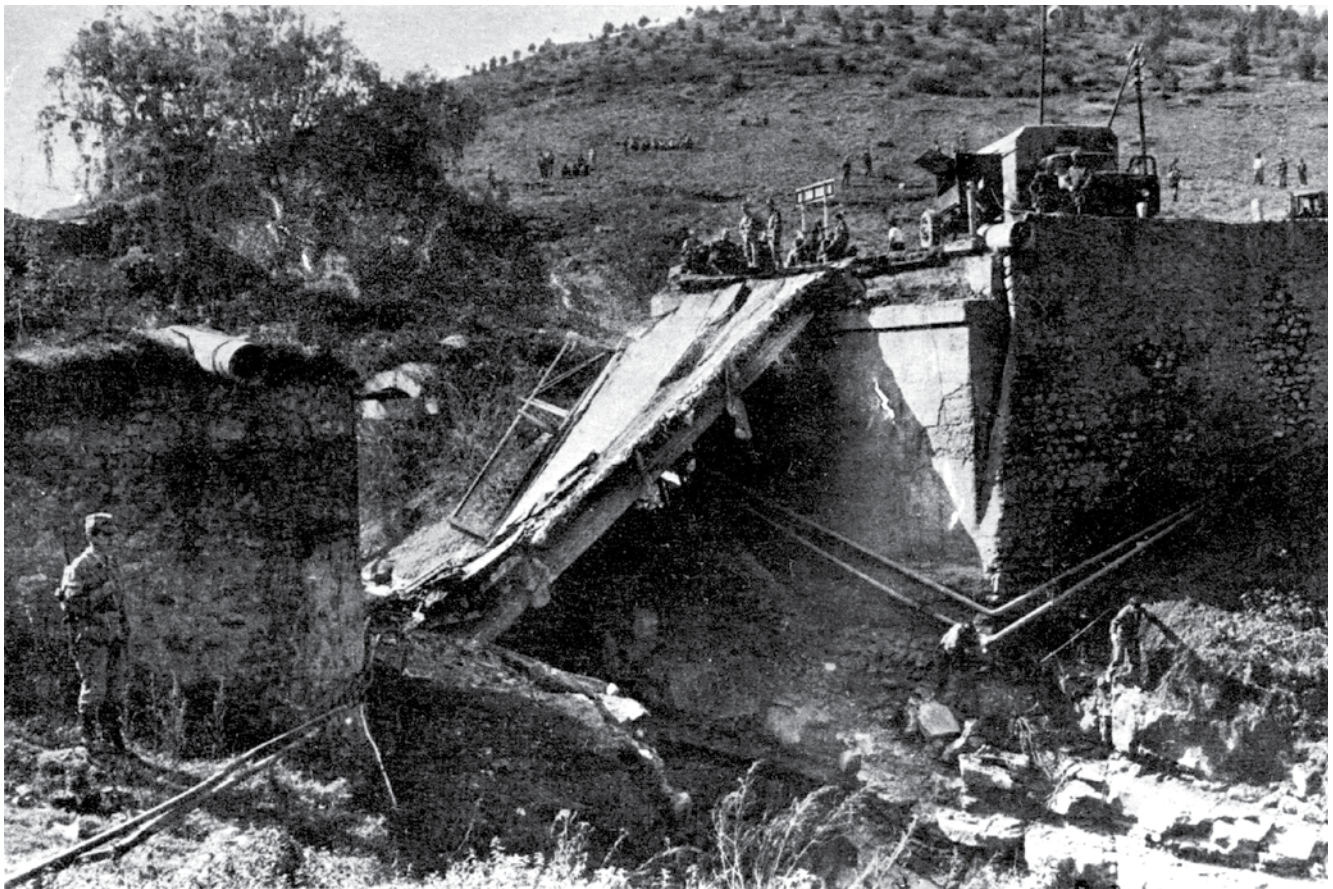


ASALA & ARF 'VETERANS' IN ARMENIA AND THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH REGION OF AZERBAIJAN

Abstract. Between 1988 and 1994, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) fought a war over the political future of Azerbaijan's province of Nagorno-Karabakh; an autonomous province with an Armenian demographic majority, but with tremendous historical



Blown up bridge on the Shusha-Agdam road. To block the Azerbaijani villages of Karabakh, Armenian terrorists destroyed the infrastructure of the region

These Azerbaijani refugees expelled from Armenia did not receive housing, work or food. Moscow pretended that they simply did not exist

and cultural value to both sides. Although a ceasefire has held for 19 years, and while all three of the local participants have lost, Azerbaijan lost more. Nagorno-Karabakh claims it is an independent nation, albeit one not recognized by a single government in the world, not even Armenia, and Armenian armed forces and militias illegally occupy 20 percent of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory.

There are a multitude of reasons why this six-year conflict ended the way that it did, and many of them involve the Armenian diaspora. While the significant role the diaspora played in securing weapons, money, supplies and volunteers for Armenia and Karabakh, and its successful public relations campaign directed towards Western governments, media and public opinion during and after the conflict are typically mentioned, scholars have yet to conduct detailed analyses, in English at least, on the diaspora's role in the conflict (1). While this paper will not explore the entire range of the Armenian diaspora's activities between 1988 and 1994, it will attempt to explore at least one: the role of two Armenian terrorist organizations, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation's (ARF) terrorist wing, in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Although it will likely never be known precisely how many of the approximately 300 diaspora volunteers who arrived in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to fight in the conflict were veteran terrorists of ASALA and the ARF, this paper will make two arguments (2).

Introduction. In the wake of the end of World War I and the collapse of the Russian Empire, the new independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan both laid claim to the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. When the case was put before the Paris Peace Conference, the allied governments sided with Azerbaijan in early 1920 (3). The Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War, however, and their advance into Transcaucasia made the wishes of the Paris Peace Conference a moot point. In July 1921, despite the lobbying efforts of Armenian political leaders to transfer the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR, the Caucasian



Bureau of the Russian Communist Party ultimately confirmed the Azerbaijan SSR's retention of the province (4). Considering the intense competition for the region immediately after the First World War, the first 65 years of Nagorno-Karabakh's existence as part of the Azerbaijan SSR passed peacefully, with only a handful of minor incidents in the mid-1960s and late 1970s (5).

In the late 1980s, however, this all changed. In August of 1987, a political petition from Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to Moscow requesting the transfer of the province from Azerbaijan SSR to Armenia SSR set



Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia's Kafan District arrive in Azerbaijan

in motion a series of events that, within a few months, plunged the southern Caucasus into a humanitarian crisis that witnessed ethnic cleansing, displaced persons, illegal occupation, terrorism and war that remains unresolved today, more than 25 years since the first outbreak of violence. While the origins of the conflict are multifaceted and complex, like most violent conflicts, at its simplest, the dispute pitted the right to self-determination for an Armenian majority in an Azerbaijani SSR province against the constitutional rights of the Azerbaijan SSR, and later the sovereign rights of the Republic of Azerbaijan in a historically and culturally significant area for both groups. Obviously, however, it is much more than that, and even labeling the conflict properly is difficult, given the geopolitical context during which it was fought. It began as an internal dispute of the Azerbaijan SSR and a civil war between two republics of the Soviet Union and then evolved into an undeclared war between two sovereign nations and a breakaway province (6).

Although a ceasefire brokered in May 1994 has for the most part held, the war took the lives of approximately 17,000 to 25,000 Azerbaijanis and Armenians, wounded over 50,000, and produced well over one million refugees, of which the vast majority, over seventy percent, were Azerbaijanis (7). The most infamous and deadliest event of the entire period, the massacre in Khojaly on February 25 & 26, 1992, alone saw the slaughter of approximately 500 to 600 non-combatant Azerbaijani civilians by Armenian militias, with an additional 1000 wounded, 1250 taken hostage, and another 150 who remain missing and unaccounted for (8). In one of the more bizarre twists of this conflict, the United States Congress responded to this tragedy by inexplicably passing a resolution denying all forms of U.S. aid to Azerbaijan until, among other things, it respected "international human rights standards." (9) Today, including the province of Nagorno-Karabakh, which seceded from Azerbaijan on December 10, 1991, 20 percent of the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan remains occupied by Armenian armed forces (10).

Nagorno-Karabakh in the Diaspora and Mainstream Media. Despite claims that the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh suffered under the oppressive rule of the Azerbaijanis and continuously sought to be reassigned to the Armenian SSR, there is little record of this in either the Armenian or the mainstream press in the United States. In fact, prior to December 1987, evidence that the diaspora had any concerns over the

loss of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, the plight of Armenians living there, or that they were even aware the issue existed, is few and far between. In the two decades between 1966 and 1986, there are only a handful of references to Karabakh: six articles in the Armenian press and two articles in the mainstream media, one of which was then read into the Congressional Record.

Even this attention towards Karabakh appears to have been provoked by the large demonstration commemorating the 50th anniversary of 1915 massacre in Yerevan in 1965, which revitalized Armenian nationalist movements throughout the diaspora, and by specific reports of sporadic clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani inhabitants of the region (11). There was no sustained attention towards either the province of Nagorno-Karabakh, or the Armenians who lived there until 1988, and after that, coverage of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia dominated the Armenian-American press for next six years. Fortuitous for Armenia and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, there was not much else competing for the attention of the diaspora at the time. By 1988, the civil war in Lebanon was winding down, and Armenian terrorism, the assassinations of Turkish diplomats and their families and high-profile assaults on embassies and airports, which had energized and emboldened the Armenian diaspora since the early 1970s, had not been factor in nearly five years.

ASALA & the ARF. During the 1970s and 1980s, two Armenian terrorist organizations, The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and a terrorist wing of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), first known as the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) and later as the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA) (12), carried out a combination of assassinations, bombing campaigns and assaults that spanned North America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia aimed, ostensibly, at extracting genocide recognition, reparations, and eastern Anatolia from Turkey. Both groups emerged from Beirut, Lebanon, the political center of the Armenian diaspora, at a time when the political tactics and protests of the Armenian diaspora, along with the rest of the world, were becoming radicalized and increasingly violent. ASALA and ARF terrorist attacks also occurred in the immediate wake of the the Gourgen Yanikian murders of the Turkish Consul General Mehmet Baydar and Consul Bahadır Demir in Santa Barbara, CA by on January 27, 1973. Yanikian enjoyed near unanimous support, both financial and moral, within the diaspora for his actions and become

*Moscow-Baku passenger train blown up
by Armenian terrorists on May 30, 1991. 11 dead, 22 wounded*



an overnight hero and celebrity. The reaction of the diaspora to the assassination of Turkish government officials was not lost on the founders of ASALA or the ARF leadership (13). ASALA is credited with being the first modern Armenian terrorist organization, but the ARF was very quick to follow its lead.

There are currently two theories regarding the creation of ASALA, and they differ only in very minor details. The first is that Simon Simonian, a renowned Lebanese-Armenian intellectual, linguist and publisher of the Beirut Armenian weekly *Spurk* [Diaspora], urged his brother-in-law, Kevork Ajemian, another burgeoning Armenian intellectual, and a Protestant Armenian minister based in Switzerland, James Karnusian, to formulate and conceptualize plans for an Armenian "liberation movement." At some point during this period, Simonian became acquainted with Haroutian Takoushian (aka Hagop Hagopian), a half-Armenian mercenary who worked for Wadi Haddad's faction within the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-External Operations (PFLP-EO) (14). Once he introduced this veteran terrorist to Ajemian and Karnusian, the movement acquired the means through which to move from conceptualization to actual implementation.

The second version argues that it was Fatah's Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) who suggested to Takoushian that an Armenian terror cell should be developed along the lines of Black September, and it was Takoushian who then sought out and enlisted the aid of sympathetic Armenian intellectual(s) (15). Regardless of the specific details, ASALA carried out its first attack on the World Council of Churches in Beirut, Lebanon on January 20, 1975.

The ARF is one of the original and most powerful modern era Armenian political parties, founded in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1890 (16). No strangers to violence, the ARF began life as an armed force and operated against the governments of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, arguably the most famous attacks being the takeover of the Ottoman Bank in Constantinople in August of 1896 and Operation Nemesis, the campaign of targeted assassinations against former Ottoman government officials and Armenian sympathizers between March of 1921 and April 1922 (17). The ARF transitioned away from international to intra-national violence in subsequent decades and focused on obtaining local political power and influence (18). From at least the late 1950s, the ARF maintained a paramilitary wing in Lebanon and a number of ARF members were arrested in Syria in 1961 for



House in the village of Ashagi Askipara in Azerbaijan's Gazakh District. Results of Armenian artillery fire. August 1990. Moscow still pretended that it did not notice how Armenian terrorists using heavy weaponry

stockpiling large quantities of weaponry (19). Although this is not surprising given the instability of Lebanese politics 1950s, it certainly facilitated the process of creation when the decision came in the mid-1970s to organize a terrorist cell. While the specific details of the ARF's decision to form a terrorist wing remain unknown, it is alleged that the leadership was afraid that the youthful, aggressive, militant and, potentially, more popular ASALA would be more attractive to the diaspora youth than the ARF. Therefore, the ARF's top leadership, the Bureau, created the Justice Commandos Against the Armenian Genocide to maintain its membership ranks and to compete with ASALA for new recruits (20). Given the lack of any media coverage and the frequency and locations of ASALA's initial attacks, however, this argument is not convincing. What we do know is that ARF member Apo Ashjian was the leader of the first incarnation of the ARF terrorist cell, the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG). Ashjian had a falling out with ARF Bureau members Hrayr Maroukhian and Sarkis

Zeitlian though, who allegedly negotiated a deal with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to cease all ARF terrorist activity in the United States. Ashjian continued to plan attacks in the United States, however, and was apparently assassinated for his insubordination in December of 1982 (21). It was at this point that the group's name was changed to the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA), and Ashjian was replaced by Sarkis Aznavourian, who, a mere two and a half years later, was also assassinated, but not by the ARF (22). Rumors persisted throughout this period that Maroukhian and Zeitlian had assumed control of the terrorist wing, and on at least one occasion Maroukhian was denied entry into the United Kingdom because of his connections to Armenian terrorist organizations (23). At a minimum, Hrayr Maroukhian, the chairman of the ARF's Bureau from 1972 until he was forced to leave Armenia in 1992, must have had some knowledge or involvement in the creation and implementation of the terrorist cells.

Between January 20, 1975 and February 2, 1988,

ASALA and the ARF killed approximately 100 individuals, including 29 Turkish diplomats and their immediate family members and at least 14 of their own operatives, and wounded more than 500 more (24). By early 1982, however, Western intelligence and police agencies began to crackdown on Armenian terrorist activity in the United States and Western Europe and, for the first time, ASALA and ARF agents were in custody, in jail, or on trial. After the attack in Paris at the Orly airport in July 1983, Monte Melkonian split from ASALA and started his own rival Armenian terrorist organization, but by then the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had developed an impressive network of informants and agents who were providing the FBI with high quality, reliable intelligence on ASALA, the ARF and Melkonian's new organization, the ASALA-Revolutionary Movement (ASALA-RM). Armenian terrorism was on borrowed time.

When Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh began to openly agitate for a revision to Azerbaijan's borders in mid-February 1988, it had been three years since the last significant Armenian terrorist attack: the ARF's assault on the Turkish Embassy in Ottawa, Canada. During that three-year hiatus, a brutal war unfolded on the streets of Beirut between either ASALA and the ARF, the ARF and Mossad-inspired Turkish counter-terror hit squads, or perhaps all three, that took the lives of at least fourteen high-ranking members of the both organizations between January 1985 and March 1986 (25). The ARF terrorists that survived this bloodletting, and who were not in jail, largely disappeared, or at least went dormant, and took a backseat to the more traditional political and publishing activities of the ARF. It appears that some may have also moved into the ARF's illicit activities, such as arms smuggling, drug trafficking, particularly Heroin, and money laundering (26). Takoushian on the other hand, seems to have concentrated ASALA's efforts on anti-ARF, anti-Western and anti-Turkish publications and propaganda, while loaning his terrorists to the Libyans, Syrians, Palestinians, and whoever else would pay. When he was assassinated on April 28, 1988, two months after the Karabakh and Yerevan demonstrations, it seemed that, for all intents and purposes, Armenian terrorism had run its course. At a minimum, the death of Takoushian meant that the ASALA that had terrorized innocent civilians and governments in Europe and North America for over a decade, was finished.

The outbreak of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan rejuvenated the individual hopes and careers of the remaining ASALA operatives

(27), many of whom had no other choice but to migrate to Armenia by the early 1990s. For the ARF, Nagorno-Karabakh merely represented a new chapter in their long history. There were minor changes in location, titles, conditions and targets. They traded North America, Europe and Australia for the Caucasus. Instead of terrorists, their armed operatives were now called paramilitary groups and militias. Instead of operating underground in, possibly, hostile foreign territory, the ARF was now "home," and appears, at least until 1992, to have operated independently of the laws and jurisdiction of the Armenian government (28). Instead of targeting Turkish civilians and business interests, and anyone else who got in the way, the paramilitaries now targeted Azerbaijanis, Russians, Armenians and anyone else who got in their way. The tactics employed by the ARF's terrorist organizations, seem to have been very similar to the ones employed by the paramilitary groups and militias. The ARF members who left the diaspora to volunteer to fight on behalf of the homeland did so willingly.

ASALA's Rejuvenation. The resurgence of extreme Armenian nationalism in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian SSR in 1988, and in particular the prospect of acquiring more territory for Armenia, could not have come at a better time for ASALA and the ARF's terrorist wing. Largely leaderless and directionless, excitement and enthusiasm for Armenian terrorism had waned during the years its operatives were incarcerated, on the run, or in hiding. This had a much greater negative impact on ASALA, which did not have the history, organizations, contacts and resources that the ARF had. It was much more difficult for an ASALA agent to disappear or transition to a non-violent occupation: the Armenian youths attracted to ASALA were ideologues who joined the organization for life. In other words, most embraced ASALA's ideology and its interpretation of the Armenian cause in its totality, and wanted to see the fight carried through to the very end. Land, specifically the reclamation of lands lost, was the crux of ASALA's ideology, at least for Kevork Ajemian, James Karnusian and Monte Melkonian. In fact, making sure that there were enough Armenians left in the region to resettle the lands, once they were taken back, was a major concern for ASALA, as more and more Armenians left the Caucasus and the Middle East for Western Europe and North America (29). As ludicrous as the idea may seem that Turkey, the United States or NATO would tolerate any territorial changes in eastern Anatolia, the only significant border between a NATO country and the Soviet Union, to



House in the village of Garmechatag in Nakhchivan destroyed by Armenian artillery fire. 1990

the founding fathers of ASALA, and true believers like Monte Melkonian, the prospect was still theoretically possible. During the 1970s, right and left-wing violence in Turkey had produced near civil war-like conditions, and the 1980s saw the rise of the PKK. ASALA's links to the PKK are well known, and there is evidence that it was also cooperating with some of the more violent left-wing groups in Turkey. Also, as detente gave way to the start of the "New Cold War" around 1980, the hostility and mutual distrust between the United States and the Soviet Union reached levels not seen since the 1960s. The West's victory in the Cold War, therefore, was anything but assured during the first half of the 1980s, but by 1985 the Soviet Union's chances for victory and expansion were fading, and by November 1989, were all but destroyed. Nagorno-Karabakh, therefore, offered ASALA's scattered veterans their first chance at a symbolic "victory" for the Armenian cause, even if redrawing the internal administrative borders of an autonomous province with an Armenian majority between the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR was far and away removed from goal of liberating the lands of eastern Turkey and repopulating it with Armenian settlers. In fact, annexing Nagorno-Karabakh quickly took precedence over eastern Turkey (30).

Ironically, a mere six days before the assassination of Takoushian, the FBI believed that ASALA would not involve itself in any confrontation with the Soviet Union over Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh and would "congratulate [sic] the Soviet authorities on whatever repressions occur." (31) The FBI failed to understand that Armenian nationalism and anti-Turkishness, in this case applied to the Azerbaijanis, trumped all ideological considerations. It also missed a thinly veiled threat to the Soviet Union in a statement issued by ASALA on April

7, 1988 that they were pleased the leadership of Soviet Armenia was supporting the separation claims of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, and that they believed "justice would prevail." (32) Two years later, someone using the ASALA name issued another statement on the organization's behalf claiming that ASALA vowed it would be actively involved in the liberation and annexation of the Karabakh region to the Armenian SSR" and that it viewed "the Karabakh region to be an inseparable part of historical Armenia." (33)

There was also another factor that was pushing ASALA operatives to the Caucasus. By the late 1980s, they were running of time, options and, most importantly, places to go. West European governments, and their respective police and intelligence agencies, were no longer as sympathetic and forgiving as they once were. Beirut, the terrorist and heroin transit capital of the world, primarily so because of the complete deterioration of state authority during the decade and a half civil war, was slowly returning to normal, and thus, no longer a guaranteed safe haven. ASALA's support in Eastern Europe deteriorated, first, in 1987, when their intelligence agencies began to cooperate with the CIA on counterterrorism (34), and then in November 1989, when the communist regimes began to collapse. Even the two most sympathetic nations to Armenian terrorism, Greece and Cyprus, had proven to be unsafe after Takoushian's assassination in February 1988. It can be assumed that Monte Melkonian was not the only ASALA terrorist who chased the receding borders of communism in 1989, as he bounced from Yemen, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and, finally, Bulgaria, before landing in Yerevan, Armenia on October 6, 1990 (35). ♦

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Rally in Baku. People demand that the Center stop the aggression and terror



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