shop window that has still not been repaired after the war, I'm made all too aware of the new reality that reigns here. On my previous trips to the town, the war seemed strangely remote. Not remote in a psychological sense, but the thought of this well-polished town being the centre of one of the world's most infected and intractable conflicts was hard to fully digest.

On other side of a shop window, a shop worker fish out some garments from a box to dress one of the mannequins, but there is a special detail to this tableau. The cracks in the pane created by three, four – no, five holes left by flying shrapnel. Across the road, the long since patched up asphalt is still black. But women in heels and businesslike clothes walk down the street, middle-aged men sit on benches chatting and a couple of elderly people queue at the bank for their pensions.

Despite Stepanakert being war-ravaged, and despite the inaccessibility of Nagorno-Karabakh, the young are not abandoning the town. Nagorno-Karabakh has an image of being a vibrant home of artists and entrepreneurs. There is little depopulation to speak of, and the young who want Nagorno-Karabakh to be cosmopolitan make it more cosmopolitan.

Nvard's face appears as it reflecs in the window, reaching no higher than my shoulders.

"Me and Tigran, my husband, are thinking of moving here with the kids," she says. "We stopped talking about it when they started school, but now since the war we're entertaining the idea again."

"I don't get it," I reply. "Everything's so uncertain now since the war ended and another war is never far away. There hardly seems anywhere for the refugees to live."

"Perhaps. But for us Armenians it's always been the case. You have to understand this. We're the survivors of attempted genocide, whatever the rest of the world says."

BORDER CONTROL. *According to the ceasefire agreement that stopped the 2020 war, the border was controlled by Russian peacekeepers.*

JINGALOV HATS. *The traditional flatbread dish from Nagorno-Karabakh is made from up to twenty wild greens and onions.*

Chapter 2 – ”We got the body back … it was unrecognisable”

Jirayr gestures across the valley that stretches out between the verdant mountains. Pretty white clouds drift slowly across the bright blue sky. His five-year-old son with the chestnut brown eyes watches intently and curiously as his father talks, his arms clamped around his father's leg.

“See over there,” says Jirayr, pointing at some houses on the mountainside a few hundred metres away. “There are the Azerbaijanis. See – there's the school and the churchyard that I told you about. Our families lie buried there.”

Jirayr falls silent and turns worried eyes to the mountains. Worried? No, pensive, or perhaps mournful. He's only thirty-one, but the wrinkles around his eyes and his grey hair attest to a hard life. He looks simultaneously young and old.

The houses he's pointing to are at the other end of the village of Taghaverd. On the way there, he's been telling about how the village was split in two after the war. The upper part is controlled by Azerbaijan and lies strategically on the road from the south leading up to Shushi, while the lower part is at the bottom of the valley and still under Armenian control.

It would be too simple to say that the surroundings are tranquil but apart from a lowing cow and a few chirping birds, silence reigns. The scent of the budding trees suggests the imminent arrival of the summer months. But on the way to here, we passed several Armenian and Azerbaijani military posts glaring at each other along the mountainsides. Fifty metres away, Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh ends and the

Azerbaijani areas begin. The militarisation has been quick.

Jirayr shakes his head and strokes the back of his son's hand with a thumb.

"The blue tents mark where our side of Taghaverd starts. I can't believe that it's come to this," he says. "Before the war, this was a peaceful village. Life carried on as usual. No one could ever have imagined that we'd be living next door to the enemy…"

After the war, his family had to relocate back to the capital of Stepanakert, his wife being a teacher in the upper part of Taghaverd. Even though the family don't formally classify as refugees in that they still have their house in Taghaverd, they've been forced to reshape their lives. The children have had to change schools, his wife has found a new job and Jirayr is struggling to make ends meet.

In the Azerbaijani part of Taghaverd a fire burns, sending smoke winding up into the clouds.

"They sometimes burn things to wind us up. Like tyres. Just to freak us out. But they also sometimes burn down someone's house," Jirayr says.

It has been hard to learn anything about what the new borders mean, and only a handful of foreign journalists have managed to get past the military checkpoints to visit the affected villages. Before I set out on this trip, I had the feeling that they didn't want journalists writing about it – perhaps for the very reason that the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh boundaries has not yet been established. But it can also be because Azerbaijan sporadically breaks the ceasefire in these parts.

In Azerbaijan, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is a burning political issue; the political opposition there believes that the army should have seized all of Nagorno-Karabakh when they had the chance. But now this opportunity has been wasted, say many. President Aliyev himself claims that the matter of

Nagorno-Karabakh's status has been done and dusted: there is no administrative entity called Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenians in the region are not autonomous.[33] In other words, the official view is that the conflict has been resolved and that Azerbaijan has total control of the region – a view that stands in stark contrast with reality. As a journalist, I regard Aliyev's proclamations with astonishment, but standing here now I realise that it has ramifications. Because what does it mean for Nagorno-Karabakh not to exist in the eyes of Azerbaijan?

In 1991, when Azerbaijan declared its independence and the war was already raging, one of the initial resolutions adopted by its parliament was to dissolve Nagorno-Karabakh as an administrative entity. This meant that what was once the autonomous Soviet republic of Nagorno-Karabakh was carved up into several new autonomous regions: "Kalbajar" and "Upper Karabakh", with a border slicing right through Nagorno-Karabakh. The formal demographics of the regions have thus also been radically changed. If Armenians were once in the clear majority in Nagorno-Karabakh, they were divided up in a way that created the opposite situation. The regional reform left Armenians suddenly in the minority in two Azerbaijani regions.

For Jirayr, Azerbaijan's policy is formalised in his daily life, as is obvious when he and his son stand at the side of the road looking out over his home village. He takes a deep breath and sighs. The sun is blinding him, and he squints into the light.

"After the ceasefire, Azerbaijani cars started to appear along this road," Jirayr tells me. "It's the only road between Hadrut and Shushi. It was horrible... They'd drive up, sounding their horns, shouting and swearing at us and then speed past. Once they threw stones at a school bus and blocked its way. When the children got home, they were terrified!"

The Hadrut region south of Taghaverd lies between Azerbaijan proper and Shushi, so in order to enter Shushi,

Azerbaijan also had to take Hadrut.

I ask Jirayr if Azerbaijanis still drive freely along the road.

He shakes his head.

"It took a while, but then the Russians took control of this road, too... The Azerbaijanis take it as theirs, but as you've seen, it's the only road between Taghaverd and Stepanakert. Where else are we meant to drive? How else can we get home to our village? Things have improved a bit since the Russians started to control which cars were allowed to drive and when. Now the Azerbaijanis' cars drive along here twice a week at certain times. But otherwise, not even ambulances can get through," says Jirayr.

The ceasefire agreement of 9 November changed the borders, but at the time of writing, spring 2021, the only definite is which areas are Azerbaijan's, not where the exact borders are to be drawn in Nagorno-Karabakh. That is possibly in the nature of the beast. If Azerbaijan recognises that the military in Nagorno-Karabakh controls the border zones, it can be interpreted as confirmation of the region's independence.

Under the terms of the ceasefire agreement, Nagorno-Karabakh undertook to return what was taken during the war of the 1990s, and roughly one third of southern Nagorno-Karabakh up to Shushi, which Azerbaijan re-took militarily. This means that the area that the republic of Nagorno-Karabakh had claims on since the 1990s has been reduced by about a half, so that Nagorno-Karabakh suddenly found itself bereft of its long border with Armenia. The region is now an enclave entirely within Azerbaijan.

Before the war there were two roads into Nagorno-Karabakh, one passing through Karvachar in the north and one passing through the Lachin Corridor further south. Even before the post-Soviet break-up, the area between Nagorno-

Karabakh and Armenia was sparsely populated, but now the Armenians were being forced to flee, although admittedly, the area was populated primarily before the wars by Azerbaijanis – who were displaced in 1993 – and even earlier by Kurds.

The ceasefire agreement closed off the northern road and left the southern under the watchful eye of Russian peacekeeping troops. The Lachin Corridor, which formally belongs to Azerbaijan, thus severs southern Azerbaijan from northern Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh's left flank. But it is also the only road that connects Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Any foreigner passing through the Lachin Corridor is considered to be breaking the law in Azerbaijan. Every year up until 2020, between 50 to 100 foreigners – everything from regular tourists to journalists – were entered on a "black list", which serves as a source for some of the arrest warrants that Azerbaijan issues to states that it regards as allies. The countries that have received such orders are unconfirmed and while there are some claims that the number is in the twenties, there is only one case to date in which such an order has been heeded. The Russian-Israeli travel blogger and journalist Alexander Lapshin, who was arrested when the flight he was on made a stopover in Minsk in December 2017. He was first placed in custody in Belarus for two months and then extradited to Azerbaijan.[34] Why this happened to just Alexander Lapshin and no one else on the blacklist is a mystery; no public explanation has been given and even if the European Council records can confirm some details[35], many pieces of the puzzle are still missing.

The official case against Lapshin was that he had entered Nagorno-Karabakh for two days in 2011 and again in 2012. His trial in Belarus was accused of being unreasonably short and without due process. The judge, Alexander Konyuk, was subsequently made the Belarusian ambassador to Armenia,

where he has since cynically paid homage to Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian history and affiliation.

In an interview with me[36], Alexander Lapshin told about his extradition and his stint in an Azerbaijani prison. When he was sentenced, President Aliyev's private jet was waiting at a Minsk military airfield to take him to Baku. Eyes burning, Lapshin said that he had never seen such luxury in all his life. It contained a jacuzzi and gold trimmings, and had he had a more amicably minded host, he would surely have been offered a martini.

Once in Azerbaijan, he was placed in a cell in a prison in Sumgait. His cell was no larger than four by four metres and the light was on 24 hours a day. For the first two days he was denied contact with a lawyer, embassy staff and relatives; he also was deprived of anything to read or do. The toilet was a hole in the ground and an old rusty tap would briefly dispense water once or twice a day.

After seven months in prison, he was set upon in the middle of the night by four masked men who took him in a strangle-hold; when he awoke in a Baku hospital, he found himself with a broken hand and cuts and bruises all over his body. According to the records of the European Court of Human Rights, he signed a letter of pardon to Aliyev personally, admitting his crimes and asking for forgiveness. On his deportation to Israel a couple of days later, he underwent a medical examination that showed that he had been subjected to an almost fatal beating; in Azerbaijan, the story was that the prison guards had saved him from attempted suicide.

In May 2021, the European court ruled that the evidence against him had been manipulated and that the letter that Lapshin was said to have written was fiction. The medical examination stated that he had been lying unconscious for three days and had barely been in any shape to write

anything. The records also contain a longer section in which an Azerbaijani judge on the bench delivers a thoroughly worded counter claim to the Israeli medical examination and accuses Lapshin of lying. In the end, Azerbaijan was ordered to pay EUR 30,000 in compensation, a sum that cannot be seen as anything but symbolic.

Lapshin opened an account at "Artsakh Bank" in Nagorno-Karabakh and asked for the money to be deposited there. He laughed at his own craftiness and made it clear that he was under no illusion that the money would ever appear.

Laphin's story is relevant to the border question as symptomatic of how seriously Azerbaijan takes its territorial integrity. To defer decisions about – or even fail to set – the boundaries that the Russian peacekeepers are to guard is a way for the country to advance its positions or dismiss the Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian government as a negotiating party.

Since the war, Aliyev has also concluded that there are only 20,000–25,000 Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh, a figure reached by the Azerbaijani intelligence services counting cars driving in and out of the region.[37] It doesn't take a long time in Nagorno-Karabakh to realise that the true population is much greater, somewhere around 100,000–120,000, albeit some 25,000 fewer than before the war.

Some of these are Jirayr and his family, whose home has suddenly found itself in the middle of a border conflict.

The mint has started to sprout in the grass and the smell that rises as it's crushed underfoot is fresh. The trees are ablaze with blossom and Jirayr's son is running ahead. We've arrived at the house that Jirayr lived in until the war. In the front garden of a bungalow is an empty swimming pool, circular and painted light blue, its rim latticed with cracks. The house opposite is empty. It's bordering on eerie. Abandoned.

"My last day here," Jirayr says, "was 27 September on the morning of the war. Me and my friends gathered over there under the roof for a coffee. We knew that we'd be sent to the front and we had to pluck up our courage together. There were five of us, and now only two of us are left..."

While Jirayr talks, Areg asks him and his son to sit on the edge of the pool and look into the camera. Son sits close to father, resting his head against him. Jirayr puts his arm around the boy.

"The bombs fell here in the garden," says Jirayr. "You can see over there amongst the fruit trees. We've tried to clear away the bulk of it, but the hole is still there. The shrapnel hit a branch, as you can see, and then shot towards the house."

He gets up from the edge of the pool and sets off for the house. The windows have been provisionally patched up with plastic, but the shrapnel holes pepper the facade.

"Up there in the corner," says Jirayr as we enter, "you can see that the wall is damaged. It was sheer luck that the house didn't take a direct hit."

The floor is dusty and on it is an old discarded Coke bottle with a mouthful or two of drink left in it. Most of the furniture has been removed and what is left is wrapped in plastic. The feeling is one of being in an old crofter's cottage in a distant forest where you know that a family spent some of its best summers; but then a family member died or the children grew up and no one ever bothered to return.

Jirayr kicks a piece of junk but then picks it up carefully and leans it against the pastel-painted wall.

"We had so many plans... You saw out there where we parked, where the guest cottage was. We had plans to turn it into a restaurant for people passing by. They would've sat under the trees down by the brook and I would've served khorovats – skewers – and my own homemade vodka. I'd

have done it for the pleasure of it, not for the money."

"It really looks like a house for a happy family," Nvard says to him.

"Yes, it was perfect. Absolutely perfect. The children were free to run around and play. They had the pool, the orchard... the toys out there."

His son has found a little children's bike painted bright red, yellow and blue with stabilisers. He starts riding around and Areg runs behind to play with him. We're left alone with Jirayr, listening to Areg's deep tones, now laughing, now playfully exhorting. The son laughs hysterically as he tries to evade, with the typical taunts of a child, the grown-up chasing him.

"The same day that my friends and I joined the army, we were given our guns and sent to Jaybrail on the southern front," Jirayr tells us. "I can't really describe what it's like when you're there and it's nothing I want to think about... But sometimes it's hard not to."

He takes out his mobile and starts to browse through his photos. He appears bearded with a Kalashnikov and an ammunition belt slung from his shoulders in a cross.

"Those of us in the photo survived...but...the bombs fell day and night – unrelentingly. There were maybe fifty of us from Taghaverd who went...now there are only ten of us who came back."

I ask him whether he can send the photos to me.

"I don't think it's right to share pictures from the war," he says curtly and stuffs his phone back into his pocket. "They're kind of personal for us who were there."

We head out to the others and he tells his son that it's time to go. We're driving on to see Jirayr's brother. But he turns and looks back at the house, the orchard and the empty pool.

"We'll move back here one day. No doubt about it. It doesn't matter if the Azerbaijanis are just around the corner

or what happens. This is our home."

A teenage girl and her mother lift a wooden table out of the shade and into the sun and then collect a couple of chairs from the garden to place at it. A younger girl of about twelve with long, dark hair emerges from the house and descends the steps to the porch with a white cloth in her hand that she carefully lays over the table. The family is busy setting out coffee and tea and a cake. And what a cake! Multilayered, it is, with jam and sweet bread.

"The girls have been baking all morning in preparation for your arrival," says their mother, Ruzanna, as she gestures to us to sit.

It's calm and peaceful. Some birds are singing in the background and the odd car can be heard in the distance driving along the road down to Taghaverd. The spring sun throws a pleasing warmth. The girls, who are too old to play

like the other three children, sit on the sofa either on side of Nvard. They were war refugees and lived in a hotel in Yerevan where Nvard was the manager. It's a happy reunion. In Yerevan they were like a family.

Areg is standing impatiently to one side. He's not in the mood to sit down to listen to yet another long-drawn out conversation about the horrors of war. Areg is also a street artist and after the war he painted playful figures, blojiks, around Nagorno-Karabakh that went viral on social media, and on his way to Taghaverd he saw the rear end of a missile sticking up from the ground. No one has got round to removing it yet.

"I'll take the kids," Areg announces. "We have to find something else to do other than listen to talk about war day in day out."

Ruzanna looks anxiously at Areg as he leads away the three boys, who run after him laughing.

OLD MEMORIES. *Though it has only been a few months since they left their home, it feels like a lifetime of memories has passed.*

"Don't go to far," Ruzanna calls out to him. "I want to know where the children are!"

"It's OK," answers Areg with a smile. "There's no need to worry. We'll just go off and do some painting somewhere!"

Ruzanna is left with no choice, and it's obvious that she's not comfortable.

"Since the war, I've never been able to totally relax," she asserts. "But I realise that sometimes I need to let go."

The hill behind the house marks the new border to Azerbaijan. It's no more than sixty or so paces away.

"We can sometimes hear them riding there," Ruzanna says, "as the only way to reach their positions at the other end of the village on horseback is via the hills. But truth be told, they're probably just as scared as we are... so we don't see them and they don't see us. But once they've built their new road and can transport things there maybe that'll change – but what do I know?"

She takes a knife to a banana and some apples and lays the slices on a dish.

"I was born in Baku, you know," she goes on. "My family came here when the pogroms began. I remember that we set off in the middle of the night and kept driving until we got here. We could've driven all the way to Armenia, but my dad loved Azerbaijan and didn't want to be too far away. He hoped that there'd be peace so that he'd be able to return. He'd spent his whole life there, you know?"

"But you stopped at Taghaverd?"

"Yes, we managed to make it here. Not everyone did. But Dad spoke perfect Azerbaijani and he had friends in the army who could vouch for him, so they let us through. A couple of weeks later, his friend also turned up with all our furniture, but he had to spend the whole time hidden in our cellar. Azerbaijanis weren't that welcome here, you could say... A little later Dad was able to drive him to the border zone so

that he could walk back to his own country under the cover of darkness."

She shakes her head and asks herself how things could have gotten so bad.

"And now we're at war again... just around the corner of the house..."

Their eldest daughter, Melina, says that she'd like to show us her school while her father prepares our lunch. She's grown impatient and has itchy feet. She takes Nvard by the hand and we walk down through the green bushes and across a football pitch, on which a few children are kicking a ball.

"The Azerbaijani forces ordered us to take down all our Armenian flags the other day," Melina tells us in passing as we approach the school. "They said that the whole village is theirs now, and if we didn't take down the flags they might attack us. As you can see, there aren't any flags flying here any more..."

The school yard is scarred by a large bomb crater and from it – as usual – the shrapnel can be traced across the entire facade of the three-storey concrete building. All the windows have recently been replaced and some of them are still covered by their protective plastic. As we turn a corner, we see a table covered with red bouquets in front of the main entrance.

"A cluster bomb exploded," says Melina, indicating the damaged building opposite, "and killed about twenty soldiers. We leave the table here as a reminder that they tried to protect us."

If the school's rear facade is damaged, the traces of the bomb that hit this side are visible everywhere. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have been accused by human rights organisations of using cluster bombs, and some 120 countries around the world have signed a resolution to prohibit their use, although not Armenia or Azerbaijan – or indeed Russia

and Israel, each country's respective weapons supplier.

Between 2016 and 2020, 69 per cent of Azerbaijan's arms imports came from Israel, according to the Stockholm International Research Institute (SIPRI).[38] Israel imports in return around 40 per cent of its oil from Azerbaijan.[39] Azerbaijani oil reaches Europe through pipelines that lead from Baku, through Georgia, to Turkey and the municipality of Ceyhan on its Mediterranean coast. From there, it is shipped onwards, to countries like Israel. The oil pipelines had eleven owners in 2021, the four largest being Britain's British Petroleum, Azerbaijan's Socar, the USA's Chevron and Norway's Equinor, with a combined stake of 70 per cent or so. Western ownership has faced some flak, but at the time of writing it has never been serious enough for the companies to pull out of their pipeline extension projects.

The relationship between Israel and Azerbaijan dates back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Israel's case, it is one of practicalities; for one thing, Azerbaijan is a good trading partner that sells subsidised oil in exchange for high-tech weaponry, for another it is geographically close to Israel's arch enemy Iran. There are also unverified indications that Israel has deployed signals intelligence equipment close to the Iranian border.[40] For Azerbaijan, the relationship with Israel is convenient for the purposes not only of arming itself but also of rhetoric.

Its close ties to Jewish Israel, give Muslim Azerbaijan – although admittedly a largely secular nation – an almost unique position in the world, a relationship it can cite as evidence of its commitment to multi-culturalism and tolerance. At the same time, Azerbaijan is excoriated for its serious legislative shortcomings when it comes to minority rights. This failure notwithstanding, the question of multi-culturalism is used rhetorically by Azerbaijani leaders to set their allegedly inclusive country apart from what they

consider, without much cause, the ethnonationalist racist state of Armenia.

During the war, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel was particularly chafing to the Armenians, and Armenia recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv in protest.[41] Given the similarities between Armenians and Jews – both having been the victims of genocide with a widespread diaspora, and with Jerusalem home to an historically important Armenian minority – many Armenians expected Israel to sympathise with them, but others also looked on cynically as Israel instead chose money and military strategy over the seemingly value-informed option.

However, Israeli-manufactured cluster munitions fell over Nagorno-Karabakh[42] and Russian ones over Azerbaijan[43]. And one of them came down right in front of the school where I'm standing.

On our way back to the house, Areg appears with the children. They hurtle towards us, their faces full of laughter, overjoyed at having done some painting with Areg.

"We painted that missile on the way here to make it look less menacing," says Areg. "And then we went down to a large doorway on the way to the school that had some shrapnel damage. I did a blojik there, too, to give the children something to laugh at when trudging reluctantly to school!"

Lernik, the father of the household, has just returned from work. He's brought lunch and the family sets out the meal on a long table. I help to lift it out from the shade.

"I'd actually intended to do some barbecuing," Lernik says, but the neighbours have just had their son's body returned to them, and to have a barbecue is kind of like having a party. We don't want to spread the smell to the neighbours out of respect for their loss."

When the family fled to Yerevan, Lernik stayed behind and signed up, just like his brother.

"I run a bakery here in the village, and I managed to persuade some of the women to stay behind and help me," he says as we seat ourselves at the table.

The whole family gathers around the meal, and the children start helping themselves. Lernik opens a bottle bearing a Coca-Cola label but that now contains home-distilled vodka. He pours us adults a drink each and makes a solemn toast.

"To our neighbour's son! He fought like a true martyr so let us drink to his memory!"

He drains his glass and shoots me an admonishing glance for not doing likewise.

"No, no, we don't do that here in Artsakh! Real men knock their drinks back," he announces.

I laugh and blame it on not wanting to dull my mind, and ask him to tell me what he did during the war.

"I pretty much lived here and went down to the bakery. Then we drove it out to the front..."

"To the front?" wonders Areg. "For the entire war?"

"Yes, the entire war."

"Christ... I can't imagine a more dangerous thing to do."

"Someone had to do it, right?"

"Is it the same thing now?" I ask.

"Sure it is. I still bake bread and one of my biggest customers is the army, who take it up to the soldiers right by the border checkpoints."

"Does any trade go on with the Azerbaijanis there?"

Lernik has drunken but serious eyes.

"We don't sell them bread, of course, but sometimes they get cigarettes. We put some on the ground and they run over and leave some cash. That's about it. Ironic, isn't it? We try to kill each other yet still respect each other enough for us to sell them fags."

He continues.

"That's something, but it's not like they deserve it! Think

what they did to Jirayr's father-in-law!"

Ruzanna breaks in.

"It's nothing for little ears," she says hushingly.

She looks at the children and tells them to run off and play.

"When the ceasefire agreement was signed, it wasn't clear where the borders ran," Lernik continues. "He helped the soldiers in upper Taghaverd to get down to us here in the valley. He wanted to save as many as he could. The last time he went up he was abducted. He wasn't even armed!"

Lernik pulls a pained face.

"We got the body back... It was unrecognisable. His face had been defiled and his body was a mess. I just don't get it. Why? Why?!"

The Azerbaijanis seem to be turning into phantoms around the dinner table – creatures the haunt the mountains and frighten the locals. Maybe it's to do with the psychology of war, in which the creation of an enemy is a means of coping with the distress. But this explanation is probably too simplistic and trite to describe the mechanisms behind the dehumanisation of "the enemy".

One thing is for sure: the Azerbaijani harassment of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh is ongoing and, as for now, one-sided. Since losing the war, the Armenians have ended up in a kind of disadvantaged position in which every misstep could be the spark that reignites hostilities. Instead, a formerly controlled security has been placed in the hands of the Russian peacekeepers and left at the mercy of geopolitical posturing. If Armenia expresses any discontent with Russia, there is a danger that Russia will punish Armenia by giving concessions to Azerbaijan. Frustration at the impotence is bubbling up.

In the independent news flows and reports from the region, which are few and far-between given the barring of

journalists, it is not uncommon to come across accounts of harassment: cars in Shushi being pelted with rocks or livestock failing to return from the pasture. A dozen people have also been shot, including a technician repairing a waterpipe, who was killed under the watchful eye of the Russians. Azerbaijan claimed to have been unaware of the scheduled repairs and fired.

It also happens that Azerbaijani soldiers occasionally advance their positions only to be pushed back by Russian peacekeepers. In most cases, the Russian response is to urge both sides to lay down their arms.

The harassment has also spread to Armenia. Since the war, minor parts of the main road that runs from the south of the country to Yerevan passes through Azerbaijan, at which points it has erected signs saying "WELCOME TO AZERBAIJAN" in large letters. In one of his speeches, Aliyev has said that this is "to make Armenians driving through that road feel safe in Azerbaijani territory".[44] At first, they closed the road off, trapping around 40 civilian cars as hostages until Russia negotiated their release. Since then, however, Armenia has built an alternative route so that its people can be spared the aggravation.

In May 2021, Azerbaijani troops entered the area of Lake Sev (not to be confused with Lake Sevan) on the border with Armenia, where they were said to start building a permanent outpost. The Azerbaijani army presented a map, regarded by Armenia as manipulated, of how the border pass across the lake and not along its shore. The mountain plateau affords a view of the road between Yerevan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The examples continue, and in 2021, Armenia's territorial boundaries were violated at least five times by the Azerbaijani army, which constantly accuses Armenia of having opened fire on them, or as in the case of Lake Sev, simply believes that the areas are theirs.

A LIFETIME OF WAR. *Ruzanna was born in Baku and fled the city due to pogroms against Armenians at the beginning of the 1990's. Now war has returned.*

The rationale from Azerbaijan is that the demarcation and delimitation of the maps never took place in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union because the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh took control of the borderlands to Armenia. Armenia, for its part, contends that such processes are to be conducted through talks rather than military might, and accuses Azerbaijan of repeated harassment. As ever, the knife remains to Armenia's throat, because one false step and Nagorno-Karabakh might very well fall.

And perhaps this is the greatest post-war change. The balance of power has been reversed, and the ones stuck in the middle are the families in Taghaverd.

NEW REALITY. *The new border was only 50 meters behind this family's house. Sometimes they could hear Azerbaijani soldiers pass by.*

Chapter 3: ”Our presence here will be a long one”

On a hill on the outskirts of Martakert lies one of the biggest Russian military bases in Nagorno-Karabakh. Hastily erected by the Russians, it affords a view over the Azerbaijani steppes only a couple of kilometres away. The perimeter fence is clad in combat-green to keep out prying eyes, and the watchtower bristles with submachine guns.

An opportunistic family has set up a stand right outside it, selling beer, cigarettes, spirits and chocolate from a small white plastic shed to the soldiers stationed there to guard the surrounding area. A child from some nearby houses is running around in front of the base, but the soldiers on guard don't seem to care much.

We've tried to make contact with the Russians several times but they've been reluctant to answer the most innocuous questions, speaking to us instead with their vacant military stares that do all the necessary talking: "You'll not get a word out of me. Piss off!"

This time my hopes are higher.

Martakert is north Nagorno-Karabakh's largest town and during the war it stood firm against the onslaught. Maybe it was because Azerbaijan concentrated its resources onto the southern front. Historically, however, the road to Martakert has passed through the Aghdam District, which after the 2020 war fell to Azerbaijan. Aghdam was an Azerbaijani-dominated town before 1994, and when the Armenians drove out the

Azerbaijani forces, the entire population of some 30,000 souls fled with them. In order to create a military buffer zone, the town was razed to the ground and heavily mined. To be sure, much of the town had already been destroyed by the fighting, but what was once a vibrant metropolis is now one of the most overt symbols of just how devastating the war of the 1990s was. It is completely deserted. There's barely a house left before you reach Martakert in the north.

One of the 1990s most notorious alleged war crime cases took place nearby. To the west of the road, inside Nagorno-Karabakh, stood the Azerbaijani village of Khojaly, one of the few places in Nagorno-Karabakh with a mainly Azerbaijani population. Accounts of the incident differ, but a consequence of an Armenian advance was that hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians were killed. Human Rights Watch has established at least 200 deaths[45], but official Azerbaijani sources, often difficult to verify, put the figure many times higher. In Azerbaijan it is referred to as a massacre, amongst the staunchest nationalists even as "genocide". What is certain is that the Armenian side was accused of not having done everything in its power to prevent civilian deaths.

While to the east of the car, we've been able to gaze silently over the devastation of the 1990s war. This is the clearest example of when a story is created out of an unsolved alleged war crime and then institutionalised in Azerbaijani state rhetoric.

The road is now blocked off, and to get to Martakert you need to take a long detour through a massive valley – "Earth Valley" – that you first need to drive to the bottom of before winding your way back up. So a drive that once took forty minutes can now take up to three hours, which has effectively isolated Martakert from the rest of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Is that why the Russian presence is so large in the north? To keep order on the borders? And it can get larger, because

on the way here today we met convoy after convoy of Russian lorries carrying material northwards. The longest of these convoys I reckoned to be roughly 25 lorries, all easing their way slowly down the steep hillsides.

Standing outside the military base is a young freckle-faced soldier. He quickly yanks his scarf up over his mouth as if suddenly remembering that he should be wearing it. Has he been ordered not to show his face to strangers? Maybe. It at least helps to distance the soldiers from the locals.

"Halt!" he shouts.

I try to peek in behind the gates, but a barrack is blocking the view of anything interesting.

"I'd like to ask you some questions," I explain to him. "I'm a journalist from Sweden and would like to know more about what you do here."

He gives us that look – "Piss off!" – but I hold my ground, so he lifts his comms radio to his mouth, speaks into it and announces:

"The Captain's on his way. Stay here. Don't touch anything."

Other than a knee-high concrete block standing beside him, there's not much to touch. The soldier's order seems scripted.

A tall man in a miliary cap approaches from the distance, striding towards us with military steps. His cap covers the top of his shaved head but under his uniform hides a heavy gold chain hanging over the typical light blue striped sailor's vest that Russian soldiers wear.

"Well?" he barks. "I haven't got all day. What do you want to know?"

Not the optimal conditions for an interesting interview but what the hell – what do I have to lose? I tell him we saw some Russian military vehicles escorting an Azerbaijani along the road. It's a white lie, given that it's just hearsay, and I haven't actually seen it myself – but there are credible reports of it,

and I want to see his reaction.

"We perform services for both sides," is his brusque reply.

"What services?"

"I'm assigned duties. I delegate duties. And my men perform duties."

"What can you tell me about the reactions of the local population?"

"They respect us. We respect them. Everyone is friendly."

Closed-ended questions would clearly be a waste of time with this one.

"How does it feel for you to have been stationed out here? For you and your men?"

"We're soldiers. We follow orders."

The reply just as curt. He regards me with his cold eyes without batting an eyelid. Prepared to answer the next question with the same impassiveness. This is definitely getting me nowhere.

"How long will you be staying here for?"

"Our mandate is for five years, but our presence here will be a long one. No one need worry."

"How long?"

"Do you have any more questions?"

I give up and let him go back to his business. Once he is some way away, I make eye contact with the freckly soldier. He can't be any more than twenty.

"Well? How about it?" I ask him jokingly. "Is he always so chirpy?"

He's smiling, but he says nothing and looks away.

"Our presence here will be a long one," announced the captain at the base, and it's not hard to believe him. The Russian militarisation has been quick. Incredibly quick. As stated before, there are just short of 2,000 peacekeeping troops. Formally. But standing here, it's hard to believe

anything other than that the number is higher, at least periodically when setting up all military bases. It's a rumour that's hard to confirm but that often gets repeated. Sometimes matter-of-factly, sometimes sadly. But in the world's press, it has slipped past the news desks. Maybe because the militarisation process has been disguised by innocuous sky-blue emblems bearing the Cyrillic letters "MC" picked out in yellow: Mirotvorcheskiye Sily – peacekeeping forces.

The phenomenon differs, however, from other instances in which Russia has conducted proxy wars – conflicts in which a country arms another group without entering the theatre itself. An obvious example is the war in Ukraine, where separatist forces took control of the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk with Russia's help in 2014.

In the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, internationally recognised as Georgian territory, Russia has deployed regular military units to defend their allies' borders from Georgia. In South Ossetia sections of the military have been formally incorporated into the Russian army, further strengthening its dependency on Russia.

In Transnistria, an autonomous Russophone breakaway republic situated between Moldavia and Ukraine, Russia is said to be smuggling soldiers and arms in to the local army. But there are also around 400 peacekeeping troops there as well, to which Russia has added some 2,000 regulars – a deployment that has been regularly criticised by the UN and the outside world and that is a constant bone of contention in the Moldavian debate.

In this sense, the Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh differ from the country's other foreign military strategies. They are, on paper at least, welcomed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and their five-year mandate is, at least when believing the initial rhetoric in Nagorno-

Karabakh, supposed to be extended after 2025. Moreover, their mission is regulated by an agreement that has not been widely criticised by other countries – perhaps because the OSCE, EU or UN were never even close to brokering a peace between the arch-enemies, so the wider world had no choice but to accept Russia's temporary de facto role as a guarantor of security.

The question everyone's asking themselves is what a Russian presence means in Nagorno-Karabakh both on stage and behind the scenes.

Besides guarding the Lachin Corridor, and holding some bilateral talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, they are assisting – to a certain extent, at least – local authorities in the rebuilding of Nagorno-Karabakh. The region has thus shifted its dependency from Armenia to Russia, and anyone who has an understanding of Russian foreign policy will know that such dependency does not come free.

Towards the end of November 2020 when most war refugees had returned to Stepanakert and Nagorno-Karabakh, there was an opening ceremony for its society and schools, after which photographs of children holding portraits of Russian president Vladimir Putin circulated on social media.[46] Although there were suggestions that Russian soldiers had distributed the photographs, it was more likely the initiative of a single school principal keen to show appreciation for Russia's brokering of a ceasefire.

Shortly afterwards, during the following spring, the local parliament voted through a change to the constitution that established Russian as an official second language,[47] allowing all official business to be conducted in Russian. In effect, the move was hardly radical in that much of the bureaucracy was inherited from Soviet times and therefore already in Russian, but it was seen as symbolically important nonetheless. However, it did get the locals talking: Just how Russian will

Nagorno-Karabakh become?

One thing is certain, and that is that Russia was instrumental in drafting the ceasefire agreement and getting the countries to sign it. Within the UN-backed Minsk Group, displeasure had been growing over the previous years at how Russia was more or less deliberately trying to outmanoeuvre the other parties. When the Minsk Group was supposed to gather again, after the 2020 war, it was largely malfunctioning.[48] Analyses differ as to how much power Russia had: could the country have stopped the war in its infancy? And if so, why hadn't it?

Some regional analysts, rightfully or not, contend that Russian could have stopped the war at an earlier phase but chose not to. The reason is at least two-fold: Russia wanted good relations with Azerbaijan for its close – often corrupt – economic ties and it wants to teach Armenia's new prime minister Nikol Pashinyan a lesson. This narrative has been widely repeated in Russian media and well-spread by agitators of the Pashinyan government.

Armenia's balancing act between being part of the Russian sphere of interest through the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO – the Eurasian answer to NATO) and having good relations with Europe did not go down well with Putin, so while the new Armenian government embarked on a package of liberal and democratic reform, it had to do so with Russian sensibilities in mind.

With Russia's historical enemy, Turkey, on its western border and Azerbaijan on its eastern, little Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are the only physical obstacle to a geographically unified pan-Turkist world stretching from Istanbul in the west to Kazakhstan in the east. In security terms, relations with Russia have by Armenia long been considered crucial to the balance of power.

Put simply: If Pashinyan falls into Putin's bad books, Russia will be less incentivised to support Armenia in the event of a conflict, which is what some experts argue happened in the autumn of 2020 when Azerbaijan and Turkey attacked Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though Russia could have put an early stop to the war, it refrained from doing so in protest against Armenia's drift towards democracy and, in its view, Russophobia.

Other, often moderate or western minded, Armenian experts argue that these narratives reproduce Russian rhetoric, and that the Azerbaijani preparations for war were obvious and far-gone. In other words, it was a matter of time

before a war would happen, rather than a miscalculation in diplomatic loyalties towards Moscow.

And now we're leaving a Russian military base behind us. The sign outside the base shows a picture of Russian troops accompanied by a slogan written in large Cyrillic letters: "Where we are – peace is."

In the centre of Stepanakert, high up by the large open square between the parliament, the government building and the grand Armenia Hotel, placards bearing hundreds of names have been erected. In front of them, lying on the ground or standing in vases and pots are red flowers on long green stalks. This is where people come to pay their respects

RUSSIA. *Russian troops made Martakert's football stadium into a military hospital.*

to dead soldiers or pin up photos of the missing.

A large Russian sign above the placards reads: "Thank you to our Russian friends who are helping our soldiers back home". Beside it is a Russian flag so there can be no mistake who has arranged this display. It all serves as a reminder that even if the war is over on paper, it is still being fought on the ground. Russia demands gratitude for working with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to negotiate the return of the dead.

An elderly gentleman passes from photo to photo, holding his walking stick behind his back to get a better look at the faces. He squints as if he needs glasses but has never got round to visiting an optician. The photographs are stained and buckled after having hung there the whole winter. The man hums to himself as moves along the line. The portraits are of young men, boys almost, with grave expressions. One or two are private pictures seemingly taken at a happier time in their lives.

Not having wanted to enter the semi-circle of images, Areg is standing smoking around the corner when I approach him.

"I get it that the Russians have to be here for our security," he says, "but there's not a huge difference between owing a debt of gratitude and being enslaved."

He sighs.

"Myself, I try to stay out of all this... After having been in two wars there's hardly any room for politics in my brain as well. I'd go mad. Sometimes when I look through my camera lens, I just see the aesthetic nowadays, as if I shut down. I know what kind photos people enjoy, so that's what I take photos of."

His cigarette falls to the ground and he squashes it underfoot, twisting the butt to make sure it's properly extinguished.

"Whatever. Enough of that. Poshli," he says frivolously in

Russian: "Let's go."

Pro-Russian placards are no longer uncommon here. On my previous visits, I didn't see any traces of Russia at all, which surprised me. The only witnesses to a Russophone past are old Soviet murals and monuments; now, however, they're everywhere. Russian flags hang on every other façade and signs put up by the Russian troops can be seen in every quarter. Sometimes they're of a more subtle nature: like when you enter a hospital and a sign beside the door reads "Your healthcare is provided by us, Mother Russia".

It's obvious that a more explicitly asserted Russian presence in the region is not a kind of value-based peace intervention, but one that carries with it obligations from the beneficiaries. It is ever thus with Russia.

Russia's interests in the South Caucasus go back a long way. The remote mountainous region lies where the three former great powers of Turkey, Russia and Iran meet, and was historically the centre of one of the great trade routes between Europe and Asia. Any country that controls the region, controls the trade and has the military power.

The splits between these three great powers have had – and still have – a huge impact on the region, which seems to the observer to be wrestling with the interests of the outside world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were declared independent republics, marking the definitive end of Russia as former power-holder. While Georgia has been actively breaking with Russia since 2003 in hopes of closer ties to the West, Russia retains a major stake in the other two countries . The Turkophone Azerbaijan has, for its part, made clear overtures towards Turkey, where the official line is that they are "brother nations".

Armenia has retained its close relationship to Russia for

reasons not only of military strategy but also of history, since the greatest Armenian diaspora in the world lives in Russia.

The economic figures speak for themselves. Over 25 per cent of all exports go to, and almost a third of all imports come from, Russia (2021).[49] This increased, with the major Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, to over 40 per cent in 2023.[50] Armenia seems to be, as many other former countries of the USSR, including Azerbaijan, used as a buffer country to avoid sanctions. Armenia's diplomatic relationship with Russia is also evident in the import of military materiel, for which Russia accounts for almost 95 per cent (2020).[51] Until the autumn of 2023, when France started to export arms to Armenia,[52] Russia nearly held a monopoly of arming Armenia. Arms imports from Russia are also a consequence of an OSCE recommendation of an arms embargo[53] on Armenia and Azerbaijan, which Russia and a number of other OSCE members have ignored.

It is easy to argue that Armenia's dependency on Russia is a tough nut to crack, assuming that the country wants to crack it. This has also proved the case historically.

2009 saw the founding of the EU's Eastern Partnership with the three Caucasian states, Belarus, Moldavia and Ukraine. While it was never an explicit goal for the six countries to be part of the EU, the key aim of the initiative was to create a format for cooperation and to strengthen mutual ties.

The following year, the EU embarked on talks about extending partnerships to more former Soviet states. Ukraine was one of them, Armenia another. For four years, Brussels negotiated with Yerevan on the forms of such extended economic cooperation, which would entail a political shift for Armenia from the Russian sphere of interest to the European. However, shortly before the agreement was due to be signed, Armenia's former prime minister Serzh Sargsian met with Russian president Vladimir Putin. It was subsequently

announced that Armenia was to join the Eurasian Economic Community instead.[54]

Armenia had joined the CSTO on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it was likely that the Kremlin did not take kindly to the idea of Armenia having an economic union with Europe and a military pact with Russia. In short, even though ambitious talks had been going on for four years with the EU, Armenia finally resigned itself to the fact that the country was still under the influence of Russia.

Outside the entrance to his bar, Azat has embedded a missile in the ground. To one side stands a Soviet bus that's seen better days. The bar looks more like a place where a scrap dealer has tried to tidy up than somewhere Stepanakert's younger adults go to listen to music and drink beer.

As I enter, I'm greeted by a dense cloud of cigarette smoke that has infused the cramped room, in one corner of which a jazz band is playing. It's not long before I make eye contact with Azat, who recognises me from two years previously. His eyes shine as he approaches me. His bald pate and perfectly groomed beard reinforce his military appearance. Dressed in a tight T shirt, camouflage trousers and high leather boots, he looks ready to enter the battle again.

"Azat!" I call to him loud enough for him to hear. "I've heard you don't allow Russians into your bar!"

"Fuck, no, this is war-free zone," he replies. "Here it's Artsakhians only!"

He points to a flag hanging over the counter. It's the Armenian, with the Tetris-like triangle at the far end, indicating that it's the emblem of Nagorno-Karabakh.

"There'll never be a Russian under that," he proclaims.

I've arranged to meet Lika Zakaryan, one of the few journalists that remained in Nagorno-Karabakh throughout the war. When Armenian martial law forbade the

dissemination of non-state information about war, she kept a diary of her experiences, a personal record that enabled her to sidestep the otherwise prosaic reporting.

The musicians play on and Azat tells me that the drummer is the best there is in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Lika Zakaryan beams when she enters the bar. With her is her boyfriend-cum-colleague Levon. He's a cameraman and during the war he alternated between being a soldier in Taghaverd and reporting with Lika. He was probably given dispensation to assist with the spreading of information about the war.

"We come here virtually every day," says Lika as she sits down. "It's like one of the few places here in Artsakh where we don't have to think so much about all the horrific things that have been going on."

"And here's me, wanting to talk about these very horrific things," I say.

She laughs and brushes off my comment. "No problem!" I'm struck by what she's just said. Here inside the bar it feels as if a war has never happened.

I ask her about the important issues after the war.

"By far the most important issue right now," she says, "is the lack of housing. We had a massive housing shortage here in Stepanakert even before the war and now we have to house an additional 50,000 people from all around Artsakh who've lost their homes. Many of the houses were destroyed, as you've seen."

Levon chimes in:

"Many of the refugees have simply been unable to return to Artsakh, and it's really important to our future status that we have a demographically strong population. This is how Russia, outwardly at least, can justify defending our borders."

I ask him what he means.

"I mean, there were 150,000 people here before the war,

and 120,000 afterwards. Russia seems very keen to see as many people as possible returning so that we can be some kind of symbol of their benevolence. That's just something we'll just have to put up with. The more of us there are, the more bonus points for them – and a large population also make us a stronger voice."

This is probably why Ilham Aliyev constantly repeats that only 20,000 to 25,000 people live in Nagorno-Karabakh: because a demographically weak Nagorno-Karabakh deflates the incentive of the outside world to take the issue seriously. Since the war, Russia has therefore gone to great lengths to help the local authorities rebuild the region. According to Lika, this is also a way to uphold the people's trust.

"The Russians are putting a lot of resources into making things work here. But maybe that's necessary? They know that we're a pretty damn headstrong, patriotic lot in Artsakh, so they have to do these things."

"Aren't you afraid that they'll take over too much?"

"Sure, absolutely. To be honest, no one wants them here. Or you know...we want them here, but we don't! We know that we just have to grin and bear it. Just because they're here doesn't mean that we'll – POOF – turn into Russians over night."

She gestures with her hands to illustrate the sound she's just made.

"Many of the older people I speak to," she continues, "are much more well-disposed towards Russia than we young people are. I think it's because they grew up during Soviet times. It's not like they think it was better then, but they've at least had a different experience of the Russians."

This is something I hear again and again. It's not uncommon for older people to keep their comments on Russia's presence to a minimum. They're never negative but often neutral. Younger people are more verbal, as if the stronger position

taken by Russia in the region is a cause of sorrow for them. The difference in mentality can also be due to the 1990s war, which lives on in the memories of the old; the young, however, are experiencing the war for real for the first time. At least before that war there reigned some kind of peace.

Lika points out that people now have less confidence in the Armenian authorities, a result of the way the course of the war led the region to defeat.

"The fact that the Russians are embraced in the way they are now is also due to a split appearing between Artsakh and Armenia. We feel that Armenia should've backed us up more. For example, they didn't send regular troops to help us, only volunteers and they were often getting on a bit."

Since Nagorno-Karabakh is, in terms of international law, a region of Azerbaijan, the war was formally designated a civil war rather than an inter-state conflict. This means that if Armenia had gone in with its regular army, it would, in the eyes of both Baku and international law, have constituted an invasion, entitling Azerbaijan to defend its borders; it is also why Armenia could not call upon Russia's help as a signatory to the defence pact.

Consequently, the Armenian soldiers who joined the war in Nagorno-Karabakh were volunteers, and often poorly trained ones at that. Many of the ones I met were older and said that they had only been given one or two weeks' intensive training before being sent to the front.

"Another aspect," continues Lika, "is that it was illegal to spread information during the war that had not come from the military. And they never said a word about losses. Everything was positive. Going swimmingly. Right up to the last day. I realised pretty soon after the war started that we were screwed."

The sense of frustration at finding no one responsible for their defeat is all-pervasive. Everyone I speak to in Nagorno-

CATHEDRAL. *The grand cathedral in Stepanakert was open throughout the war.*

Karabakh expresses similar sentiments and they all have their own theory or explanation about what went wrong. One thing is for certain, though, and that is that enough went wrong for Russia to win military and political ground in Nagorno-Karabakh.

"Maybe it was inevitable," wonders Lika. "Maybe this was the plan all along? We're good fighters and are raised in an environment where war is ALWAYS present – so I guess we somehow knew that it would come back to us. But no one could ever have imagined that we'd lose Shushi and that we'd all of a sudden have to speak Russian with blue-eyed men from the north."

WAR CRIMES. *During the 44 days of war, Nagorno-Karabakh was the center of one of the worst war zones at that time. Azerbaijan denies all allegations of civilian targets.*

MEMORIES. *The nurses and doctors at the hospital could not stop relating about the traumas they had been through.*

Chapter 4: ”It's our work that turns soldiers into people”

The spring sun has been battling to break through the clouds of cold rain. It’s still calm, but the light drizzle patters against the windscreen as we turn off the road towards a residential part of Martuni. The crumbling asphalt road is flanked by low concrete walls shielding the houses behind them. One house across the street has collapsed, as if having split in two and fallen in on itself. It was hit by a missile during the war, and now it’s just a heap of rubble.

Areg, sitting behind the wheel, stops the car and takes out a tablet.

“Watch this,” he says, placing the screen on the dashboard and opening a video. “A group of journalists and I were on this very street in October.”

He lets the car roll slowly on heavy panting sounds from the screen, someone gasping for breath. A whining sound that ends in an explosion so loud that the sound distorts. The camera points downward and all that is seen is thick dark smoke. Running footsteps are heard pounding the ground and the gravel crunching underfoot. The camera is dangling freely from a shoulder. A scream is heard in the distance. A woman cries out, her words degenerating from controlled to panicked, twisted in the most macabre of ways.

“It’s going to be okay! IT’S GOING TO BE OKAY!”

The camera tilts up. The smoke disappears. Areg’s voice is unclear, but the footsteps speed up. The camera dangles again. A man moans. No, he’s not moaning. He’s screaming

in agony. But there's not enough air for his throat to form the sound he imagines. He's lost control of his vocal cords.

"That's the French journalist who was injured," Areg says in a whisper. The film plays on.

A man is lying on the ground and a woman is bending over him. It looks like his leg has been blown in half. White bone glimpses by and his green trousers are drenched in dark blood. A green jeep approaches in the background and Areg's camera captures three men lifting the French journalist into the back seat. He lends a hand.

"For twenty, no maybe thirty minutes, I don't know," Areg says, "we were bombarded by missiles. They came from nowhere. It said "PRESS" on our vehicle in big letters."

He stops the video and steps out of the car. He lights a cigarette with his hand instinctively cupped over it to shield it from the wind. His otherwise so friendly expression is now thoughtful, his eyes wrinkled.

"I was standing here," he says looking at the front door of a house, "and took shelter behind this wall. The French guy had been trying to run towards us but one of the bombs that fell...over there...got him before he made it. And we couldn't run over to him while the bombs were falling. It just wasn't possible."

I'd read sweeping descriptions of the incident in reports from Human Rights Watch before I set out. They condemn Azerbaijan for having targeted a civilian area as well as journalists. What had hit the residential area was a hail of Grad missiles from a 40-tube Soviet-era rocket launcher.

"There were no Armenian soldiers anywhere near the area," says Areg, "just us, a couple of civilians who'd stayed here in town, and the houses, of course. The military let us through outside the town and said that Martuni was going to be safe that day."

Areg guides us to where the journalist lay. The low wall

behind is pocked with shrapnel and a tree stands cloven in two beside it.

"It's strange how everyone wants peace, but the whole world seems obsessed with war," he says quietly. "War is portrayed in Hollywood films and sugar-coated in military parades – as if it's something nice and exciting…"

Martuni uphill from where the Azerbaijani steppes start to take over. During the autumn war, the town was the centre of artillery fire for virtually all of its 44 days, and as a consequence, according to figures from a person at the local emergency response authority, some 850 of its 900 houses have either been damaged or destroyed. Reports from Human Rights Watch[55] and the war-crime investigators IPHL/Truth Hounds[56] say that it was unusual for soldiers to be so close to civilian areas as to make them, from an international law perspective, a legitimate target.

At home in Sweden, I read report after report on war crimes committed by both sides of the conflict. I read about missiles armed with cluster bombs being fired at residential areas in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, and prisoners of war being summarily executed instead of being placed in custody. Each side accuses the other of grievous violations, the one allegation being outdone by the next. The volume of text is so incomprehensibly vast, it's as if the crimes had perhaps never happened. No. This is just a feeling that I quickly shrug off. But how can you take in the sheer extent of the war crimes in word form?

The reports also say that the Azerbaijani side – with the exception of a couple of symbolic inquiries – has largely failed to start investigating war crimes committed during the war, as required by the law of war, while the Armenian side has two ongoing cases with its own public prosecutor's office. The simple answer to why war crimes are not the subject of

wider investigation is that an official accusation could used against the countries and would compel individuals in the military ranks to accept responsibility in a tribunal. No one wants to point a finger at a colleague or friend. Keeping numb is a mutual understanding.

Since the 1990s, criticism at the combatants' failure to investigate alleged war crimes has been obvious. Journalists like Thomas de Waal, who wrote the predominant book "the Black Garden" on the conflict, and experts behind the organisations' reports attribute it to the absence of a reconciliation process. If a crime is not investigated, it is not acknowledged and remains an empty holster in the form of a detonated missile outside a collapsed house in Martuni.

In Azerbaijan, President Aliyev denies that any war crimes have been committed at all,[57] while in Armenia there is no general opinion on the matter and it is neither denied nor admitted; every time I raise the issue, the person I'm speaking to squirms and states simply that "it's a matter of us or them".

Us or them.

What the reports make clear is that the number of presumed war crimes in terms of quantity and quality from the latest war is greater on the Azerbaijani side. The situation from the 1990s is, put crassly, the other way round. When I read the figures from the latest reports and compare them to the situation on the ground, the stories I hear and people's suffering, they come across, no matter how detailed, as understated. What they illustrate is the actual war crimes on the basis of a number of principles.

In essence, war crimes are their own subdivision of international law, or the international humanitarian laws, that govern the mutual relationship between states. The war-crime laws rest on four main principles: distinction, proportionality, humanity and military necessity – a prohibition against excessive harm and unnecessary suffering.[58]

Taken together, they obligate the military to differentiate between military and civilian targets, to not cause more damage than is necessary and to take precautionary measures to avoid civilian injuries and prohibit the use of weaponry able to cause excessive harm. The vast majority of war crimes are never investigated, and the few investigations that are held are often long and complex.

Another important aspect is the handling of prisoners of war. During the war there were generally no reports of prisoners from either side; however, accounts of how prisoners of war have been treated are hair-raising. It is suspected that many of the captured soldiers were executed on the spot and films of soldiers, especially Azerbaijani, taunting their prisoners have been part of the social-media mediated psychological warfare against the enemy.

Despite their scope, the reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and IPHL/Trust Hounds have been dismissed by journalists and human rights activists as overly balanced in their accounts of the latest war in making both parties equally guilty of quantity of war crimes. True, both have violated all four of the above principles by targeting civilian homes the other's country.

Nevertheless, anyone reading the reports and interviews soon notices a difference: there have been nine confirmed missile strikes against civilians in Azerbaijan (among them, the deadliest throughout the war), while the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh was a war-zone target, and in the space of 44 days, residential areas, schools, bridges over escape routes, power stations, military and civilian hospitals and fire stations were destroyed in what is regarded as precision attacks – in many of which there was said to be no Armenian military equipment in the vicinity to justify them.

There at the residential quarter that Areg showed, it's easy to feel anger at what has happened. Or at least despair and

grief. But this is not the time or place to let my emotional reaction to the failures of the outside world take over.

Martuni's modest hospital is neat and tidy in all its simplicity. The two-storey building is surrounded by an asphalted courtyard designed to make it easy for ambulances to drive round. The large white gates leading to the open front courtyard are wide open when we arrive. The drizzle has turned into a downpour and we dash as fast as we can under the roof jutting over the entrance where a clean and shiny ambulance has been parked. Just that little run of twenty metres from the car has left me drenched and shivering as I enter the building.

In the town of Martakert, where we visited the Russian military station, the hospital staff refused to see me, the consultant claiming that any interview with him would require approval from a higher instance. I asked who that might be and was met with a shrug. Nvard was shaking with fury at his arrogance.

"He's the higher instance! God damn chauvinist!" she hissed as we walked out.

In Martuni, I'm hoping for a better outcome. Walking through the doors, I sense a totally different atmosphere.

"Areg, my dear!" exclaims a nurse standing at a reception desk. "What brings you here?"

She rushes up to Areg and gives him a hug. It's an affectionate embrace, one that she gives impulsively without reflecting on its possibly excessive intimacy. But neither of them seems to be bothered by it.

"I've brought someone I want you to meet," says Areg with a laugh. "A journalist from Sweden. You've got some stories to tell, haven't you?"

She looks at me and beams.

"Boy, have we got stories to tell!"

She grabs my hand and calls to her colleagues. We go up to an examination room on the second floor. The patient bed stands empty in one corner and we're invited to sit down on a couple of rickety chairs standing in another.

A few minutes later, Nvard is trying to simultaneously translate the war-time accounts of three, sometimes four, nurses. They're talking over each other, showering us with stories.

"We couldn't be here," says the smiley woman, who turns out to be called Mariam. "It was far too dangerous during the war! Instead we had to be down in the basement. The only times we came up was when we had important matters to...

"Or needed a shower," interjects one of the others.

"Exactly. Or then, yes. It was worst towards the end of the war," another says. "At first, we could at least tell if the bombs were ours or theirs. You could hear the difference in how far away they were fired. But towards the end, the noises came from all directions – we were surrounded. The enemy were no further away than our own guys. What could we do? We had to keep working."

The hospital is one of few buildings in Martuni not to have suffered much damage. I ask why, when the rest of the town is in ruins.

The consultant, who has overheard us, marches in, presumably to rebuke the staff for sitting around chatting when they should be working; but hearing my question she takes the floor:

"It's obvious, isn't it? The only reason they didn't bomb the hospital was so that they could say, 'See, we're not war criminals. Look how good we are!' But you believe that? They bombarded the hospital in Stepanakert and the military hospital in Martakert. Besides, maybe they felt they'd need the hospital themselves if they were ever to take the town."

Before the trip to Nagorno-Karabakh, I interviewed a doctor

working at the hospital in Stepanakert. He told that a Smerch missile loaded with cluster munitions landed smack in the middle of the staff accommodation and utterly destroyed the newly built perinatal centre beside it. Fortunately that part of the hospital was empty.

"Tell me something," says the consultant, whose name I don't catch. "Can you tell me about any other conflict like ours, where the rest of the world doesn't give a toss? How are we meant to react?"

I answer that it's hard to say. After all, I write for an International audience, and sure, I've been struck by how hard it is to get published in the major press. For the reader, there are often some difficult thresholds to cross. For one thing, the conflict is morally nebulous. Who actually holds the moral high ground when both sides have committed war crimes? The conflict is also incredibly complex juridically. Even though international law says that Nagorno-Karabakh formally belongs to Azerbaijan and the UN has adopted several confirmatory resolutions, the region has an Armenian population that asserts its right to self-determination and a status that's still under negotiation. Does self-determination imply autonomy, or is it the right to independence, like it was for Kosovo?

This place was at war just a few months ago. Now, as we head for the basement, the polished rooms of the hospital look like any other. The well-scrubbed linoleum floor carries the faint smell of the chlorine that's been used to sterilise the surfaces, and the bare white walls are painted grey or light green up to waist height.

On the wall at the foot of the stairs hangs a large whiteboard in a brown wooden frame. On it are fifty or so names in Armenian and a date – 22 October 2020 – in the top corner. The date is from the most violent days of the war.

"We didn't have the heart to take it down," Mariam says,

and points to some of the names. "We keep it hanging here so that we don't forget."

One of the nurses starts to recount the injuries the different soldiers had and describe their personalities anecdotally – until she arrives at a name part way down the list and falls silent. She shakes her head.

"He didn't make it," she says in a whispered tone. "We thought he would when he came in, but he didn't. We couldn't save him. We...couldn't...save him."

She turns round. One of the other nurses takes her hand. Her knuckles whiten as she tries to hold back the tears.

"When you work this close, this much with the boys," says Mariam, "it's like you become their mother. They're just kids and when you take care of them like we do, you become attached to them."

She then indicates a door leading to the courtyard, the same one that was in the film Areg showed me as we were driving down the street a couple of hours ago.

"That's where we brought the patients in during the war," Mariam says. "Well, it's not ideal as you can see. It's far too narrow. Over there," she continues as she turns a corner at the end of the corridor, "is where we took them out."

"Them?"

"The dead."

"Please, let's not go there," says the nurse who'd been crying.

Mariam pats her shoulder and says that it's important to show everything, but that she can wait in the staff room.

"Every day, all day long, we mopped up blood," Mariam says. "There was so much blood it was almost impossible to move. For the sake of dignity we all agreed that we'd never...and I mean NEVER, tread in it! And were we living in the middle of it all. When the injured took over so much that there was no more room for us, we slept here in the corridor instead on

thin little matrasses that we dug out from somewhere."

Another nurse speaks up.

"It's our work that turns soldiers into people. And so we have to conduct ourselves with dignity."

As usual in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, they offer us tea, cakes and coffee. We sit in the kitchen, where cook Varduhi is preparing lunch for the patients. She's standing behind a large pot that she's carefully stirring with a ladle. She's cleaned and tidied her surfaces and is on the last stage of the lunch. When she smiles at us, the tension instantly dissipates.

"The patients' meals will be ready soon," says Varduhi.

"She's our mum. We love her! She was the one who made sure we could carry on during the war," says Mariam.

"You're exaggerating," retorts Varduhi. "We worked together and all did what we're best at. I cook and you save lives."

Everyone laughs. I ask them how they could work under all the stress, and continue working every day.

"What choice did we have?" says one of the nurses. "The only thing for it was to do what we're professionals at. And when you're professional at something, you get it done."

When Areg gets his camera out, things get giggly. Everyone wants to have their photo taken in different poses.

"Do you remember that time I was having a shower up there, and you shouted at me," Mariam asks another nurse. "You were banging on the door. 'THEY'RE BOMBING US! HURRY!' I didn't even have time to get dressed!"

Everyone laughs at the memory.

A nurse pops her head round the door, and asks some of the others to go with her. "It's an emergency." Mariam nods and jumps up. She grabs a colleague and says: "It's our turn." And they disappear out of the door.

There's a power cut. Varduhi sighs loudly and says that the

food's ready anyway. She takes the pot and heads off with Areg following along behind her to take photos.

There's only one nurse left. The tearful one. She lights a candle on the little table we're sitting at.

"My son died during the war," she says, "but I stayed here for as long as I could. The soldiers needed someone to take care of them. Someone to hold their hands through their suffering. It got like they were my children. Staying was the only right thing to do."

"When did you leave?"

"People left one by one. They couldn't take it any more... So those of us who were left had to take over their jobs. It was worst when the best doctor left and we had no idea who'd take over. But we got round it somehow. The number of deaths didn't go up. In the end, they forced us to evacuate, against our will actually, but we had no choice. And all we could think was: who'll take care of the soldiers if not us?"

It's late at night by the time I leave the others and go back to my hotel room in Stepanakert. The days are long. We start early and finish late. Exhausted, I hold a cold beer in my hand and look out of the window. A car drives around the roundabout below, otherwise there's nothing. The window has been hastily patched up and there are still traces of the shrapnel that penetrated it. In the distance, the cliffs rise above Shushi. The town is illuminated, much more so that it has been in previous years. Someone said this is because Azerbaijan wants to demonstrate that they're the ones in control. It's seen as psychological warfare. During daylight, you can see the steeple of the local cathedral that was bombed during the war.

All day long I've been asked why the rest of the world doesn't act. How can it let the war carry on?

Just like the consultant, all I can say is that I'm listening.

I'm sitting here. I've come here. My readers abroad are interested. Maybe one of them is someone with the power to do something, too.

When the war began after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions – 822, 853, 874 och 884 – that Azerbaijan often makes reference to. These resolutions make it clear that while Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan, the conflict must be settled by peace talks through the OSCE and its specially assigned body, the Minsk Group.

This is where international law gets complicated. Does the clarification of Azerbaijan's territorial status mean that the country has the right to breach the ceasefire that was signed in 1994 in order to retake Nagorno-Karabakh by force? And is its status really and truly established?

The response in Azerbaijan is ambivalent. It is often this right that Azerbaijan appeals to as a justification of its military

actions against Nagorno-Karabakh. But the UN resolutions unambiguously state that the conflict is to be settled through peaceful negotiation, and most Western diplomats see Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh as a violation of their principles. There were also calls from the international community for the parties to return to the negotiation table, although there were few moves to place the burden of responsibility explicitly on Azerbaijan. Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the fourth principle of which concerns a country's right to its territorial integrity and the eighth a people's right to self-determination.

Even though a unanimous press and numerous experts on the conflict believe that Azerbaijan both prepared and carried out the invasion of 27 September 2020, it has not accepted responsibility , for the reasons stated above – despite the fact that President Aliyev has frequently admitted to starting the war. For Azerbaijan, it signifies a fragile dividing line between recognition of its takeover under international law and condemnation of its actions.

The concrete peace talks that were held between Armenia and Azerbaijan largely ended between 2007 and 2009 with an emphatic proposal – known as the Madrid Principles[59] – on the Minsk Group's table. These principles were condensed into six points that returned five of the seven occupied areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control. Nagorno-Karabakh was to be given a special interim status and have its borders guarded by international peacekeeping troops, and finally, all parties made a joint declaration about paying respect to both Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and a people's right to self-determination.

This last means that the locals will be able to vote on their own status and that the Azerbaijani war refugees amongst them will be able to return home.

In the interpretation of some pundits, this implies that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has not been formally settled, which is also what drives the continuation of the peace talks. Nagorno-Karabakh exists in a kind of limbo, lying as it does within Azerbaijan's territorial boundaries; but there are calls to negotiate its status and a peace proposal with provisions on how to go about it. When Azerbaijan claims its status to have been settled, the Armenians counter that no such settlement is possible until the principle of a people's right to self-determination has been examined.

There can be little doubt about the outcome of a referendum in Nagorno-Karabakh: the local Armenians would have voted either for self-determination or to be part of Armenia. In Azerbaijan, such a referendum is disdained, as they see the Armenians living there as illegal occupants. Both sides have come under fire for what can be seen as their absolutist positions on the conflict, whereby the Armenians demand international recognition and the Azerbaijanis cannot even entertain the thought of handing autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh. Advocates of the Armenian side reason that given human rights developments in Azerbaijan over the past thirty years, it is no surprise that the Armenians have not wanted to budge an inch from their goal of self-determination.

On occasion, government representatives in Baku have reiterated a kind of alternative fact that the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh have been kidnapped by a radical Armenian terrorist organisation. This is, of course, one of many bizarre theories that get constantly repeated by Baku.

Even though the Madrid Principles have never been implemented, they are, after all, still the most obvious choice of proposal when Armenia and Azerbaijan return to the negotiating table after the latest war. But as mentioned earlier, both Azerbaijan and Russia have by 2022 pronounced

the Minsk Group "dead".

The 2020 war therefore changed the practical conditions, even if the formal status remains the same. Azerbaijan managed to retake the surrounding districts with military force, and the two others were signed over in the ceasefire agreement. And even if many have accused Azerbaijan of having breached the 1993 and 1994 resolutions, the Security Council has omitted to act. Azerbaijan also captured a third of Nagorno-Karabakh, displacing the Armenian population to either Armenia or other parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, where they are waiting to be accommodated.

However, there are parts of the ceasefire agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia on 9 November 2020 that resemble certain features of the Madrid Principles. Russia has peacekeeping troops guarding the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijanis will be allowed to return to the areas of Nagorno-Karabakh occupied by Azerbaijan.

On the cliffs of Shushi that I'm looking at in the distance, preparations are underway to make the town ready for the returning Azerbaijanis. International construction contracts have been awarded to British, Italian and, above all, Turkish companies. The Azerbaijani economist Gubad Ibadoghlu, since July 2023 a high-profile political prisoner in Azerbaijan, has written numerous reports revealing the link between the Aliyev clan's financial network and ownership in the retaken areas.[60] Turkish companies with close ties of friendship to presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev have been given preferential treatment and, according to Ibadoghlu, corruption is rife.

Jirayr is waiting out on the unlit street. It's already quite late but he wants to invite us to dinner at his in-laws. The faint glow of a street lamp above is all that illuminates the scene as Jirayr runs around the car, calling out instructions on how to

park so as not to be in the way for passers by.

Jirayr embraces me and says that he's happy that we've come. He then grasps my shoulders and looks me in the eye. His chestnut brown eyes are anxious – stern, almost.

"Do you remember the fire we saw in Taghaverd? My mate checked with his binoculars and saw a house on fire. It wasn't tyres, as we'd thought."

Like many others with dark stories to tell he heaves a sigh and his grave expression transforms as in an instant his war-weary wrinkles turn into a young man's boyish grin.

"No, let's talk no more of this! Come in, everyone! Come in!"

We climb some metal steps and walk straight into a little kitchen where Jirayr's brother-in-law Vahram is waiting. He shows us into the living room, where the children are. At one end, two beds face each other covered with the family's matrasses, and at the other are a small sofa and a dining table bearing the barbecued food that Jirayr has brought. There's also a plump little TV and the Russian children's programme is flickering on its screen. The whole family lives here. Parents and three children. The entire flat can be no more than thirty, perhaps thirty-five square metres.

"My brother-in-law's family once had a house in upper Taghaverd," Jirayr tells me. "But now they live here instead as they wait to be allocated a new place to live. But God knows when that'll be."

Vahram and his wife, Melina, are sitting quietly in one corner. Both their heads are weighed down, as if each word is a burden. It was Melina's father who was arrested by Azerbaijani soldiers as he tried to help Armenians evacuate. I express my condolences and Melina nods. "Thank you," she whispers.

"The worst thing," says Jirayr, who does most of the talking, "is the way they defiled the body. They really could have treated it so much more respectfully."

According to reports from Human Rights Watch, both sides are guilty of desecrating the dead, although more so the Azerbaijani side. While such reports are limited to cases that have been confirmed by information gatherers, the evidence suggests that the desecration of Armenians by Azerbaijanis is much more common. There are, of course, examples from the Armenian side too. Years after the war ended, I met an Armenian from Nagorno-Karabakh who had fought on the Eastern front. He showed a video from Instagram of how a person first, with a pitchfork, desecrated and then burned the body of a dead Azerbaijani soldier, claiming – almost bragging – that it was him on the video.

After the war, images of such acts circulated on closed social media channels, and easily the vast majority were posted by Azerbaijanis. It's hard to confirm the sources, but what is certain is that the cases reported by the human rights organisations are just the tip of the iceberg. My guess is that the suffering such defilement causes will be passed down from generation to generation.

The defilement of Melina's father is, however, one of the unconfirmed cases, the authenticity of the film or video being a major sticking point. In this conflict, the digital verification of material is done mainly by Amnesty International[61] and to a lesser extent the journalistic platform Bellingcat[62]. The organisation has aroused suspicions of 22 cases of the extrajudicial execution of enemy soldiers – most of which have been committed by the Azerbaijani side – and three instances of beheading or defilement of the dead. One of these has been committed by Armenians and two by Azerbaijanis. Again, if the videos and images doing the rounds have any credence, these figures are grossly underestimated, especially regarding crimes committed by Azerbaijan.

This begs a broader question on how war crimes are documented, and what the lack of resources means for the

war-crime experts. The issue of accountability for a conflict like Nagorno-Karabakh that is under-reported by journalists and out of reach of war-crime experts gets complicated. Here, the journalists have a role to perform. When the resources fall short of what the human rights organisations need, the journalists can document what otherwise goes undocumented. It is not, of course, in the interests of Azerbaijan for journalists to chronicle war crimes committed in Nagorno-Karabakh, and this is one of its main justifications for outlawing those who visit the region. It is a kind of intimidation-tactic aimed at civilians.

Since the war, a great many videos have also circulated of Azerbaijani soldiers defiling or denigrating Armenian homes in the areas they have seized. One video shows an Azerbaijani soldier urinating on family phots and another two soldiers destroying a grave. What's curious is that it is the soldiers themselves who have posted the films on TikTok and Instagram. These are just two of perhaps a hundred or so examples. The access to such footage on social media serves as a kind of psychological warfare that impacts everyone with a mobile, including children.

At the dining table in the little flat in Stepanakert, redress in any legal sense seems remote for Melina. She returns from the kitchen with cups of tea and starts to clear away our plates.

One of her children has found a place beside Areg. The boy is drawing flags – first an Armenian, then one for the Republic of Artsakh and an Azerbaijani. Areg shows him how to draw a Japanese flag.

"You really should go there one day," he tells the boy. "It's got samurais and ninjas!"

The boy laughs and goes over to his siblings and cousins with the flag to tell them about Japan.

"It makes me sad to see that all the children know are these

other three flags. They just represent war these days," Areg tells us adults.

He takes a dollop of home-made jam, drops it into his tea and stirs it gently. It's a common sweetener in Nagorno-Karabakh.

"We adults must be able to show the children that there's something else," he says, removing his spoon from the cup.

"How's their schooling been?" I ask the adults.

Melina, now back at the table, looks at her husband.

"It's going well... They're back at school here, but they miss the village and their teachers," says Vahram.

He hasn't said a full sentence for the whole meal until now.

"During the war," Nvard says, "the family came to the hotel where I was working. The kids were in school and the 'Artsakh children' were well looked-after by the other children in Armenia, but it's not good for them to change school like that. And now in Artsakh the classes are far too big."

"It's almost impossible to move back to Taghaverd, even if we get given a house there," says Vahram. "One day the Russians say that everything's fine, the next, Azerbaijanis come with fresh demands. But all the children want to do is go back home."

Areg gets up from the table. The children look at him and realise straight away that something's afoot.

"Come on, let's go out and do some painting," Areg says to them and picks up his military green shoulder bag with the spray cans in.

Once the children have left the room, Jirayr raises his snaps glass in a toast.

"To one day being able to barbecue together again in Taghaverd!"

He knocks back the contents and like his brother Lernik in Taghaverd, tells me off for not doing the same.

"We drain our glasses out of respect here in Artsakh!" he

announces.

I regret my faux pas and tell him that it's too strong for me, but raise my glass anyway to make amends.

"To the children getting their old teachers back," I say and empty my glass.

"Good! That's a good one! We'll make a Artsakhian of you yet!"

Jirayr turns serious.

"After the war I went to Armenia to bring my family to Stepanakert. All I could think of was returning to Taghaverd," he says. "I heard people say that Azerbaijani soldiers were about to take the village and I'd have to defend my home."

"Did you?"

"I did everything I could. There was no shooting but we returned to show that we were there. It's a question of pride, of maintaining your dignity."

"It seems to me as if the war was completely devoid of dignity. The stories I hear of what happened are dreadful."

"There is no dignity in war!" Vahram suddenly exclaims. "It's as simple as that. It's either you or me that ends up dead. YOU OR ME!"

Vahram gets upset for a moment but soon sinks back into his melancholy silence.

"It's important that you think about your actions," I venture, but Nvard interrupts me when she sees where my point is heading.

"Do you really want me to translate this, Rasmus?"

"I want to see what they say," I reply. "Can you say: It's important to think about your own dignity and not commit your own war crimes. To treat the enemy as you'd want them to treat you."

Nvard reluctantly complies. I know that she doesn't agree with me about my question, and that what she really thinks is that I come across as a naïve Westerner, but the question

can elicit reactions that are critical to the greater journalistic purpose. There is silence around the table for a moment until Jirayr opens his mouth.

"In theory, yes. But when you're standing there with the enemy in front of you or you have him in your home village, all that is immaterial. Something else takes over you. I both hate and love that side of me. The one side says that I'm a family father who wants to show his children all the love he can, and other side feels nothing but indifference towards the enemy. Is there any other way of looking at it?"

Questions like this are awkward to raise after the war and there are many sensitive toes that can easily be trod on. I imagine it's hard for someone who hasn't lived through one to understand the psychology of war. What does it do to a people to spend the past thirty years in constant preparation for the next attack to come, for the next cluster bomb to fall?

Studies by the International Red Cross show that faith in the law of war is a privilege for those living in peaceful environments. There is a correlation between a country's proximity to war and scepticism towards such a concept. The discussion with Jirayr and Vahram brings this very matter into full relief: that the law of war is important until two enemies stand face to face. Perhaps it is this reasoning that makes Armenia and Azerbaijan reluctant to investigate their own war crimes: because both sides know they have been committed against each other.

"Shall we go outside for a smoke?" Jirayr asks to inject some fresh oxygen into the conversation.

We go down the little flight of steps to the flat and find Areg and the children outside. Laughing, the children run up to their parents and not even Vahram can help smiling.

On the wall outside, Areg has painted two blojiks hugging each other.

"One is your family and the other is us," he says. "We take

care of each other, right?"

Areg and I are sitting on the steps of Stepanakert cathedral waiting for Nvard, who's getting ready before we leave for the day. The morning sun warms our faces and Areg is smoking, as usual.

"Once, in the middle of the war, it was such a starry night here at the cathedral. The whole town was unlit, as was usual at night," he falteringly informs me. "If the lights were on we'd have made an easy target for the drones...but they attacked anyway. The cathedral looked so beautiful under the stars."

Areg gets up walks up the fifty or so steps to the base of the cathedral.

"See... You can light spots here that light up the cathedral," he says, indicating a switch. "When you photograph the stars you need a long exposure time, and I wanted to get that perfect shot when the camera could capture both the illuminated cathedral and the stars. So I put the camera at the bottom of the steps."

He points to where we'd just been sitting.

"And then I turned the camera to the night sky and set it on a 30-second exposure, during which time I had to run all the way up here, up all those steps, and switch on the light at just the right time so that it'd be enough to light up the cathedral with just the right amount of light."

He chortles at his ruse.

"Do you have any idea how many times I had to run up and down the steps before it worked? And me a smoker! Those Azerbaijanis must have wondered what the hell I was up to!"

In the background, a priest in a black gown approaches us. He's in his sixties and one can tell that he's tall and imposing with a bright white beard. I recognise him in an instant. It's Father Yohannes. At the start of the war he made a name for himself posing with a Kalashnikov in front of the Dadivank

Monastery. It is a beautiful place located in a narrow valley between rugged mountains. He had declared to the media that the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were the fiercest fighters in the world.

"Father Yohannes," Areg says to him. "How nice to see you here!"

They greet each other warmly and Areg introduces me.

"Are you still at Dadivank?" I ask him.

"No, no, the Russians won't have it," he chuckles back. "I'm too political and they say there'd be one almighty hullaballoo if I was there!"

As part of the ceasefire agreement, the sacred Dadivank Monastery has become an enclave that the Russians guard, at least for the first six months. The surrounding area, Kalvachar, returned to Azerbaijani control. Kalvachar lies sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and was once populated primarily by Kurds, but when they fled in the 1900s, Azerbaijani families moved into the area, with the exception of a couple of Armenian villages around Dadivank and a few other places.

Father Yohannes shakes hands with us both again, excuses himself and heads down the long flight of steps.

"The funny thing is," Areg continues, "that when there's a war on, everything seems so surreal. Little things can be incredibly funny, while other things can make you cry. What I've never understood is what war actually is. It's not just people killing people, or power seeking power, but also something within yourself."

He leads the way back down the steps and we set off towards a little barber's shop across the way from the hotel.

"This is where the barber cut our hair. He never accepted payment. Like the rest of us who did civilian work during the war he was one of us, and refused to budge from Artsakh."

It's a small detached concrete building. Outside it hangs

a red and blue neon sign depicting a pair of scissors and a comb. Some of the diodes are broken, so the light tends to crackle.

"I was sitting in there once when the bomb alarms started to sound. Loudly! And the missiles fell. First a whining sound and then impact.

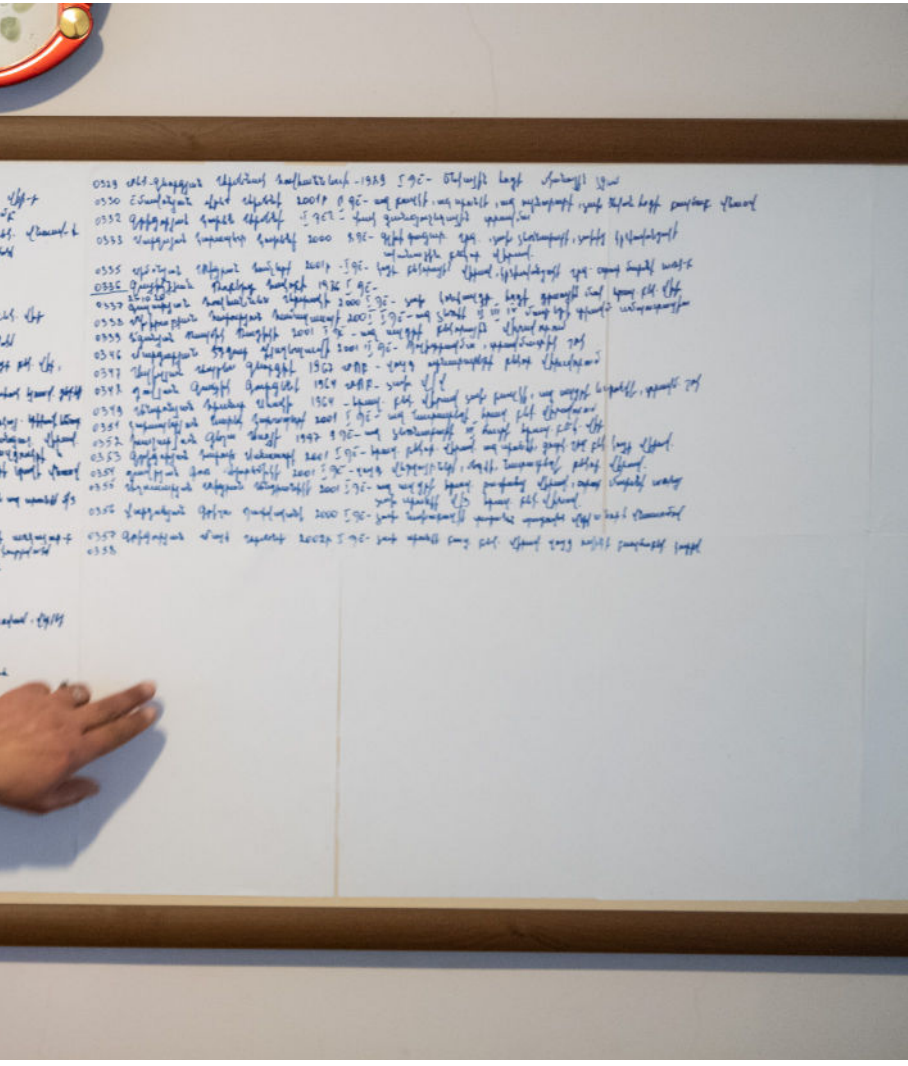
Areg laughs again at the absurd memory.

"We stayed put. I just sat there as the barber ran his shaver over my head. Outside we heard people sprinting to seek shelter from the bombs but we just remained where we were. Silent. He concentrating on his work and me with my eyes shut, listening to the war."

"It sounds like you miss it," I tell him. "Is it like a cigarette - addictive?"

"No. I really don't miss it at all, and it's not addictive either. It's horrific. But before 2016, before I went to war, it was somehow more complicated. I was a family father, a photographer and artist, and many other things. During the war I was none of those things. I was, like, free, in myself. That feeling is hard to shed after a war. Of being free in yourself."

CHILDREN. *The schools in Nagorno-Karabakh had to prepare for up to 30% more students in their classrooms due to an influx of those displaced by the war.*



NAMES TO NOT BE FORGOTTEN. *They didn't erase the names of the soldiers from the patient board in Martuni's hospital.*

Chapter 5: ”We've got the best athletes in all Armenia - I swear to God!”

A chilly wind is blowing, there's rain in the air and football players are busy training in Stepanakert's central stadium. The seats are the colours of the Armenian flag: orange, blue and red. The pattern is interrupted only in the stands on the eastern side, where a bomb once fell. Out on the field, it's four-aside on a little pitch.

“Cover your spaces!”

The coach's voice echoes around the stadium.

“Cover! Co-o-v-e-er!”

On this particular afternoon, Sergey Asryan is practising with second-division team Lernayin Artsakh, which usually plays in the Armenian league. EUFA doesn't allow teams from Nagorno-Karabakh to play in the Armenian league, so Lernayin Artsakh is formally registered in an Armenian town, where they also play their home matches.

“I'll be with you after training,” pants Sergey. “They're pushing us hard today.”

The coach roars.

“Back here! NOW!”

Sergey casts a glance at me, his lopsided smile telling me there's nothing for it but to do as he's told. The coach is angry with me. He calls out in our direction.

“Get lost! You can talk in an hour!”

Like after so many other wars in world history, football was one of the first activities to rise from the ashes of Nagorno-

Karabakh. The biggest problem was gathering together enough players to even begin training. When the war broke out, effectively all males over the age of 18 signed up for the army to protect Nagorno-Karabakh's autonomy, but when it ended teams re-formed quickly and the league could soon kick off again. One was formed with a centre back missing due to his being dead; another tried with a midfielder who'd had his legs shattered by a missile.

The regional football league was founded as late as 2018 and was a direct consequence of the European championship that the non-FIFA organisation CONIFA wanted to arrange in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2019 for non-recognised republics. Before this, football had been played, a lot and often, but under more or less unorganised circumstances. The best players had instead gone to Armenia to join the major clubs' academies.

CONIFA teamed up with other sponsors to restore Nagorno-Karabakh's match arenas. Fresh artificial grass was laid, changing rooms were built and the local football association received funding to create a viable organisation.

Ten teams competed in the league's first year. Lernayin Artsakh won it easily and the decision was immediately taken to relocate it to Armenia, where it would serve as a natural channel for young talent from Nagorno-Karabakh to play professionally in a UEFA-approved league.

Azerbaijan looks upon all this with sceptical eyes.

Even before the opening match of CONIFA 2019, Azerbaijan had done its utmost to thwart the championship, which it regarded as a tool for legitimising Nagorno-Karabakh's sovereignty. They sent threatening letters to officials and wrote to the governments of the competing national teams. And many of the foreign players who took part are now also persona non grata in Azerbaijan.

Things have changed since the war. Clubs have lost their

geographical home, shrinking the league back to ten teams instead of twelve. But at least it's up and running. Efforts to coordinate the start of the league were begun just a couple of days after the signing of the ceasefire agreement, with the first match scheduled for February. As I stand in the arena on this damp afternoon, the players in front of me are gearing themselves up for a match in the fourth round.

One of the coaches blows his whistle, initiating a slow exodus of the players towards the changing rooms. Sergey waves a gesture that says he'll soon be back. The last time we met was in 2019, when he was a goalkeeper and played championship matches for the Nagorno-Karabakh national squad.

Sergey is sitting behind the wheel of his beige Jaguar. It's obvious that he takes good care of it. The paintwork is polished to a shine, and the leather upholstery is spotless. The car stands out in the mass of the more run-down Soviet-era Ladas or Asian-built Toyota Camrys.

We're on our way to Sergey's home village of Noragyugh. In less than an hour's time, he'll be running a training session for his own club project, Tigran Mets.

"I didn't actually do any fighting at the front," he says. "I was an 'official', you could say. I drove supplies to where they were needed and helped out by doing was I was told to."

I ask him where he lived during the war.

"At home, in the village. Noragyugh is one of the few places to have been spared a lot of military fire. I presume it's because it's not on a strategic location. Only a couple of houses were damaged."

He turns more serious.

"I don't actually like talking about the war, to be honest. I'm not really sure what I can tell you. You had to have been there to understand what it was like. For 44 days, the whole

of Artsakh was one single frontline, and when we were sent on a mission we never knew if we'd be coming home. But you understand...I can't say so much... Many guys had it much worse than me."

Sergey tells me about when he signed up.

"Formally, none of us who'd already done our military service had to fight in the early days. But everyone, and I mean everyone, joined up. We didn't hesitate for one second. It was our duty. Me and my brother said goodbye to our parents and set off. Everyone in the team did the same thing. It all happened very fast.

We approach Noragyugh, a tranquil little village of about a thousand, by which time Sergey has told me that his family should be there when we arrive.

"We usually argue at home about which team is best. My dad likes Bayern Munich, but I prefer Chelsea. We never fought about the war, but he kept saying that if he could, he'd take my and my brother's places."

He turns off by a high wall surrounding the family home.

"But he fought in the 90s," Sergey continues, "so I reckon he's done his bit."

On the other side of the main door we pass a little inner courtyard in front of a two-story house. A small tree is growing in one corner, and even though there are no children living here, there's a swing at one end. Presumably the family had planned to remove it once Sergey and his brother had grown out of it, but changed their mind. Maybe there's a grandchild on the way?

Sergey's mother comes out of the kitchen downstairs and announces that she's just made some jingalov hats. The scent of newly baked bread and fresh coriander is heavenly.

"Would you like to eat it here or will you be taking it away?" she asks us as she hands me the bread.

Sergey finds a tatty old football, its colours all worn out.

"When I was a kid I'd kick the ball against this wall."

He boots the ball to illustrate how he'd practise.

"The sound of the ball bouncing off it drove my parents nuts. From the moment I learned to walk until now, I've always loved playing football. When I was little, I'd tell my parents in all seriousness that I was going to play professionally for Real Madrid. They asked me once how I was going to pay for the family to move and I said, 'You'll have to sell the house, Mum, surely you can see that.'"

We walk to the village football pitch to meet some guys who are there to train. The asphalt along the way is so old that it's been repaired with soil that in places has taken over the substrate. He tells me that Tigran Mets is struggling to become established in the Nagorno-Karabakh league. After three matches, they're way behind the other teams.

One of the goals lacks a net and the pitch is covered in bits of gravel. In the background is a preschool and a school. The odd car drones past. Otherwise it's peaceful. A few kids playing in the distance and an animal making a noise that's hard to identify. That's it.

"I spent my childhood here," says Sergey, gazing out over the field. "I was here all the time."

I wonder why, so soon after the war ended last winter, when so many other things should have taken priority for returning to a relatively normal life, he opted instead to devote his time to setting up a new football team.

"We wanted to give the village something to do after the war," he says. "And if there's one thing I can do and know how to organise, it's football. It was easy to get it off the ground. So many people have put their lives on hold, now. You know... people who said they'd renovate their house don't really dare or feel motivated to do so. Starting a football club and creating something together with other people in the village is maybe one way to show that there is a life after the war."

Player after player saunters onto the uneven pitch. Sergey embraces some of them and tells them to warm up. He looks down and starts apprehensively poking at stones with a foot.

"Maybe I started the team for my own sake, too... My uncle and an old childhood friend stopped their car to have a smoke during the war. As soon as they got out, the car was bombed by a drone that had probably been following them. Both died. Me and my friend used to play football when we were kids on this field. I think it's to honour my best friend that I started this team.

Another guy joins the training session. He comes up to us and greets us politely. I turn to Sergey and comment on the young age of the team he's got together. He bursts out laughing.

"These lot don't play in the adult squad! The adults will be coming a bit later. While we were at it we started a youth team to give the kids a positive place to come to."

I ask him what the children say about the war and how much they talk about their experiences.

"I'm in close contact with the parents and have told them that they have to make an effort to bring their children to football practice. We notice that the exercise is doing them good. Many of them were evacuated during the war, and now that they're back they carry trauma with them. We combine youth training with the adult training precisely so they can talk to each other about these things. So they can run off their anxiety together.

A couple of senior players arrive and jog straight over to the youngsters and start kicking the ball around with them. Sergey calls out some instructions and tells me that they'll soon be starting the practice session.

My trip to Nagorno-Karabakh coincided with the World Cup qualifiers. Norway, the Netherlands and Germany are

some of the teams with increasingly outspoken views on Qatar hosting the 2022 championship. I read the news alerts on my phone about payers pulling up their jerseys to reveal messages questioning the choice. Why should a country like Qatar get to arrange a World Cup? It's clear that the country is pumping cash, often through its airline Qatar Airways, into several top European clubs and that its economic relations with FIFA were instrumental in its being selected as championship host.

The same thing has happened in Azerbaijan, when they were selected to host four matches in the 2020 Euros, which on account of the pandemic were played in 2021. But any similar debate surrounding Azerbaijan has largely been unforthcoming. The state oil company Socar entered the championships as one of fourteen main sponsors but began its partnership with UEFA back in 2013.[63] This was just two months after UEFA had decided to spread the championships across Europe instead of holding it in a single country, and just a fortnight afterwards it announced the criteria for applying to be a host. It is not too hard to imagine that Socar's sponsorship paved the way for Baku to be accepted as one of them.

To be sure, Azerbaijan was not at war when the decision was made, but in the spring of 2013, a large number of journalists and activists in the country found themselves under arrest.[64]

Azerbaijan was already low down all indices of democracy, press freedom and human rights, but after 2013, the country fell even further. That same year, state TV declared by mistake the official election result before the polling stations had closed. Ilham Aliyev won by a landslide.

There are probably many reasons for the lack of objections to the choice of Azerbaijan as the host of sporting events. Qatar, for one thing, is a bigger player in the sportswashing game, and Azerbaijan lacks the closeness to Europe that Belarus has. Azerbaijan's export of gas and oil to Europe is also seen as an alternative to Russia. Whenever the question arises of the country being "Europe's worst dictatorship", the debate often gets bogged down in discussions on whether Azerbaijan is to be considered part of Europe or not.

The sun has started to turn red and is slowly setting over the distant mountains. From the football pitch in Noragyugh, as I'm watching youngsters and adults play together, this great political game seems quite remote. The thought strikes me that the red sun under which this football team is training is the same one that shines on the stadium in Baku.

Sergey looks at his watch. A minute or so later he claps his hands and takes a couple of steps onto the pitch. At a blow of his whistle, the balls they've been warming up with are put to one side. It's time to train.

A day later. Under the blue sky, three older men on a football pitch are trying to flatten the ground beneath them. The hole they're doing their best to repair was made by a bomb that fell on club Avo Martuni's little home ground last autumn.

The three men sweat in the heat on the pitch, but just behind it, in the valley below, the border to Azerbaijan is seen a couple of hundred metres away. If it hadn't been for the bomb crater on the pitch, it would be hard to believe

that a full-scale war was raging here just a few months back. The grapevines are sprouting on the hills and the birds are singing. But there was indeed a war.

The trio look out of place. One of them is wearing a cowboy hat with "Maribor" on it and his two companions are so old that they must have retired long ago. I walk over to tell them:

"You look rather old to be doing a job like this," I say.

"We call ourselves the Three Musketeers," one of them says. "I'm 70."

He points at the other two.

"He's 65 and him there is 72. I guess we just have to keep going. The holes aren't going to fill themselves!"

The 70-year-old lights a cigarette. I ask him if they laid the pitch themselves. He talks fast and laughs at himself.

"Sure we did! We're caretakers here at the stadium. We usually take turns watching over it. But now they told us that we'd be paid extra if we helped to fill in this hole. The money? We won't see hide nor hair of it. Our main problem, though, is that they want us to repair the pitch by next Sunday, but they refuse to send us the sand. How will we have time to fix it if we don't get the stuff we need?"

Cowboy hat-man smiles at us, but his smile doesn't reach to his mournful eyes. It turns out his name's Martin.

"I was on duty when the rocket hit. I was sitting in the office over there when it happened. I don't remember much. I heard the explosion. BOOM! Everything went black...pitch black! I threw myself onto the ground and lay still. For how long, I don't know. No, no... I don't remember a thing."

He turns round, his large frame trembling, and takes a couple of staggering steps away from his companions. He sits down on a roll of artificial grass and pulls his hat down over his eyes. He says that he wears a hat so that he can hide his tears that never seem to stop welling up. Deeply moved, one of the others walks over to Martin and lays a hand on his back.

"It's time to call it a day. We can't do so much without sand anyway."

Two of the men set off for the caretaker's room to get changed. Martin stays seated.

"I can take you to my house if you want".

We drive to the residential quarter. Martin stayed throughout the war and was in Martuni during some of the worst bombardments. The house is in the quarter where Areg filmed the French journalist who was hit by a bomb. Martin asks me to stop the car. He steps out and walks up to a door, its blue paint not quite able to hide the rust. The key is under a rock. He unlocks the door with care and opens it. On the other side is his house.

Or former house.

The sight of the remains makes the lock on the door seem redundant. Perhaps it is, like much else, the psychology of the war? The trauma makes Martin unable to give up looking after the house despite its destruction. Walls have collapsed and the roof has been smashed to pieces. On the ground are the remains of an exploded missile. And yet there's laundry drying on a washing line.

"It was the second time my house had been destroyed. The first time was in the 90s war, and I rebuilt it. By hand and on my own."

"Will you be rebuilding it again?"

"Maybe. First, though, I have to be done with the football ground. The kids must be able to play football again. And then I've got my new granddaughter to take care of. She's the best."

Martin clears away some rubble from the front of the house and picks his way through it to where the front door should have been.

"Tea or coffee?"

I don't get him. Tea or coffee, here?

"I'll see what we've got. Hang on."

He walks into a room on the ground floor of the only part of the house that's reasonably intact. The door is hanging askew.

"Sorry, I think I'm out of coffee," he comes back out to tell me. "All I could find was these."

He hands me three pomegranates. The red fruits stick out against the grey dust and rubble surrounding us.

"We used to have a tree in the garden and these are the last three. They're yours. You're coming to dinner with me and my family, yes?"

A little later we're climbing up to the apartment that Martin's family were given pending the rebuilding of their house. In the garden outside, a volleyball net has been erected between four spotlights that light up the court, and a bunch of youngsters and children are playing there. As usual, the facades of the surrounding buildings are peppered with shrapnel scars, as if someone has sprayed them paint. Martin mumbles something about a missile landing among the blocks.

In the hallway outside their front door are about thirty shoes. Big and small. A neighbour peeps out of her door and laughs when she sees my amusement at the mass of footwear. You can tell that large families have moved in here.

Before long, I'm standing beside Martin's almost 90-year-old mother, who has settled into a large forest-green armchair in one corner.

"Martuni is a real sports town," chuckles Martin as we sit down around the kitchen table for dinner. "We've always loved wrestling, football – anything and everything! We've got the best athletes of all Armenians – I swear to God!"

The gas heater is on and the kitchen is stuffy. There are brown sofas along the walls and a dining table in the middle.

The ceiling light is missing a shade and the bulb is spreading an industrial sheen over the room.

"I've somehow managed to raise three sons, who are all much smarter than me. One is a maths professor in Russia, another is an engineer. And then there's Vahe here in Martuni, who's head of the local emergency planning unit. I myself just played football and was caretaker at the stadium in town. It mystifies me how my sons have done so well."

Vahe enters the room and I ask him how much time Martin puts into his work.

"He's there the whole time. He'd never miss a training session. I try to tell him that he doesn't need to go there to arrange things, but he's a stubborn old sod. He seems to love that stadium as much as his family!"

A little girl runs up to her grandfather and he plonks her onto his lap.

Vahe sneaks into the room with the newborn baby. She shows her to Martin and then places her in Vahe's arms.

"It's unfortunate to be born in the middle of a war," says Martin. "I hope that we'll be able to build Martuni once again. For the sake of the children. We have far too many lost generations."

Vahe nods in agreement.

"The latest war was truly horrific. As head of emergency planning I can see how the whole community is knocked out and how many children have lost fathers. Since the end of the war we've found over 4,500 bodies in the Martuni region. Can you imagine! Before the war, there were 150,000 people living in Artsakh. Just that demographic loss affects us enormously."

"You've found Azerbaijani bodies, too, I assume?" I ask cautiously. "What happens to them?"

"Yeah, we have. Many of the dead are Azerbaijanis, but also Syrian mercenaries," Vahe replies. "If you ask me, there are more Syrians than Azerbaijanis. They sent them as cannon

fodder, first to the front, and many of them seem to have had no military training. Things are a bit more complicated with them. While we can manage prisoner exchanges with the Russians and the Red Cross for the Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijan is more than reluctant to receive the Syrians. After all, they deny that Syrians were fighting in the war, so it'd be a bit strange to take them, wouldn't it?"

"So what happens to them?"

"Well, what can we do?" he says with a shake of his head. "They're also entitled to be buried in their homeland, but if no one takes them..."

In 2024, I finally asked a former employee at the Red Cross about this. He claimed that Azerbaijan accepted most of the Syrian mercenaries after some negotiation.

The Syrian mercenaries are a complex question. The BBC has reported that a great many of them were untrained, and at the start of the war, it was rumoured that they came from the debris of the Islamic State, a claim that I myself have reported on but has since been challenged. What we do know is that they were promised 2,000 dollars a month to fight in Azerbaijan in the war for Nagorno-Karabakh.[65]

However, despite the extensive evidence that Syrian mercenaries were fighting for Azerbaijan, the regime denies their existence. During the war, soldiers posted images on social media from Nagorno-Karabakh that have been geolocated to the region. And after the war, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which generally enjoys considerable confidence in the West as well, estimated that around 2,600 Syrian militants had joined the war, of whom just short of 300 were killed.[66] Both Russian and French intelligence services also established the presence of Syrian combatants.

According to the Russian-Israeli journalist and researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov , the mercenaries were civilians from the

parts of Syria that the Syrian government has retaken in the past few years, where they live in deprivation with few opportunities to find work.[67] Since the war, the soldiers have complained that they were mistreated by the Azerbaijani army, and that they have seen nothing of the money. It is very likely that they are normal but desperate men, who sign up to join Turkey's and Russia's proxy armies. While the Turkish recruitment firms send mercenaries to Libya and Azerbaijan, Russia is suspected of sending them to Venezuela. That said, it cannot be ruled out that some of the mercenaries actually fought for Islamist groups in Syria.

In the BBC's reports, the mercenaries reveal that they were sent to the front before anyone else, often with no military plan. When the called for backup or asked to retreat, their pleas went unheard. One of the interviewees says that he left the front of his own volition with an injured friend. When they met an Azerbaijani tank, it passed them by without summoning help for them. Tsurkov believes that when Azerbaijan recruited mercenaries the summer before the war, it had no clear strategy for how to use them. So they were used as experimental units to test the waters before Azerbaijani troops were deployed – as "cannon fodder".

As a short sidebar, Elizabeth Tsurkov was kidnapped in 2023 by the Iranian backed Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq while she was doing fieldwork for her PhD at Princeton University. Her investigative efforts have meant a great deal to my attempts to understand and verify Vahe's stories from Martuni. It might disrupt the flow of my text, but I'd like to take this opportunity to thank her and draw attention to her case. Her research on how Russia and Turkey use Syrian mercenaries has been brave, astute and significant to our understanding of modern proxy wars.

To continue. In Armenia, the mercenaries were portrayed as Jihadists during the war, prompted by films posted on social media of them shouting Islamist slogans when celebrating victories, as well as by a rumour that each mercenary had been promised 100 dollars for "every Armenian head". While under interrogation by the Armenian military police, two of the mercenaries admitted it and in the spring of 2021 they were sentenced to life for acts of terrorism.[68] The outside world has accused the Armenian government of not ensuring due process and judging them in accordance with the law of war, which applies even to mercenaries.

Back in the stuffy atmosphere of kitchen, Vahe pours out some more homemade wine and looks at his father.

"One of the most important things we're seeing in Martuni right now is sport and football. They've really taken it far. Not even the restaurants have re-opened yet. That's also why I don't stop my dad from going down to the stadium to repair it. The local sports club here in Martuni has been phenomenal. They work together with us and deal with the parents. All the trainers were soldiers, as were the players. They know what they're talking about and have the full trust of the community."

Martin interrupts him.

"While we're on the subject...we haven't got any sand at the stadium. Can you tell the authorities to deliver us some? Otherwise we'll never get it done!"

To our left, the last Armenian military post disappears as we drive to the Aghdam checkpoint. Farming is still underway on either side of us, but the area seems deserted. There's barely a living soul working in the fields, and many of the houses have been abandoned. A couple of men in Askeran, which we have left behind us, told us that the road we're on would lead us to

the checkpoint on the Azerbaijani border.

A few kilometres later, we see the first speed limit sign indicating that we're to slow down to 20 km/h – the second one says 5. Areg drives between the obstacles laid out to slow the approach to the Russian military post and I climb out of the car.

"What do you want?" the soldier in front of me asks.

"I'm a journalist and I'd like to ask a few things," I say in Russian.

"Out of the question," says the man.

"Can I talk to the captain here?"

"Our orders are clear. No."

I turn to the Areg still sitting in the car and shake my head.

"You should've let me do the talking," Nvard hisses. "I know how to get people to open up."

She's right. She speaks perfect Russian and has proved a diamond on this trip. She can sustain a conversation and simultaneously interpret without disturbing the vibe.

Beside the military station is an abandoned restaurant and only thirty or so metres away I can see Azerbaijani and Turkish flags. Suddenly, a loud peal of laughter bursts from behind the Russian soldier and he turns round. A couple of his companions have got hold of a barbecue that they're carrying between them from the restaurant to the post. One of them stumbles and the other laughs at him raucously. They appear drunk. The soldier at the barrier winces in embarrassment at me.

"Are they drunk?" I ask.

"None of your business," he barks back.

An old red van drives up to the checkpoint and a man with a large belly and a scraggly beard steps out of it. He presents a document to the soldier, who takes it over to a tent for inspection.

"You're allowed to pass?" I ask in surprise. "I wasn't!"

"We have a special permit. Our farm is over there."

"Surrounded by the Azerbaijanian army?"

The Azerbaijani military posts are everywhere just a couple of hundred metres away.

"Sometimes we say hi to each other, but they're not allowed to do anything. We can work away virtually undisturbed."

He retrieves his papers and jumps back into his van and crawls off between the checkpoint and the restaurant. Just before he reaches the Turkish soldiers on the other side, he turns off down a gravel track, the dust whirling behind him as he disappears off up towards the hills.

This is the road that leads to Martakert, where we visited the Russian military base. From here, the ruined town of Aghdam is much more visible. Today, it is heavily mined and possibly the clearest visual example of the abuses that the Armenian army committed against Azerbaijani areas in the 1990s. The man's ability to work virtually undisturbed would turn out to be short-lived after the 2020 war. As time passed, more reports came in of Armenian farmers being shot at by Azerbaijanis. During the 2023 blockade, it was almost impossible to work along the border and the lack of facilities for taking care of harvests stoked fears of a famine.[69]

For many people not from Aghdam, the town is best-known for its football club, Qarabag FK, which until 1987 was called Mehsul. For many Azerbaijanis, the club has become a nationalist symbol and for want of the national team successes, Qarabag FK has been adopted as an alternative. In the 2010s, the club dominated Azerbaijani football, made good progress in the UEFA Europa League and the Champions League, and plays in the national arena in Baku. The change of name in 1987 demonstrates just how high tensions were running in the region even back then, when the club chose the Azerbaijani spelling to assert its regional affiliation. Naturally, the club was snubbed by the Armenian

population, which wore the colours of Lernayin Artsakh, Sergey's team, instead.

During the war of 2020, Qarabag FK drew the interest of the international media when its press officer wrote on social media: "We must kill all Armenians – children, women, the old. Without exception. Without mercy and without empathy."[70] This was after Armenian missiles had hit civilian areas in Azerbaijan. The press officer was given a lifetime ban by UEFA. But it perhaps reflected the club's relationship with Nagorno-Karabakh, where it's known for its highly conservative attitude towards peace talks and the region's status.

A couple of hundred metres away from the checkpoint we take a break. Areg takes out his spray cans by a rusty container riddled with bullet holes and paints another blojik on it. As usual he smiles and laughs.

"This is to show that the road isn't as dangerous as it looks!"

We'll soon be meeting Sergey again.

It's a Sunday and we're in Askeran, a town half an hour's drive away from Stepanakert, right next to the Azerbaijani border. The football stadium is on the outskirts of the town and on the hill behind it I can just make out an Azerbaijani flag. The clouds sometimes veil the sun, sometimes release its warmth.

The team has started to warm up on the pitch. The grass is soft underfoot. Along the sides of the stadium hang placards left over from CONIFA 2019. The colours are faded, making the signs appear like phantoms from bygone times. Maybe it's time to take them down, I think.

Sergey's Tigran Mets will be kicking off against FC Berd from Chartar in Nagorno-Karabakh's southern corner in twenty minutes, and Sergey spends the time instructing his players out on the field. Mher Avanesyan is standing on the

sideline chatting with a couple of other men. Mher Avanesyan is chair of the Nagorno-Karabakh football association and the driving force behind the establishment of the league in 2018, the 2019 CONIFA European cup and the startup of the league after the war. When he catches sight of me, he excuses himself from the conversation and comes over to shake my hand. He smiles and his kind eyes wrinkle up.

"I've been in Sweden a couple of times, actually," he says. "I was there in 1998 playing for Shirak against Malmö. We lost 2–0. I remember a guy...was his name Ohlsson?"

"Jörgen?"

"That's the man! He scored. Fucking scrappy goal. A bugger to get past, too."

During his professional career, Mher played up front in Armenian and Iranian clubs. In Nagorno-Karabakh, he's possibly the best Armenian that the region has produced in modern times.

"I had just over 500 matches and 114 goals registered with UEFA when I hung up my boots."

We walk to the stands, and he greets the referees warming up as we pass. I ask him if he can tell me how football has changed since the war.

"Where shall I begin? 99 per cent of the players were soldiers, and 9 per cent of them never came back. People say sometimes that the stands are the twelfth player. I'm talking one player dead in every starting eleven. And that makes its mark on the game. When I called around the clubs a couple of days after the war, there wasn't a single player who turned down the opportunity to start playing again."

We stand watching the teams clustering around each other for a final heads-down before kick-off.

"Before the war, the stands were always packed," says Mher. "Especially after CONIFA. There was hardly room to stand. As you can see, numbers have dropped. That might be down to

the pandemic, but whatever, it all feels depressing and tragic. People don't have it in them to come here yet. But we are noticing that every week there are more and more."

I ask him how much contact he has with the various clubs.

"The coaches and I have a lot of contact about the situation in the troops. Not just injuries or organisational hassles. We talk more about how the players feel in themselves. If there are any problems. But it's important to understand that many of them were at the front every day for the entire war. What they saw, what they were made to do... Everyone reacts differently, of course, but we want to help the coaches handle things like this."

"What does it mean to you to have been able to get the league up and running again?"

"You've probably heard the same thing from the players. But for me it means everything. I know that football is there for the lads to be able to process and handle the war. Many have lost friends, and now the ones that are left get to work as a team. This motivates me to make something proper of this. To build up football together in Artsakh."

Just as the referee is about to signal the start of the match, Mher excuses himself. His daughter has a dentist's appointment.

We settle down in the stands. A pair of young women below us have drawn the FC Berd emblem on black and white paper. A couple of guys have sat down nearby. But otherwise there are few spectators.

Sergey is on the sideline looking focused. He claps his hands to egg on his players, more than one of which has a marked paunch under his tight match jersey.

After a minute or so, a frustrated Sergey calls out:

"Don't dribble yourself into knots when defending!"

One of the players flings out his arms, shoots Sergey a puzzled look and shakes his head. Sergey copies his gesture

and shouts, unclear to whom.

"He's always taking things into his own hands. I've told him hundreds of times to clear the ball and not show off."

Shortly afterwards, a Tigran Mets player puts his laces through a perfect volley. Goal! All the players – even the opposing team – stop and clap.

A few minutes before half time, FC Berd are awarded a penalty. The goal means that the teams are level when the ref blows his whistle. Back in the changing room, Sergey praises his team. He pats the scorer on the back and then goes round to each of them giving instructions for the last 45 minutes. He rounds off by standing in front of the team.

"Carry on what you're doing! It's good. You're shaping up. To think that a month ago we'd never played a match together."

On the way back out, Sergey mutters something about the ref being "shit" and conceding a penalty was a disaster.

FC Berd immediately start dominating the game and Tigran Mets are pushed further and further back. The players are looking increasingly tired on the field and Sergey increasingly jittery on the sideline. FC Berd scores another goal and soon afterwards it's 3-1. Sergey drops down onto his bench, shaking his bowed head. Just before full time, Tigran Mets pull one back, but it's not enough. Yet another defeat. I jump down to him from the stands and commiserate him. He smiles.

"Know what? That was the best match yet. I'm happy it was this one that you saw. Next time, we're taking home three points."

Chapter 6: ”He gave away our lands”

It rained earlier this morning and the puddles hide the potholes in the bumpy gravel road in the border town of Goris in Armenia. We've left Nagorno-Karabakh. A washing line hangs between two small blocks of flats that are in such poor condition that they look on the verge of collapsing. An old white Lada stands clumsily parked opposite them. It's hard to say if it still works. The rust eating through the bonnet seems to be slowly overwhelming the vehicle.

A man in black tracksuit bottoms, cheap, dark-blue typical Soviet style plastic bath slippers and a red hoodie emerges from one of the blocks and stands on the steps to light a cigarette. A child appears beside him. Coughs. A shrill, dry cough. Nvard takes a deep breath. She has two girls of her own and her maternal heart beats for all the children we meet.

"This is where we live," declares the man. "Come in and sit down. The rest of the family is here."

We step over the threshold and are greeted by a thick, damp cloud of fug. Our immediate reaction is to take three steps back into the fresh spring air, but I keep going. Above the door to the flat hangs an old junction box out of which cables have been inexpertly fed through a hole that has been knocked recklessly in the wall. The dark-green floral wallpaper droops in strips that have buckled in the humidity.

"If we don't have the heating on it gets way too cold, and

when we have it on it gets like this," he says.

He continues.

"We got the flat from a woman in the USA who had no use for it. These flats were built after the war in the 90s as temporary accommodation. She moved to Los Angeles shortly afterwards and the flat's been empty since. But it's good that we can live in it."

It's dark in the narrow corridor that leads to a little sleeping recess and a kitchenette. In the corner of a small living room is a TV giving off a loud, tinny sound. The family's pregnant mother is sitting on a wooden chair rocking a five-month-old baby in a pram. Around her are seven other children ranging from the age of three to late-teens. All of them are sniffling and coughing.

"Do you all sleep in here?" I ask her.

"Most of the children do. We have to lay out mattresses when it's time for bed. We adults sleep with the littlest ones in the bedroom."

They have eleven children and another one on the way. When the war broke out, they were forced to flee from Lachin, which these days is more of a Russian military post than a residential town. According to the ceasefire agreement, the village will eventually return to Azerbaijani control, which means that its Armenian residents have had to leave.

The family would have been given a house anyway by the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities because they have more than five children. When displaced, they had to abandon their home pending a new house in Nagorno-Karabakh they live in Goris, but they're not holding their breaths.

We sit in the little flat and try to get the conversation to flow. Maybe it's the thick air that keeps people quiet – either that or there's not much to talk about. A child walks up to Nvard and hugs her while Nvard strokes her hair. On the TV screen in the background, a young urban woman presents

a sports drink as she heads to the office after a session at the gym. The advert, which has been filmed in Yerevan, is totally divorced from reality in this room.

I ask them if the children go to school.

"Sometimes, yes," the mother replies. Everything is so temporary at the moment, so I wonder if it's really worth it. They go as much as they have to to get their grades".

Nvard is bubbling inside from the internal struggle between sympathising for the refugee family and wanting them to do right by their children.

"The children need to go to school," she says calmly. "This flat isn't good for them, they need to get out."

The mother shifts awkwardly in her seat. She has eleven children to take care of and they live in a flat that should have been demolished twenty years ago. Maybe she thinks that things aren't that simple. Maybe she's fretting over the thought that the children have to grow up in a place like this and is powerless to do anything about it. Where and how are they going to start over?

"How do you see the future?" I ask.

"Most of all, we want our old house back. It was big enough. We had a good TV and a barbecue area."

The refugee families from Nagorno-Karabakh are a burning political issue in Armenia. According to the unofficial figures, some 50,000 people were displaced and 30,000 have still not returned to Nagorno-Karabakh. The government aid they receive for their return is poor, and the welfare institutions in Armenia are both bureaucratic and inefficient. The families are compensated with a paltry social benefit of $90 equivalent a month, and the most vulnerable, the ones that have no family in Armenia, have to rely on the charity of civil society, which supplies them with food, nappies and other necessities.

During the war and for a couple of months afterwards,

much of the aid was managed through the tourist industry, which due to the pandemic had no visitors to speak of, and few of the hotels that opened their doors received little compensation, if any, to help the families. As more and more people returned to Nagorno-Karabakh, the need for society to step up also declined. In Goris, a border town in Armenia, a great many families still live under similar conditions to this one. You take whatever accommodation you can afford and can move into.

The teenage son, who has been out, comes to join us, his tight light-blue tee-shirt straining over his broad forearms. He'll soon be turning eighteen and joining the army.

"There you are! Won't you read some of your poetry to us?" says the father.

"He's even taken part in poetry competitions," adds his mother proudly.

Hunched over a chest of drawers, he rummages around the old memories that they've stuffed into it from their house in Lachin. Eventually, he finds one of his notebooks and opens it tenderly. I'm thinking that this could be glimmer of light – hearing some poetry – and train my microphone on him as he stands up. He thumbs through a few pages looking for a poem that he's fond of.

"I haven't written much since we moved," he says. "But this one was written after the 2016 war. It's as relevant now as it was than and is one of my favourites."

He gives it his all and shouts, almost roars, out the poem with the full force of his entire body.

A quiet life our brave soldiers had
When an armed, hostile tribe fiercely attacked.
It was a nightmare.

They wrecked and laid waste to all in their path.

All that we had built.

They had their eyes on our land, our water.
But our brave soldiers were strong,
And tore the eyes from the malevolent foe.

From one blow from the Armenian soldiers
The wretched Azerbaijanis fled,
Never to return.

When he finishes there is silence. Nvard translates the poem. It's exactly as it sounded: a patriotic war poem.

Back outside in the fresh air, Areg, Nvard and I are walking side-by-side. They are deeply move by our visit to the family. We stand at a distance from the house and see the father standing in the very same spot as when we arrived. He's smoking and watching a neighbour working on his car.

"Shall we help them in some way?" I ask them, knowing that it's not the task of the journalist.

For the first time during this trip Areg shouts.

"No! Everyone who sends money from abroad or gives money to these families is doing them no favours. It's up to the parents to sort their lives out. They didn't have to live like this!"

Nvard agrees.

"Giving them money doesn't do any good at all. It enables them to buy more cigarettes but it's their own responsibility, and perhaps the state's too, to sort out. Begging mustn't be a job. They asked us if we had any spare change and we told them we're journalists and aren't allowed to give them money. The father got angry and that's when we left."

"The son. The one who read the poem, dropped out of school when he was fifteen to start a company breeding rabbits. Why didn't the parents tell him it was a stupid idea?!

All he's got to look forward to now is the army. And that's no life in the long run," says Areg.

We get into the car and no one says a word as I drive down the cobbled street. Whose responsibility is it? The parents', the state's or the local association's? Nvard breaks the silence.

"Maybe I get so mad because I know that if the state hadn't been broken we'd have had neither the war nor the ensuing chaos. Everything's just one big mess now. Do I think that the parents have to take responsibility? Yes, I do. But I also blame Pashinyan. He gave away our lands after the war and now here we are, in the middle of all this fucking shit."

After a week in Nagorno-Karabakh, where so many people have repeated pretty much these very same sentiments, it's hard to keep the emotions in check. The anger at the war is palpable and the Armenian government is widely blamed for what's happened. As always, it's likely that the explanation is more complicated than that. Armenia was, after all, for many years, a deeply corrupt country with deep-rooted connections to Russia's oligarchy. The 2018 revolution radically changed many things, even if the networks to Russia have remained. The war, which Azerbaijan had so clearly been preparing itself for, was very probably inevitable, regardless of who was in power.

The women's rights organisation Sose Women's Issues receives us in Goris. In their new premises outside the centre, they work with democracy issues pertaining to women, but like all civil society organisations they had to adapt after the war. The need to fill the mouths of refugee families was simply too pressing and once a week they open their doors to help families in need.

Liana Sahakyan meets us in her purple polo shirt. There's a radiance about her as she opens the door and shows us in. She started the organisation almost twenty years ago, since

when she has become something of name in the Syunik region, where Goris lies.

"How was it there with the family?" she asks me when we come in.

"What can I say? They have it really tough."

"As do many. It really is a dilemma for us... How can I explain it... It's an uphill struggle. We know we're just fighting fires when we leave food and necessities, but if we don't do it no one else will. The government hands out a little money and food, but it's nowhere near enough."

The rooms are still cold. The staff have tried to breathe some life into them by hanging up a collage of photographs from their activities. I can see happy children engaging in group exercises in some of them, and in another Liana is out talking to a crowd of women. She opens a little cupboard to show us a batch of nappies and things that they hand out to the families that come to them for help.

"This isn't really our core activity, and we try to put the time we need into our other projects, which are also important. Until recently, we had to put everything we were doing on hold, but now we've managed to get organised at last, so we work 20 per cent of the time with refugees and 80 per with other things.

These other things include strengthening the role of women in civil society, tackling domestic violence and educating young people about equality.

Areg asks me if I want to take some photos, or if he can go off for a while. He's mentally exhausted. Liana sees it too, and tells him he can go for a rest in an adjacent room. Nvard goes with him. While Liana and I talk, they sit beside each other. Nvard gets out her phone and translates an article that I've just published. Her voice is soft and serene as she tells Areg about the hospital staff in Martuni.

"The look like two tired little children," I say to Liana.

"I know," says Liana and smiles thoughtfully. "It makes me realise how hard it's been for us here in the organisation over the past six months. It's terrible to say...but the only way to get through the day is to switch off your emotions."

"Can you cope?"

"Mostly, yes. You automatically get inured to it after a while, as if the body just shuts down. We have a psychologist who works with violence against women and children who are abused in the home, so we all get a chance to offload to her at times."

"What about her? She must also find it tough."

"Yes, she gets to offload at a clinic that we collaborate with. Goris isn't a large town and we all try to be there for each other when it's needed."

Liana checks the time and tells me that they've invited refugee families over today so that I can get a taste of how they work. She has to make a few preparations before they arrive and leaves me with Areg and Nvard where some of the staff have set out lunch. Areg reclines his head against the back of the sofa, his eyes misty. As if he's dreaming of another world.

"You know, Rasmus, I die slowly every day," he says softly. "For months I've been trying to keep away from all sorts of pain and have virtually gone into isolation. I don't know if I can keep it up any more."

He holds back the tears.

"I've not talked about the war until this trip. There are so many dimensions to war and my body's too small to bear them all."

The front door opens, and a woman in a thick black coat enters. She meekly explains what she's come for and a member of staff fetches a list to tick off her name. Liana adds her verifying signature, and the woman is given a bag of food and a little cash handout.

"You give them money, too?" I ask Liana after the woman has gone.

"Yes, but it's not much and it's earmarked for buying school books for the children. They have to show us receipts the next time they come."

A queue forms outside and the staff help each other to receive the families. The once peaceful office becomes a hive of activity in which one by one the arrivals report what they need. Liana runs to and fro between the helpers. A woman nods to her husband. They take their bags and leave. Six months after the war, it's still the local civil society that the refugees have to rely on for help.

Areg has dropped off in the passenger seat, gasping for air every now and then so that he snores. Nvard's head looks increasingly heavy whenever I look in the rear-view mirror. A car zooms past me and disappears over the crest that winds down from the mountains. Through the windscreen I can see the sun setting over the majestic Mount Ararat. We're not far from Yerevan and this is the first time there's been silence. Nvard and Areg usually talk incessantly to each other. I smile to myself. Have I finally managed to tire them out?

I'm at once happy and miserable. Happy that I've made it into Nagorno-Karabakh. Happy that, with Areg's and Nvard's help, I've come so close to the heart, the people and the places of the conflict. But I'm also miserable because I know that my stories from inside Nagorno-Karabakh might go no further than being just that: stories. The people we've met have sometimes been called terrorists by Azerbaijani government officials for the sole reason that they live where they live. And the macropolitical game being played over their heads is beyond their powers to control.

I know that as a journalist I must strive for objectivity and I know that I mustn't take sides on the issues I report on, but

how the heck will I manage to describe the conflict in a way that isn't platitudinal when I get back to Sweden? I also know that every report I write will be taken by others as partisan. How can I avoid the trap that so many other journalists end up in: endless wrangling over reports from the human rights organisations, technicalities of international law, quotes from top-level diplomats and everything else that doesn't seem to have steered the conflict towards a peaceful resolution? "Bothsideism" is an ever-present concept in the journalistic discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

My reports will probably end up not strictly following the Journalism 101 textbook. An Armenian diplomat saying one thing and an Azerbaijani another forms the essence of most foreign media coverage of the conflict. The journalism fails to take the readers beyond the most superficial perspectives and take in dimensions of authoritarianism and disinformation. The best journalism is found in the Caucasus and often in local English-language newspapers. Regrettably it does not lie at the heart of international reporting but is valuable to understanding developments over and above what is written by Reuters or AFP.

No, it's not my job to propose solutions to the war; but maybe it's the book's job to give the failures of the peace negotiations a face, a voice. I breathe heavily. The constant doubt I feel about delving into a conflict that I have no control over stirs and grows within me.

In Yerevan, I'm due to meet another part of civil society than Liana's women's rights organisation, one that's busy working for Nagorno-Karabakh's future. They are there to step in when they feel the state isn't delivering. I'm to meet the city's liberals and democracy activists, those who are doing their utmost to ensure that the conflict finds a peaceful resolution, and those who see that the way to peace passes through greater democratisation.

Areg snores loudly in the seat beside me and Nvard's head falls heavily against her breast. I depress the clutch – again – and curse the potholes. The delicate cotton wool-like petals of the cherry trees are gilded by the almost red sunset. In the distance, I can see the peaks of Ararat: Masis and Sis – Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The snow-capped mountain is on the other side of the border, in Turkey.

AWAY FROM HOME. *40,000 Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were displaced by the 2020 war, with few resources to assist them.*

Chapter 7: ”Peace is intimately tied to democracy”

As spring arrives, the city fills with people. Central Yerevan is teeming with groups of teenagers wandering back and forth along the streets, young families playing with radio-controlled cars in front of the grand opera house, and dudes driving around in their big black muscle cars. Cafés can switch off the infra-red heating in the outdoor seating areas and well-dressed urbanites sip their red wine or tea, kept warm by their fashionable coats whenever the sun goes behind a cloud. On the surface, Yerevan looks like any other European city, with its clean facades, large squares and abundance of modern restaurants. It presents a sharp contrast to the mountainous and often neglected Nagorno-Karabakh.

The young peace and democracy activist, whom I shall call Harut, approaches me from a distance. He tells me that some of his activism, not related to the war, has faced a lot of public criticism in the last few months and prefers to not appear with his real name.

With his long blond hair and blue eyes, he sticks out from the crowd. But like the rest of the crowd, he lights a cigarette. He excuses himself.

“I hope you don’t mind. Since the war and the pandemic, I smoke way too much. The war madness was too much for my nerves and I started to chain-smoke. Not deliberately. I did it without thinking. But now I’m trying hard to stop.”

He grimaces at his vice and suggests we get going. We’ve already spoken. During the war, he was one of the initiators of

several peace manifestos by young left-wingers, a response to and an act of solidarity with a similar action from the Azerbaijani side. They wanted to show their friends across the border that there were routes to reconciliation. Unlike in Azerbaijan, however, the number of signatures in Armenia was almost ten times higher.

"It's not as well-written as the Azerbaijani one, but we had to make some compromises to get it through. But the spirit of the manifestos is pretty much the same: the resolution to the conflict must be democratic and peaceful. We also denounce all forms of authoritarian bullshit and nationalist narratives that turn people against each other."

"Did you get any negative reactions to the manifesto?"

"No, none really. These are radical ideas in a way because they go against much of that nationalistic shit that our politicians spew out, but there's much more support for peaceful resolutions in Armenia compared to Azerbaijan. Many of my friends in Azerbaijan were subjected to a lot of hate. I've not had any of that."

We sit at an outside table and order something to eat. Mushrooms, bread, cheese and a dish of five kinds of herb. Harut lights more cigarettes.

"Peace is intimately tied to democracy. It's pretty simple. Democratic and liberal values allow for a positive view of other people and a respect for minority rights. In the best of all worlds, Karabakh could be part of Azerbaijan, no problem. Now I realise that this isn't the case, but you get my drift. If both countries were democratically minded and didn't just perpetuate antiquated nationalistic narratives, Karabakh's status would've been a non-issue."

It's April and Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has just announced an early election for June 2021. He will win by a landslide, but as I'm sitting here this evening with Harut, such an outcome is far from certain. Representatives

from the power-elite, the former government, that Pashinyan deposed in 2018 have just started to organise themselves in earnest, and it's becoming increasingly obvious that their candidate will be the former prime minister and president Robert Kocharyan, who held power for a decade from 1998.

"Pashinyan's been in a kind of Catch 22 situation," Harut informs me. "At the same time as wanting to push through liberal reforms, the entire system is pervaded by its Soviet heritage. Losing parts of Karabakh can't be seen as anything other than Russia punishing Armenia."

"How do you mean that the system is pervaded by a heritage?" I ask him.

Harut looks thoughtful and replies pensively.

"Pashinyan's reforms clash with the Russian oligarch system, you could say. Just look at the war. It was soon pretty obvious that oligarchs in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in Russia too, make money on it. The system is so deeply entrenched that it's almost impossible to root out. When Pashinyan on the one hand has implemented swift reforms and on the other has had to take this into consideration, the power-elite has grown increasingly discontent with him."

The peaceful demonstrations led by Nikol Pashinyan in May 2018 overthrew the then government after a heavily criticised change to the constitution prompted by the resignation of president Serzh Sargsyan in favour of Armen Sarkissian after two terms of office.[71] The constitutional amendment that the parliament had voted through shortly before transferred power from the president to the prime minister and parliament. The election of Sargsian as prime minister sparked huge demonstrations against what was widely seen as a transfer of power by the power-elite to cement their hold on power.

The protests engaged large sections of the population,

and soon afterwards, Sargsyan was forced to peacefully step down and call a new election. Nikol Pashinyan's liberal-minded "My Step Alliance" fronted by the Civil Contract Party won the election by an overwhelming majority. The peaceful demonstrations earned the epithet "the Velvet Revolution".[72]

Pashinyan's early days as prime minister were characterised by a fast pace of reform aimed at reducing corruption and streamline bureaucracy. In 2017, Armenia was ranked 107 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Two years' worth of effort later, to the applause of the West, it had shot up to 60, just behind countries like Slovenia and Greece.

As a direct consequence, from 2019 to 2020 the EU almost doubled its financial support for democratic reforms Armenia, boosting pro-European opinion so much that a slim majority now prefers closer ties with Europe than with Russia.[73] Nevertheless, Armenia remains in a partnership with Russia, both economically through the Eurasian Economic Community and militarily through the CSTO.

The upward pro-European trend was still rising in 2020. Then came the war.

Where Pashinyan's government had relatively high support before the war, it nosedived after the defeat. The summer's snap election was an immediate consequence of this. In the week leading up to polling day, many opinion polls had Pashinyan trailing Kocharyan. While prognoses varied, the outcome was predicted that a little over 20 per cent of the votes would go to Pashinyan and almost 30 per cent to Kocharyan.[74]

As it turned out, when the election results were announced, Pashinyan was found to have secured yet another parliamentary majority with almost 55 per cent of the vote, with Kocharyan landing on 22 per cent. Supporters of Kocharyan accused Pashinyan of election rigging and

balloting irregularities, but OSCE observers cooly stated that the election had largely been conducted properly, even though the running campaign was characterised by deep polarisation.[75] To European eyes, it is seen as yet another victory for Pashinyan's democratic reforms for him to retain a high degree of democratic credibility two elections in a row.

However, discontent after losing the war persists and the negativity towards Pashinyan has not eased up. The renewed trust in the Pashinyan government is seen by many as an indication that the march towards reform will continue, but one that is burdened by a bitter lesson: having to find an approach to balance the country's reliance on Russia for its security with its EU aspirations. At that time, Russia's major invasion of Ukraine was yet to come.

For Yerevan's urban liberals, these developments are both welcome and worrying. Harut regards them with a certain degree of cynicism, but reasons that there's no other choice.

"An alliance with Russia comes with strings attached, and after the war we can see how Russia has taken on the role of protector – without them, Armenia would lose all of Karabakh. This also means that we have to toe the line. It's a difficult balancing act for Pashinyan: the people want democracy… at least not corruption…and that's at odds with Russia's will."

"How is it at odds with liberal reforms?"

"Liberal reforms?"

Harut laughs cynically and rolls his eyes.

"We can 'call' them liberal, but we still have among the worst legislation for LGBT-people in Europe and there's still a kind of nationalistic culture of silence dominating the media. But sure. Pashinyan has been good in many ways, and there's no one else right now. So I guess I'll have to vote for him, unfortunately."

I ask him if he thinks things have got getter since the 2018

revolution.

"Many things have, yes. There are more free media channels, for instance...but they don't get that much media space. The peace organisations have also received a bigger handout, but to be quite honest most of that is made up. The youth organisations are usually pretty decent, but as for the majority of the 'liberal think tanks' that have suddenly got more money, many of the leaders are technocrats from an ex-Soviet heritage. It's not credible. The EU doesn't seem to have a clue where the money goes."

I break a stalk of fresh coriander in half and take a bite. I've seen the Armenians eat it in this way and taken a liking to it. The sharp flavour of the herb floods my mouth.

"You eat like an Armenian," Harut says with a smile. "I've never been able to do that."

"When in Rome," I say and laugh. "I learnt to do it in Artsakh."

"Artsakh? Hardly anyone, not even in Karabakh, says Artsakh. You're the first one I've heard say it in ages."

"Really? I'm not sure I'd agree..."

"It's another example of when the rhetoric becomes more nationalistic. It used to be just Karabakh and nothing else. If we're to fight for peace, we also need a common language."

"How do you mean?"

"They twist and turn the names to suit whatever the particular country's official rhetoric is."

Harut's point is that a name's symbolic charge is used to widen the gap between peoples. The argument is the same that other peace activists on both sides have explained to me, and maybe it is the case that the names of the region and its towns are used for nationalist purposes, but shouldn't it be possible for a place to have two or three different names in different languages in a fully functional democracy? It has turned out to be significant. If I use the wrong name to an Armenian I am instantly corrected, and the same goes

in Azerbaijan. If I say Shushi instead of Shusha, the most ill-willed Azerbaijani can snap back that I've "been bought by the Armenians" and either the mood becomes hostile or I get corrected with an undertone of my not understanding any better. Harut, however, is the only one in Armenia who has criticised me for choosing to use "Artsakh" in a conversation.

Nagorno-Karabakh feels remote as we sit here at the restaurant. A democratic view of the resolution to the conflict is rare amongst the people on the street, but the fact is that the principles for the peace talks rest on a democratic view of its resolution centred on the Armenians' right to self-determination. There are, however, two points of contention: whether the principles imply independence, autonomy or separate minority rights and how a vote can be organised that remains true to those principles.

"One of the main reasons why a peace settlement has not been in sight before," reasons Harut, "is that it hasn't been in the personal interests of the power-elites of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. A status quo has been financially profitable for both controlling elites."

I go out on a limb and say that it sounds a little conspiratorial. Does he mean that the elite have agreed that a non-settlement is more profitable than a settlement?

"Let's just say that it's an autocrat's logic," he replies. "This has been about having a small clique close to the power base who have benefited from it. In Azerbaijan, the Aliyev clan has occupied all top positions in state companies, as well as private ones. They've won huge contracts for importing arms and oil and for infrastructure projects. A couple of months ago, an audio recording was leaked of Sarkissian in discussion with the Belarus dictator Lukashenko about the former having been offered a large sum of money for returning some of the occupied districts to Azerbaijan."

The conversation, which was from 2016, was published

in December 2020 and sparked a heated political debate in Armenia. Many people cynically regarded it as part of how the former government worked: through corruption, dictatorialness and authoritarian control. Sarkissian was heard to offer a counter-bid to Aliyev in which he upped the ante in return for Azerbaijan ceding its claim on Nagorno-Karabakh and accompanying areas.[76]

"If Pashinyan wins the extra election, the peace talks can continue, but I really doubt they'll lead anywhere," Harut continues. "Right now, it's Russia that's ultimately calling the shots. That's obvious. A democratic solution to the conflict that takes international law into consideration is more a façade than a reality."

"If I understand you correctly, you don't think that a vibrant Armenian civil society has no impact on the peace talks?"

"Yes and no. It possibly impacts public opinion on its willingness to compromise over Karabakh, but the Armenian leader who signs a peace accord that signs over even parts of Karabakh to Azerbaijan will most probably have to be sent into exile. Pashinyan's problem is that he's a populist, nationalist and a democrat rolled into one, but maybe that's also what gets him elected. And this is what I mean: it's unlikely we'll ever have a genuine democratic leader, at least that's how I see it."

"I'm not really following. How do you mean?"

"A nationalistic narrative that turns people against each other is simply not democratic and therefore a democratic premise in the peace talks that recognises minority rights is self-contradictory from the off. It's based on a Western concept that has no grounding in reality."

The clash between the Western, the contemporary Russian and the endless breakup from the Soviet Union is the subject of most articles and books from the former Soviet world. Countless analyses talk about how democratic elections in

countries like Moldova or Kyrgyzstan pit Western-orientated against a pro-Russian candidate. This eternal tug-of-war for political influence is discussed at great length. Armenia is, of course, no exception in this analysis and the once prevalent Soviet mindset is very much still alive here.

Many of the arguments that Harut supports are symptomatic of the time immediately after the war. Looking back in 2024, three years later, much has happened, as will be evident from part two of this book, so my interview with Harut should probably be seen in light of how quickly the discourses in Armenia have evolved. For example, Nikol Pashinyan remains the country's prime minister, and there is no broad political discussion on banishing him from the country – even if it is a recurring theme in oppositional circles.

The polarisation of Armenian politics has thus escalated. In an opinion poll from the last quarter of 2023 conducted by the International Republican Institute, only 13 per cent of respondents said that they trusted Nikol Pashinyan.[77] All other opposition-leaders received only one per cent, while two thirds replied that they didn't trust anyone. The Civil Contract, which Nikol Pashinyan represents, had the trust of 21 per cent of respondents, way ahead of the second largest party at four per cent; meanwhile, over half replied that they would abstain from voting or vote blank, or that they had no confidence in any party.

Internationally, however, trust in Nikol Pashinyan has not really wavered. Over the past year, he has made explicit overtures to the EU, which Armenian voters, in principle, seem to have accepted, primarily out of disappointment at the lack of Russian support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict despite existing agreements. Part two of this book will examine this in more detail. Before then the visit in 2021 to the Armenian civil society continues.

Tamara is standing at the cooker in the staff room of an EU-funded Armenian youth organisation tipping teaspoons of coffee powder into a coffee-making. She turns on the gas. The flames flare up and for second or two I have the smell of gas in my nostrils. The red upholstery on the chair and that I'm sitting on is frayed at the edges.

"I'm sorry but we've got nothing to go with it," Tamara says. "If I'd been given more notice of your arrival, I'd have knocked together something more formal."

Tamara heads up their exchange programme with Turkey, but also helps to coordinate programmes concerning Azerbaijan.

"I heard that you arrange trips to Turkey for young Armenians and camps for Armenians and Azerbaijanis," I tell her.

She stirs the coffee and just before it starts boiling, she pours it into small cups. In many countries, it's called Turkish coffee, but here it's Armenian coffee.

"That was before the war," says Tamara. "We've not got that many activities planned at the minute."

It's a succinct observation.

"We haven't got any proper statistics, but going by social media there's a lot of negativity about. I want to get things back up and running as soon as I can, of course, but first the shock of war has to wear off. I don't think it'll be such a good idea, as for now, to send young people out to meet someone 'from the other side'."

She continues.

"I'm in touch with our counterparts in Turkey and Azerbaijan and we more or less agree: the young people aren't ready yet. I'm in daily contact with the offices, but even between us...I mean the other leaders...things can be quite

fraught. It wasn't like that before the war."

The organisation works with youth projects both inside and outside Armenia designed to encourage young adults up to the age of 25 to become active in civil society on important issues. The peace programmes are their flagship.

"I feel quite down about it, to be honest. We've worked so hard to get young people from the different countries to meet each other, to build strong contact networks, and to make sure that they continue communicating. But then the war came along and when I followed the participants on social media, it made me really sad. Pro-peace posts suddenly became warmongering. All our hard work was reduced to nothing, you know? And now I have to find the energy to start all over again."

I object by saying that it sounds as if there's a clash between how the governments and civil societies have acted and that they have different views on how the conflict can be resolved.

Tamara agrees.

"Yes. That's true! Everything we do is based on a kind of naivety and an over-confidence in the effects it can have. The main problem, as we see it, is that we can work fairly freely here in Armenia and we have the strong support of the local community. But in Azerbaijan their work is incredibly marginalised and they get a lot of push-back. I find it hard to imagine the war has made things any easier."

"What was it like before the war?" I ask. "How did you work with the young people then?"

"There were slightly different camps. The very best ones were those where they didn't only meet to talk about what they have in common and love and stuff. It was when they met to discuss constructive issues of a histographic nature. When they arrived at the camps no one agreed with each other, and when they left, they at least understood each other."

"What kind of governmental support do you get for working with this?"

"Too little, to be honest. We get informal support from the local authorities and individual officials, but from a greater perspective? Not much. What makes us different to when the state does a similar job is that we own our view of peace-orientated work: by working through civil society channels we can work preventatively with such issues. In Azerbaijan, as you might know, they hardly have a free civil society to speak of any more, so it's naturally much harder there and they keep a watch on the organisations in a totally different way."

On the day of my flight home, I wake up with a sore throat and cold sweat trickling down my back. My sheets are damp and I untangle myself from them to go to the bathroom. I look into my blue eyes reflected in the mirror and they're moist with fever. It's in the middle of the covid pandemic and I'm coughing. There's nothing for it but to cancel the flight.

My test comes back negative and my thoughts turn to the refugee family in Goris from a few days before. The whole family had a cough. The damp flat and the heater that turned the air into a dense fug must have been a perfect breeding ground for germs. Poor kids.

I go back to sleep. I toss and turn. Feverish dreams and a troubled slumber. My telephone beeps. It's Nvard, wondering how I am and if I want her to bring me some medicine. I tell her I'll be alright. It's just an infection that the body has to endure and suffer.

The screen of the fat TV set flickers and a Russian talk show comes on. I skim through the channels hoping to find a football match, but almost none of the channels seems to be working. A traditional dance, a Turkish soap opera, and, my ultimate choice, a channel on which President Ilham Aliyev can be seen behind a large table with the entire assembly of

the Turkic Council in front of him on screens. The presidents of the Turkic-speaking world and Hungary are listening to Aliyev's speech.

Are they really showing Azerbaijani TV in Armenia? It's probably because these are satellite channels. I write to an Azerbaijani friend to ask if I can get hold of the speech somewhere. All his speeches are published in English on the government website and while Aliyev talks, I read along to what he's telling the other leaders:

Finally, in late September, our military positions and settlements came under artillery fire, and several of our servicemen and civilians were killed. Naturally, we responded adequately, conducted a counter-offensive and punished the enemy. The 44-day Karabakh war resulted in a complete victory for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan regained its territorial integrity, more than 300 towns and villages were liberated on the battlefield during the war. Our historic city of Shusha was liberated from the occupiers on 8 November and Armenia was forced to sign an act of capitulation.

In the early hours of 10 November, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia and the prime minister of Armenia signed a statement. Based on this statement, our other districts were returned to Azerbaijan through political means. So issue was resolved by both military and political means. It is safe to say that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been resolved. There is currently no territorial unit named Nagorno-Karabakh.

I switch off and go out onto the balcony to get some fresh air. I've heard Aliyev's protracted speeches before. On the garden below, a cherry tree is in bloom. Its beautiful white

petals will soon be pink. So deliciously pink.

I'm thinking that I'll write that book that will give the people of Nagorno-Karabakh a voice – one that will give the failures of the peace negotiations a face.

I pick up my phone and write a message to Areg and Nvard.

When are we going back?

THE PAST. *Remnants of the Soviet era are present everywhere, including here in Martuni.*

PART 2

September 2023.
Two and a half years later.

Photos by Rasmus Canbäck

Chapter 1: ”There's nothing”

At the bottom of the hill, a lorry trundles through a newly built tunnel. A bulldozer is busy carting off huge boulders and some Azerbaijani soldiers are sitting on the kerb smoking. Right behind them, perhaps no more than twenty metres, is a Russian military base.

It’s 7 September 2023. The asphalt is still damp from a recent shower. The Armenian military officer who has escorted Nvard and me to the blockade of the Lachin Corridor drops his cigarette butt to the ground and squashes it with his foot. He’s stood here with enough foreign journalists, politicians and human rights workers to understand that such visits don’t make any difference.

“See the blockade?” he says. “That’s what it is. No one is allowed in or out. Not even the Russians seem able to pass the Azerbaijani border control any more. They fly in food and supplies to themselves.”

We’re standing on the road to Nagorno-Karabakh. I gave up my attempts last year to get in again. Instead, my trips to Armenia have ended right where we are at this very minute: on the hill above the Lachin Corridor. On the other side of the valley, the majestic mountains rise to Nagorno-Karabakh, and on the other side of them are just over 100,000 trapped people. They can’t travel east towards Azerbaijan and the humanitarian corridor westward is blocked by Azerbaijani forces, and has been since December 2022.

It's been a terrifying circus, to say the least. When Azerbaijan imposed the blockade, they did so under the

pretence of environmental activism. For the first few days, people of all ages from all over Azerbaijan were driven to Shusha, or Shushi as it's called in Armenian. The area I passed through two and a half years ago is now full of tents and banderols bearing slogans of environmental protection. The Azerbaijani state denied all forms of involvement in the pseudo-activists' protest, which effectively stopped all free movement between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. There was no question about whether they were government backed or not.

The Russians tasked with overseeing the road complied and accepted the Azerbaijani ploy, and over the following months the blockade intensified. The activists themselves claimed to be protesting against a goldmine in Nagorno-Karabakh and when it was closed down shortly after the blockade began, the slogans were rewritten to express the demonstrations' true purpose: "Karabakh is Azerbaijan".

According to oppositional students in Azerbaijan that I spoke to, university teachers arranged travel for them to get to the blockade. One journalism student told me that her teacher had offered her and her friends to be accompanied by the teacher. When foreign journalists reported "from the Azerbaijani side" at the invitation of the government, they were misquoted in the national media. A Spanish journalist complained to Reporters Without Borders that the regime's media had claimed that he had denied the existence of a blockade, when he had in fact done the opposite.[78]

It is also important to note that, in principle, no foreign journalists have been able to enter the area without having to go on at least partly paid trips to Azerbaijan.[79] The country's foreign minister has even boasted about the number of foreign journalists to have gone on arranged press trips under their supervision. If the annual reports are to be believed, we're talking a total of 780 media workers from 2020 to 2023.

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But the blockade intensified, and come the spring, Azerbaijan built the checkpoint on the Hakari Bridge that we can see from the hill on which we're now standing. The day after, the environmental activists declared that their protest had been put on hold and the students were able to return to their universities. The installation of the new border checkpoint brought further restrictions. Up until then, the International Red Cross Committee and Russian hauliers had at least been allowed to pass, but in the summer of 2023, the blockade became total in defiance of the ICJ in the Hague, which had twice – in February and reaffirmed it in June of that year – issued an interim decision calling for Azerbaijan to "guarantee unimpeded movement" through the Lachin Corridor.[81]

Azerbaijan interpreted the injunction differently to the international community and continued the blockade. The EU Commission, the USA and high-profile human rights organisations were unanimous in their finding that Azerbaijan had disobeyed the court order.

A lorry's air conditioning system rumbles in the background. In a PR coup, the Armenian government has sent in a convoy of trucks decorated with the words "Humanitarian relief for Nagorno-Karabakh. Food for life". They have been standing here since the end of July as people's desperation worsened. Reports of diseases caused by malnourishment increased and the first deaths started to be reported. The lorries are now there ready to drive in should the blockade be lifted, but not even the Armenian government seems to think that his will happen and is quite open about the convoy's presence being a PR stunt.[82]

To be sure, this is not my first trip to Armenia since the 2020 war, and I have continued to come here to keep up

HAKARI BRIDGE. *The Azerbaijani checkpoint at the Hakari Bridge, seen from the Armenian side. Just behind the green-roofed checkpoint is a Russian military base.*

with developments. Each of my trips to southern Armenia has been bleaker than the last, but this time is the worst. Images from inside Nagorno-Karabakh, the desperate cries from the civilian population and the diplomatic hopelessness are striking. When, after a security conference just a couple of weeks ago on 16 August 2023, France announced that it was preparing a resolution for the Security Council, it felt like the last opportunity. Rumours of the resolution's preparation were snuffed out, however, when the USA claimed not to have seen a draft. In other words, France had opted not to write one in view of the lack of support from heavyweight veto states on the Council.[83]

In Yerevan, the Armenian deputy foreign minister Vahan Kostanian told me a couple of days ago that the international community is speculating that there might be a mass exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh, and if they still won't act, they will be responsible for whatever happens.

But what can they do?

The International Court of Justice in the Hague is a mechanism that has so far proved toothless. A resolution in the UN Security Council, the support of the USA or the UK notwithstanding, would be negated by Russia's veto. Relations between Armenia and Russia have steadily deteriorated since Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia in September 2022. After Russia chose not to activate CSTO clauses, it dawned on Armenia that Moscow's commitments could not be relied upon. Besides, Azerbaijan and Russia had signed a formal alliance just a few days before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2023, 43 items of which strengthened many of the ties between the two countries.[84] Amongst other things, the parties agreed on preferential treatment for Russia in investments in the energy sector and on closer military cooperation.

Every time they have met since the agreement was

signed, Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin have reiterated their intention to strengthen their cooperation. In June 2022, just a month before Aliyev signed new gas agreements with the president of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen[85], the Azerbaijani leader and his Russian counterpart made a point of stressing that the alliance agreement from February had started to take effect. A year later, in May 2023, Aliyev stated that the alliance with Russia was not just "de facto", it was "de jure" – that is, an alliance in the legal sense.[86]

The only action that the international community seems to have agreed to act upon is verbal. The condemnation of Azerbaijan's actions has been repeated and systematically intensified. True, after it attacked Armenia in September 2022, Azerbaijan was vehemently denounced by the EU Commission's foreign affairs spokesperson, Josep Borrell; but he also added the reassuring sidebar that the energy agreements, which had recently been signed, were quite safe.[87]

It is against this backdrop that I'm standing at the Lachin Corridor on 7 September, 2023. On this trip, after the collapse of the UN Security Council talks, it is fairly evident that the end for Nagorno-Karabakh is nigh. Of all the many journalists who were here in 2020 there has been little sight in the past couple of years, even less so right now. In Yerevan I met two or three foreign journalists, all of them freelancers like me. The major media outlets have been generally absent.

A term that has etched itself into my mind was coined by the Armenian political analyst Sossi Tatikyan. In an article she wrote shortly after the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh began, she referred to the Azerbaijani strategy as "creeping ethnic cleansing"[88], a term inspired by the situation in Georgia, where Russia is slowly but surely advancing the fence alone the South Ossetian border. One day, someone's

farm can suddenly find itself on the wrong side of the fence, and Georgian families behind barbed wire. Creeping ethnic cleansing is not unlike this. Over the past few years, Azerbaijan has taken to occasionally attacking parts of Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia, forcing Armenians from the homes and districts. Slowly starving the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh is part of this strategy, which is effective in not begetting any headlines. But now in September, it is obvious that Azerbaijani patience is running out.

Nvard and the Armenian officer who's followed us to the hill are standing off to one side talking. They've got to know each other after all the trips that Nvard has made to the place with other journalists and pundits who have travelled to Armenia to write about what's going on. When we came here in March 2023, our first time after the blockade began, the situation was more tense. The soldiers accompanying us were clearly nervous and told us again and again that taking photos was prohibited. At that time, there were reports of shootings every day and no foreign journalist had been allowed to come to the hill.

This time, the officer there recommends the taking of photos.

"If you go behind the crest over there and use a wide-angle lens, you'll be able to get a picture of all the lorries winding down the road," he says with a little smile at having learned what a wide-angle lens is from all his dealings with photographers.

"You've done this before," I reply.

"It's all just about getting good shots for you," he says.

A group of drivers keeping an eye on the trucks have produced some stools and a camping stove and are making tea. Unlike the others, their vehicles have not been sent out by the state. An Armenian confectionary company has sent two

truckloads of Armenian sweets. You find these small wrapped chocolates in all former Soviet states and every time you're treated to tea or coffee, there's a rustling as the host tips a handful of them onto a dish. One of the major manufacturers of these sweets has its factory in Armenia.

"Naturally, once we've arrived in Artsakh the kids will get sweets," says one of the drivers to us as we walk over to say hello.

He continues.

"A home without chocolate can never be a happy home. I know that first and foremost they need something proper to eat, but after they've had their first meal after this disaster, there must be sweets."

"Do you think you'll be waiting to be let in for a long time?"

"It doesn't matter how long it takes. But as soon as the politicians have finished talking, we'll drive into Artsakh. We're sitting here ready, mostly for days on end."

Given the failures of the UN Security Council and the deaf ear Azerbaijan has turned to the Hague there's little to indicate that wagons will roll. Moreover, a conflict arose in the summer surrounding the humanitarian aid. At first, it was the Russian convoys that were barred from driving goods into Nagorno-Karabakh. In the winter, there was an alternative route that passed to one side of the humanitarian corridor along which young people able to withstand the juddery drive were able to circumvent the blockade. However, it was closed after a military attack by Azerbaijan in the early spring.

The Russian convoys continued to drive provisions through the humanitarian corridor. Following an agreement between the parties, people who were on the wrong side of the blockade, which is to say those who were stuck in Armenia when it began, were also allowed to return home with the help of the International Committee of the Red

Cross. A queue system was set up, whereby lists of the names, without identity papers, who were to pass were shared by Azerbaijan and Russia for rubber-stamping. The vast majority chose going home to their families in Nagorno-Karabakh over staying in an Armenian hotel for the rest of their lives.

The International Committee of the Red Cross also helped to transport the sick from Nagorno-Karabakh to hospitals in Armenia. The blockade has stifled the availability of medical equipment in the region, and as the supply of medicines has dwindled, so people's desperation has mounted.

When the blockade became total during the summer – when not even the International Committee of the Red Cross could pass through – medicines, like everything else, ran out. Surgery was done without anaesthetic and deaths from otherwise treatable diseases rose. From its Genevan headquarters, the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that they could get neither in nor out of the region.[89] The principle of neutrality prevented them from blaming any one side, but in a scrunity I made, published in August 2024, of how Azerbaijan was hindering the work of the Red Cross for the media platform OCCRP presented a picture of how Azerbaijan was preventing the Red Cross to conduct their work. For its part, Azerbaijan initiated a battle over humanitarian aid. The Azerbaijani Red Crescent movement said it was prepared to transport supplies along the Aghdam road, that is from the eastern side of Nagorno-Karabakh bordering on the rest of Azerbaijan. That was where Nvard, Areg and I had seen the Russian soldier trip while carrying the barbecue from the abandoned restaurant two and a half years earlier.

Just as the Syrian Red Crescent movement was accused of ties with the regime in Damascus during the Syrian civil war, so it soon transpired that the Azerbaijani section of the movement was fully aligned with the Baku government. Its

chair, Novruz Aslanov, is a so called independent member of parliament. Since the 1990s war, the International Red Cross Committee's internationally acknowledged special mandate has been a lifeline for many people in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the public rhetoric, representatives of the Azerbaijani government put out a statement that Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan, so it is up to the residents in Nagorno-Karabakh to accept aid.[90]

And just as environmental activists were sent to the Lachin Corridor during the winter, so volunteers dressed in Red Cross colours were suddenly sent to the Aghdam road, the rhetoric now being that Russia was preventing the Azerbaijani Red Crescent from doing its job.

When the International Committee of the Red Cross, its appeals for help eventually heeded, was finally given permission to at least drive a couple of critically ill patients from Stepanakert to Yerevan, one of the vehicles was stopped by Azerbaijani soldiers demanding that an Armenian man, Vagif Khachatryan, be transferred to an Azerbaijani vehicle.[91] A Red Cross worker accompanied him, but a couple of minutes later he was dumped. Khachatryan, who was to undergo heart surgery in Yerevan, was accused by Azerbaijan of being a war criminal from the 1990s. The dominant narrative in Armenia is that he was "kidnapped" by Azerbaijan. The International Committee of the Red Cross responded with yet another statement on the importance of transferring the patients as part of its humanitarian mission.[92] Meanwhile, Azerbaijan was accused by international law experts of violating the terms of the Geneva Convention. In the autumn of 2023, legal proceedings began against Vagif Khachatryan, who faces a life sentence. Critics contend that the trial is politically motivated and the evidence fabricated.

While Nvard and the truck drivers chat, I gaze out over the

mountains again. The blanket of dampness that covered the ground has all but disappeared under the still blazing late summer sun. The clouds have drifted over the mountains towards the valleys of Nagorno-Karabakh. It's only an hour's drive away, but the blockade has made the distance so much greater. I promised a colleague, Marut Vanyan, who is trapped on the other side of the blockade, that I'd call him from here. We have long planned to do a report together with me on the one side and him on the other. This is the only way to get information out these days: to work with the journalists there on the ground.

"No, it's not a good day," I hear Marut say on the other end of the line. "Those who have time to worry about what's going to happen are really worried. The rest of us are just looking for food."

He tells me that he's queued for hours waiting to get some of the little food that's left in the shops.

"There's no bread. The flour's run out. They tried making bread from another kind of grain, but it didn't work. Two weeks ago, they cut bread production down to a daily loaf per family. Now there's no certainty that there'll be more than one loaf to every twenty residents," he says despondently.

His voice is breaking, as he continues:

"When a father of two children came up to me, and said I'm lucky because I don't have any children, I turned around [and left]… thinking I might be able to find something else to eat."

I hear a heavy sigh.

"But to be honest, there's nothing."

"What do the Stepanakert authorities say?"

"What can they say? That food's coming? It's all going on way above our heads now. All we can do is wait, and while we do so we look for food. Most people seem to live on grapes that villagers bring into town to sell or give away."

Marut continues to explain the hopelessness of the situation and after a while ends the call because he's running out of charge and electricity in Nagorno-Karabakh is in short supply. He tells me that there are only two places where you can charge your phone when there's a power cut: the hospital and the office of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has backup generators. An employee at the Red Cross later told me that they, despite Azerbaijan tried to prevent them, managed to sneak in fuel to the generators by filling up the cars every time they entered Armenia with the convoys. They provided some of it to the hospital to at least make it functioning to a bare minimum.

The main source of electricity is the Sarsang reservoir in northern Nagorno-Karabakh, but it's steadily emptying as there's no inflow coming from Armenia since Azerbaijan has blocked it. Local authorities say that if it rains enough, the water in the reservoir will last a couple more months, but that's it. At the same time, bizarre accusations are being made by Azerbaijan that the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh are guilty of environmental destruction on account of their using the water.

It's the same with gas. Following a minor incursion by Azerbaijan in the winter of 2022, the gas from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh was turned off. Azerbaijan claims to have nothing to do with it, but the supply resumed after Azerbaijan had installed a control centre that allowed them to turn the taps off and on at their discretion.[93] According to Azerbaijan, this particular part of the pipeline lay in an area outside the supervision of the Russian peacekeeping command.

Since the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh began in December 2022, the gas has been turned off as good as permanently. This has caused problems for food preparation, has left homes with no hot water and compromised much of the local infrastructure. And it was not long before petrol

HARVEST. *Just weeks before the final military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, the harvest is ongoing near the Lachin Corridor.*

ran out, too. Satellite pictures of Nagorno-Karabakh taken at night reveal almost total darkness,[94] while the Azerbaijani controlled areas are brightly lit – despite the fact that since the 2020 war, only a couple of hundred people have settled in the towns that the Azerbaijani state has rebuilt.

Autumn 2021 saw the completion of the new airport in Zangilan and at the end of 2022 Ilham Aliyev declared that Lachin would also be honoured with an airport. The Azerbaijani economist Gubad Ibadoglu, although supportive of Aliyev's war in 2020, has spent his time in recent years scrutinising how the country's elite grabbed land for themselves in the reconquered areas of Nagorno-Karabakh. From London, where he has taught at the London School of Economics, he had published numerous articles detailing the nepotism that pervades the Azerbaijani elite and its possessions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. His investigation ignited so much wrath among the power-holders that he was arrested under dramatic circumstances while on a brief visit to Azerbaijan to see his dying mother. Azerbaijani intelligence claims to have found 40,000 dollars in cash in his home, citing it as evidence of money laundering. Other journalists and opponents were similarly arrested in the autumn of 2023. Though in the case of Ulvi Hasanli, editor-in-chief of the independent media outlet AbzasMedia, who had also been investigating corruption, the currency was switched to Euro. The actual sum remained the same. In any event, Amnesty International has declared Gubad Ibadoghlu a prisoner of conscience.[95]

If relations between Azerbaijan and Russia have improved over the past few months, they have done so in light of Armenian's deteriorating relations with Russia. Now that I'm in Armenia, it's clear the things are changing rapidly.

The Armenian ambassador to Moscow has just been summoned to the Russian foreign ministry to be berated

and regaled with threats in response to the dispatching of the country's humanitarian package to Ukraine since the Russian invasion of 2022.[96] Accompanying the humanitarian convoy was Nikol Pashinyan's wife Anna Hakobian, who was due to meet the Ukrainian prime minister Volodmyr Zelensky. Russia took this as a serious breach of the military alliance. Admittedly, Azerbaijan has sent aid and subsidised fuel to Ukraine, but has done so without much of a response from Russia. Perhaps it is because Armenia and Russia are part of the same military alliance; more likely, it is due to the fact that while Armenia's relations with Russia are worsening, Azerbaijan's are steadily improving. The vacuum that Armenia leaves behind in the Caucasus gives Azerbaijan an opportunity to let Russia keep a foothold in the region. Moreover, in a report from 2022, Freedom House pointed out that an Azerbaijan military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 could have served as an inspirational model for Russia's was against Ukraine.[97]

However, shortly after Armenia had sent aid to Ukraine, the country's foreign minister had a statement published about forthcoming military exercises with the USA. Now, in September 2023, US soldiers are flying to Armenia to take part in a joint NATO exercise. This might not be the first time that such exercises have occurred but it is clear that this time the Armenian foreign ministry is making a big thing out of them. The Armenian ambassador was again called to the Russian foreign ministry for a more explicitly worded reprimand; meanwhile, Putin's rhetoric has shifted much more towards the accusatory.[98]

All this is happening while more reports come in of Azerbaijani cargo planes flying from Israel to Azerbaijan. Statistics from the Israel investigative journalist Avi Schaarf, who writes for Haaretz, show that the number of flights between the countries generally increases ahead of

Azerbaijani attacks on Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia.[99] In September 2020, the number of flights was around twenty, just prior to the 2022 invasion, it was eight. For many monitors of the conflict, air traffic between Israel and Azerbaijan has been an indicator that something is about to happen.

The way Azerbaijani social media have churned out films and images of troop movements in the country has not eased the situation. Many of the trucks transporting troops display a new symbol – and inverted A, calling to mind the Russian Z symbol in Ukraine. There are many theories of what the A might stand for. The leading one is that it symbolises the Armenian Syunik province in the south, the line representing the Zangezur Corridor. In Armenia, this is taken as a threat of an out-and-out invasion of the country. Many Azerbaijanis insert the symbol beside their user name on social media. It is, however, hard to say what it actually means. It could equally be a sign used to keep the military rank and file in order. Whatever the symbol means, it is obvious that the loyalist social media channels are trying to make a big deal out of showing it.

After days filled with posts concerning Azerbaijani troop movements, social media suddenly goes quiet. This is not because they stop, but because the Azerbaijani state forbids pictures of troops, which is standard practice in war. What is striking is the submissiveness of the social media channels, which cease to publish these films the very second that the order is issued. It comes across as a deliberate strategy of intimidation from the Azerbaijani armed forces designed to show that the army is preparing for a major assault and to demonstrate the discipline of its own people.

The sun is setting and in the inner courtyard of the hotel in Goris, a calm murmur can be heard under the grapevines that frame the tables. Nvard is playing backgammon, or

"nardi" as it's known in Armenian, with some men. A group has gathered around her. They're not used to women playing, but Nvard has jokingly said that her dad taught her to play when she was a kid.

"My dad was the best player in our neighbourhood. My mum was the only one who could beat him, and usually did so in secret. So I don't know if I've inherited the ability from her or my dad," she once told me.

Just as much as the men want to cheer on their friends, Nvard's skill at playing nardi has caught their attention. One of them tells me that it's an even match as Nvard rolls the dice, but there is every indication that she's going to win. After beating her opponent, Ashot, he leans back in his chair and flings out his arms.

"Well, I guess there's nothing for it but to admit defeat!"

Nvard and Ashot leave the table and come over to me. Ashot is one of few people from Nagorno-Karabakh who hasn't gone back to the region since the blockade.

"It's not that I haven't had the opportunity," he says. "I've had many. The Red Cross and the Russians often said there were vacant places before the blockade became total. Even afterwards there have been opportunities to go back."

He twists a crucifix necklace around his fingers while, like so many others, he lights a cigarette.

"The thing is that I've not trusted anyone's guarantee that I'd be able to get out again. Look at Vagif Khachatryan who was arrested while he was in the Red Cross vehicle and accused of war crimes. It's not about whether or not he's committed any. We're roughly the same age and were both soldiers in the 1990s. In Azerbaijani logic, anyone who was fighting back then can be accused of war crimes."

"Did you think like that before he was arrested?"

"Yes, definitely! Lots of us did. I wouldn't say many, but you know, when they set up that border post, I realised that

I might never be going home again. I've been able to send some cigarettes and medicine to the family from here, too... Well, I suppose it's not totally by the book but it's worked."

He won't go into if it's the Russians or the Red Cross that has taken his goods across, but other people I've spoken to earlier in the year have had a similar relationship with the Russian soldiers, who have taken small parcels to the families on the wrong – or right, depending on how you look at it – side of the blockade for a little cash; Ashot sees himself as being on the wrong side of the Lachin Corridor.

"I miss my family terribly. It's been nine months since I last saw them and I've done all I can to avoid the bad luck of ending up where I have. But what can I do? All I can do is wait it out. That's all I can do."

STUCK IN ARMENIA. *Ashot, left, did not want to show his face, fearing that Azerbaijani border guards would cause trouble for his family if they tried to leave Nagorno-Karabakh.*

Chapter 2: ”Never again”

About two weeks later. 26 September 2023.

One after the other, the helicopters roar through the sky as they fly over Goris, filled with injured Armenians who survived the explosion at the fuel depot on the outskirts of Stepanakert.[100] Men of all ages. Children and the elderly had all gathered there a few days earlier to refuel their cars in order to flee from Nagorno-Karabakh. Survivors have described the scene as being like an apocalyptic film, with people getting tossed high into the air like rag dolls high and landing twenty, perhaps thirty metres away. If they were not killed by the heat of the blast, they died when hitting the ground. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported some 200 deaths and more than 300 injured.[101]

The hotel where I met Ashot in Goris a fortnight ago is crowded. His family have arrived. Foreign journalists are sitting here and there working on their articles. Some are recording films for TV and radio stations in their home countries. All are reporting the same thing: over 100,000 Armenians are about to be, as most describe it at the spot, ethnically cleansed from Nagorno-Karabakh. The despondency of two weeks ago has been exchanged for something else. It is now grief and weariness that the people carry with them as they arrive in Goris. Exhausted and starving, the refugees help each other as best they can to settle.

One family has brought their aged mother. Her wheelchair didn’t fit in their car and now four people are at her side

helping her take slow, tottering steps over the inner courtyard. But there are also children. They've just had their first bite of chocolate for months and are milling inquisitively around all the foreign journalists, looking at their equipment and, if brave enough, asking to have a go. Their parents try to get them to leave the journalists alone, but they can't help themselves.

It's easy to be cynical about it taking a disaster to turn the eyes of the world to Nagorno-Karabakh, despite the fact that international organisations, like the independent conflict-prevention organisation Crisis Group, have been saying for years that the conflict is one of the most explosive in the world.[102] The journalists who have suddenly appeared are often poorly informed and seem keener to seek out dramatic life-stories than describe the lead-up to the current state of affairs. The Lachin Corridor, where I was standing a few weeks ago and that is now packed with cars from Nagorno-Karabakh, is a magnet for media teams hunting down the same pictures. The articles are often one-tracked, use politically charged terminology, have no understanding of Nagorno-Karabakh's status and fail to explain why the disaster has finally occurred.

Oh, well, it is what it is. I had just arrived home from Armenia when events started to unfold. Shortly after my previous trip just two weeks ago, the rhetoric increased rapidly. Suddenly, just after lunchtime on 19 September 2023, Marut Vanyan sent a film. In it, you can see the roofs of the houses in Stepanakert and in the distance, a little outside town, a thick plume of smoke. Air-raid sirens can be heard under the sound of fire from machine guns and mortars. The military buildup that has been going on for a couple of weeks has tipped over into an out-and-out attack on Nagorno-Karabakh. While Azerbaijan moved in from the east, the blockade to Armenia to the west was still in effect. People had nowhere to go. Marut was one of the journalists to wire his coverage of the

situation.

A mere twenty-four hours later, the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities announced that they had decided to lay down their weapons, as any further fighting would have just led to more deaths. The Russian peacekeepers were reported to have just stood by and Vladimir Putin was quick to publicly pin the blame on Armenia. The independent Russian newspaper Meduza revealed that the Kremlin had issued instructions to regime-friendly media to follow suit.[103] The reason, according to Putin, was meant to be that Pashinyan had "acknowledged Azerbaijan's territorial integrity" and that Russia therefore had no business being there.

Several witnesses that we speak to in Goris have said the same: that the Russian troops withdrew from the front just before the attack was launched. One person, who took up arms, claimed it was hours beforehand. If this is true, it is clear that Russia was aware of Azerbaijan's intentions to attack the fragile, worn-out Nagorno-Karabakh, which after a ten-month blockade had few means to mount any resistance.[104]

Admittedly, Western governments and institutions reacted swiftly, but also seem to have been caught napping. European Council president Charles Michel, who has been mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the "death" of the OSCE talks, promptly condemned Azerbaijan and issued a strongly worded statement[105] with the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, saying that the use of violence was unacceptable and that it may in no way lead to the displacement of Armenians from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh[106].

For the fleeing Armenians, the sharp rebukes of the outside world haven't meant squat.

Amongst the international institutions, the events seem to have ended up in a terminological wrangle. While the EU parliament was quick to call them *ethnic cleansing*[107], the EU

LIFETIMES OF MEMORIES. *For about a week, car after car crossed into Armenia, filled with people, animals and lifetimes of memories.*

Commission has avoided the term since the exodus began. Using the term brings legal obligations and risks causes a deep diplomatic crisis with Azerbaijan. Some sixty MEPs have banded together to demand that the EU Commission look into sanctions against Azerbaijan.[108] In the spring of 2023, it therefore invited the 27 member states to a discussion, which concluded that, going by the course of events so far, sanctions are off the table. The pronouncement from the Foreign Affairs Council of 13 November 2023 reads, according to the MFA of Sweden[109], that "no measures can be ruled out and that sanctions can be used as a tool". The red line appears to be that sanctions can be discussed if Azerbaijan violates Armenian sovereignty. In other words, the very thing that happened on September 2022 when Azerbaijan launched its two-day invasion of Armenia.

This is not a simple stance for the EU to take. Azerbaijan, like Armenia and Georgia, is a member of the EU's strategically important Eastern Partnership together with Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine since 2009. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership countries were considered to have relatively similar preconditions, but they have since followed different paths of development, bringing the EU's dilemma as regards its approach to the authoritarian states of Azerbaijan and Belarus into ever sharper focus. While international civil society actors stress the importance of cooperating with the democratic opposition in and outside Belarus, there is no such discourse about Azerbaijan. The huge protests that led to the exile of the Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her acknowledgement as the country's leader by various world governments, have had no equivalent in Azerbaijan. The free civil society here is all but dismantled and the democratic opposition is more like a tiny grassroots movement comprising a network of individuals. Between 2022 and 2023, the number of political prisoners in

the country shot up from 99 to around 300.[110] This combined with the need for gas and the discourse on regional security has left EU decision-makers struggling with an ambivalence towards Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, since 2015, after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in the previous year, the EU has spent more resources on expanding the gas pipelines from Azerbaijan to Europa. A prominent discourse amongst scholars and politicians active in Eurasia is that the infrastructure projects will help to bring about stability and peace. Ironically, all of Azerbaijan's larger-scale attacks on Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia since the 1990s war have occurred since the EU's infrastructure investments. The first attack on Nagorno-Karabakh was in 2016. Shortly after the gas pipelines were completed in 2020, the 44-day war was launched, and not long after the EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen signed a new gas agreement with Ilham Aliyev in July 2022, Azerbaijan attacked neighbouring Armenia.

While Armenia has spent years raising the issue of where the international community's *red line* goes in its relations with Azerbaijan, effectively the same analysis has been made about Azerbaijan for almost two decades, one based on a concern that an overly tough line against Azerbaijan would make the country turn its back on the EU. So despite the fact that Azerbaijan has both waged war and taken a wrecking ball to its civil society during the period, conclusions as to how the EU is to relate to the country have hardly changed, as the leaders in Baku are well aware.

Another factor, and one that is possibly more important than EU's need for Azerbaijani gas, is the geographical. The war in Ukraine has brought sanctions against Russia, and south of Azerbaijan, sanctions are in place against neighbouring Iran. Even further south, pirate activity off Somalia and, more lately, the war in Yemen, have blighted

the trade route between Europe and Asia via the Suez Canal. Since the Iran-backed Houthi rebels started attacking cargo vessels, many shipping operators have opted for the Cape Horn route instead of that which passes through the Gulf of Aden and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. The crisis has not been lost on China, whose efforts to establish a new trade route with the West through Central Asia and Azerbaijan – known as the Middle Corridor or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route – now occupy a more prominent place in the public discourse. At the time of writing (Summer of 2024), the route is still far from being an economically viable alternative to the Suez Canal, but it is on the table nonetheless. To advocates of the Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan is considered the door between east and west.[111]

In the border town of Goris, the Middle Corridor is an alien concept. The door to Nagorno-Karabakh was temporarily opened for people to pass through, never to return. Out of fear for the Azerbaijani war machine, the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh has seized the opportunity to leave home for the last time.

I hear the toddler in the cot gasp for breath and then deliver a weak, rattling cough. David, who's just two years old, turns round and fumbles for his dummy again. He regards us with moist eyes for a brief moment and then returns to his feverish slumber.

"The stress and dampness made the whole family sick as we hid away in the shelter in the basement in Stepenakert last week," says Anoush Alakhverdian as she looks at her son. "David got it worst. When we were about to leave..."

She tears up and turns her head for a moment before continuing.

"When we were about to leave... I can't believe I'm saying this… but, well, when we were about to leave home,

everyone got sick. Our little boy, David, had a temperature of 40 degrees and we weren't sure he'd last the journey. But what choice did we have?"

The convoys of cars that flowed out of Nagorno-Karabakh following the Azerbaijani offensive on 19–20 September tell of a long journey. Anoush and her son, who's recovering from it at a hospital in Goris, says that the drive normally takes no more than two hours; this time it took thirty. The line of cars stretching the whole way from the Azerbaijani border control at the Lachin Corridor to Stepanakert seemed to go on for ever.

Tired and sick, undernourished people have gathered at the hospital in Goris. It's not just the flight from their homes they're recovering from, but also the almost ten-month blockade that they've just survived.

"The worst of it wasn't the physical survival," Anoush tells me when describing the blockade. "It was holding things together and being strong in front of the kids. We all thought that the 2020 war would be the worst thing ever, but the past three years have been pure hell... And it's the end of Artsakh, but not of the war. Believe you me. It'll return. And this time

The blockade has taken its toll on the hospital. There are as many stories as there are patients lying in the beds waiting to be well enough to have the strength to go down to the hastily established registration office for new arrivals in Armenia. Over 100,000 people have arrived within the space of a week.

One man tells me that his wife gave birth to their baby on the way, the storming of Stepanakert leaving her no time for a routine delivery. On arriving at the hospital in Goris, there were informed that their baby was 600 grams underweight, starved of the care and attention a newborn requires during its first 24 hours. Another doctor talks of many deaths. On our visit to the hospital, we still didn't know the exact number, but eventually the Armenian authorities would confirm that it was more than sixty,[112] mostly the elderly and infirm but also, apparently, a 16-year-old. A heavily pregnant woman only two weeks from her due date is said to have miscarried.

A woman sitting beside her husband's hospital bed tells me that he almost didn't make it. According to the doctors, he had had three strokes in close succession as well as a minor heart attack, but somehow miraculously survived.

Another woman, older than the first, so emaciated, pale and unmoving that she looks dead, suddenly comes to life and spits out her false teeth. The nurse beside us rushes over to her and says that this is the first time since being admitted three days ago that she's shown signs of life.

One major hurdle is the lack of insight into what was going on in Nagorno-Karabakh during the most critical days. The lack of electricity, deactivated mobile networks and a raging war of aggression made it as good as impossible to make independent records of the presumed Azerbaijani abuses. The strategy is a well-known one in war. The aggressor targets the flow of information by knocking out telecoms and other infrastructure and replacing it with its own propaganda apparatus, which then becomes the sole source of information for foreign media. For journalists reporting on developments, it presents a labyrinth of disinformation strewn with traps for the uninformed to fall into before finding the way out – if that is, they are left with the will to try. It became clear during these critical days that major news agencies like AFP, Reuters and the BBC failed in many respects in their reporting by giving too much credit to the Azerbaijani propaganda machine – for want of any other source. Furthermore, almost all major media descriptions of the war were informed by narratives that clearly came from Azerbaijan.

Nor is this the first time that the foreign media narrative has been coloured by the Azerbaijani side due to a lack of insight. In chapter five, I argued that the undocumented war crimes created a distorted view of the war that resulted in a kind of reporting often referred to as *bothsideism* – whereby each side is portrayed as being equally culpable. In point of fact, since the 2020 war, the gravity of the presumed war crimes committed by Azerbaijan has grown worse.

When Azerbaijan attacked Armenia in September 2022, many presumed war crimes spread like wildfire through

DEATH. *Armenian sources claim that about sixty people died during the flight, while others made it to Armenia barely alive. This man endured three minor strokes.*

Azerbaijani social media channels. One video showed Azerbaijani troops massacring Armenian prisoners of war[113]; another a dead female soldier, naked and dismembered, an offensive slur scrawled on her body and her severed fingers into her mouth.[114]

This time, in September 2023, hardly any videos at all are leaked from Azerbaijani social media. In the previous chapter, I explained why: a prohibition on documenting the attack on Nagorno-Karabakh. A possible interpretation of this is that Azerbaijan had learnt its lesson from earlier wars, where war crimes had been used as a means of psychological warfare. But with its membership of the Eastern Partnership and dependency on the EU for its gas exports, it is a very fine wire the regime balances on when attacking Nagorno-Karabakh. In terms of international law, Azerbaijan has its argument straight: Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan, and territorial integrity is paramount. But is it really right to drive 100,000 people into exile in the interests of territorial integrity?

On this point, Azerbaijan argues that it has not forced the Armenians to flee, and Aliyev insists time and again that its army is innocent of ethnic cleansing in any legal sense.[115] In November 2023, the Hague issued a provisional order ordering Azerbaijan to present a plan for how the Armenians are to be repatriated.[116] From the perspective of the refugees, this is likely a catch 22. Just like Anoush Alakhverdian, everyone we meet in Goris says that they fled in fear of what was to come. Even if Azerbaijan devises such a plan, the situation per se remains unchanged. The Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh are, given everything they have been through, terrified of the Azerbaijani state. As I wrote above, with the EU's decision not to rule out sanctions as a tool, a red line has been formulated. On 10 November 2023, Sweden's minister for foreign affairs Tobias Billström described it as follows

For one, it is, of course, difficult to say exactly what could lead to sanctions. The EU would have to discuss such situations. However, serious incidents would naturally include a violation of Armenia's territorial integrity, human rights offences in Nagorno-Karabakh and denying the right of Armenians to return to Nagorno-Karabakh"

Three days later, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council was to hold a meeting to discuss sanctions on Azerbaijan, and a similar messaged was repeated in the meeting synopsis.

In short, the EU's red line is, after all that has happened, two-fold: An invasion of Armenia by Azerbaijan and a denial of the right of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to return. Again, both would have to coincide for sanctions to return to the agenda. If the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, even if Azerbaijan's offer of repatriation is on the table, choose not to return for reasons of personal safety, there is a danger that it will be used as an excuse by the international community not to take a stand against Azerbaijan.

The American-Armenian attorney Anoush Baghdassarian, field-researcher in Armenia for the University Network of Human Rights, is in Goris to make a record of developments. She has documented alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity since the war of 2020.

In Goris, she seeks out new arrivals from Nagorno-Karabakh. Walking amongst the crowd of people waiting to register themselves, she and her team try to interview as many as possible to gather witness testimonies with which they can compile their reports. She says that most accounts she hears are similar and that it has been possible, despite the obstacles that Azerbaijan sets up, to verify key facts by

comparing independent sources.

"In our conversations over the past week, I've noted that most people tell similar stories. For example, many people tell of harassment at the border station and virtually everyone says that it'd be impossible for them to stay in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan has taken over," she says.

She continues to argue the point that months of blockade has broken people down mentally.

"Life during the blockade reached a tipping point and people were terrified after the Nagorno-Karabakh government was forced to capitulate on 20 September, before the escape route through the Lachin Corridor had been opened."

She explains that it was already hard to verify accounts of abuses in Nagorno-Karabakh even before the mass exodus:

"It's obviously a problem that there was, and still is, no independent body in Nagorno-Karabakh able to gather information. This is largely because the Armenians have been forced out of the region, so we can't collect forensic data and other evidence based on anything other than hearsay, data that we need to collect in as close a proximity to the crime as possible."

Moreover, she foresees difficulties in gathering testimonies and documenting abuses in the future.

"Now that virtually everyone has fled and the victims of the abuses and the witnesses to them are probably in Armenia, it'll be a huge task to gather their testimonies to hold anyone to account, not only from Azerbaijan but also from the international community that has allowed this to happen under their scrutiny."

"Why is it hard to gather verified testimonies?"

"Azerbaijan's army forced Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto government to resign under difficult circumstances. And Azerbaijan effectively left the population of Nagorno-

Karabakh having to choose between fleeing or staying behind to be killed or forcibly assimilated into Azerbaijan, which is why everyone is fleeing. Their headlong flight has, of course, made documenting things hard."

She believes, however, that even though the international community has failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, there are still things that can be done.

"First and foremost, academics and analysts must promptly reveal and disprove Azerbaijan's claims that the flight is voluntary. The world needs to make it clear that Azerbaijan's actions are illegitimate and have no support in the peace talks, which also applies to the termination of Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto government."

"What can the international community do?"

"The UN can appoint a UN-backed peacekeeping mission along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. There are also dozens of Armenians still being held hostage in Azerbaijan, and even more have disappeared. We will keep fighting for their immediate and unconditional release," Anoush says before excusing herself and returning to her work.

My interview with Anoush Baghdassarian is conducted in the midst of the September crisis, since when much has happened, as I have described earlier in the book. Armenia is trying to pursue multiple lawsuits at the same time. There is still the ongoing hearing on before the ICJ as well as activity in other parts of the UN machinery. Some of the talking points that Anoush Baghdassarian considered vital in September are the same that Armenia is putting before the UN, of which one of the most important is that for Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to feel comfortable to even be able to return, a couple of crucial measures need to be taken.

These include guarantees of their security. As I have previously pointed out, according to the Armenians, no


HYUNDAI

THE RED CROSS. *The International Committee of the Red Cross increased its budget for the Nagorno-Karabakh mission five fold after 2020, and then again with 4,2 million Euros due to the blockade. Here is a volunteer for the Armenian Red Cross.*

ANGER. *After 30 hours on a truck, the woman is blaming the journalists, politicians, and anyone who will listen for the failure.*

such guarantees can be made by Azerbaijan – because if Azerbaijani guarantees had been sufficient, 100,000 people would not have had to flee the region in terror. Guarantees, as many Armenian diplomats argue, come from the outside in the form of internationally recognised peacekeeping forces. In essence, that is also what the Madrid Principles issued by the OSCE Minsk Group proposed. One could argue that while the physical reality has changed radically, the general Armenian view of the conflict constantly gravitates back to what it was before 2020 for want of other solutions that bring the Armenians a sense of security.

One of my interviewees in the village of Shurnukh, just over an hour's drive south of Goris by the Azerbaijani border, compared the situation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. With a Kalashnikov in his arms, he says, "on paper, it looks like we're almost at the top of the pyramid but in reality, given that our security can't be guaranteed, we're still on level two."

Another guarantee that needs to be in place before repatriation is the right to ownership. In the hasty exodus, as good as all civil registers were left behind in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the regional register and instruments of ownership. This right is one of the main points that Armenia took to the Hague on 14 October 2023, and that a month later the ICJ ordered Azerbaijan to preserve.

In spite of this, images and videos of Azerbaijani soldiers vandalising homes, vehicles and even sacred artefacts flooded Azerbaijani social media in the autumn and winter. One possible reason for Azerbaijan's lack of compliance with the court's decision is its firm belief that no Armenians will ever return.

The Baku regime has repeated the same narrative that no Armenians will be given special rights, but will have the same "rights" as all other national minorities in the country, the largest of which are the Lezgins in the north, the Talysh people

in the south on the border with Iran, and Jews. The notorious policy of assimilation imposed on the first two ethic groups has drawn international criticism of Azerbaijan; the country's pragmatic relationship to Israel, on the other hand, is why the Jewish population has in general been allowed a high degree of religious freedom.

In any case, come the end of September, when I'm in Goris with Nvard, the notion of a return is very remote. The fear and exhaustion in the eyes of the refugees betray a collective sense of resignation.

Standing outside Goris are the lorries that a few weeks ago were waiting to drive into Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the drivers shows us that their cargo is still inside, waiting for better times. On the same day as the first refugees arrived in Armenia, the now redundant lorries were driven away. But we're not here to inspect their contents again. Not far away is Martin – you know, the stadium caretaker in Martuni who invited us home meet his family. A couple of hours earlier, we met his daughter-in-law at the temporarily registration centre and she said we could pop by their relatives.

"We'll be spending the night in Goris before moving on. We have relatives. You should come over," she said.

No sooner said than done.

Martin, who was already gaunt when we met him in Martuni is all skin and bone now. When he sees us come in through the door, he bounds over – despite his fragility – and gives me a hug. He seems reluctant to release me.

"I was really hoping that we'd meet again, but not in Armenia. We were meant to meet in Artsakh," says Martin.

The family has gathered. Their relatives in Goris met them at registration and made sure to procure a feast, which they're busy laying out. They've made chicken in herb sauce, a variety of dolmas, and there's Armenian sourdough bread

everywhere.

"Towards the end we literally had nothing left," says Martin's son, Vahe.

He was the emergency planner in Martuni who told us about the bodies of the dead Syrian soldiers that they didn't know what to do with.

"We weren't the worst off, to be honest, and the harvests had just started coming to the village," he continues. "But there was a big problem in that the farmers got too close to the Azerbaijani positions and got shot at. Most farming areas around Martuni are...I mean were...also right on the border."

Martin fills all the men's glasses with vodka. The women, as is often the case, get only half a glass.

"It's from Artsakh," says Martin. "We brought a load of bottles so we wouldn't get thirsty when we arrived."

Vahe raises one of the glasses and makes the first toast.

"The journey here has been a long one. It didn't begin yesterday or the day before, not even when the Turks attacked us a couple of days ago..."

Many people in Armenia call the Azerbaijanis "Turks".

"It began years ago. It's an outrage that we gave up. That we were forced to. That our home of Artsakh doesn't exist any more. Next stop, Armenia. But here's to surviving and having to carry on doing so," declares Vahe theatrically.

Everyone drinks. One of the men, whose name I don't catch, picks up the theme and runs with it.

"If our leaders had only understood long ago that we needed to modernise ourselves and our army, we'd have been able to defend our home countries. It's not only an outrage that we lost them, because the defeat means that soon Armenia will cease to exist," he says, reaching for a bunch of coriander.

He snaps off the stalks and mixes them with fresh sheep's cheese before popping the food into his mouth.

One of the women breaks a fresh loaf.

"Eat more," she tells everyone. "You haven't eaten for months, so you're jolly well going to eat now!"

"Where will you go?" I ask.

"Tomorrow, we'll drive to Yerevan and then we'll see. We have a relative there we can stay with for a couple of days while we look for somewhere to live," Vahe replies.

Virtually everyone we meet in Goris says the same thing. After the long drive to Goris, most people just want to settle down to rest before moving on. Most of them go to Yerevan in hopes of finding somewhere to live. But the war in Ukraine has made prices skyrocket. The tens of thousands of Russians who have left Russia to escape oppression and military service and who have arrived in countries like Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan have pushed up rents. Apartment prices have almost tripled within a short time, driving people further and further from the centre. The sudden arrival of 100,000 refugees in Armenia will just exacerbate an already dire housing situation. And this despite the fact that new homes are being built everywhere. But many of the newbuilds seem to be just empty shells, and it's rumoured that corrupt developers are simply using them as a means to launder money."

"We've discussed things back and forth in the family. On the one hand we want to be as close as possible to Artsakh, but on the other the enemy is right there on the border," says one of the women.

Nvard cuts in.

"It's no better in Yerevan. It just feels that way. You have to remember that Nakhchivan is only 45 minutes away, not to mention Turkey. You can see them from Yerevan," she says.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's just an illusion," the woman replies.

Martin pours the men around the table another glass. His

wife asks for a top-up and she too gets her glass filled. This time it's Martin who addresses us.

"Fuck everything," he says. "But at least I got to see Nvard and Rasmus again. I didn't think I would. Fuck the lot of it. Here's to us meeting again," he says and drains his glass.

I ask him how the football went.

"The kids played for as long as they could," Martin replies. "Only a week, or perhaps ten days ago, we were down at the pitch getting things ready. Before we left, I told my son that I had to go and say goodbye to it."

"There wasn't really time for it," says Vahe, "but what could we do? My old man had to go down to the pitch before we set off."

Martin smiles.

"We'll get the football up and running again soon enough. Maybe we can have a chat with the others from Martuni to make sure we can live close to each other in the future!"

During our stay in Goris, we bump into many familiar faces. Areg couldn't be with us after his family also made it out of the blockade. Football trainer Sergey drove up to me in his beige Jaguar, sounded his horn and hugged me. Jirayr's family from Taghaverd did their utmost to try to see us, but were hastily moved on to other parts of Armenia. The nurses from the hospital in Martuni came up to us one by one. Journalist Marut Vanyan who had nowhere to live was put up in my hotel room before he moved on. Bar owner Azat declared shortly after going home that he was opening a new bar. On a side street in Goris, we were stopped by a café owner from Askeran who recognised us from our previous trip.

Our encounters with acquaintances from Nagorno-Karabakh just went on and on.

SURVIVED. *Martin from Martuni endured the war, the blockade and the flight to Armenia.*

Epilogue

In February 2024, I gave a talk about the conflict to a small but curious audience at a Folk High School in the small Swedish town of Nyköping. Outside, darkness had fallen and the snowflakes drifting down from the sky were reflected in the glow of a street lamp. This was the first time in a couple of months that I had held the presentation, which, like the book, had been amended. Previously, before the de facto ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in September, it had been reassuring to think that the world's institutions would be able to act.

As I closed my talk with the photo of an emaciated Martin from Goris, I could feel my throat tightening and the tears welled up in my eyes. It took me by surprise. I'd just spent an hour talking about my first journey to Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016, just two months after the four-day war when Azerbaijan launched its first large-scale invasion of on Nagorno-Karabakh in the 22 years since the ceasefire. My lecture continued with a complicated account of the causes of the conflict, my trip to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2021, my work during the blockade and finally the images from the mass exodus in September 2023.

I was suddenly stuck by all the work I'd done during the conflict, the grey hairs that had slowly started to replace my normal brown ones and, above all, the creeping pain that the people there have suffered. When Areg said that "every day I die slowly", I thought in some sort of naivety that the conflict might somehow be normalised with the arrival of the Russian

peacekeepers. I was wrong. The most important lesson I've learned from the past few years is to always ask myself, "What's the next worst thing?". This is a question that foreign diplomats and fellow journalists should also ask themselves when trying to picture what the future holds. So far, the next worst things have happened all the time. For as long as I've been covering the conflict, reactions to it have been reactive rather than proactive, responding to what's happening rather than to what might happen. To date, this has been a devastating strategy for anyone who prefers peace to war.

At any rate, my melancholy spread to the audience. They could see how moved I was by the photo of the emaciated Martin, which, to me, also symbolised my countless journeys, articles, presentations and affliction of greyness.

The next photo in my presentation is somewhat cheerier. It's of Areg holding his newborn daughter. So even though the next worst thing seems to be happening, new babies are still being born to the world. After my trip to Nagorno-Karabakh in March 2021, Areg married Lusine and they had little Léa. Many Armenians draw parallels between the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh and the genocide against them under the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The children are then particularly symbolic of their defiant drive to survive.

Now, in 2024, the war has littered history with far too many victims. The hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis who were displaced after the 1990s war are some of them. From the settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh and its environs by Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Kurds, not a soul now remains. A chain of violent retaliations has left everyone a loser, no matter how much Ilham Aliyev proclaims himself a winner. During the extraordinary presidential election on 7 February 2024, he made a big deal of voting in Stepanakert,

or Khankendi as he called it. Hundreds of people were ferried here on government-arranged buses to vote for the autocrat in Nagorno-Karabakh's government offices.

However, it is also a loss for world order. There were recognised structures for peace talks in place, orders from the ICJ were clear, and Western diplomacy was deeply involved in the conflict; still, the world failed to prevent the disaster. And not only failed – it chose to take insufficient action what was obviously looming on the horizon.

In total, almost 145,000 Armenians have lost their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh in the past few years. For a country like Armenia, with its population of a meagre three million and a strained economy, the influx of refugees has been a burden. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of the Armenians arriving from Nagorno-Karabakh have opted to leave Armenia and, in most cases, move to Russia instead – despite the disappointment and upset that Russia's actions have caused. One of them is Ashot, the guy waiting at the hotel in Goris for the blockade to be lifted, who was pushed northward by the lack of accommodation for him and his family, the absence of job opportunities and the air of restlessness the permeates Armenia.

As for me, personally, I have returned to the Caucasus several times every year since my trip to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2021. I've given up my attempts to enter the region since Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia in September 2022, and to apply for accreditation to work in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani media platforms have called me both a spy and a terrorist, on account not of my conflict journalism but, primarily, of my investigations into Azerbaijani "caviar diplomacy" and how it has served to influence decision-makers in Europe. And for the number of articles on the oppositional grassroots movement in Azerbaijan and its tireless struggle for democracy.

IMPRISONED. *The Azerbaijani peace activist Bahruz Samadov has been detained in Azerbaijan.*

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PART 1

Chapter 1

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