

## Empire and Names: The Case of Nagorno Karabakh

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### **Abstract**

The Nagorno Karabakh region in Western Azerbaijan has been the site of a bloody conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1992. Both nations claim historic ties to the area as independent kingdoms or as autonomous vassal nations under larger empires.

This paper will survey toponymic patterns in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Nagorno Karabakh, under Soviet and post-Soviet rule. How did toponyms change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Has toponymic reality followed demographic reality? How did the Soviet toponymic system differ from previous imperial or national systems? Lastly, what does Karabakh's toponymic history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have to contribute to the discussion on the Soviets' treatment of nationalism, and to the discussion on the ongoing tension over Karabakh?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by examining past and present maps, policy documents, and other textual sources to provide a toponymic history of Nagorno Karabakh. This history will help explain how the current toponymic landscape of Karabakh came to be, and whether or not toponymic actions and policies may have contributed to the conflict. By bringing this aspect of Karabakh's history to light, I hope to show how the toponym, an important cultural symbol, plays a role in interethnic relations.

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The area of Nagorno Karabakh,<sup>1</sup> encompassing 4,400 square kilometers (1,699 square miles) in Western Azerbaijan, was the site of a bloody conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia from 1988 to 1994. Both nations claim it as an inseparable part of their countries' territory, history, and culture. These claims appear in bitter arguments that include arguments over the origins of the area's toponyms. In Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev's 1998 decree declaring March 31 the Day of Genocide against Azerbaijanis, he included a description of cultural destruction that included changing of geographic names of Karabakh during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Aliyev 1998).



Source: United States Central Intelligence Agency

**Figure 1**

Aliyev's comments invoke the turbulence that has resulted in a confusing toponymic landscape for more than a century. During the second millennium A.D. numerous empires conquered the area, each leaving new toponyms that were destroyed, left alone, or shared by successors. For several centuries, the Persian – Ottoman fighting in the Caucasus became such that at times, one empire or the other would pursue a “scorched earth” strategy, deporting Kurdish, Armenian, or Georgian inhabitants to Tabriz or Istanbul (Saparov 2003: 181). In 1603, the Persian Shah Abbas led a massive deportation of Armenians to Tabriz. In 1796, Shusha was completely emptied of inhabitants (Hewsen 2001: 146). The towns' subsequent occupiers would either not be able to decipher the foreign alphabet or simply ignore markers indicating place-names, and would make up their own names for geographic objects (Saparov 2003: 182). The Russians invaded a short time later and, with the exception of regional trade or government centers such as Yelizavetpol and Alexandropol, left alone the cultural markers of the area. In other words, the Russian Empire did not project Russian culture onto the area by means of toponyms, as had previous empires. Maps published in 1915 show a Caucasus featuring mostly Turkic names with Persian elements, with the more prominent features – Yelizavetpol, the Caucasus (Kavkaz) mountain range, for example – labeled with Russian names.

When the Soviet Union arrived in 1921, they projected cultural power in a different way. Though Russians constituted a majority in the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik leadership was clear about renouncing any legacy of Russian imperialism. The Soviets did not capture the Caucasus Republics in order to russify them; that is, in order to change the local national identities to match that of an existing, conquering, people. This avoidance of imperialist practice was intentional, and the fact that the Soviets were concerned with identities at all made them unique among previous empires in the Caucasus. While Ottomans left Turkic marks, Persians left Persian marks, and Russians left Russian marks, the Soviets *removed* Russian marks. In renaming geographic

features, the Soviet policy was to shun the “imperialist” tendency of finding culturally internal names for nationally external features.

If projecting linguistic culture through toponyms was a method of past empires, the Soviet method was to project political power while preserving local cultural forms. The toponym remained a local *form*, obeying phonological and linguistic constraints of the local language, and in some cases even honored national figures or themes. The *content* of these toponyms was socialist, as the national figures honored were socialists. In addition to the content of the names being socialist, the mechanism, or bureaucratic procedure of name-changing, was unequivocally bound in the highly centralized structure of the Soviet Union (Saparov 2003: 185). Due to a law passed by the Supreme Soviet of the Union, name changes could not be carried out at the national level, but required Union-level consent. No name was approved, even a name “entirely” Armenian, Azerbaijani, or Georgian, without approval by the all-Union Supreme Soviet.

As Nagorno Karabakh has been subject to such a succession of empires throughout its history, toponyms there have a very short life. An objective argument of what lands legitimately belong to which people in Nagorno Karabakh would be difficult, if not impossible, to create. Each ethnic group inhabiting the area has left a patchwork of cultural, linguistic, and historical markers. In this context, assigning ethnicities to one place or another based solely on its toponym’s form would be to ignore the history of the people and place of Nagorno Karabakh. Though some have called the toponym the “most valuable source for resolving the problem of ethnic origins” (Geybullayev 1986: 3), there are numerous linguistic and historical obstacles to an accurate conclusion reached by this methodology.<sup>2</sup> Rather than follow Aliyev and the many others into the either-or argument over Nagorno Karabakh, this paper will take as given the historically heterogeneous makeup of the region as it examines Soviet toponymic practice during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to do so, the toponymic landscape of Nagorno Karabakh under Soviet rule will be examined. Sources include maps from 1915, 1941, 1979, and 1994; policy documents detailing the birth of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast’ (NKAO) and toponymic guidelines; and other textual sources, such as the *Territorial’noe-Administrativnoe Deleniye* Catalogs of Azerbaijan. These changes and policies enlighten as to how the Soviets made any changes to national toponyms, and how quickly the independent states “corrected” the names of Soviet-named features.

It is expected that toponyms in Karabakh from the Soviet period mixed Armenian, Azeri, and “Soviet” names. If this is the case, then Soviet toponymic policy resulted in a confusing geographical landscape which has fueled local tensions since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By bringing this aspect of Karabakh’s history to light, the perspective on the area will be broadened to one that considers how outside forces can antagonize local actors against each other.

The first section briefly explains the role of autonomy in the Soviet Union, and in regard to Nagorno Karabakh in more detail. The intended use of Nagorno Karabakh as an autonomous *oblast’* will allow predictions about what the Soviet toponymic practice in the *oblast’* should be, and provide a framework with which to analyze the findings of the survey of the toponyms therein. The next section looks at the ethnic makeup of the area, and the major changes that may have affected what the deciding bodies saw as the desired name for a given geographic object. The third section will present the data: the number of geographic objects catalogued; the ethno-linguistic categories the names fall into; and changes to toponyms made in the Soviet era. The conclusions made therein will inform the final section, which will compare the trends to the expectations from the first section. An assessment of the legacy of Soviet toponymic practice in Nagorno Karabakh, and its effects on the ongoing conflict will conclude this study.

### **The Role of Autonomy in Nagorno Karabakh**

The framers of the Soviet Constitution had evidently learned what dangers to the union could be presented by disenfranchised nationalities. In prewar Vienna during the 1910's, Stalin observed how the Hapsburgs ascribed a separate national status to non-Austrians. He criticized the Austrian model for dividing the proletariat, preventing them from any sense of class unity (Stalin 1913). He instead advocated a territorial autonomy, which, when practiced in the Soviet Union in the 20s, would lead to the creation of non-Russian republics and autonomous regions. Within these regions, national cultures, national elites, and education were allowed to flourish (Brubaker 1994: 52). Thus the Soviet Union could assert not a national supremacy of Russians, but a political supremacy of the Party.

Autonomy in the Soviet Union served several purposes, though all of these purposes were ultimately subservient to winning the loyalties of non-Russian peoples. First, if the new empire was to be a force for the international movement of communism, it would not work for the borders to dramatically shrink back to a scale comparable to those of 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia. The revolution and collapse of the Russian Empire emboldened the new Turkish state, as well as western powers interested in supporting new Baltic States. Foreign troops were quick to arrive on Soviet soil, even as a civil war was raging in the new Union. The Soviets wanted to secure the allegiances and convince the indigenous people and secure their loyalty away from the advancing Turks, British, and French in Anatolia and the Caucasus.

Second, autonomy for non-Russian nationalities could serve as a step in the eventual “withering away” of nations. While the nationalism of Europe sought to divide people along ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines, the Soviet Union aimed to unite people according to economic class. The hope was that by bringing about a state in which different nationalities could participate and in which economic and class development among nationalities reached a similar level, the Soviets could “drain nationality of its content while legitimizing its form, to promote long-term withering away of the nationality as a vital component of life” (Brubaker 1994: 49). Autonomy within the USSR would “create” nations with their own schools, educated leadership, and national culture. Autonomy, however, would not be so generous as to allow separate SSRs to actually emancipate themselves from the binding socialist principles, but would only be so extensive so as to make culture serve the purposes of building socialism.

Third, autonomy served as a rhetorical tool, used to distance the new Soviet leadership from their Imperial Russian predecessors. The leadership claimed solidarity with the smaller nationalities of the Empire by pointing to the similarities between the class oppression that the working class had suffered at the hands of the tsars and national oppression that the Turkic and other peoples had suffered. The minorities of the Russian Empire had been exploited and used the same way that the working class of Russia had been exploited, so the logic went. By considering minorities of the erstwhile empire as an exploited people, a sort of “national proletariat” was created. Autonomy for these peoples would include them in the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Autonomy would be reflected in toponymy by changing geographic names to those which would agree with national forms of language, but in many cases would evoke socialist themes. Cities with tsarist content such as Tsaritsyn would become Stalingrad, Yelizavetpol eventually became Kirovabad, and in Nagorno Karabakh, Xankendi (a Turkic name meaning “the Khan’s town”) became Stepanakert. Elsewhere, many populated places were renamed after Lenin, but were unique in their national forms: Leningori, in Georgia; Sovietabad, in Tajikistan, or Kyzyl-Orda (‘kyzyl’ meaning ‘red’) in Kazakhstan.

Nagorno Karabakh stands as a unique exception among autonomous regions of the Soviet Union. Each republic and autonomous region (from here on represented collectively by “autonomous region”) was named to indicate “titular” nationalities or ethnic groups not represented in another republic or region. Nagorno Karabakh, however, was home to Azeris and

Armenians, who were represented in the Union by the Azerbaijani and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>3</sup> This uniqueness provided a problem with regard to toponymy: should names be represented according to Armenian or Azerbaijani conventions?

Some characteristics of Nagorno Karabakh complicate the why and how of the *oblast's* designation. The history of the region does not provide legitimacy exclusively for any one ethnic group's claims. Its Soviet name sets it apart as the only autonomous region that does not explicitly state the ethnicity for which it was formed. While there were regions created and designated as homelands for specific groups (Adyghea, Karakalpak, Kyrghyz), each indicating with their toponym *who* would live there, Nagorno Karabakh contained no such explicit indication. While other autonomous administrative bodies of the Union were formed with internal stability and preservation in mind, Nagorno Karabakh was formed with external factors in mind. The new Turkic state advanced into the Caucasus until 1920, forcing the weakened Soviet State, now in the grip of a civil war, to the Treaty of Moscow that would involve Karabakh. On the other hand, Armenians in Karabakh, reacting to the pro-Turkish conditions of the treaty, threatened internal stability (*K Istorii* 1989: 41). At the same time, British and French forces had designs for an independent Armenia in the Caucasus.

If the Soviet Union was going to resolve the problem of Nagorno Karabakh, it needed to find a solution that satisfied various requirements. The internal conflict needed to be solved in order to assert Soviet sovereignty in the Caucasus; the external threat of the Turks needed to be removed; the ideological enemies from the west needed to be neutralized; and Armenia's allegiance guaranteed. The Soviets resolved to leave Karabakh in Azeri territory, but created an autonomous *oblast'* that would be populated by both Armenians and Azeris (*K Istorii* 1989: 155).

Due to the mixing of ethnic groups in Nagorno Karabakh, and the official celebration of that diversity, a diverse set of toponyms is expected. The Soviets, wishing to promote solidarity among Azeri and Armenians there (*K Istorii* 1989: 155), would be expected to make several name-changes to represent the Armenians of the *oblast'*, but would retain the Turkic names as well. Given the 1924 ban on name-changes without the all-Union Presidium's approval, most populated places would retain their pre-1917 names. As is consistent throughout the rest of the Union, a small percentage of names can be expected to feature a "socialist" name, though even toponyms socialist in content must contain a national (local) form. We can expect these to be shared between Azeri and Armenian forms.

### **Demography and Toponyms in Nagorno Karabakh**

As reviewed in the last section, the Soviet government and party committees who created the NKAO wrote that they did so in order to promote "brotherly solidarity" between the then-warring Armenians and Azeris who lived there. This section reviews the demographic history of Nagorno Karabakh and how it led to competing narratives about the "rightful" inhabitants of the region.

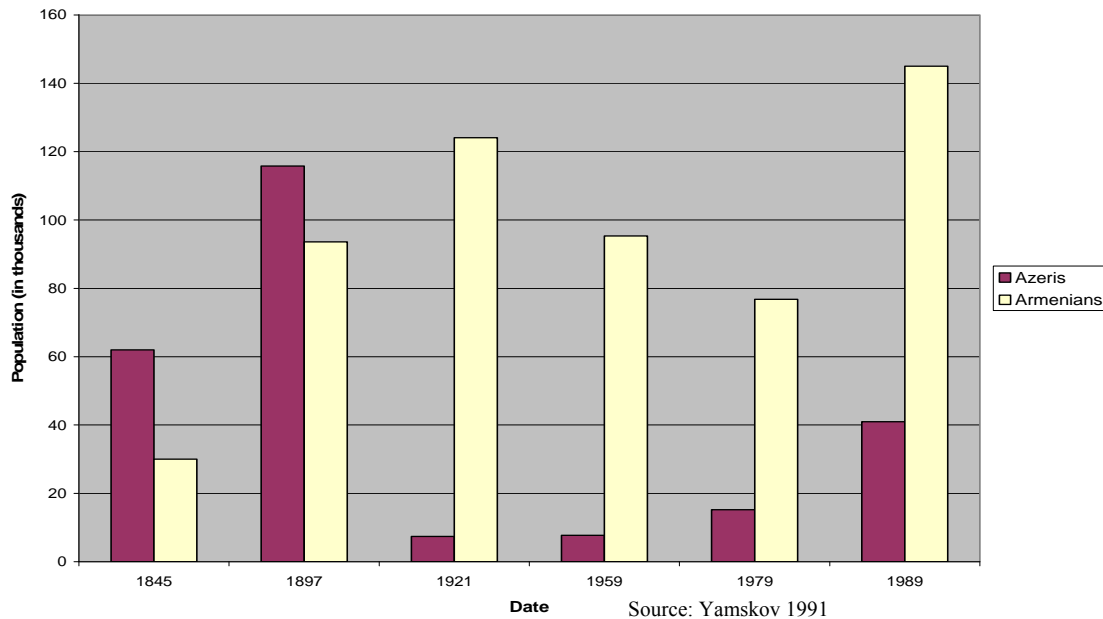
The Persian and Ottoman Empires clashed in the Caucasus for centuries, drastically changing the ethnic makeup of the area. Armenians, Kurds, Persians, and Turks were exiled, relocated, and resettled. Until the systematic slaughters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Armenians enjoyed a certain favored minority status in both empires. Those deported during the wars to Istanbul or Tabriz became a vital part of the commercial sectors there (Hewsen 2001: 11). The Armenian land itself, however, became emptied of most Armenians. Upon repopulation by Turkish, Iranian, and Kurdish settlers, the Armenian settlements lost their Armenian character and in effect became Turkish, Iranian, or Kurdish, as these new settlers had no reference by which to name them with any but their own language, resulting in "the total replacement of the cultural landscape" (Saparov 2003: 182).

When the Russians entered into the Caucasus at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenians began to return. Depending on the nationality of the source, the Armenians either

returned under the impression that the Russians, being Christian, would make Armenia safer for Armenians; or they were brought back by the Russians in an attempt to Christianize their newly acquired territory (Geybullayev 1986, Saparov 2003, Yamskov 1991). At any rate, the ethnological makeup of eastern Anatolia changed dramatically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Armenians, long since gone to Tabriz, Istanbul, or elsewhere, returned in such numbers as to render Turkish, Kurdish, or Iranian towns Armenian again (Geybullayev 1986, Saparov 2003, Hewsen 2001). As many as 105,000 Armenians arrived in the South Caucasus between 1828 and 1831 (Yamskov 1991). Even by then, half of the population of the *Armyanskaya Oblast*<sup>4</sup> including Nagorno Karabakh was non-Armenian, but more Armenians flooded the region throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through 1917. According to the 1926 census, Armenians constituted over 84 per cent of the population of the Armenian SSR. As the Russians did not populate the area themselves (Saparov 2003: 183), beyond the major commercial and administrative centers of Alexandropol and Yelizavetpol, the toponyms generally retained their Turkic character.

Under Soviet rule the toponyms of Nagorno Karabakh became more Armenian, as over 80 changes to populated places' names were made, reflecting the mixed population of Armenians and Azeris. The Soviets desired a multiethnic NKAO, as the *oblast's* own toponym was the only one out of all of the autonomous regions not to indicate a specific ethnic group. From official documents, this intentional decision would promote goodwill among peoples of the Caucasus. Given the *korenizatsiya* practices of the 20s and 30s, the resulting toponymy attempted to reflect the *oblast's* ethnic makeup and do away with the either-or discussion about the ethnicity of the area.

The demographic trends in Karabakh for the last 150 years have generally shifted in favor of the Armenian population. In 1845, when sources began to note significant changes in the area, Azeri Turks constituted about two-thirds of the population there (92,000, see figure 2). By 1897, the populations were almost equal to one another. When the NKAO was created in 1921, the Soviet census found that out of 131,500 people accounted for, 94.4% were Armenian, with the rest being Azeri Turk. The census did not, however, include seminomadic inhabitants, who wintered in the lowlands outside of the *oblast's* border. Even considering that Azeri Turks in Karabakh numbered as many 50,000 in the previous century, the low population density associated with seminomadic people indicates that they still would be outnumbered by the nearly 125,000 Armenians there. Over time, the Soviet practices of urbanization, collective farming, and forced emigrations led to the end of the seminomadic way of life. More Azeris were included in the 1979 census, in which Azeris numbered 37,000 (22.8% of the population), while the figure of Armenians living in Karabakh numbered at 123,000 (77.2%). Note that the Armenian figure changed little, if at all, throughout the century. The trend of Armenian growth there would continue through the end of the Soviet era, with 4,000 more Azeri Turks and 20,000 more Armenians in the *oblast'*. The beginning of armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh can account for this, with Armenians fleeing into Karabakh, and Azeris persecuted and expelled from Karabakh.



**Figure 2: Population Trends in Nagorno Karabakh**

### Soviet-Era Toponyms of Nagorno Karabakh

Determining the ethnolinguistic “belonging” of toponyms in Nagorno Karabakh can appear deceptively simple. Both languages feature toponyms with endings indicative of one nationality or the other. These endings will indicate a given toponym’s ethnicity. In addition, each language features certain letters or letter combinations that the other does not have. For example, the consonant clusters *-dz-* and *-ts-* are not part of the phonological inventory of Azeri. Toponyms with these combinations can be considered at least partly Armenian.

There are complexities, however, of determining the ethnolinguistic root of Karabakh’s toponyms. These complexities are the legacy of the region’s difficult history. While Armenian and Azeri are very distinct from one another, both have been heavily influenced by Persian languages (Hewsen 2001: 11). Even the name *Karabakh* is evocative of Persian, as *-bağ* means ‘garden’ in Persian. Therefore, names that feature Persian characteristics could be claimed either by Armenians or Azeris. The Persian ending *-abad* appears in several toponyms, meaning one must look elsewhere for evidence of more local linguistic influences. In addition, the Turkic and Armenian cultures have mixed. Powerful Armenians under Turkic rule were given the title *Melik* (the Armenian version of *malik*, Arabic for ‘king’). Eventually, the title found its way into local toponymy. “Melikjanli,” for example, is a town in Karabakh with a Turkic name using an Armenian term. Some toponyms with Armenian endings use Turkic titles in the same way, such as “Mkhtarishen,” which has as its root the Turkic title *muhtar*, meaning ‘headman.’

Another phenomenon that appears in Nagorno Karabakh is the Sovietization of toponyms. These toponyms feature distinct Azeri or Armenian endings, but contain Soviet roots. Most of these toponyms are either clearly Azeri or Armenian in their endings, such as *Leninkend* or *Leninavan*, but the name *Leninabad* features a Soviet root with a Persian ending. The intended representative Soviet nationality in this town cannot be determined by the toponym alone.

In this context, the first step to determining what choices the Soviets made in toponyms would be to examine which toponyms have distinctive Armenian or Azeri elements, and to determine the types of toponyms existing in the area. Informed by the Soviet instructions for

transliterating Azeri and Armenian names and Geybullayev's *Toponimiya Azerbaidzhana*, I have classified the names of Nagorno Karabakh into six categories:

1. Armenian names – names can be identified as Armenian if they contain solely Armenian characteristics. Such characteristics include the digraphs *rr*, *dz*, or *ts*, which do not occur in Azeri names; the endings *-bert*, *-van*, *-kert*, *-gyukh*, *-tag*,<sup>5</sup> *-shen*, *-shat*, *-gomer*, *-dzor*, *-zur*, and *-tekh*; the descriptive terms *nerkin*, *verin*, or *lerr*; or consonant clusters, such that appear in *Mkhtarishen*.
2. Azeri names – names can be identified as Azeri if they contain solely Azeri characteristics. Such characteristics include vowel agreement across an entire word, such that one will seldom see the letters *i* and *y* in the same word; the appearance of vowels at the end of a name; or the endings *-li*, *-ly*, *-kend*, *-bey*, *-peya*, *-gaya*, *-qaya*, *-lar*, *-lyar*, *-chi*; otherwise containing *memme*, *bazar*, *kuscu*, *guscu*, *kun*, *gul*, or *kul*; or the descriptive terms *ashaghi*, *yukhari*, *chay*, *su*, or *dag*.
3. Armeno-Azeri names: toponyms featuring an Armenian root with an Azeri generic or ending, such as *Metstaglar*, from the Armenian *mets*, meaning 'big,' "tag," the Armenian word for 'crown,' and *-lar*, the Azeri plural suffix.
4. Azero-Armenian names: toponyms featuring an Azeri root with an Armenian generic or ending, such as *Dashushen*, from the Azeri word *dash*, meaning 'stone,' and the Armenian *shen*, meaning 'town.'
5. Sovietized Azeri names: toponyms with the form of an Azeri word, but featuring an element of Soviet culture, such as *Leninkend*, *Mir-Bashir*.
6. Sovietized Armenian names: toponyms with the form of an Armenian word, but featuring an element of Soviet culture, such as *Leninakan* or *Stepanakert*.

Maps from pre-revolutionary Russia show that Karabakh was covered in Turkic-named settlements. General Staff maps from 1915 do not display boundaries for Nagorno Karabakh, but within the approximate area I counted 334 names, including those of settlements, mountains, passes, and rivers. 30 of these features had Armenian names, with five Azero-Armenian or Armeno-Azeri names. Existence of the latter categories indicates that adaptation of Turkic or Muslim conventions had been used to form Armenian names, in the case of *Allaberd* from *Allah* and *-berd*, meaning fortress. Armenian titles were also used in order to form Turkic names, such as the case of *Melikli*, from *melik*, the Armenian variation of the Arabic word for 'king,' and *-li*, a common Azeri suffix. In toponymy this denotes the inhabitants of a given settlement (Geybullayev 1986: 36). The majority of toponyms with Armenian elements in them were found in a North-South axis running from the town of Ağdam to the Akera River near the present-day border between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

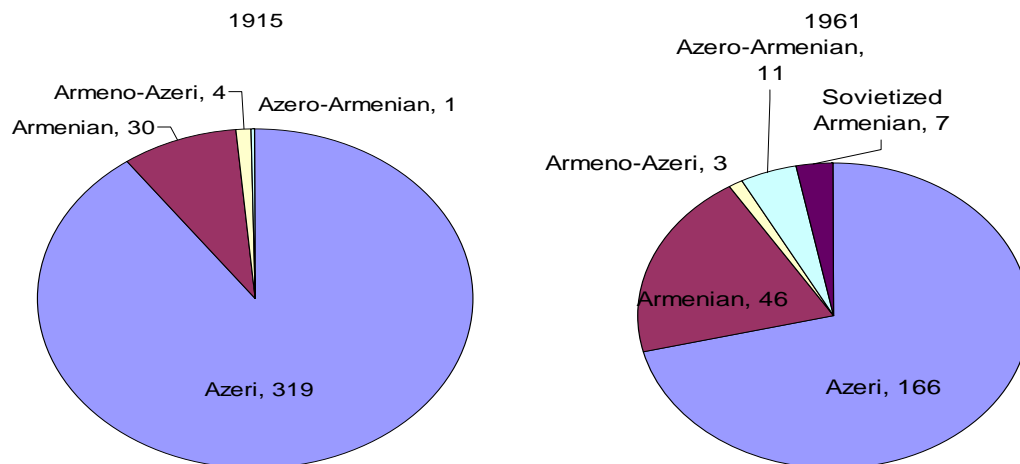
Nearly all of the changes towards Armenian names took place between the founding of NKAO in 1921 and publication of the 1961 *Administrativno-Territorial'noye Deleniye* of Azerbaijan. Out of 269<sup>6</sup> toponyms listed in that publication that fall within NKAO, 82 are Armenian names, with at least nine Sovietized Armenian names, six Azero-Armenian names, and one Armeno-Azeri name. There are three Sovietized names which indicate no affiliation with either ethnic group, and one Sovietized Azeri name. The increase in names with Armenian elements from 35 to 95 names shows a practice of name changing inclined towards creating cultural space for the Armenian toponyms at the expense of the Azeri names. It is important to note that the remaining 156 names catalogued in the publication are Azeri names without overt socialist references or Armenian elements. It appears that, from the numbers alone, toponymic practice did not coincide with the change in demography. Given the pre-Soviet state of toponymy in Nagorno Karabakh and the distance between the Caucasus and Moscow, a majority of Turkic (Azeri) names should have been expected.

The dynamics of the features renamed show that the scales are tipped significantly in favor of Armenian names. In the list of "the most significant" name changes in the 1961 version of



*Administrativno-Territorial'noe Deleniye*, four names of NKAO features are listed, and each is changed to an Armenian name.<sup>7</sup> The existence of more than 90 toponyms with Armenian elements in 1961, in comparison with less than 40 in 1915, indicates that there were more changes during this period. Finding changes from Turkic name to Turkic name would be more difficult, excepting names such as Mir Bashir, Krasnyy Bazar, Leninkend, etc. Looking elsewhere in Azerbaijan, it appears that the majority of name changes removed Persian, imperial Russian, religious, or Armenian elements, and did not change from one Turkic name to another (*Deleniye*).

One must keep in mind that not all geographic objects are equal in significance. In the same way, not every toponym will carry the same political significance. This phenomenon in ethnolinguistic research has been called the *incongruent* nature of languages, and it is useful to consider this phenomenon in the study of toponyms as well (Viechnicki 2008). Therefore it is necessary here to view the *types* of objects renamed. The administrative divisions of NKAO, for example, provide an example of significant features that underwent name changes. Before the revolution in 1917, the area of NKAO lay within the province of Yelizavetpol. When the Soviets absorbed Azerbaijan (and Karabakh), the province and borders of Yelizavetpol were dissolved and *rayons* were created which did not include a mention of Karabakh (*Deleniye* 1961). However, when the Autonomous *Oblast'* of Nagorno Karabakh was created in 1923, each administrative division within it featured names with Armenian elements: Stepanakert, for Stepan Shahumyan, a notable Armenian communist; Mardakert, Hadrut', Shusha, and Martuni. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *rayons* have been dissolved and the cities from which the administrative divisions took their names have all been renamed, with the exception of Shusha. While the majority of settlements retained Azeri names, those that were changed to names with Armenian elements carried either administrative significance or socialist themes (*Kolkhozashen*).



**Figure 3: Number of Toponyms by Linguistic Association**

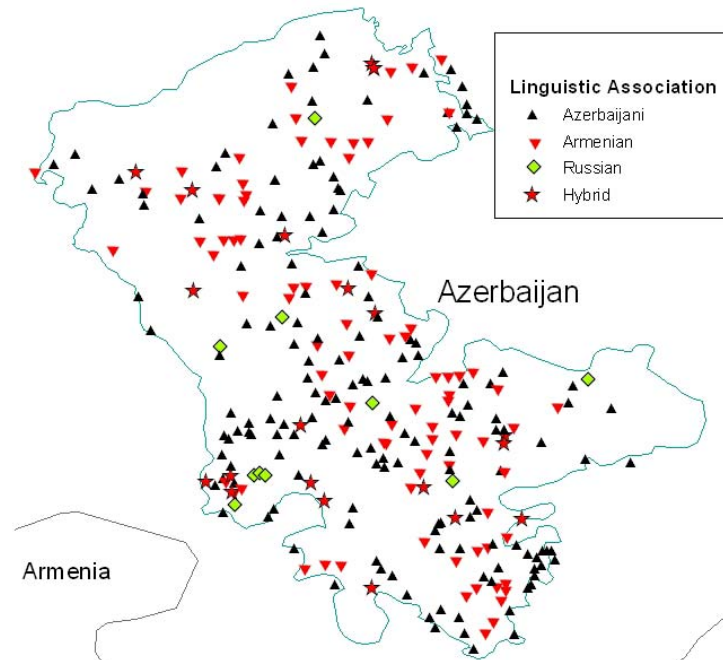
### Conclusions

The initial hypothesis was that one would find a mix of Armenian and Azeri names in Nagorno Karabakh, due to the supposed intentions of pacifying the Turks and integrating two (or more)

antagonistic ethnic groups into one region. The most precise guess was that there may be more Azeri toponyms in NKAO, but that the majority of renamings would be toward Armenian names. The actual result was that the commercial and political centers of Nagorno Karabakh were renamed to reflect the Armenian majority, while smaller settlements officially retained their Turkic names.

The initial hypothesis, and the Soviet experiment in Karabakh toponymy, both neglected a few important aspects of cultural geography. First, spatial distribution of geographic data is often the first noticed, but it was an aspect apparently ignored in Soviet toponymy. A spatial display of the categories of toponyms (see figure 4) indicates no frontier between “Azeri” and “Armenian” cities in Soviet Nagorno Karabakh. Given the Soviets’ prediction regarding nationalities, the possibility of Nagorno Karabakh becoming a nonethnic *oblast*’ may have appeared viable. It became clear in 1988 that ethnicities were still very pronounced, as Karabakh’s people became casualties of the non-frontier between the warring ethnicities.

Toponymy does not account for the Karabakh War. However, tensions between the two ethnic groups were exacerbated by the inconsistency created between toponymic and administrative structures: the Soviets did not rename settlements in spatial groups. Rather, towns with Armenian toponyms existed mixed in with Azeri-named towns. They even renamed certain Azeri-populated towns with Armenian names.



**Figure 4: Spatial Distribution of Toponyms by Linguistic Association**

The second neglected aspect, that toponyms are incongruent, was mentioned above. In order to perform a significant study of toponymy in any region, a “weighting” of geographic objects will be necessary. This weighting would differ according to the political and geographic context

of the region considered. In the case of NKAO, where populated places and administrative regions constituted the majority of features surveyed, the weighting would be performed according to commercial and administrative importance, and population size.

Third, the hybrid toponyms found in NKAO provide another phenomenon seen in ethnolinguistics that applies to toponymy: the heterochthonous nature of toponyms, or the lack of linguistic purity featured in the region's toponyms. In the context of the Soviet experiment in creating a non-ethnic region in the Union, it should not be a surprise that toponyms were heterochthonous. The pre-revolution maps from 1915 showed a few hybrid names already in existence. In addition, Armenian and Turkic names, as functions of Armenian and Turkic languages, which both feature words borrowed from each other, featured political and cultural phenomena of the other culture, as demonstrated in the toponyms *Mkhtarishen* and *Melikjanli*.

The Soviet attempt to mix the toponymy of the ethnic groups was frustrated by the administrative structure, which appears to have had the intention of dividing them. The very existence of NKAO symbolically distanced the Karabakh Azeris from Baku, but divided the Armenians from Yerevan. To the Armenians and Azeris living there, it appeared as a place of limbo between the two republics, instead of an intersection of the two (Yamskov 1991). Administrative oversight was another difficulty. NKAO was not placed under the direct administration of a Union-level body; rather, it was placed under the administration of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Armenians frustrated with leadership in Baku had no alternatives or avenues for appeal, given the Union's strictly hierarchical structure in political and economic matters. The juxtaposition of toponymic mixing and administrative division renders the prediction that the ethnic identities would wither away in favor of a universal proletarian identity disastrously inaccurate (Brubaker 1994: 52). A more critical stance would consider it a deliberate attempt to direct the smaller nations' frustrations toward each other and create conflict that only a more powerful actor could control.

In 1993, only two years after declaring independence and despite (or perhaps, because) of the Karabakh War, the government of Azerbaijan began their own renaming campaign in the region. The government renamed the *rayons* of the former *oblast'*, and dissolved the *oblast's* own boundaries. No less than 116 name-changes took place within those two years (PCGN 1993). Some names, however, such as *Yekhtsaog*, an Armenian name even according to Azeri sources, (Geybullayev 1986: 119) retained its name. Others were renamed to an Azeri name, but still retained an Armenian element: the new name for the Soviet-era name *Khintaglar* is *Köhne Tağlar*, from the Armenian *tag*, meaning 'chief' or 'head of family.'<sup>8</sup> Toponymic homogeneity, according to internationally recognized political bodies, appeared for the first time in the region. And it coincided with the similarly homogeneous administrative structure, even if it did not agree with the demography.

### Notes

1. A note on spelling of geographic names: due to the era researched in this project, sources were mostly Soviet and rendered in Russian. Toponyms are Romanized from the Cyrillic alphabet, and may not agree with direct Romanization from the Azeri or Armenian forms.
2. Geybullayev also notes that, even in antiquity, the Caucasus presented a dizzying array of languages. For example, the name Albania, from which both Azerbaijanis and Armenians draw for legitimacy, refers to places in modern-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and even Dagestan.
3. The Karachay-Cherkessian and Kabardino-Balkarian autonomous regions were each home to two nationalities, but these nationalities had no "home" territory elsewhere, as the Azeris and Armenians did, and each ethnicity's legitimacy was confirmed in the name of the autonomous region.

4. Which consisted of the Yerevan (present-day Armenia) and Nakhichevan (made Azeri in 1921) provinces.
5. *-tag*, meaning ‘crown,’ is problematic, due to its proximity to the Turkic word and toponymic suffix *dağ*, meaning ‘mountain.’ I have refrained from using *tag* as a definitive indicator of either language and used other elements in the toponym instead. *-dağ* is considered an Azeri element.
6. The discrepancy between the 334 names collected from the 1915 map and the 251 collected here lies in absence of a boundary of Karabakh in the 1915 maps surveyed, so a larger area was surveyed; also, only populated places are indicated in the *Deleniye*.
7. These are Hadrut Rayon (from Dizak), Leninavan (from Margushevan), Mardakert Rayon (from Jerabert), and Martuni (from Nerkin Karanlug).
8. *Even if it is an alternate spelling of dağ*, meaning ‘mountain,’ it would have been very easy to remove ambiguity by naming it *Dağlar*, instead of *Tağlar*.

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